

# MEETING MILLIE

AN OXFORD ROMANCE



CLARE ASHTON

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by

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*To Jayney*

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## Chapter 1

### *Thirteen years ago*

“Hello,” said the woman with bouncing curls and the biggest grin. “I’m next door to you.”

Sun beamed through the dormer window of the small kitchenette at the end of the corridor and set the woman and her hair blazing with golden light.

Charlotte recognised her, the arm at least. Pink nail varnish, cotton-weave friendship bracelet and a tan from the long summer. Charlotte had seen it reach out from the neighbouring room in the halls of St Hilda’s, Oxford, grab the rugby shirt of an eager freshman and tug him inside. An indulgent giggle had spiced the air and the door slammed.

That laugh. Charlotte had stepped inside her own room, closed the door and put on headphones to be discreet. But it was impossible not to smile at that laugh.

“Hello. I’m Charlotte Albright.” She put out a hand to introduce herself in an awkward approximation of how her mother did.

The woman stared at it, blue eyes sparkling and the corner of her mouth twitching at Charlotte’s formality.

“Well, Ms Charlotte Albright.” The woman shifted her accent from relaxed London to an absurd, posh British that belonged in the 1950s. She raised her eyebrows. “Are you called Lottie for short?”

A laugh glittered the edges of every word. Charlotte stared bemused before she realised the woman was playing with her, because Charlotte had been more appropriate for meeting a tutor than another student. Her cheeks roasted and she mentally rolled her eyes at herself. She was not the most worldly. But she was amiable and also charmed by bright eyes. The woman really was pretty.

“People don’t call me Lottie,” Charlotte said.

“Lotte?”

“No?”

“Char?” The woman was almost laughing.

Charlotte giggled, then tried to pretend to be affronted. “Never.”

“So, Ms Charlotte Albright,” the woman relished the enunciation of the full name, then dropped into her usual accent, “fancy a cheese toastie? I’ve got two on the go.”

She pointed a thumb to the sandwich maker that fizzed with leaking cheese. Without waiting for an answer, she spun away and cleared food into the fridge, which was too small for the ten students along the corridor and crammed with pints of milk. The woman was shorter than Charlotte and curvy. As she leant down, her bum, accentuated in a pair of tight jeans, made a voluptuous heart shape in the fridge doorway.

Charlotte stooped, guilty at staring at the curvy bum and always conscious of her height, a gawky five-foot ten. It was as though she was half-finished compared with her older sister and mother, and the comparison was made often. The two of them were as tall, mother taller, but completed with

curves and the confidence to throw back their broad shoulders. They had lush, straight, mahogany hair, whereas Charlotte's tumbled in waves, as if someone had lost interest and forgotten to brush. Again, the comparison was made often. As was the observation she hadn't matriculated at prestigious Magdalen College, Oxford, like her sister and mother.

"Well, neighbour," the woman said. "Wanna join me for a toastie?"

"Love to," Charlotte said.

She wiped her mouth, fearing she dribbled. The cheese that leaked from the edges of the toaster had crisped to golden and the imagined saltiness teased her tongue. She was incapable of hiding anything, including her enthusiasm.

"Hope you're all right with Value Cheddar," the woman said, slipping one toastie onto a plate. "Some bugger's got Waitrose in there."

"That's mine!" Charlotte laughed, and her cheeks filled with heat again.

"Ooooo," the woman sang. She looked Charlotte up and down. "Look at you with your fancy cheese."

"I didn't buy it," Charlotte added. "My mother bought me a basket of food to get me through noughth week."

"Very nice," the woman cooed.

She handed Charlotte a plate and they leant on the window ledge, the woman nudging her shoulder into Charlotte's unselfconsciously like she did everything. Beautiful college grounds filled the view outside. Sun sparkled on tendrils of river, which meandered over the Oxford plain,

and highlighted the tips of trees around the playing fields in gold. Iconic and ancient buildings peeked out in every direction.

“My mum couldn’t drop me off,” the woman said after a mouthful. Her expression wilted a little. “She’s a nurse. Ward sister. Couldn’t change her shift, not without being unfair to the others. I wanted her to visit the place.”

A blink later the lull was gone and she snapped her gaze to Charlotte’s again. “What are you here for anyway?” Then she laughed. “That sounds like we’re in prison. I meant, what are you studying? I’m doing Jurisprudence.” She rolled her eyes. “That’s Oxford for Law.”

Charlotte quickly swallowed her mouthful of toastie and blurted, “Me too,” accompanied by a crumb.

Oh dear. Her mother would have disapproved of her manners if she’d been there. But she wasn’t. There was just this sparkling woman.

Charlotte spluttered, “We could get tutorials together if you wanted.”

The woman’s eyes pinged wide, “Yeah?” as if she couldn’t believe Charlotte would offer. “You fancy being tutorial buddies?”

Charlotte nodded, mouth still full, keen to partner with this effervescent and irreverent woman, who apparently also wanted to be friends with her – quiet, stumbling Charlotte Albright.

Charlotte cleared her throat and stood straighter, realising the awkwardness. “Erm, I’m sorry.”

“What for?”

“I’m eating your food, and if we’re going to be tutorial partners...” She had no idea what her name was. “You still haven’t introduced yourself.”

The woman’s lips twitched. Charlotte had done it again, sounding so formal compared with the girl, who swiftly dropped a half-eaten toastie, brushed the crumbs off her hands and put back her shoulders.

“Penelope Partridge Pickstock the third. Delighted to meet you, Ms Charlotte Albright,” she said, returning to posh British.

“No, you’re not,” Charlotte said, giggling.

“I beg your pardon.” The woman was pretending to be appalled. “I am genuinely thrilled to make your acquaintance.”

“I meant that you’re not called Penelope...Pick... Thingy.”

The woman threw back her head. “No, I’m not.”

She relaxed the pretension and lapsed back into her faint London accent. “But I could be, Ms Charlotte Albright. This place is ridiculous.” She knuckled her fists onto her hips, the movement done in a blink. “Ever noticed the woman in a black suit hanging around the end of the corridor?”

“No?”

“You will, because she’s the security detail for a princess.”

Charlotte didn’t respond because it was too easy to stare at this woman.

The woman's eyes stretched wide and she added, "We live opposite a real-life princess." She nodded her head to indicate over Charlotte's shoulder and along the corridor.

"Do you mean the girl with long, straight, chestnut hair?" Charlotte came to at last.

"Yes! Gorgeous hair, with brown eyes and lashes to die for. I was chatting with her earlier and her family are real-life Scandinavian royals."

"Wow," Charlotte said, impressed on so many levels.

One, there was an actual princess. You heard about that kind of thing at Oxford, but she didn't think she'd see it.

Two, how nice it would be to talk about a woman like that, complimenting her appearance without a twitch of anxiety.

Three, this woman's confidence. She'd stood in the kitchenette with an attitude that said she talked to everyone like this. Charlotte imagined she introduced herself as easily to the princess. She'd probably offered a cheese toastie. Except that, Charlotte realised, the woman still hadn't introduced herself.

As if reading her mind, the woman relaxed her shoulders, lifted her chin and beamed up at Charlotte, the movement rippling through her golden curls.

"Millie," she said. "I'm Millie Banks."

## Chapter 2

### *Present day*

“Bollocks. We’re late,” Millie said, checking her phone and slipping it into her long coat.

Alec, only a little taller, struggled to keep up and puffed alongside.

“Let’s try to catch them before going into the hall,” Millie said, grabbing a fistful of his suit arm as they scuttled faster down Beaumont Street.

Her heels clacked on the paving stones, the sound echoing around the tall Georgian terrace, as they marched towards Worcester College that stood grand at the end of the street. The Oxford architecture shone at its best in the autumn evening, the low sun bringing out the gold colour of the stone, only ever better against dark skies when storms brewed. Millie was tempted to brush her fingertips along a wall and taste the crumbs to see if they were as biscuity as they looked. It was her favourite time of year with the tourists gone and the city left to the townies, and annoying undergraduates yet to flood the university for the new academic year and Michaelmas Term.

She glanced at Alec. “Stop,” she said, bringing them to a halt. “Come here. Let’s straighten that bow tie.”

Alec rolled his eyes and tipped up his chin, like a child being dressed by a mother.

“Don’t worry, I’m a pro,” Millie said. “You wouldn’t believe the number of men I’ve done this for.”

“I would,” Alec retorted.

“Ha.” Millie drew out. “Look, I’m doing you a favour here.”

“Sorry,” Alec grumbled. “These events make me uncomfortable.”

Millie fumbled around his neck, trying to rescue the mangled tie. “How the hell did you get anywhere without networking?”

“I haven’t,” Alec said. “That’s the point of joining these law groups. But,” he breathed out in a long sigh that wafted Millie’s curls, “I know how it’ll go: ‘Which school, university, firm did you get into?’ Then it’s downhill from there.”

Millie paused and looked into his big, sad eyes. He reminded her of the neighbour’s dog she played with as a kid. “I sympathise, and I’ll help you as much as possible, but I struggle with these elitist groups too.”

He blew out another breath and put back his shoulders. “Thank you for being my guest tonight.” He pursed his lips into the best smile he could manage.

“No worries,” Millie said. “Anyway, I’m doing this for your wife. I wouldn’t wish an evening of lawyers on her. It’s bad enough she has to live with one.”

“You were one, Millie,” he said, with an amused accusation. “You can’t deny it.”



“Exactly. I understand what horrible things they are.”  
She grinned.

“At least it’s not an evening with accountants.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Accountants realise their jobs are dull and don’t insist on talking about work. Whereas lawyers...” She pinched her eyebrows together in concentration as she fanned out the wings of his bow tie.

“There. Perfect.” She looked up at Alec’s pink, dewy face.

“Christ, you’re sweating.”

“That’s because someone frog-marched me here from Carfax.”

“Come here.” She folded out a square of tissue from her coat pocket and dabbed his brow where dark hair thinned at the temple. “There. Dapper again.”

Something caught Alec’s attention over her shoulder. She twirled round to see their reflections staring back from a large townhouse window.

Alec’s mirror image deflated. “I look like a mushroom.”

She threw back her head, laughing. “You kind of do.”

His black suit had disappeared in the dark window, leaving his pale face and receding hairline shining like a button mushroom in beautiful loamy soil.

“I hate these things,” Alec said.

“You’ll be fine,” she replied, then added naughtily. “Come on, fun guy.”

“Oh. Ha. I see what you did there.”

“Am I not delightful?” Millie grinned.

“Yes, you are, but...” He trailed off in a groan.

“This is the best group to meet,” she said. “You need their expertise and recommendation to fund your charity work and, although I hate to admit it, you’ll find some of the sharpest minds at the Law Society and alumni dinners. Now, let’s go.” She offered an arm, and they continued their march down the terrace.

“So,” he said, “tell me about dinner etiquette. After dessert, they serve a decanter of port?”

“Right.” Millie confirmed.

“I fill my glass, then pass the bottle to the left?”

“Right. Sorry, correct. And if they offer a silver bowl of rose water at the end of the meal, do not, I repeat, do not drink it.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s for washing your hands.”

Alec stopped in his tracks. “Why do they do this?”

“Because this is Oxford. And if they can cling to an outdated practice and call it tradition they bloody well will, even though napkins are a thing.”

“It’s a wonder they have electricity.”

“And dinner will be candlelit,” Millie deadpanned.

Alec stared at her, cheeks knotted and jaw jutting. “Do they try to catch people out on purpose, to expose who didn’t study here?”

“That’s why I’m your companion tonight. Because, Alec Gooch, you have twice the intellect and many times the soul of those I met at Oxford. You deserve the best.”

He was better than them all, except one. But Millie batted that niggling reminder away.

They dashed across the road, through the iron gates and ancient doors of Worcester College, beneath the arches of the arcade where they stopped.

“My god,” Alec breathed.

The main quad opened before them. Lush grass sloped into a square of perfect lawn. A row of medieval stone cottages formed the left side of the quad and an imposing North range terrace, the right. Ahead, gates onto expansive grounds, trees and a lake drew the eye into the distance. The mix of styles developed over centuries was part of its charm.

Alec drew breath beside her. “Sometimes, there’s a lot to be said for tradition.”

And Millie smiled. “Yes, there is.”

She couldn’t deny it. The scenery never failed to awe, and Millie’s heart beat quicker at the sight.

“It’s fucking gorgeous, isn’t it,” she said. But there was no sign of dinner guests. “Come on. They must have gone inside.”

They scuttled along the arcade towards the hall. A couple of dons in black gowns accompanying guests in suits disappeared through a doorway ahead of them.

“Quick,” Millie said, pulling Alec. “Find our names on the list.”

She glanced inside the hall, up three long wooden tables that ran the length of the grand room, to the High Table that crossed beneath a large ornate window, then back to the seating plan pinned to the notice stand.

“Gooch and guest, Gooch and guest,” she muttered, running her finger across High Table then down the first long table. “Gooch and...”

She stopped halfway, her finger pointing at swirling ink writing. But the letters didn’t form Alec’s name.

“Charlotte,” she whispered.

“Have you found us?” Alec said, half-distracted and checking the remaining tables.

Millie didn’t speak. She stared at the swirling letters that formed the name “Charlotte Albright”. There she was, after all these years, spelled out in black and white. Millie stood back as if punched in the chest.

“My god.”

She vaguely heard Alec saying, “Have you found... Millie? Are you alright?” And when she didn’t respond, he began to babble. “We’re not listed, are we? Is that the problem? How humiliating.”

Millie slowly came to. “No, no, no,” she interrupted. “It’s not that.”

But it could be humiliating for her. She glanced around the other table lists. “I’m sure we’ll be here somewhere,” she

waved her hand over the sheet of paper.

“Then what is it?”

“A friend’s here,” Millie said, while her heart pounded hard against her chest.

Alec’s shadow fell over the list as he stepped closer to squint at the name. “Charlotte Albright,” he read. “Do you know her from Oxford?”

“I do,” Millie murmured. “I knew her very well.”

“Then you can catch up this evening.” She caught the beam on his face, then the grin fading. “She’s alright, isn’t she? You must have met someone you liked at Oxford.”

Yes, she had. No matter how much she moaned about the institution, Millie had met plenty of individuals she respected. Some incredibly intelligent, others generous human beings and others again an astonishing combination of the two.

“We haven’t seen each other in years,” she said.

“Ah,” Alec said with understanding, which Millie imagined was off the mark. “It’s weird, isn’t it,” he carried on. “You share every waking hour with college friends, every heartache, essay crisis, hangover and embarrassment. Then you scatter across the globe and never see each other again. I haven’t thought of my college buddies for years.”

“Hmm,” Millie said.

It was nothing like that. Not even a little bit. Not when it came to Charlotte. There was plenty to remind Millie of her friend, especially with so many memories around Oxford.

Oh fuck. Millie’s heart beat like a bass drum.

What were the chances she could avoid Charlotte this evening? At the same time, the craving to meet tugged at her. Perhaps they'd notice each other, recognise their older selves and wave across the room as minimal acknowledgement. Then Millie would, as she'd done for years, leave it to Charlotte to make contact.

There, that was a plan.

"Hey, you're in luck," Alec said, pointing at the board. "We're sat near her."

"What?" She shot her eyes to the list of names.

There, on the other side of the long table, in the same swirling ink, were "Alec Gooch" and "guest", bang opposite Charlotte and unavoidably in view.

Her plan fell in tatters.

"So, you'll get a chance to catch up," Alec chirped.

"Looks that way." Millie sighed.

It felt other-worldly stepping into the hall, with the absurd grandeur of the Oxford college and tense anticipation of encountering Charlotte thick in the air. Millie cast her eye to their place settings on the left. The seats were empty and she half hoped Charlotte wouldn't turn up as they stepped further into the echoing chamber. The light was gentle from candelabras, a fire roared in the grand fireplace and candles flickered on the long tables. She gazed around the room, eyes adjusting to the soft glow, then she spotted her.

Tall Charlotte Albright stood turned away, but it was unmistakably her friend. She looked a lawyer from head to toe. In fact, she looked more like her mother, the eminent

Nicola Albright KC, than ever before. Shoulders back and confident. Had her gawky friend turned into that woman after all? Fuller figure, now Charlotte was well beyond her teens. Sleek hair flowed down her back. Charlotte must straighten it these days because it was immaculate. Black dress, but red shoes, the party lawyer tonight. Charlotte would have snorted with a giggle at the observation at one time, but that was unlikely now. In fact, as unlikely as karaoke on High Table.

Shit. Millie wasn't ready for this.

It was exactly how she feared Charlotte would turn out though. The signs were there from the start, Charlotte's family being a stalwart of the educated upper-middle class, part of the system and institution of Britain, and very different from short, curvy Millie who'd felt out of place at Oxford. Millie had only applied because ancient and scary Miss Havers, a temporary teacher at her ordinary comprehensive school, insisted she fill in a form. Millie and her working-class mother would never have tried otherwise.

Wow. It really was Charlotte.

Did anything remain of the wonderfully awkward and amiable nineteen-year-old she'd met in their halls' kitchen, or the twenty-two-year-old she'd last seen over ten years ago, in the assured woman nodding earnestly with a don? Would any version want to talk to Millie?

A tug on her arm disturbed her thoughts.

"What else do I need to know?" Alec said in a harsh whisper. "About this dinner?"

“Oh.” Millie shook her head to dispel her thoughts and they wandered to their places. “It starts with a prayer.”

“Prayer?”

“Yes, in Latin.”

“But I’m not religious,” Alec squeaked. “And I don’t understand Latin.”

“Neither do I.”

“Then what do we do?”

“I don’t know,” she said, still distracted. “Stare reverently at the oil painting of the master.” Millie gestured to a serious man in oils, high on the opposite wall. “I’m not even sure it is a prayer. It might be a warning about invasion by wild boar, but no-one’s thought of changing it for centuries because...”

“Tradition,” they said together.

They laughed from amusement and nerves, the reasons for Alec’s anxiety she imagined very different from hers.



### Chapter 3

That laugh. It caught Charlotte's attention immediately.

One moment she was back-stiff and concentrating on posture, hoping her straightened hair didn't bend out of shape, while also nodding at the jurisprudence don's conversation. She'd been treading a fine professional line between supporting his view or asking questions where she disagreed.

The next, her whole body twitched alert and the don's voice faded away. With the past building behind, her shoulders slumped as she melted into a goofy teen and everything pulled at her to turn round.

Another burst of laughter, musical almost, rang across the hall. She would recognise it anywhere, full of delight and naughtiness and wildly out of place at formal-hall dinner, especially incongruous in this staid bunch of lawyers and old academics. Was it really Millie?

Charlotte twisted her head by degrees to peek over her shoulder. Dark suits and academic gowns filled the room, but there in the middle stood a woman with a shock of blonde hair and a grin that was wide and mischievous. The woman giggled at something the man beside her said, then sloughed off a navy coat to reveal a bright red dress. Scarlet. Of course it was scarlet. And, of course, that dress hugged every curve.

Good god. Millie, after all these years, the same but also not. Her old friend looked more refined than at college. Hair shorter and cut above the collar, the curls swept back in darker waves behind the ears. Face slimmer and more mature, but she was still all curves, rosy cheeks and sparkling

expression. And that laugh. It had never failed to make Charlotte smile. Definitely Millie.

Held breath built in Charlotte's throat and she flailed behind, patting the air several times before clasping Olivia's arm.

"Millie," she managed to murmur.

"Sorry, just a second." Olivia's curtain of straight, black hair swished across her light brown cheeks and neatly along her jawline as she excused herself from a colleague and turned to Charlotte. "Millie?" Olivia snapped. Perfect, velvety eyebrows made a cross, V shape. "Did you call me Millie?"

"God, no," Charlotte said. That would be the worst mistake.

Olivia's lips pinched together, so they became small and irritated.

"She's here," Charlotte managed with a strangled gurgle. "Millie's here. You didn't tell me she was in Oxford."

"Where?" Olivia craned her neck, eyebrows arching to see, then crumpling into annoyance. "Good lord. It is her. I've never seen her at one of these events." She looked at Charlotte. "I would have told you, if I'd known."

"Sorry, of course."

But she couldn't avoid Millie here. Worcester didn't have the largest hall in Oxford. Other colleges had more elaborate versions where she might hide in a corner. And wasn't that the table where Charlotte was seated? In fact, wasn't she going to be directly opposite?

“That’s where you’re sitting, isn’t it?” Olivia said.

Charlotte groaned. “Yes, it is.”

Typical. Her first night in Oxford, with her push to boost a career, buy a home, charge her life with fresh energy and meet those goals, which everyone thought she should have already, and she runs straight into her past and Millie Banks. So much for fresh starts.

“We can swap,” Olivia said. “I’m sat next to the Professor of Legal Philosophy so it won’t be a relaxing evening, but it won’t be Millie.”

“No!” Charlotte blurted.

That would be much worse. She’d have to watch Millie and Olivia circle each other like two cats, backs arched and fur prickled. Although it would be Olivia with fur prickling while Millie taunted her like a cheeky mouse with a hundred lives, forever there to vex her.

“No,” Charlotte said, more tempered. “Thank you for the offer.” But if Millie lived in Oxford, Charlotte would face her at some point.

Did it have to be now though?

“I wonder what she’s doing here,” Olivia continued. “She’s not at any partnerships in the City. Last I heard, she joined a new and expanding firm in London. I don’t recognise the man she’s with either.”

Of course, Millie had male company. Although the man, no taller than Millie, had soft features, a kind smile and looked rather sweet. They had an ease together. Millie rested her hand on his shoulder, whispered into his ear, something

conspiratorial and funny, and the man grinned. He gave the impression of being unassuming, uncomfortable in his present surroundings, but at ease with Millie.

Maybe Millie found someone nice at last. That, Charlotte could be happy about, for Millie's sake she realised with a relieved flood of empathy. If only she didn't simultaneously feel sick.

"High Table are coming," Olivia said. "We'd better get to our places."

The master and important guests emerged through the doorway and Charlotte's heart raced.

"Will you be all right?" Olivia said, her eyebrows tetchy, but Charlotte knew her well enough to catch the genuine concern in her deep brown eyes.

Charlotte breathed in, her chest expanding against the snug body of her evening dress. She breathed out again, as if carefully considering the question.

She still had no idea. Charlotte didn't know if she was anxious about Millie's reaction or more scared of her own.

She went with, "Yes, I'll be fine."

Charlotte wound up the left of the hall. She watched Millie the whole time, her old friend standing behind the bench, back to the wall and facing into the room. She still hadn't spotted Charlotte.

Millie looked well. That was an understatement. She was so blooming and beautiful it was almost rude. Charlotte paused, waiting for the admission to hurt a little. Yes. There it was, that ache inside. Her heart beat faster and her stomach

jumped somewhere near her throat. But those were understandable nerves, surely?

She could do this. Charlotte was a more mature person now, wasn't she? Not the giddy teen who first met Millie and was star-struck by her blazing personality. Millie's energy and irreverence for anything staid about Oxford had been a flame to Charlotte's well-brought-up moth.

Charlotte reached her place and waited in front of the long bench, ready to sit down, arms relaxed but fingers agitating. On the other side, Millie chatted with her male companion and shook hands with the woman next to him, like the consummate extrovert that she was. She clambered over the bench, tight red dress barely stretching over the knees to allow the movement. Millie laughed loudly, throwing back her head, and said something to the woman, probably cursing the long benches in an entertaining way that had everyone chortling.

Charlotte's heart thumped, waiting for the inevitable – the moment when Millie caught her eye. She couldn't miss her. The long tables were narrow and it would take less than a second for Millie to recognise her.

Millie turned, her eyes found Charlotte's and she blinked. A mixture of surprise and hurt played in her expression.

Charlotte breathed in ready to say, what? She'd be polite. Not because of her upbringing. Her family was big on rules, etiquette and not making a fuss. But more important for her was honesty and not being hurtful. Either way, she still didn't know what to say.

Millie seemed as incapable as they stared at each other, two friends, apart for a decade, now with only a metre between them. Millie's mouth opened a fraction, as if lost for words. Then she gathered herself, squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. Her demeanour tightened into a lofty attitude, but naughtiness twitched around her lips and sparkled in her eyes. She struck out her hand across the table, fingers straight and dipped.

“Penelope Partridge Pickstock the third,” Millie said, in crystal-clear pronunciation. “Delighted to make your acquaintance.”

And despite Charlotte's professed maturity, despite years of playing the responsible lawyer, the nerves in her stomach erupted into delighted butterflies.

## Chapter 4

What would Charlotte say? Would it be anything at all?

They stood, Millie holding her arm out rigid, waiting.

Charlotte looked everything she was meant to be. They all did – those proto captains of industry, politicians and lawyers Millie had met at college. Smartly dressed and already successful in their thirties and beyond silly games. Was Charlotte the same? Would the mature lawyer version of her old friend object to her juvenile ploy?

Charlotte frowned at the arm extended across the table. She leaned forward and took Millie's hand, expression still serious.

“Delighted,” Charlotte said, her accent regal and ridiculous. “Ms Charlotte Albright.”

Millie wanted to burst out with laughter. Her friend had joined the game.

Charlotte's delivery and accent were perfect. But those eyes, they glistened with humour. Charlotte never had a poker face and, unable to lie, she'd been bloody hopeless at the game and a royal flush came out in her cheeks whenever she hid a winning hand. She was still in there – that girl who looked like Oxford elite but had a goofy smile and support all day long for Millie Banks from a crappy comprehensive school. Not that Millie would let anyone else call it that.

“What a pleasure to meet you, Penelope,” Charlotte said. “Do you mind if I call you Penelope?”

“Please do,” Millie said, tightening her lips into the absurd accent. “Nothing awful like Pen, or Penny.”

“No, how frightful.”

They were both dying to grin, Millie could tell, but she held the lid on her excitement. “Sometimes I insist on my full title,” Millie continued.

“When? In court?”

“When I don’t like someone.”

Charlotte snorted through her nose, and Millie elated inside. Her friend recovered quickly, but Millie could see her midriff jiggling as Charlotte tried to suppress a belly laugh. Bliss.

Footsteps dragged Millie’s attention from the conversation as the master of college entered the hall. The stooping figure lurched into the room almost completely hidden by his black gown, and other men with grey hair and grey suits followed towards High Table. Shuffling echoed around the chamber, people coming to attention with scrapes of benches on the flagstone floor as they took their seats. Prayer was announced and solemn heads bowed throughout the room, apart from Millie who held up her head with other odd detractors sitting tall, including Alec. Opposite, Charlotte bowed her head, never eager to stand out from the crowd. Another familiar face was less coy. Olivia Sachdeva, on the other side of the room, stared at Millie with shrewd piercing eyes like a hawk.

Interesting.



So Olivia and Charlotte were still in contact. Millie wondered in what capacity and ignored the palpitations when considering the options. The scowl on Olivia's face could mean anything. Should Millie grin and wave? Olivia was unlikely to move at this point while entrees were served; far too perfectly behaved. Perhaps it would be more fun to ignore her and blatantly chat to Charlotte. Of course, it was more fun.

“Forgive me,” Millie said, continuing her play. “My Latin's a little rusty. Would you mind translating the prayer?”

“Oh,” Charlotte said, raising her head now grace was done. She took a moment to stiffen up from her affable self into the haughty character. “I believe it apologises first, for we are all undeserving men thankful to God.”

“Indeed.” Frigging typical.

“And promises that we'll take what God provides soberly and modestly.”

Was that a grin fighting at Charlotte's sealed lips as she glanced down at Millie's dress, which was of course immodest right down into the deep cleavage. Fair enough. They both knew the likelihood of Millie keeping this promise.

“And gratefully,” Charlotte finished.

The last part was manageable. Millie was more than grateful for this chance.

“So,” Millie allowed herself a smile. “Ms Charlotte Albright. Do you work?”

“Would you believe, I'm a lawyer?”

“Good lord. At a Law Society dinner? Who’d have thought.”

Charlotte’s smile was breaking out of her character. “And you? Do you have the misfortune to work?”

“Afraid so,” Millie replied, then she paused. She glanced down and reined in her pretence. “I erm...”

Time for some truths. A confession. She wondered if Charlotte was ready for them to talk to each other, properly.

“Actually.” Millie relaxed her shoulders and slipped into her natural voice. “I’m a physiotherapist.”

“Really? You changed career?” Charlotte blurted. It came out in her normal voice, her accent not so different as Millie’s from the upper-class they’d been playing; more like a BBC presenter’s. “You gave up law and became a physio?”

Millie braced herself for the usual response of disbelief. How could she throw away her degree and training? Why did she quit that high-salary job in the City?

“Yeah. Four years ago,” Millie said. “I left Durnst and came back to study at Oxford Brookes. Just started my first job as a trained physio.” She shrugged and waited for the inevitable.

Charlotte’s eyes stretched wide, but it was excitement that filled them. Thoughts were always obvious in Charlotte’s readable face. “Your mum must be so pleased.”

It was like the past rushed in. With that reference to Millie’s mum, came the full acknowledgement of their deep friendship and familiarity. The surroundings fell away, leaving

only Charlotte across the table, smiling and her face soft in candlelight.

Charlotte's shoulders dipped and her whole demeanour dropped out of artificial character, into the good person Millie recognised.

"Belinda must be so proud," she said.

Charlotte put her hand on the table and suddenly she was every inch that goofy girl Millie met in college. Her friend bent forward, like she always had, a familiar habit from their difference in height, but the effect intimate. Millie had always found it endearing. And the artifice of their game melted away as their history bled into the room.

"She is." Millie put her hand on the table to mirror Charlotte's. "She's really pleased."

"Your mum always said you were wasted on the law." Charlotte said it with no irony, even though she likely worked for a prestigious law firm. "I remember sitting with her by the river, end of the first year, while you packed to go home."

The generosity with which Charlotte recalled Millie's mother filled the gap between them with so much warmth Millie felt her cheeks glowing.

"She hoped you weren't too bogged down in books," Charlotte continued. "Because you were always best with people. And she was right. You were good with everyone. You nattered with the scouts, flirted with the master, had the porters wrapped around your little finger."

Charlotte's face. Millie gazed at the broad mouth and smile that lit up the room. She'd missed that.

“I didn’t charm everyone,” Millie said quickly, to hide how wonderful it was hearing Charlotte say that. But a reminder of the fact scowled across the hall. She was tempted to waft a gracious wave in Olivia’s direction.

“You could charm anyone when you wanted.” Charlotte’s tone turned censorious. “You just enjoyed winding some people up, that’s all.”

“Ha!”

“It’s true!”

No point denying it, she supposed, not to Charlotte who’d known everything about her. Lovely Charlotte.

The smile had crept back onto Charlotte’s face, her cheeks flushed again, and Millie was compelled to lean forward. Because Charlotte was one of the few people familiar enough with Millie and her mum to appreciate the career change, even if she didn’t know what triggered it. Finding Charlotte again was like discovering a pot of gold in the room, rich and shining. A side of Millie’s life came into vivid bloom, leaving her whole, more secure, more...happy. Millie looked at their hands on the table, reaching towards each other, the gap between them small and tempting.

The clink of a plate beside her and the chink of cutlery signalled the arrival of food. Millie pursed her lips in acknowledgement, regretfully withdrew her hand and sat back to allow the first course to be served.

The man sitting next to Charlotte pounced into conversation and she, being Charlotte, politely entertained him for a course. Alec was engrossed with the woman beside him.

Millie hoped she was a good connection and stared at the paintings on the wall, her vision blurring as she tried not to look as if she followed Charlotte's every word.

It was difficult not to dwell and appreciate the changes in her friend, and all that remained the same. Charlotte stroked her hair behind an ear in a movement that was utterly her. The curl of thumb as she pinched a ribbon of hair, the stroke behind an ear with a little finger, all in a smooth movement and a little self-conscious and inelegant. It was so familiar that a swell of affection rose and Millie had to swallow. She looked away, not wanting to stare or be overwhelmed by it.

"Are you enjoying it?" a voice intruded later.

Millie refocussed to find Charlotte gazing at her and broke into a grin at her friend starting conversation again

Charlotte clarified, "Your new career?"

"Yes, I am," Millie said. "It's bloody hard. And I'm skint after paying for another degree, but..."

She hesitated. Did Charlotte want to hear, or was her old friend being polite? But there she was, brown eyes intent on Millie's, head forward, listening.

"I love it," Millie said. "Patients are fun and the work challenging. Then getting people back on their feet, sometimes literally, is incredibly rewarding."

"You are so good with people, Millie. I bet you're a brilliant physio."

The compliment, genuine and generous, from someone who knew her well, walloped her. Millie swallowed over the lump in her throat. Maybe it was from the heart-felt comment.

Perhaps emotions welled up at seeing the friend she'd lost. Or was it fear that this glimpse was all she'd have of Charlotte, then she'd be gone for another ten years?

Millie had missed this. She had really missed this.

A silence settled.

“Do you want to...?” Millie started.

No. Charlotte had to be the one to decide whether to meet again. Charlotte's crooked eyebrows, raised and alarmed, said she agreed. It's like she pleaded with Millie not to ask, because she would say no.

Millie breathed out. “Do you want some water?”

Charlotte nodded and bit her lip, perhaps grateful that Millie hadn't asked what she'd intended.

A waiter poured red wine for Millie to accompany the main course, and Charlotte covered her glass to say no. Millie filled Charlotte's tumbler from a carafe of water, her friend taking a sip without pause then saying thank you. It was a familiar act – Charlotte hardly ever drank.

“How is your mum?” It wasn't casually asked. “How *is* your mum?” Charlotte had said, genuinely interested.

“She's great.” Millie grinned. “She's in Northern Ireland now. Took up with a new fella.”

“Good for her.”

“He's super actually. And I'm glad she was with someone these past few years. It's been difficult.” Millie paused then made herself say, “We videocall all the time now.”

“I'm glad she's well. Will you send her my love?”

“Of course.”

Charlotte’s face slipped for a moment. Perhaps they’d overstepped the mark. If Millie passed on her regards, it would acknowledge they’d met, and questions would start.

“No, erm,” Charlotte hesitated. “Please do. I adore your mum.”

The feeling had been mutual. Belinda had loved Charlotte most out of Millie’s friends.

“I always loved her visiting halls,” Charlotte said. “Do you remember the time she arrived wearing the same top as you, even though you hadn’t seen her in ages?”

“The silly pink sweatshirt with the cute bears and hearts?”

“That’s the one. Except yours had ‘I love my mum’ and hers ‘I love my daughter’.”

Millie laughed, fortunately, because it hid how wonderful it was seeing her friend and that beautiful Charlotte smile. The one where her eyes creased and glistened with tears, her eyelashes somehow seemed longer and inkier, and pink flushed on her olive cheeks. Millie always found that smile infectious and felt her own cheeks rise as she filled with affection.

She almost blurted a reminder that Belinda had later bought that silly sweatshirt for Charlotte, except it said, “I love my best friend”.

“And your folks?” Millie said instead, eager to keep the conversation going.

“They’re good considering these tough years. A few changes, but we’re all still here.”

“Good. I’m really glad to hear it.”

The room melted away again, leaving Charlotte in candlelight. She was still the same woman, only different in ways that were perfect. A few more freckles across the nose, pale olive skin a little more tanned at this moment. Were her lips fuller or more shapely? Millie couldn’t tell. But Charlotte wore maturity well, like she came into her own the further she travelled from awkward teenage years.

“You look great,” Millie murmured. “Really great.”

She wondered if it made Charlotte uncomfortable, but her friend smiled. “Thank you.”

That was even better. That she felt positive enough about Millie to take a compliment after what had happened. A flutter of hope tickled inside Millie’s chest.

“I should have wondered if you’d come back to Oxford.” Charlotte said it quietly, the conversation more serious suddenly.

“Everyone seems to return, don’t they,” Millie said.

People had a habit of coming back to Oxford, grasping for what they’d had in the past in an ancient place that stayed the same. A new wave of students crashed and broke over the city every year, like tides leaving different remnants on the shore, but similar remnants on the same shore.

“I assumed you’d be miles from here,” Charlotte said. “You were always ambivalent about the place.”



Millie shook her head. “Never thought I’d come back.” It was true, she’d been in two minds. If it hadn’t been for meeting Charlotte, she might not have stayed a week at university. “But I loved many things too.”

“Really?” Charlotte wrinkled her nose.

“Of course. You can have reservations about places, but still love them. Same with people. They have faults and can drive me bonkers, but I still want them in my life.”

Charlotte twitched.

Shit. What Millie said was tactless and the air between them cooled. It was the slightest change in Charlotte’s attitude, too subtle for anyone else to notice, but glaring to Millie.

Too late, all the meaning in what she’d said tumbled through her head. The words resonated with their past and were a step and allusion too far. She sat back to allow a waiter to take her plate and wished away what she’d said.

But the encounter was changed, the rekindled connection fading with every second, so that Millie wanted to lunge out to save it but had no idea how.

Buzzing on the table distracted them both. Charlotte frowned at her phone and swiped away a notification.

“Excuse me a minute,” Charlotte said, without catching Millie’s eye. She rose, stepped over the bench and left for the other side of the hall.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Millie said under her breath.

“Hey.” A nudge on her arm came from Alec. “How’s it going?”

Millie wanted to kick herself. It had been going brilliantly.

“You were going great guns catching up.”

“Yes, it was good.” Millie wanted to sink into the ground.

“Who’s that she’s with?”

Alec peered in the direction Charlotte left. Millie resisted, not wanting to be caught doing the same, and suggested, “A woman?”

“Yeah.”

“Tall, razor-sharp bob, brown skin?”

“Uh huh.”

“Mouth tight and expression like she’s just seen a turd?”

“Err, well now that she’s looking at you, yes.”

Arse.

“That’s Olivia from a couple of years ahead at St Hilda’s. She was Charlotte’s college mother.”

“Excuse me, what?”

Alec screwed up his nose in absurd disbelief. The man was another like Charlotte who could never hide his thoughts, which was why he made a terrible lawyer, or not a rich one.

Millie sighed. “We were assigned college parents from the second and third years when we arrived as freshers. You know, an older student to introduce us to college.”

Alec stared at her. “They couldn’t think of a less disturbing or infantilising way to welcome you?”

“This is Oxford. Of course it’s archaic and faintly disturbing.”

“Well.” He gazed in the direction of Charlotte and Olivia. “Mother is not impressed.”

Arse, again.

“In fact, I don’t think mother approves of you at all.”

Nothing new there, but Millie didn’t need the death stare right now and kept her eyes directed at the table.

“Wait,” Alec said. “Did you say Olivia? That’s not Olivia Sachdeva is it?”

“Erm, why?”

“Olivia Sachdeva? Family law specialist?”

“Makes sense,” Millie grumbled. “I’m sure she enjoys tearing families apart.”

“Millie?”

“Sorry, that was catty.”

“Millie, tell me you’re not enemies.”

“Oh. Is she important?”

“Tell me you didn’t sleep with her husband or boyfriend.”

No, but the odd girlfriend of hers may have had a crush on Millie. She didn’t know if Olivia was ‘out’ publicly, so didn’t say.

Then, “Hey, you’re better than that.” Millie batted his arm. “You know I never got involved with anyone in a monogamous relationship.”

He nodded to acknowledge her point. “Sorry. You’re right. But, please don’t tell me that you’re enemies with the one person I’d pinned my hopes on.”

That was unfortunate.

“I wouldn’t say *enemy* as such.”

But yes.

Charlotte didn’t return for the next course. Millie sat eating Eton mess with bad vibes stabbing at her from the other side of the room. She wondered if Charlotte and Olivia were together. One look across the hall might answer that, but she didn’t risk it.

She’d always suspected that Olivia had the hots for Charlotte, so it wouldn’t surprise her. But Charlotte? Was she interested that way in Olivia? If so, that would be the final nail in the coffin of being friends again. The thought made her nauseous. They hadn’t seen each other for years, but Millie always nursed a nugget of hope, a small flame, that they’d be friends again.

Coffees were served and guests were leaving. Millie put on her coat and shuffled her bottom to swing legs over the bench.

“Hey,” Millie heard, and she snapped to attention, recognising Charlotte’s voice.

Charlotte’s face was almost neutral. That was the most generous way Millie could describe it. The previous warmth

and familiarity had disappeared, and the old hurt returned rippling beneath a polite guard.

That was it. Millie had been allowed a glimpse of their friendship this evening, but that would be all.

“I’m heading off,” Charlotte said.

“Us too,” Millie replied.

Charlotte nodded, her mouth open as if to say something, then she closed it without a word.

“So, we’re both in Oxford again,” Millie offered, hoping to tease out conversation.

“Yes.” Charlotte nodded. “Perhaps I’ll see you around.”

“Maybe we’ll bump into each other?”

“Maybe.”

But there was no suggestion of making it happen. Millie wanted to offer her number, just in case, but she’d offered that before. She breathed out in a sigh, too audibly, so that Charlotte bit her lip in discomfort.

“OK,” Millie said, accepting their status. This was all they’d have.

“Goodbye, Millie,” Charlotte said quietly, and she turned and left.

Her old friend joined Olivia and walked out of the door, a strange, unexpected sight that left Millie feeling as desolate as years before, and the whole evening seemed a cruel reminder of what they’d had, and what she’d lost.

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## Chapter 5

### *First year university, thirteen years ago*

A loud, very suggestive moan reached Charlotte from down the corridor.

“Millie,” she muttered.

She rolled her eyes, shook her head with a smile and carried her cheap-cheese toastie from the kitchen to her room, closed the door and dropped onto the bed.

She could still hear the moan. Impressive through two sets of doors and above the crunch of sandwich. Millie had zipped through several men already this term, but she was usually more subtle about it.

Charlotte’s phone buzzed through her bottom on the mattress and lit up with a notification. She sighed and wondered if that was the extent of sexual thrills she’d enjoy at Oxford.

She tapped the message open and read, “Wanna know something interesting?”

From Millie. When did she send it? Charlotte wrinkled her nose, not wanting to reply mid whatever her friend was doing. But another message followed saying, “that noise isn’t me!”

Charlotte dropped her sandwich and snatched up the phone. “What?!” she typed. Then added, “Are you sure?”

“I didn’t stop mid hump to text!”

Charlotte padded to the door. She opened it a crack, stuck out her head and found Millie doing the same, her mass of blonde curls poking from the next room. They both froze and listened. Then Millie's mouth dropped as she pointed to the door opposite.

“The princess?” Charlotte whispered.

“The princess!” Millie mouthed back with exaggerated shock.

Millie ran on tiptoes from her room, and before Charlotte could react, she'd grabbed her and pulled her inside. Millie pressed an ear against the closed door.

“Stop it!” Charlotte whispered. “How would you like it if...”

She trailed off. As if Millie would care. She wasn't listening anyway, to Charlotte that was.

“Is it the princess though?” Millie asked. She quirked her top lip in confusion. “Doesn't sound right.”

“Come away from the door.” Charlotte tugged at her friend, trying not to giggle.

“Nawww, spoilsport,” Millie moaned. “I'm sure you all do the same when it's me.”

“No, we don't. We mind our own business.”

“Really?”

“Actually,” Charlotte stared confused towards the sounds, “you're never that loud.”

Millie only pressed closer to the door. “I wonder how she sneaked him past the security detail? They're not meant to



leave her alone with a man. Wouldn't want someone random fathering the next-in-line, would we."

Charlotte noticed the lack of moaning at the same time as Millie, both staring at the ceiling, the silence so complete that when a door clicked open in the corridor the sound was enormous and they jumped.

Millie laughed out loud.

"Stop it," Charlotte whispered harshly, and she covered her friend's mouth, which only made Millie giggle more.

Voices mumbled outside and a door shut. She listened, still attempting to gag Millie, as the conversation receded along the corridor.

"Let me look," Millie said, muffled beneath Charlotte's fingers.

"OK. Just a peek." Because she always gave in to Millie.

She watched as Millie opened the door with exaggerated care then poked her head above Millie's around the edge. Two women walked towards the end of the corridor, the princess with her long straight hair over her shoulders, swaying with the movement, the other with a shorter style. They held hands and smiled at each other. They smiled a lot.

Oh god.

Charlotte winced at what was coming.

Millie hunched rigid with restrained hysteria and when she pulled inside and spun round, it was with pursed lips and cheeks blown out, desperate to burst.

The cold dread settling in Charlotte's stomach couldn't be more different. She backed into the room, heart thudding. She waited for Millie's reaction to become verbal and willed her own cheeks to stay a shade cooler than the centre of the Earth.

Here it came. Millie inhaled with a whoosh of air, and with purring accusation, said, "Prrrrincesssssss." She threw back her head, laughed out loud and collapsed onto the bed. "Oh my god," she said. "That's hilarious."

"Why?" Charlotte replied. She swallowed and remained standing. "Why's it so funny?" A small wobble intruded on her voice.

Millie snorted and clutched her belly, before sitting up and wiping her eyes. "Birgitta said her family weren't keen on her studying abroad unless she had a bodyguard practically in her room. They wanted to keep her closer to home."

"Oh?"

"They were happier with our women-only college."

"It's changing soon though," Charlotte said, aware that wasn't the point.

"But at least she starts," Millie sat rigid and put on an uptight accent, "in the hallowed confines of ladies."

Charlotte tightened her lips, keeping everything inside, while Millie stared at her.

"They sent her to a single-sex college to avoid sex!" Millie said, expecting Charlotte to laugh at the punchline. "And all the while, she was interested in women." She threw

her hands in the air. “This place must be crawling with lesbians.”

Charlotte crossed her arms and hugged herself. She stared down at her thick socks, curling then uncurling her toes. It was very quiet.

“Charlotte?”

She bunched her toes tighter. The subject was bound to come up, and she’d sworn to be honest with Millie when the time came.

“Are you...?”

Charlotte straightened her toes. “Gay.” She looked up and shrugged. “Yes, I’m a lesbian.”

“Really?” Millie replied. The surprise was obvious, but a smile lingered and her expression remained open.

“Yes, I am,” Charlotte said.

“Are you like...out and stuff?”

“I told my parents before I came here.” She shrugged again.

“That...” Millie stood up and walked closer. Charlotte squeezed her own arms tighter in defence and braced against a hurtful reaction. But Millie finished with, “That’s so cool.”

Millie wore the warmest, most gentle smile Charlotte had seen on her friend’s face. No hint of hilarity at Charlotte’s expense. No confusion. Only the welcome of something unexpected.

She let Millie guide her, and they sat on the bed side by side. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realise.”

“Well.” Charlotte tried to make light, but she’d only come out to a handful of people, and it still felt enormous. “I haven’t told anyone at university. I’ve never had a girlfriend, so it seems a bit academic. But I know I’m gay.”

God, did she know. That she leapt through rings of fire for L Word DVDs said she knew. How every poster on her wall displayed women said so, and probably gave everyone else a big hint too.

“I’m sure.”

“That’s so good,” Millie said. “If you know, you do. I clicked way before I jumped into the sack that I’m into fellas. That didn’t happen by accident.”

Still cautious, Charlotte gazed into Millie’s eyes. They sparkled with an intensity that showed she listened. Her reaction was a relief, but Charlotte had expected it oddly. This loud and unapologetic girl who was so blatantly heterosexual. Was that what bound them so quickly, neither of them being the acceptable norm?

Then Millie’s smile turned naughty.

Oh god. What was coming.

“Charlotte Albright,” Millie said, with accusation. “Did you break your mother’s heart, spurn her college of choice and apply to a women-only version, just so you could get laid?”

“No!” Charlotte nudged her. “I didn’t.”

Millie raised her eyebrows.

“I bloody didn’t.”

“If you’re swearing, I’ve hit a nerve.”

Damn it. Millie already knew her that well after a few weeks. “I would like a girlfriend,” Charlotte said.

Millie nodded, her expression earnest. She was so taking the mick.

“A meaningful relationship,” Charlotte insisted, a pitch higher.

Millie’s mouth twitched in the corner.

“And yes, it would be nice to have sex at some point,” came out in frustration.

Her nineteenth birthday flew by before term started, and she felt the pressure of years and the craving. She’d thought about it often. So often. What it would be like to touch someone and be touched.

“No shame in that.” Millie grinned. “Well, Ms Charlotte Albright, if getting action is your priority, what’s your plan?”

Her heart motored and she couldn’t decide if she was hot or cold with embarrassment. Millie hadn’t skipped a beat. In fact, she seemed fascinated and was scheming already.

“Where have you tried to meet women?” Millie pressed.

“Erm.” Oh dear. Millie would not be impressed by this. “Ballroom dancing club?” Charlotte suggested. That she said it as a question acknowledged just how weak it was.

Millie didn’t dignify it with a response.

“What’s wrong with that?” Charlotte said.

“You won’t bloody meet lesbians at ballroom dancing club.”

“Why? There are more women members than men. I’m always having to pair up with a girl.”

“I bet it’s full of uptight grammar-school girls.”

“What’s wrong with that? I’m an up-” Charlotte gathered herself. “I’m a grammar-school girl.”

“Exactly. You’ll refuse to look at each other for months.” Millie stiffened her lips and pulled back her shoulders into an absurd conversation. “Hello Charlotte.” She tilted her head the other way. “Hello Penelope. Would you like to play polo on my new pony? No, thank you. But I’ll shake your hand when we’re better acquainted.”

“Some people were...” Charlotte started out indignantly but lowered her voice. “Some girls were at it constantly at school.”

“What? Shagging like rabbits?”

“No. I mean, yes,” Charlotte flustered. “Besides, everyone loves ballroom dancing after *Strictly*. Not just boarding and grammar-school girls.”

“They might, but they weren’t fast-tracked to Oxford.” Millie considered her a moment. “There’s the LGBT Soc. Are you a member?”

No, she wasn’t. That was too many steps at once – joining the society and being out, forever, always, to everyone and everywhere. She’d be an exhibit, a statue on a column, for people to stare at and point. Palpitations fluttered and her breathing escalated.

“I take that as a ‘no’.” Millie gave her a reassuring squeeze.

“I’m not quite ready for everyone at college to know. Not until...you know.”

“You’ve...?”

“Got a girlfriend and have...” Charlotte nodded towards nowhere in particular, hoping Millie would get there.

“Done it?”

“Exactly.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s not a prerequisite for joining.”

“I know.” Charlotte tutted. “But I want to be less clueless before I join an actual club.”

Millie beamed. “Maybe they have a novice’s group.”

“Shut up.” But Charlotte’s cheeks twitched. Millie always brought her round with humour.

Millie sat up straight. “Then we have no other option.”

“What do you mean?” What did adventurous Millie Banks have in mind now?

“Gay bar!” Millie sang in delight. “I’ve always wanted to go to one, and now I can. In fact, it’s my public duty.” She linked her arm through Charlotte’s. “We are going in search of lesbians. Non-college dykes. Until you throw off your virginal shackles and gain your Level One Lesbian badge.”

Charlotte giggled, impossible not to with Millie, and she counted herself lucky again that she’d met her friend in the

kitchen that day. Then her heart thumped and a flood of fear washed the humour away.

“Oh god.”

“Look, if you’re that desperate, I can frisk you down,” Millie said, as if the most ridiculous suggestion.

But Charlotte nearly blurted out, “Yes!”

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So was that it, Millie wondered. Was being gay what made statuesque Charlotte Albright bow her shoulders, where others stood so bloody tall and straight?

Oxford was a slap around the face for Millie, a reality check about how the world works and who owns it. She’d arrived on the bus, while other students pulled up in family SUVs, as opposed to father’s car, or mother’s smaller city number. And they called their parents by first names, or mother, father, mama, even pater in irony, anything but plain old “mum”. Predominantly confident white teens who wore shirts and chinos, the boys omitting the tie and rolling up sleeves as a concession to casual, a foreign uniform compared with the kids Millie had grown up with. Her friends would gawp at the place.

Many of the freshers had attended the same schools as second and third years and were welcomed into select societies before Millie even heard they existed. There was the private school tier and landed gentry, including those who insisted they weren’t rich but owned a family castle – and Millie was



still in shock that they meant an actual castle. They came knowing Latin and how to row in an eight.

Charlotte came from the grammar-school tier, institutions that required an entrance exam and confident in Oxford as a meritocracy and their place in it. But Charlotte didn't share their arrogance. Did queerness make her stall, wriggle in her mould, and leave her open to being friends with little Millie Banks from an ordinary comprehensive, who could be a right pain in the arse by her own admission and her mother's.

"Come on, lanky," Millie said. "It's somewhere past the Westgate." And Millie linked her arms through Charlotte's because they were already that comfortable with each other.

From the college porter's lodge, they turned towards the centre of Oxford, across Magdalen bridge and past the rich college and its chapel tower, the stone glowing in the bright frosty day.

"Let's take the back route," Charlotte stuttered, words rapid as she hauled Millie off the main road.

Millie let her. Charlotte knew all the interesting twists and turns of Oxford, but she suspected her friend of delaying tactics. She gave her tall best buddy a squeeze of encouragement and Charlotte returned a grin, one on the edge of hysteria.

She stayed quiet while Charlotte led them down the narrow lane by the Botanic Gardens out into the green of Christ Church Meadow. Towering trees lined the path to the river and boat houses, longhorn cattle grazed in pasture, and ornate college buildings stood to the right of the broad path. It

was difficult to believe she was a few minutes' walk from a city centre. Millie breathed in with long satisfaction through her nose. Sometimes Oxford was flipping magical and she appreciated the privilege of being there.

Beside her, Charlotte huffed and puffed, clearly with many thoughts. Only a sigh made it out loud, but it gibbered with anxiety.

“You’ve nothing to worry about,” Millie said, giving her another squeeze.

Charlotte nodded. “Of course. Why would I worry? First time at a gay bar. Absolutely not obvious I’ve never had a girlfriend. Not going to be eaten alive. Totally fine. Totally. Oh my god I can’t do this.” She stopped dead in her tracks. “There must be another way to meet women,” she said in a tumble of words.

“No, there isn’t.” Millie smiled. They’d been through this several times. “Not real-life lesbos who want your bod.”

That was apparently the wrong thing to say. Millie could almost hear Charlotte’s heart rate rocket.

“How do you do it?” Charlotte said.

“What?”

“Meet men,” Charlotte added, eyebrows reaching desperate heights. “You never search for them.”

Millie giggled despite herself. She shook her head at her very clever, very ignorant friend. “I work behind a bar in the evenings. Have you any idea how many offers a busty barmaid gets?” She gestured to her chest, which was a couple of sizes more than average.

Sometimes she wondered who was the more innocent abroad of the two – Charlotte, from her prestigious school, who'd never had a girlfriend, or the otherwise worldly Millie plunged into these strange, privileged waters.

“Men are easy.” Millie shrugged. “They’re everywhere. In lectures, the hairdressers. Oxford’s full of male students who want to get laid.”

“And that,” Charlotte’s voice notched higher. “How do you do that?”

“What?”

“Just...just...fall into bed with them.”

“I don’t fall.” Millie grinned, knuckled her fists onto her hips and growled lustfully, “I leap in and pull them with me.”

Charlotte’s eyes popped. “Don’t you find it intimidating? Getting to know someone. Deciding if they’re right for you.” There was a lot of irate hand waving. “Getting...personal.”

“But that’s part of the thrill.” Millie wiggled her hips.

She smirked, picturing that first connection across a room. The second look of appreciation. The flirty to and fro as expectations notched higher. The anticipation of taking them home and unwrapping a new, sexy lover. It was exhilarating. Addictive.

“I love it turning physical with someone I fancy, and if we don’t work well, or get bored, I move on,” Millie said.

Charlotte swallowed visibly. “I can’t do that. Wish I was made that way.”

“Do you?” Millie would put money on Charlotte wanting to meet The One, and The One only.

“It sounds so easy and carefree.”

“Everyone has their own needs. There’s no point craving anything else.” Really why would anyone? Millie had enough of her own to indulge.

“Is that all you want though?” Charlotte asked. Genuine incomprehension crinkled her brow. “Don’t you want something longer term? Love?”

“Not really,” Millie said. And when she thought about it more, nope, still not bothered. “People get so wound up about finding this one big love. If it doesn’t happen,” she shrugged, “then it doesn’t happen. It took decades for my mum, and she still takes things lightly, so why would it be different for me?”

Charlotte remained beautifully perplexed.

“Besides,” Millie added. “I’m nineteen. I have no intention of ruining college with a clingy boyfriend. So, bring me all the men who want to have fun please.”

And fun is how she intended to keep it. She’d seen enough friends and their lovers made miserable and jealous. Millie couldn’t see the point. Yes, if a fling ended before she was ready, it hurt, but it was nothing a new lover couldn’t fix.

She tugged her friend and they wandered along the broad walk, Millie smiling at the meadows and cows, past a scattering of tourists enjoying the bright day, Charlotte

scowling at the ground, the last making Millie smile with affection most.

“Don’t you want to know the men you sleep with?” Charlotte asked.

“Of course,” Millie replied. “I do talk to them, Charlotte.” She nudged her friend. “I’m friends with loads afterwards.”

“Don’t you date first?”

“Maybe one or two times. That can be enough either way. I need to make sure I can trust them. I won’t hook up with anyone anonymous. I feel safer that way. That’s just me.”

Charlotte looked shell-shocked. This needed a softer approach.

“So,” Millie said gently, “how many dates would you need before things got physical?”

“I don’t know. Fifty?”

Millie stopped and laughed. She had to hug her friend because, of course, it would take that long for Charlotte.

“You don’t have to sleep with anyone,” Millie said. Maybe Charlotte was made that way. “There’s no law, just other people’s expectations. When it comes to sex, what kind and how much, it’s entirely up to you.”

Millie enjoyed that aspect most about her many lovers, how different they all were.

Charlotte looked at her in a way that communicated that she very much wanted sex, but for god’s sake, she wasn’t Millie, so don’t make her say it out loud.

“The desire,” Charlotte knotted her jaw, “is there, believe me,” and she made a slicing motion with her hands to cut off any retort.

“OK,” Millie said. “Understood. So.” She drew a small foil packet from inside her coat. “This is your first time out. And we’re only checking out the place and chatting to the crowd. But, in case a miracle happens, and it doesn’t take fifty dates, I got you these.”

She passed the packet to Charlotte who squinted at it.

“Dental dams,” her guileless friend read out loud, which made Millie’s eyebrows shoot skywards. Charlotte flipped over the packet. “What are they for? Your teeth?”

Millie snorted. “Easy tiger.” She took the packet back. “Don’t worry. I’ve got another.” She pinched the end of the wrapper, tore it open and pulled the small stretchy sheet from inside. “It’s to put over your bits, like a condom for women.”

“But... What...?”

“Like this.” Millie planted her feet apart and stretched the material over her jeans. A couple of tourists walked past, giggling.

“I mean, but why?” Charlotte said.

“To stop STDs.”

Charlotte’s expression was as blank as a virginal bedpost.

“You know.” Millie stood with the material stretched over her groin. “For when someone licks your bits.”

The blush on Charlotte's cheeks was quick and spectacular.

"Too much?" Millie asked.

"It's all too bloody much."

And now Charlotte had turned green.

"Whoa, come here lady." Millie grabbed Charlotte's arm and guided her to a bench. "You should sit down. You're too tall to faint from that height."

Her friend still looked peaky.

"Put your head down."

Charlotte dropped her head between her knees and long hair tumbled to the ground. "I don't feel well," came mumbled from beneath the flowing locks. "I'm not ready for this. There's so much to learn."

"That's OK." Millie shuffled next to her and rubbed her back. "Everyone starts off that way."

"I've no idea how to do it."

"Soon, you'll have someone else's head between your knees to show you."

There was a yelp.

"Too much again?" Millie drew air whistling between her teeth.

Charlotte's hair undulated in waves and Millie guessed she nodded upside down.

"Anyway," Millie said, trying to think of something reassuring. "I bet it's easier with women. You have the same

body type for a start. Everyone's different, but there's a lot shared between two women, and you know your body and how it works and..." She gazed at Charlotte, her lovely, hopelessly naïve friend. "You... You are familiar with how your own body works?"

Charlotte's reaction was swift. An arm shot up, fingers pointing up and palm towards Millie, in an abrupt instruction to 'stop right there'.

Millie beamed. "See, you're most of the way already."

Charlotte threw her hair back and sat up. Her cheeks flushed pink then receded to their usual colour. "It's not worth it."

"Of course it is."

"Not this much anxiety."

Millie agreed but didn't want to say so.

Charlotte appealed up to the sky with her hands in the air. "Why did I have to be a lesbian?!"

An old couple, shuffling past, raised their eyebrows but didn't offer an answer.

Apparently too exasperated to notice the old couple, Charlotte asked. "Have you ever been attracted to girls?" Charlotte wrinkled her nose. Millie loved that expression of confusion on her friend.

"Me?" Millie said, genuinely surprised. "No, thank god."

"That's not helping," Charlotte said. Her pitch climbed to desperate.



“I don’t think ‘ugh’ or anything stupid,” Millie added to console her. “But it’s harder. As I said, men are easy and everywhere, so why would I think about it?”

And she hadn’t really considered it. Yes, women were soft and pretty. And she admired many. But to fancy? To crave like Charlotte did? Millie pouted her lips, thinking about it.

“I suppose, if I was a lesbian, I’d go for someone like Sandra Bullock or Julia Roberts.”

Charlotte gave her a look. “Because these are my options.”

This was another thing Millie had noticed about Charlotte. Usually good-natured, when pushed too far, she’d turn a little grumpy and the sass would come out. It made Millie adore her even more. She found it highly entertaining, though she tried not to enjoy it too much, or annoy her friend on purpose.

“Honestly.” Charlotte rolled her eyes.

“Come on.” Millie shoved her friend with a shoulder. “You’ll attract a stunning lady.”

Millie gazed at her friend with mahogany hair and shades of auburn that shimmered in the spring sunlight. Charlotte’s neat, long nose. The soft dark eyebrows – distinctive and curved. A sprinkle of freckles across her nose. That generous mouth, wider than average, which lent her a wonderful smile.

“You’re beautiful, Charlotte Albright. You’ll have them swarming.”

Charlotte scowled.

Millie laughed.

“Come on, gorgeous. Let’s go snag a Julia Roberts.”

And Millie took an arm, hauled her friend up and they set off for Charlotte’s first ever gay bar.

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## Chapter 6

### *Present day*

“Millie, Millie, Millie,” Charlotte muttered as she strolled down Beaumont Street, central Oxford, to her new law practice.

She inhaled through her nostrils, trying to clear her old friend from her mind and appreciate the fresh September morning. Very noisily apparently as several people in the street turned to look at her.

The sun blazed in a blue sky and the cool autumn air vitalised her cheeks. This grand view would be hers every morning, with the gothic towers of the Randolph Hotel one side and the limestone columns of the Ashmolean Museum the other. Her eyes swiftly moved over Worcester College at the end. No need to dwell on that blip in the perfection since Friday’s encounter with a certain person that she was trying to block from her mind.

“Millie,” she murmured. Again. The woman who was there for her from coming out to cramming for finals, through broken hearts and budget food.

Friday had been a shock but it hadn’t been awful. Charlotte waited for the pang in her chest. There it was, but gentle. She nodded and pursed her lips, acknowledging it wasn’t so bad.

She’d missed the girl who said she was cool for coming out to her parents. Because cool is not what sprung to mind about Charlotte to anyone, including her. And it was

almost therapeutic reliving the memories, those building blocks of who she was. Hearing Millie's mum was well somewhere in the world also made it a better place.

She heard herself sigh loudly, and a man walking in the opposite direction frowned, because for a quiet person Charlotte had a habit of thinking very loudly.

“Hmm,” she said, at her thoughts.

Perhaps enough time had elapsed and she was mature enough to accept Millie Banks. They'd sat a small distance apart, able to acknowledge their friendship. Years had passed, their slimmer faces and slicker clothes said as much, and Millie's presence was no longer raw. They were different people now.

And what were the chances they'd bump into each other anyway?

Not negligible in Oxford. There were plenty of common draws in the centre of the historic town. And it wasn't the biggest city either. Every few months? Charlotte could cope with that. If she kept her emotional distance, she would be fine. She sliced the air with her hand in determination.

So, her new start wasn't as clean cut as she'd hoped, but perhaps sorting old baggage was healthy. She lifted her chin and marched down the street.

She paused halfway down at the grand doorway to Bentley and Partners. A brass wall plaque with the practice name shone beside the entrance, and she reached out and stroked it with pride. Except it left a fingerprint. Then another

when she tried to rub that. Then a smudge when cleaning those with her sleeve.

“Good morning,” a rich, cheerful voice said, and Charlotte snapped her gaze away from her handiwork.

A woman, with black curly hair tied in a generous bunch and impeccably dressed in a blazer, appeared on the top step brandishing a rag and can of polish.

“Welcome to your first day.” The woman beamed. Then said, “Oh look at that.” She rolled her eyes and pointed to the plaque. “This happens every Monday morning. The cleaners make it beautiful on Friday, then over the weekend everything descends into disarray again.”

“Really?” Charlotte said, a blush burning on her cheeks.

“People can’t help themselves. Any shiny surface and they have to touch it.”

Charlotte stared at the woman. The grey that smoked through her hair and the displeased line of her lips pinched into shapely cheeks said this was not someone to trifle with. The kind of woman that had Charlotte burbling her deepest secrets.

“It was me,” Charlotte said. “I’m people. I’m people who have to touch shiny things.” Her honesty outed her again.

The woman peered over gold-rimmed glasses, then a broad smile spread on her face. A deep laugh accompanied the change in expression. “Liz Oduwole,” she said, swapping her rag into one hand and offering the other.

“Charlotte Albright.” She breathed a sigh of relief as they shook hands.

“I’d guessed,” Liz said. “As practice manager, it’s my business to keep you lawyers on the straight and narrow and the office ship shape. I’ll let you off this minor infringement on your first day.”

Charlotte grinned. “Thank you.”

Liz dismissed the smudge on the plaque with a flourish, a movement that suggested she dealt with every inconvenience with efficiency.

“Now,” Liz said as they climbed the steps inside, “Hugo has put you on the top floor.”

Charlotte peered up the winding staircase. Tall windows and white walls lent the narrow historic building an airy impression, and offices hid along short corridors and around every corner.

“Do you know the way?” Liz asked.

“Yes, thank you,” she replied, still amazed at the interior.

“I will catch up with you later.” Liz nodded. “You’re allowed to touch the rails,” she called over her shoulder with a grin, and disappeared into an office.

Four flights of stairs, aching calves and much perspiration said Charlotte would be getting fitter. She opened the door to her top-floor office. The ceiling was lower, less airy, but that view? Charlotte sighed with awe. A dormer window gave a vista across the rooftops and spires of Oxford, making the climb more than worth it.

A partner's desk with a green leather top was arranged side on, so she and clients could enjoy the view. Charlotte ran her finger over the surface, allowing herself a fingerprint, and her mood rose sky high. Maybe this would translate into literally being a partner soon.

Then Worcester College nagged from the end of the street. Again.

Charlotte leaned on her desk and closed her eyes to blank out the reminder. It lingered, the image clear in her mind, as clear as the laugh that rang out across the hall on Friday.

Millie again.

Of course coming back to Oxford would remind her of Millie. They'd spent every day together for three formative years. She couldn't purge her completely from memory, although she'd tried.

Charlotte sat determined in her chair, opened the slim laptop and followed paper instructions to log in to the company system. An email notified of a meeting at half-past nine with the managing partner, but she had a few minutes to spare. She drummed her fingers on the desk.

Where was she? What was Millie Banks doing right now? She'd mentioned a new job too.

Charlotte tutted and forced herself to take in the new room: small table and chairs by the door, large abstract painting on the left wall, the Radcliffe Camera recognisable in places, and a photograph of a silhouetted Oxford skyline on

the opposite. Her eyes gravitated back to her laptop. Google stared at her.

No. She wouldn't search for Millie. She hadn't lasted this long to cave as soon as they met again.

Except she did. Charlotte leant forward and tapped at the keys. "M", "I" Charlotte typed with her index fingers, wishing for the millionth time that she'd learned to touch-type like Olivia suggested, because Olivia was always right, annoyingly, and it would have saved her months over the years.

Enter.

Oh god, there were hundreds of Millie Banks. This could take hours. And Millie was never keen on social media at college. After being tagged in too many incriminating photos, usually by men she'd turned down, she'd decided social media was evil and deleted her accounts.

"Millie Banks Oxford." Enter.

This was more promising, with an entry on the Oxford Brookes website for a Millie Banks taking a physiotherapy degree. But no photo or contact details, and they'd be out of date anyway.

Why would Charlotte need contact details?

She paused, heart thudding. There was bumping into each other, then there was deliberately getting back in touch. She'd deleted Millie's phone entry. For a few years, an unrecognised number would text wishing her happy birthday and Charlotte would delete the message.



It wasn't even her birthday on the date the messages arrived. In their first term at university, Millie had burst into her room with balloons on ribbons, a bottle of Coke and a tub of vanilla ice cream singing "Happy birthday!" with a Millie-sized grin on her face.

Charlotte had stared at her, happy but self-conscious. "Erm, thank you, but it's not my birthday."

"What?" Millie had stood mouth open with balloons bouncing around her head from her dramatic entrance.

"I was nineteen in September."

"Well..." Millie had curled up her lip. "Where the frigging fuck did I get this date from?" she'd said, plopping next to Charlotte on the bed. "But I asked what you fancied doing today, that was a bit special? A treat? And you said Coke floats."

"I thought you wanted to hang out together."

"Oh." Millie had burst out laughing and flung herself back on the bed. "I'm a pillock." She sat up again as quickly, in a whirlwind of movement. "Well, you can be like the monarch with two birthdays. Fancy a Coke float then?"

It became their tradition. They took the day off and did something silly, just the two of them. A day watching films and eating popcorn one year. Visiting Charlotte's favourite places in Oxford with a picnic the next. And Millie would lavish attention and make the day sparkle.

Charlotte found herself smiling.

"You're thinking about her, aren't you?"

“Hmm?” Charlotte said in a high pitch, signalling she’d been caught doing exactly that.

Olivia stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, her graceful brown arms crossed, silky hair shining, black dress sartorial perfection, not a bead of perspiration from climbing the stairs.

“You’re thinking about Millie,” she said gently.

A statement. An accurate statement. And they both knew it.

Charlotte surreptitiously stroked the mouse pad and closed Google.

“Well...” Charlotte’s eyebrows stretched higher as she thought of a way to bluff. “Yes, I was.” She caved. “It’s hard not to when...” she gestured towards Worcester College, where they’d dined on Friday.

“And you’re thinking of contacting her,” Olivia said with a tilt of the head, again in an understanding way, which wasn’t always a given with Olivia.

“No?” Charlotte offered.

Olivia glided in, took a seat opposite and crossed her legs. “Did she say where she worked?”

Charlotte tutted at herself. “Why the hell didn’t I ask on Friday?”

Olivia arched an eyebrow.

“Because...it would be good to know? I’d like some warning if I’m going to bump into her again.”

Olivia’s other eyebrow joined the first.

“OK. It had crossed my mind to get in contact.”

Olivia regarded her in the same way she did misbehaving clients, with no hint to her final judgement, but leaving an overwhelming impression she'd turned over every stone and found every guilty secret.

“Why the change?” Olivia said.

“Which one?”

“Of career. And why is she back in Oxford?”

“I didn't ask.”

When Olivia continued to stare, like a cat demanding a bowl top-up, Charlotte was compelled to add. “It seemed a natural profession for her. I think it suits her.” She pulled down her lips and shrugged her shoulders, at a loss.

“And you didn't wonder why?”

“I was...”

Distracted. And surprised. And she had to admit, delighted. But also fearful.

“I don't buy it,” Olivia said, turning her head away. “Who throws away a top career when they're that talented?”

Charlotte gazed at Olivia, taking several moments longer to process than her sharp friend. They'd known each other since Olivia was assigned as her college mother. A law student, two years above Charlotte and now senior partner at Bentley, perfect Olivia Sachdeva was difficult to impress. For some reason she'd taken to Charlotte, and she couldn't fault Olivia's loyalty once made. But Millie had never won it.

“You always disapproved of her,” Charlotte said.

“Excuse me?” Olivia turned back.

“You hated her. You two always clashed.”

“I didn’t hate her,” Olivia replied. “Just because I take the opposite view in discussion doesn’t mean I hate a person.”

This was true. Verbal sparring was one of Olivia’s hobbies. It was the aspect of law that drained Charlotte quickest. She much preferred quiet, detailed research and deduction.

“But you didn’t like her,” she clarified at last.

Olivia gave the notion some thought. It clearly didn’t settle well.

“I don’t think she was fair to you,” Olivia said. Her expression softened into sympathy. “I hated how she made you feel.”

Oh. Charlotte shuffled and cleared her throat. It threatened a whole flood of overwhelming memories. So, she resorted to what she always did with difficult subjects. She changed them.

“Anyway,” Charlotte said. “Thank you for introducing me to Hugo Bentley. I’m so happy to be here.”

“You’re welcome. Although I didn’t give you an unfair advantage, if that’s what you’re implying.”

No, but it was nice if Olivia had been complimentary. Her hope must have been obvious as Olivia added, “Because you didn’t need it.”

Olivia’s eyes sparkled and lips twitched. Her compliments were nuanced and affection subtle beneath her

perfectly controlled exterior. Blink and Charlotte could miss a wry smile and amusement.

“You come with several years’ solid experience,” Olivia said, “and a master’s in intellectual property law. Most importantly, I think the firm suits you and you’ll be happy here.” Another smile. “You’re perfect for the firm and also perfectly capable of impressing Hugo yourself.”

“Thank you,” Charlotte said, grinning. Because Olivia’s good opinion was worth having.

Olivia reached over and patted her hand. “And also, ‘anyway’,” Olivia said pointedly, probably because she was familiar with Charlotte’s subject-changing tactics and not easily distracted. “Are you going to get in contact?”

Charlotte pursed her lips tight and didn’t answer.

“With Millie.” Olivia clarified.

Charlotte still didn’t answer.

“Could you ever be friends with her?” Olivia said, gently. “And be happy with just that?”

That was the question, wasn’t it. *The* question. And trust Olivia to home in on the issue so quickly.

Had enough time passed? Had Charlotte changed? Was it enough to appreciate Millie as she was?

Charlotte breathed in.

Then out again.

“I shouldn’t get in contact,” she said.

“No, you shouldn’t,” Olivia agreed.

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## Chapter 7

“Good morning.”

A white man, a couple of years younger than Charlotte, greeted her. He leaped from the head of the meeting-room table, the other seats vacant, and stood before Charlotte a handful of inches taller, with slicked back hair and a flashy pale suit.

“You must be the other new solicitor,” he said with a blinding smile.

“Hi, I’m Charlotte,” she replied.

“Richard,” he offered. “Come in.” He gestured to the long table, as if he owned the room already.

She took in her initial image again. He’d been alone in the large room, a bright space with two Regency windows and view onto the street, feet up on the cherry wood table, as if pretending to lead the session as a senior partner.

“I, erm, didn’t know anyone else was starting today,” Charlotte said. “Are you in Hugo Bentley’s group?”

“I am. Looks like we’re in competition.”

She had no idea what he was trying to achieve and stared blankly.

He winked at her. It kind of made her want to poke him in the eye.

“So, where’ve they got you?” he demanded.

“How do you mean?”

“Which office did you snag?” He planted his feet in a wide stance.

“I’m on the top floor which has an incredible view.” She pointed towards the ceiling, as if that was useful, and couldn’t help smiling. “You can see across the rooftops.” Charlotte waved a hand across the imagined panorama. “Reminds me of being at college again.”

He nodded. “One of the small rooms.”

Oh. So that was his take.

“I,” he said with much importance, “have been given the office next to Hugo. It’s redecorated and looks a peach. The perfect location to welcome clients.” He broadened his already wide stance.

She’d known him for less than a minute, and he’d already rattled out several undermining comments. She wasn’t usually quickest to judge but, flipping heck, it was difficult to miss his air of entitlement. It demanded attention from everything in the room, like he could suck the energy from light bulbs.

He was probably correct about them competing though. They couldn’t both make partner, and there was no doubt that was Richard’s aim.

“Ah, excellent,” another male voice broke into the room. “I see you’ve met.”

Charlotte recognised the tall, older man, Hugo, from her interview and introduction by Olivia. He strode into the room in a three-piece suit, fair hair greying, eyes sharp and a congenial smile on his face, like a jovial, benign uncle.



“Good to have you both join us.”

He grinned and put out a hand to Charlotte, but before she could respond, Richard struck out and enveloped Hugo’s hand with his.

“So excited to be here,” Richard said. “Eager to get started.”

“Marvellous,” Hugo said, and they turned towards the table, Hugo reaching back to wave at her.

This was not going well. Apparently, her lovely top-floor room was inferior, she had surprise competition and it was wiping the floor with her.

“Let’s sit down,” Hugo said. “Ah, here she is. This is Liz Oduwole, practice manager.”

Hugo gestured towards the woman Charlotte met in the morning, from the fingerprint episode.

“Good morning,” Liz said. “I’ve already had dealings with Charlotte.” Her eyes sparkled, although her lips pretended a smile that held back many thoughts.

Charlotte wondered how lightly Liz had taken the episode, because something bothered the practice manager.

“Now, take some advice from me,” Hugo said, sitting at the head of the table, “Liz is the one you need to impress.”

Oh. And Charlotte had goofed up with her first impression. She was used to this. She had a lifetime of clumsiness to acclimatise. It’s just she got by on the hope that it usually didn’t matter.

Richard laughed and took a seat next to Hugo. Charlotte wasn't convinced it was a joke. Liz took the other place next to Hugo, which left Charlotte furthest down the table. If anyone was keeping score, Charlotte was pretty sure she was on nil and it had happened in a blink of an eye.

This scenario was probably the reason Charlotte wasn't a partner like her Oxford contemporaries. In fact, she could hear her mother's voice in her head: "It's all very well being top of your year and knowing the finer details of IPR, but you need to push yourself forward for your sake and clients," Charlotte imagined loud and clear. "You need to speak up to be heard."

Charlotte thought it would be nice if it worked both ways, and people gave equal attention without having to shout. The flipside being, and her mother never appreciated this, was if people listened only to the loudest, they missed quiet, brilliant ideas. Surely there was a better approach than everyone shouting and egotists like Richard winning all the attention. She felt bad about the quick judgement, but he was being quite special.

"So," Hugo leaned on the table. "Welcome, new associate solicitors." He put his arms out towards both Richard and Charlotte. "I'm very excited to be beefing up our IPR and technology section. And it's a relief, frankly. You will take several clients today in fact—"

"I'm very excited, Hugo." It was Richard, of course. "I bring big-firm experience..."

And he brought a lot more. He told them all about it.

“Yes,” Hugo sat back after a few minutes, mouth still open mid-sentence. “Precisely. You two complement each other. Richard, with his client-handling and negotiating skills and Charlotte here wrote the book on IPR, literally. I have your primer on international differences in legal protection of software.” He held up a slim volume.

She was about to say, ‘thank you’ and expand on her publications, pleased at Hugo’s nod towards her accomplishments, when Richard snatched the book from Hugo’s hands.

“Hmm, basic coverage of software copyright and patenting?” he said, flicking through and casting it aside.

“That’s a version for clients,” Charlotte said. “It’s not meant to inform practicing lawyers.”

“And jolly useful it is too,” Hugo said. “After I befuddle my clients with my explanations, I hand them a copy to remedy the situation. I wish I had your ability to communicate the law so clearly and to multiple audiences.”

Richard didn’t acknowledge what Charlotte said. He didn’t even acknowledge she was at the table. He sat resolutely with his legs crossed, facing Hugo. What an arse, she concluded. Then she covered her mouth, as if to stop the thought. Then rubbed an imaginary crumb away from her mouth to cover the silly gesture. Except she found a bit of breakfast crumpet there. Charlotte rolled her eyes. The day had wobbled from the start without her even knowing.

“Now.” Hugo clapped his hands together. “When appropriate, you’ll work as a team and also take on small clients individually. But while you’re both here, there’s a small

business that falls to me every year. The annual client event.” He sat back with a smile on his face. “It’s held at my *alma mater*, Worcester College.” He gestured down the road. “Normally, Liz and I bumble through the arrangements and host it.”

Liz Oduwole looked like someone who didn’t bumble through anything. She looked uncannily adept at everything she attempted. The older woman’s expression remained impassive, however.

“But this year,” Hugo continued, “I’m handing that over too. And what better way to learn about our biggest clients than by meeting them.” He slapped his hands on his thighs and beamed. “Liz knows the usual arrangements. And, of course, my door is always open, except when it isn’t.” He laughed at his own joke and stood up to leave. “So, I’ll leave you to arrange that with Liz, and catch up with you later.”

Hugo hadn’t got more than two paces before Richard leapt from his seat.

“Excuse me,” he said, to Liz at least. “I’m sure you ladies have this covered. I’ll host, but I imagine the rest of the arrangements are safe in your capable hands.” He gave them a smile, even bowed slightly, and strode after the managing partner.

“Hugo,” he called. “I wanted to talk to you about a large client...”

And their footsteps and voices faded into the building.

Charlotte heard as well as saw Liz take a deep, deep breath. The practice manager turned towards her, lips pursed.

Charlotte wondered if she was keeping in the same words that yelled inside Charlotte's head.

The man made it impossible for her to contribute without having to shout or barge in. While that behaviour from handsome Richard might be expected, even applauded, a female lawyer like her would be considered shrill, rude and hysterical. And it wasn't just her quiet temperament complaining. She'd seen others cut down for it. It was a fine line to tread, and narrower for some. And when assigned a task, Richard grabbed the glory role and left her the brunt of the work, for an event not even part of the job description.

So, here she was. Left with the equivalent of, "you can make the tea, dear".

"Well," Charlotte said, preparing to make the best of a bad situation. "Social stuff isn't my strength..."

She probably shouldn't have said that. She was pretty sure her honesty wasn't helping.

"...But, I can do it."

She gave Liz a smile. Charlotte had been assigned a task and she'd do it to her utmost ability.

Liz regarded her for a few moments. It could have been a fraction of a second, but Liz filled them with so much intense thought, Charlotte felt it in years. "Good," Liz finally said with a smile, which intimated many things. "Let's meet up next week when you've settled in with your case load and we'll kick things off."

"Should I book a meeting room?"

“No. Let’s meet in your office. I like the views up there,” Liz said, getting up. “And it’s nice and quiet, away from noise and,” Liz looked over her shoulder, “other irritations.”

Charlotte’s mouth dropped open. She nearly snorted, but Liz said it so deadpan Charlotte wasn’t convinced she should.

Back up three flights of stairs, Charlotte sat heavily in her chair.

OK. That was...mixed, was the best Charlotte could describe it.

This was a trickier prospect than she’d imagined. Olivia had persuaded her Bentley was a perfect match for her skills. But the politics and ego of Richard were already at work here. It was everywhere in every firm, but office politics was not her strong suit, at all.

Had she made a mistake coming here? She deflated in her chair and let out a long sigh. Should she have stuck at her old firm?

Her phone buzzed on the table with a message from an unknown number. She tapped it open.

“Happy birthday.” Then, “I’m late this year. Xxxxx,” followed by a smiley.

She took a moment to realise it was Millie, then she laughed.

Charlotte stared at the message as she cradled the phone in her hand. There was Millie reaching out again. And at that moment, contained in the rectangular box Charlotte

held in her palm, it was a wonderful nugget of comfort. She tapped at the screen to keep the message alive and stared at the silly smiley face at the end. A simple emoji, but behind it sat years of Millie's friendship and support. A silly yellow icon, at the end of a silly idea of theirs, from her very clever, silly friend who she'd adored. The screen faded to black and she continued to stare at the screen.

This was a slippery slope.

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## Chapter 8

“Fucking sciatica!” The face bellowed at Millie from the ground.

Her landlady, Virginia, lay beneath an apple tree with her grey frizz spreading across the lawn and worm-eaten windfalls. At least the grass was dry. A sunny evening in the quiet orchard behind the yellow-brick terraced house, and Millie was tempted to join her landlady on the ground.

“Have—” Millie began.

“No, I haven’t been doing my fucking exercises.”

Millie crossed her arms and smiled down at Virginia. Gentle but firm was the approach with her landlady. The retired professor didn’t like being told what to do. “I was going to ask, have the exercises helped?”

Virginia opened her eyes. “Well, no! They bloody haven’t.”

Millie had to laugh. “How is it now? Has it eased?”

The woman’s face puckered into deep wrinkles and Millie stayed quiet while the spasm passed. Virginia’s cheeks relaxed into sun-weathered creases and she and her large striped shirt seemed to spread on the lawn.

“Better?” Millie asked.

“Just fucking marvellous,” Virginia snapped. She raised her eyebrows and knotted her jaw in defiance. “And I don’t know why you’re waiting there. I’m not moving.”

“You can’t stay here all night.”



“Bloody can.”

“It can freeze this time of year.” The sunny, cloudless sky could nip after dark.

“Sling a blanket over me and I’ll be fine.”

This was going to take a while. Millie put her hands on her hips. “I’m going to lock up my bike.” She’d torn through from the passageway to the back garden when she’d spotted Virginia flat out on the lawn. “I’ll be back in a minute, then we’ll get you moving.”

Virginia scowled at the sky in response, but when Millie had taken a couple of steps the landlady shouted, “Bring me a cup of tea and a biscuit!”

“You can’t drink lying down,” Millie shouted.

“I can bloody try.”

“You’ll bloody fail and make a bloody mess.”

Virginia tried to angle her head but couldn’t twist far enough. “I’m giving you a look!” she shouted.

“I know. I’ve seen it before. And I’m giving you one back.”

“Bugger off,” Virginia bellowed. Then after a pause, “but get me a biscuit.”

Virginia seemed comfortable and Millie chained her bike to a rail at the back door. She marched through the kitchen-diner, switched on the kettle and flew past the ground-floor rooms, which Virginia occupied, then up the stairs.

Millie’s bedroom overlooked a quiet street in Marston Meadows, an isolated handful of roads within cycling distance

over parks, rivers and meadows from the town centre. The room was generous for the money. A galley kitchen on the left with a three-quarter height partition from the rest of the room, a round table and chairs between two sash windows, bookcases filled with Virginia's castoffs, and a double bed pushed against the back wall.

So the curtains didn't quite meet, and sun streamed in Millie's eyes in the morning. And the Baby Belling cooker had seen better decades. Its wiring was likely suspect. "Don't worry, it won't trip the electrics because the house has nothing sensitive like an RCD," Virginia had 'reassured' her. But it was home.

Millie yanked off the polo shirt from a day's work and a full-speed cycle home. She tugged a clean top over her head, sending her blonde curls bouncing around her eyes, grabbed a packet of Florentines she'd been saving from her birthday and ran back downstairs.

"I bring tea, biscuits and ibuprofen," Millie said, striding into the garden, Florentines under arm, mugs in one hand and cushions pinched in the other. "And padding for old lady bones."

"Oh, you are a good girl," Virginia sighed. She patted Millie's trainers and closed her eyes with visible relief.

"I know."

"It's like having cheap private health care."

"In fact, I pay you to live here."

"Sorry, my dear." Virginia gazed up. "You could live here for free if I didn't have such a shitty pension."

The rent was probably the best in Oxford and Virginia hadn't raised it in the four years Millie had lodged. She couldn't complain.

"Come on," Millie said, placing the cushions against the tree trunk. She knelt on one knee and hooked her arm under Virginia's. "Ready?"

Virginia wrapped her fingers around Millie's arm. "Good god, you're strong," the landlady said, giving Millie's bicep a squeeze. "How on earth did you get these muscles?"

"Lifting cantankerous professors off the ground."

"Hilarious."

"And cycling and weights." And running and the rest. It was a compulsion and took her mind off other things.

"Right, back we go."

And with some unladylike grunting from both, they hoisted Virginia against the tree.

"Christ, I sound like a hog," Virginia said, puffing and sitting back against the trunk.

"Stop moaning and don't be a boar."

"It's only—" Virginia stopped herself and fixed Millie with a glare. "Stop making terrible jokes and hand me the drugs."

Millie laughed and slumped against the tree trunk with Virginia. She passed a mug of tea and a packet of painkillers.

"Thank you, my dear," the landlady said, apparently softening at the prospect of caffeine, sugar and pain relief.

"You are a gem."

Millie sagged and relaxed in synchrony with her landlady, sipping tea, crunching on Florentines and waiting for Virginia's pain to subside. Sun sparkled through the green and ochre-tipped leaves and she closed her eyes to enjoy the waves of warmth that caressed her face. It was lovely after another long day. She was tempted to munch through the biscuits for dinner and sleep in the garden if Virginia wouldn't move. Traffic was distant and she heard birds flitting through, arguing in chirps, and the crunch of the landlady's teeth on nutty treats. Idyllic compared with a hectic clinic.

Her phone buzzed in her jeans pocket.

If that was work asking her to cover yet another colleague, she might scream.

She leant back and slipped her phone from her pocket and tapped on the message. Her eyes adjusted to the screen, a beam of sunlight blowing out her vision for a moment, then she read:

“Hi.” Smiley face.

Millie stopped and the world fell quieter. Her heart thudded in her chest and a tingle crept up her arms. She stared at the message. Was it really from her?

Above, was Millie's “happy birthday” message from this morning, and above that several more from other years. And at the top of the thread, “Charlotte”. Actually “Zcharlotte”. Millie had changed the name so it wouldn't appear high in the contacts list when she scrolled and she wouldn't be constantly reminded of the best friend who refused to speak to her. Except every time she did scroll, the

absence of the name reminded her just as much. Charlotte had been too huge a presence to forget.

Another presence made itself felt. Millie looked up to find Virginia scowling at her.

“What?” Millie asked.

“You’ve been staring at that message for a minute. It says ‘hi’. It’s not exactly Proust.”

“Don’t be nosey.”

Virginia harrumphed and turned away.

Millie’s hands tingled with the mild shock. She’d sent the message this morning after deliberating all weekend. She hadn’t really expected a response. What the hell to say now? She hit reply.

“Hi,” she tapped out. Smiley face, smiley face, smiley face.

“If you’re playing hard to get, you’re showing all your cards,” Virginia muttered.

“Oi.” Millie waved her away with the back of her hand. “Bugger off.” She looked at Virginia. “And it’s a friend.” She looked up again. “And I’m not playing hard to get.”

Charlotte was typing. Millie watched the dots bounce while nerves danced in her belly. She couldn’t believe that Charlotte had responded.

“What are you up to? Hot date?” came back.

Ha! That was something that had changed.

“Not even close,” Millie replied. “I’m sitting in the garden, getting a numb arse on the ground and keeping my grumpy landlady company.”

“I’m not grumpy. I hurt,” Virginia muttered. “But I get the hint.” She shuffled round with a squawk of pain. “The things I do for you.”

Millie snapped her attention back to the phone. Her message had been received. No dots.

“How about you?” she couldn’t resist typing.

Dots this time. “I’m still at work. Long first day.”  
Sleepy face.

“Same.”

It went quiet. Millie’s message was received, but nothing came back.

She held her phone in both hands, thumbs poised to write. “I thought I’d get in touch because...”

That was too formal. This was Charlotte for fuck’s sake. Although their goodbyes at college dinner had been strained, it was still Charlotte under there she hoped.

“BTW,” Millie tried again. “We might bump into each other again. I work in Beaumont Street on Tuesdays and Thursdays at a physio clinic.” Send.

Millie hadn’t planned on contacting her. Charlotte made it clear on Friday that she didn’t want that. Then curiosity got the better of her and she’d searched and found that Bentley’s new associate solicitor worked in the same street. Millie never wanted to see that horrified look on

Charlotte's face again, and she was sure Charlotte wouldn't want to be ambushed. So, she'd messaged.

Except now it was obvious she'd looked Charlotte up.

Millie tapped away quickly. "Alec mentioned where Olivia worked." Send.

"And I assumed you moved to work with her." Send.

She briefly wondered what else they did together.

Millie stared at the screen, then admitted. "And I Googled and found your practice." Send.

Message read. No dots. There were no dots for a long time.

The surprise and excitement receded, and Millie deflated as if sinking into the soil. She sighed and tucked her phone back in a pocket. Well, it was a start, maybe.

She leant forward. "How are you doing? Is that ibuprofen kicking in?"

Virginia half grimaced. "It's easing, thank you. I'd like to get my numb old bottom off the ground now."

"Good." Millie jumped up. "Let's get you inside." She bent her knees to support Virginia. "And tomorrow, we'll go through the exercises again."

Virginia scowled and gave her the eye. "Fucking marvellous."

"Be grateful." Millie laughed.

"Fucking thank you."

Millie was used to all kinds of responses and was happy to accommodate Virginia letting off steam. Some patients stoically endured pain, not wanting to, what they termed, 'indulge it'. Others raged. Millie rarely intervened with the approach people wanted. Usually, it was a mix of both and more, although sometimes she referred them on to specialised mental health support if they had difficulty coping and needed more than a physio's encouragement.

"Come on," Millie said.

By the time she'd helped Virginia inside and shared dinner and chores, she almost fell into bed. She peeped at her phone. Nothing from Charlotte, and the rest would wait until morning. Fatigue descended, weighing down her eyelids and muscles so that she merged into her sheets.

When a ping woke her, she shot out a hand and tipped up the phone to read, "Say hello if you see me."

Millie grinned and dozily typed, "Will do." Smiley face. Smiley face. Smiley face. Too many smiley faces, but she was too tired to care.

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Charlotte's phone lay innocently beside her laptop like it hadn't dropped a new bombshell. So, bumping into Millie wouldn't be a freak occurrence. It could be twice a week.

The college nearby held fresh memories of the mature Millie, and now the entire street was a potential ambush on Tuesdays and Thursdays.



Charlotte stared at her laptop and a list of medical practices on Beaumont Street – the prestigious professional address in Oxford. Millie might work at any one of them. Charlotte checked the opening hours, and none were open late. She peeked at the time in the corner of her screen. It was dark outside, eleven at night, and she was still at work. She convinced herself, for a whole second, they could avoid each other for the next decade.

The phone loomed large on her desk.

She'd remained calm when hearing where Millie worked and eventually managed a friendly, "Say hello if you see me."

The response had been immediate: "Will do." Smiley face, smiley face, smiley face, which had Charlotte grinning, warmth glowing in her chest, and her heart beating too quickly.

"Stop it," she whispered to herself, tempted to reread the message for the umpteenth time.

She pushed the phone further away.

Things were getting out of hand. This was Millie all over. Things went from zero to a hundred before Charlotte even realised they were moving. Like when she came out to Millie and before she'd blinked Millie had whisked her off to a gay pub.

Yes. This had always been the problem with Millie.

## Chapter 9

### *First year university, thirteen years ago*

“You told them I’m not your girlfriend?” Millie nudged her friend. “Not one in a long line of them?”

Charlotte laughed. “Three. I’ve dated three women.”

Millie walked arm in arm with her friend, outside the long walls of Magdalen college and deer park, into town and lunch with Charlotte’s parents. Trinity term of the first year, and Oxford had turned green with spring leaves and was even more ridiculously beautiful.

And so was Charlotte. Being out and dating women suited her. She flushed pink, always with that big Charlotte smile. The one that glowed with a halo of happiness, eyes shining and inky eyelashes exaggerating the sparkle. It made Millie giddy.

Coming out had stirred interest in Charlotte and she turned heads. In lectures, a cute woman with short hair and glasses kept peeping her way. And Charlotte, being Charlotte, was completely bloody oblivious to the attention, but carried herself with a new confidence. Millie loved seeing it.

“Don’t worry,” Charlotte said. “Even if they suspected you were my girlfriend, they wouldn’t acknowledge it.”

“I’m not worried.” Like Millie gave a crap about what anyone thought of her or who she dated.

“My family,” Charlotte put on an exaggerated upper-class accent, “don’t talk about that kind of thing.”

“What kind of thing? Do you mean relationships?”

“No.” Charlotte nudged her to suggest she was being silly. “The dreaded G word.”

Millie wished Charlotte was less polite sometimes and just came out with the most direct word. “G spot?” she guessed.

Charlotte rolled her eyes.

“Gynaecology?” Millie tripped out. “Gonads? Gonorrhoea—”

“Gay!” Charlotte said, laughing. “Apart from when my grandmother said my dress looked pretty and gay.”

“And she didn’t mean made of plaid?”

“No, she did not.”

“But,” Millie curled up her lip, “don’t they ask whether you’re seeing anyone?”

Charlotte shook her head. “There’s nothing quicker on this Earth than my mother changing subjects if I mention girlfriends.”

“No interest at all?”

“Sometimes she’ll say, ‘That’s nice, darling’.”

“They’re in...?”

“Complete denial.”

Charlotte sliced her hand through the air for emphasis. It was a very Charlotte move, gesticulating when consumed with feeling.

“They can’t ignore it if you take a girl home.”

Charlotte stopped and turned to Millie, their arms slipping apart with the movement.

“Honestly,” Charlotte laughed. “They’d give it a... bloody good go.”

Charlotte had said “bloody”. It almost choked her, but that she’d managed to swear showed definite irritation. Millie stared with her mouth open, at a loss for once.

“I know you find this concept difficult, because anything goes for you,” Charlotte said.

“But, they can’t ignore it forever, can they?”

Charlotte put her hands on her hips as she reached a new level of exasperation, peak fury for her affable friend. “If a woman straddled my lap and kissed me, they’d still describe us as ‘jolly good friends’.”

“Wow,” Millie murmured.

It was so different to Millie’s relationship with her mother, Belinda. They were like best friends since Millie’s early teens. She couldn’t imagine any subject off limits.

Then an idea teased.

“Is that a bet, Charlotte Albright? If I snogged you right in front of your parents, would they ignore your awesome lesbianness?”

“I’d win that bet and you don’t have money to spare.”

No, she didn’t. Which was why she was relieved Charlotte invited her to lunch. Because if Millie ate instant noodles or baked beans, again, she would scream or get scurvy.

“Really though?” Millie asked. She was still having trouble with this.

“Really,” Charlotte said.

Millie grinned and took her arm again. “We’ll see if a chance comes along.”

And Charlotte rolled her eyes.

Lunch was at the rooftop restaurant of the Ashmolean Museum, with pristine linen tablecloths and carafes filled with ice, lemon and vibrant mint leaves.

Charlotte’s parents were towering figures in every way; tall and brimming with confidence. Her father looked like a politician interviewed at home at the weekend, the kind of professional who forgot how to do casual and looked weird without a tie. Charlotte’s mother, equally impressive in a cream suit, came with waves of luxurious hair and a handshake that could crush bones.

How did her lovely friend, with a self-conscious tendency, come from these people? But Charlotte’s gayness was the elephant in the room, quietly sitting in the corner. Its presence made Charlotte bristle and her parents’ grins stiff with perfect white teeth, while they wilfully ignored it.

Nicola, Charlotte’s mother, had said “friend” with so much emphasis and so often, it made Millie spasm.

“I’m so relieved you’re not travelling with a boy,” Nicola said, reaching out and taking Charlotte’s hand. They had the same long fingers.

Millie did a double take at the statement and silently raised an eyebrow to ask a question of Charlotte. They planned

a summer holiday, the two of them travelling by train and camping around Europe.

“I don’t want you running into trouble halfway across the continent,” Nicola continued.

“Boys are more my kind of trouble.” Millie couldn’t help herself.

Nicola blinked, then her eyes travelled around the curves of Millie’s body, judgement deepening on every inch.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it.” Nicola laughed. “But make sure Charlotte doesn’t run off with a handsome young man.”

Charlotte’s cheeks knotted and she ground her teeth. Millie heard them.

“I imagine you’re acquainted with the world, Millie,” Nicola continued, “but Charlotte’s naïve at times.”

Charlotte’s mouth dropped open with a gasp of, “Mother. That’s so rude to Millie, and...and...I’m right here.”

“I know you are, darling.” Nicola patted her daughter’s hand. “I’m trying to take care of you. Shall I top you up with water?”

Such a polished combination of punches; a swift one-two. Jab with the left and a sharp criticism, and before the opponent could counter, patronisation with the right. Nicola had deployed it several times over lunch.

“I...” Charlotte said indignantly. “I am perfectly capable of looking after myself.”

“Don’t make me feel bad, darling. It’s a mother’s job to be concerned.”

That was one hell of a hook from Nicola, the guilt trip. Millie was in awe, but also provoked.

“Is she though?” Millie tipped her head suggestively, as an idea pinged in her head. “Is our English rose as innocent as she looks?”

The pair snapped round, Charlotte literally the colour of a rose and Nicola’s eyes narrowing eagle-like. Millie imagined that Nicola Albright, King’s Counsel barrister, performed as formidably in court as Charlotte described.

Millie slid her chair closer to her friend. “We’re a year into university and a lot can happen in that time.”

“I imagine it can,” Nicola replied.

“Charlotte’s really come out this year.”

Millie wanted to laugh at her unintentional pun but kept a straight face. She cupped Charlotte’s cheek and stroked a thumb to the corner of her mouth, eyes feasting on Charlotte’s plump lips and licking her own.

“I’m sure she has changed,” Nicola said, the words clipped.

“Certainly has,” Millie purred, trailing her fingers beneath Charlotte’s chin and letting her thumb tease her friend’s lower lip. Charlotte’s mouth fell open while, out of the corner of Millie’s eye, Nicola remained unmoved with barrister poker-face intact.

“My English rose has truly bloomed,” Millie murmured, escalating her intentions.

“And, of course, she will change again, many times over the years,” Nicola retorted.

It only encouraged Millie. “I’ll be there for it all,” she said, dropping her voice into a sultry, velvet tone. It had the desired effect, Charlotte visibly gulping.

“That’s what *friends* do,” Nicola added.

Millie looked into Charlotte’s eyes, her pupils engulfing the hazel irises, cheeks blooming, features insensible to her mother’s words. She paused, to let Charlotte back out if she wanted.

“*Friends* are always there for each other,” Nicola re-emphasised.

“Always,” Millie murmured, “for everything they desire.”

She leant forward and slipped her lips over Charlotte’s, a simple movement but so very satisfying. Slowly she took Charlotte with her whole mouth, the tip of her tongue giving a tantalising tease of her friend’s top lip. Millie closed her eyes and let herself enjoy the sensation and the occasion, Charlotte’s low moan encouraging her to linger and savour the experience.

When their lips parted, Millie opened her eyes to find Charlotte staring at her with cheeks bright and flaming.

“Well, Charlotte,” Nicola said. The older woman sat back, not a hair out of place, not a crease perturbing her features. “Your face has turned the colour of your grandmother’s borscht.”



Well, fuckadoodle doo. It was polite, dismissive and all-round devastating as far as comments went. Borscht was a shamefully deep blush. And the reference to a grandparent, invoking the offended sensibilities of Charlotte's ancestors, Millie had to admit was a stroke of genius.

Two things struck her about the kiss, though.

One, Charlotte clearly liked kissing women. A lot.

Actually, three things, because she had to admit that Charlotte was lovely. Very, very soft. And Millie could see the appeal of kissing women. She'd always suspected that people who were horrified protested too much. But that wasn't the point.

And three, which was the point, if Nicola Albright KC was outraged by the display, then she didn't show it, and she was just as good a barrister as her formidable reputation.

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## Chapter 10

### *Present day*

Charlotte was meeting her mother for lunch at the Ashmolean Museum, and all she could think about was that stupid bet that backfired years ago, leaving egg on her face or, what was it, her mother saying she resembled borscht.

Hopefully, Nicola had forgotten the incident.

Charlotte stepped out of the Beaumont Street offices with a furtive glance left and right, as if about to be pounced upon. She hadn't bumped into Millie yet, but her presence haunted every doctor's practice along the regal terrace. Millie hadn't said which one, and Charlotte wouldn't ask, because their interaction was too close to snowballing.

Millie, again, always in her thoughts.

She arrived early and took a seat her mother had booked by the window – the table with the best view, of course. Her mother always secured that. An inexpensive café, but the grandeur of the building and the view always seduced Nicola.

Then, it was like she felt her mother arrive, all of Charlotte's senses alert and hair on end.

“That's marvellous.” Her mother's voice cut through the background clatter of the café. “Thank you ever so much.”

Nicola Albright didn't even need to try. Honed through years in court, she pitched her voice perfectly to command respect. The accent said home counties and Oxbridge

education, the tone rich and controlled and never strident. Charlotte fleetingly wondered if she'd ever used another delivery. But her mother said "I love you" with the same discipline as "no further questions" and she dismissed the idea.

Everyone turned to the statuesque woman, her chin raised so she gazed down on all, striding into the room as if making an entrance into court. Late fifties now, age only added to her aura. Long, luxurious hair was dyed to the mahogany of younger years, with thick ribbons of grey accenting the front. Nicola Albright had such force of personality it hit Charlotte like a wave before she even reached the table, and Charlotte stood to greet her own mother.

"Darling," Nicola said. She kissed her cheek. "You don't have to get up."

She did, the compulsion to defer to the woman was impossible to deny.

Her mother wiped a thumb over her cheek, perhaps to remove a trace of dark lipstick, then gave it a pinch as if Charlotte were five years old.

"It's lovely to see you. I'm so glad we could catch up while I'm in Oxford." And Nicola took a seat opposite with the best view of both outside and the restaurant. Charlotte left it free for her.

Just her mother for lunch today. Her parents had drifted apart for years. She first noticed at college. Perhaps being away for months made changes at home for holidays more apparent. It surprised no-one when her father announced the divorce a year ago, and the final order was imminent – an

amicable divorce, one where her parents were simply absent, a bit like her mother had been in family life.

“So,” her mother said, laying a linen serviette over her knees and pouring them both water. “Tell me, how are you settling in at Hugo’s little boutique practice?”

Charlotte blinked in confusion. “That makes it sound like a tiny makeshift company.”

“I don’t doubt its prestige.” Nicola looked at her with sparkling blue eyes that Charlotte didn’t inherit and smiled with perfect teeth. “I always hear excellent things about them. And,” she took a sip of water, “anywhere that quickly promotes Olivia to senior partner knows what it’s doing.”

Charlotte tried to suppress an eye roll. Possibly failed. Olivia and Nicola had a mutual appreciation love-in going. Olivia worshipped Nicola Albright KC, whereas jealousy that court always took priority over home pinched at Charlotte. It detracted from outright awe of her mother. She couldn’t fault Nicola’s respect for her friend though. Olivia graduated with a double first and the pick of law firms.

Charlotte also eventually processed the emphasis on ‘senior’ partner, when she hadn’t made a plain salaried version yet.

“It’s very promising,” Charlotte said, swallowing the slight, because she liked to look on the bright side. “Hugo’s assigned us technology clients, the reason I moved. I’ll be on IPR and technology cases full time.”

“Us?” Nicola said.

“Sorry?”

“You’re in a team?”

“Another associate started, Richard.”

“Trouble?”

How did her mother do that? She homed in on flaws, no matter how undiscernible to the rest of the world.

“He’s...” How to describe Richard and leave room for his improvement? Because Charlotte wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt and not sabotage a future working relationship. “...bullish.”

“Oh, dear.”

Her mother didn’t have glasses to peer over, but she gazed from beneath shapely, dark eyebrows with the same withering effect. The eyebrows exaggerated every expression and Charlotte swore they won cases in court.

“What do you mean, ‘oh dear’?” she said, wrinkling her nose.

Her mother sighed. “It’s the same with you every time.”

Charlotte’s mouth dropped open.

“It always was. You get pushed out by others far less capable because of your retiring nature.”

She hadn’t given details yet, but Nicola ran with that one word, and to be fair, and it was annoying, her mother was right.

Nicola leant forward, elbows on the table, hands intertwined. “You have got to learn to put yourself forward”.

“I—”

“Stand up for yourself.”

“But I—”

“It’s no use being razor sharp at detail if you never push yourself forward, for the sake of your career and clients.”

“I’m perfectly—”

“You must make yourself heard in law, whether in court, negotiating a contract or briefing a politician.”

“My attention—”

“You were always the same, even as a little girl. Twice the brains of your cousins, but you would never speak up.”

Charlotte sat back and crossed her arms for her mother’s closing argument. It reached a point where Nicola wasn’t listening and wouldn’t listen. Charlotte had refined her response over the years to balance sanity against progress. Like the time she wanted to apply to St Hilda’s College. Her mother wouldn’t listen. So, Charlotte stopped persuading her and simply applied. When the offer arrived, it was met with stony silence and a, “Well. St Hilda’s it is then.” And Nicola had commented on it, at every opportunity, ever since.

“Really, Charlotte,” her mother summed up. “You will never make partner otherwise.” Nicola took a sip of water, apparently done.

Charlotte said nothing, too exhausted by it all. Not by the immediate conversation, but the years of personal history it drew upon.

Her mother sighed.

Charlotte stewed.

They were both as irritated as the last time they'd had the conversation.

So, Nicola caught Charlotte up on other matters. Charlotte's older sister – doing marvellously with her perfect husband and two perfect children. Wants to have another. Husband or child? Don't be silly, darling. Of course, a child, although Nicola didn't advise it now Bryony had established her career. Charlotte's father – well, Charlotte could catch up with him herself. Grandmother – baba missed Charlotte, get in touch. Charlotte had. Well, do it more often. Charlotte didn't have any issue catching up with baba. Well, good.

“And you'll never guess who I bumped into.” Her mother grinned.

Something put Charlotte on high alert. A chill pinched her skin, and the hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention. A new level of glee delighted her mother's features, she suspected at her expense.

“Go on, guess.”

Millie. The answer was loud and clear. It was going to be Millie.

“Olivia?” Charlotte offered.

“No.” Her mother still beamed with excitement.

“Hugo?”

“No, darling.”

It was so Millie.

“Prince of Wales?”

“Are you trying to be difficult? I’ll tell you. It was Millie.”

“Really.” Charlotte sighed, in a reply that lacked any semblance of surprise.

“Wonderful to see her again.” Her mother sat back and clapped her hands together, rapt by the recollection. “She looked marvellous. Although, has she told you about her career change? She mentioned you’d run into each other.” Nicola reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Physiotherapist, she says.”

Nicola went on.

How was it that her mother always took a shine to little Millie Banks? Galling when Millie was the opposite of everything Nicola told Charlotte to adhere to – elegant demeanour, immaculate presentation, controlled behaviour – even though Charlotte loved Millie for defying those. Also galling was her mother in the past, asking after Millie when they’d fallen out.

“Such a loss to the profession and Millie herself,” Nicola continued. “It’s rare to encounter a lawyer with such strong all-round skills. I always said she should contact me if she fancied pupillage and qualification as a barrister, but she insisted on corporate. And now she’s a physio of all things.”

“I know,” Charlotte muttered. She tried to overcome her annoyance. “I think she’ll be an excellent physio.”

“You and Olivia have your strengths, of course, but I always had my eye on Millie.”

She knew that too.



“I never understood why you let your friendship drift.”

Oh, it hadn't drifted. That rope was decisively cut.

“Millie had such promise. Such—”

“Mother,” Charlotte blurted. “I know.” And she didn't want to talk about it anymore, especially with her mother.

“Well.” Nicola furrowed her eyebrows in very accusatory confusion. “Aren't you pleased you're both back in Oxford?” Her mother tilted her head. What was coming? “It would be a chance to rekindle your friendship.”

Now, that had changed over the intervening years. In the past, Nicola used the word “friend” like a club to deny Charlotte's queerness, whereas now it evolved into something with suggestion. It made her uneasy and a little queasy. Where was this going?

When Charlotte remained silent, Nicola added, “Lovely that you can catch up again.”

Charlotte took a deep breath. “She was never my girlfriend, if that's what you imply.”

Nicola lifted her chin to press again.

“She's not gay,” Charlotte added.

“I know that.” Nicola laughed. “From that outrageous kiss she gave you.”

Apparently, her mother hadn't forgotten. Nicola probably stored the incident in her high-capacity brain under Charlotte's most humiliating moments.

She'd regretted that dare, that bet with Millie. It was one of the few moments of bravado for Charlotte and

completely unwise. She'd been one of those well-behaved kids who, on the odd occasion they were naughty, always got caught. Whereas for Millie, being naughty was business as usual. And this was a prime example. That kiss. That simple, silly kiss.

“No,” Nicola leant back and sighed. “I never thought she was gay, or queer, whatever you say these days.” She waved her hand dismissively. “But to give her credit,” Nicola looked directly into Charlotte’s eyes, “it was obvious that you were after that kiss.”

“What?” Oh god.

Her mother gazed at her with mortifying sympathy. “I hoped it would be a passing phase, this lesbianism.” Another wave of the hand. “But one can’t fake that kind of reaction.” Then even more damning, “You couldn’t anyway.”

The humiliation. It was even worse than she remembered.

“You’re not the kind to fake things, darling,” Nicola surged on, “another of your issues, because it would be useful in this profession.”

Just how bad was her reaction all those years ago? In front of her parents?!

That kiss. It was everything it should be. Not rough and forceful like Becca’s later. Not prickly and cumbersome like the one boy she’d kissed – one had been enough. But from someone who knew what they were doing. Someone there for your pleasure. And it had been perfection.

Charlotte still remembered it, Millie's lips caressing hers. Not a quick peck. Not in the slightest just-friends. Millie's lips caressed hers in a slow, sensual kiss which melted. And when Millie slid the tip of her tongue inside, a glow spread everywhere.

That kiss reached places a friend had no business going. The only reason Charlotte hadn't groaned audibly for the entire room was Millie's lips around hers, sealing in the appreciation and delicious sensations. But apparently it had been audible to her parents.

Was that the start? The peek in the box she could never unsee? A glimpse of what Millie was like as a lover. At least Charlotte didn't fall in love then. Although that might have stopped her from seeing Becca.

Charlotte grumbled to herself. This damned fresh start of hers. How was she meant to launch a new life if Millie, and the rest of her past, popped up at every turn? Then she took heed of herself. Charlotte was a mature woman, over thirty. She could handle the past, now it was distant. She could cope with bumping into Millie without lifting the lid off that box of delights, peeking inside and driving herself mad with longing.

Enough. Stop dwelling on the past and extraordinary kisses.

Charlotte sat up straighter and cleared her throat. Her mother fell oddly silent and regarded her with some intensity. She had the feeling she'd missed something. If her mother knew that Millie wasn't gay and Charlotte had been so obviously susceptible, what was her mother getting at with all the damned suggestion?

“You’re likely to see her often,” Nicola said.

“I realise,” she replied.

“Then make sure,” her mother paused, gaze unwavering, “that you look after yourself.”

“What?”

“Take care.”

Really? This was motherly concern?

“Millie is charismatic and charming, and I don’t want her to break your heart.”

Oh.

“Again.”

Bigger, oh.

So, her mother did understand what happened years ago and realised why they didn’t stay in contact. God, it was disconcerting when the woman, who had been so absent from her daily life, had such insight. She might not know the details, but Nicola certainly got the drift of that drifting friendship.

“Anyway,” her mother started. At least Nicola was moving on from that uncomfortable trip down memory lane. “You haven’t asked me why I’m in Oxford.”

No, she hadn’t. And it wasn’t disinterest or being self-centred that held her tongue. It was fear. What was her mother up to?

“Now that your father’s divorce...” It spoke volumes it was father’s divorce and fault, “...is finalised, we’ve split our

assets. And with retirement on the horizon I'm making a few changes." Nicola drew back her chin and smiled in a satisfied way. She paused, lending the apparently good news some drama. It was as unnerving as a scorpion basking in sunshine.

"I'm moving," Nicola said, the satisfaction breaking into a grin.

"Where to?" Charlotte swore she heard alarm bells ringing.

"I need peace and quiet, away from London and the constant call of courts."

Definite alarm bells.

"Of course, there's the chambers London flat, but I need a home, somewhere to escape at the weekend, and eventually retire."

Those bells were loud.

"Somewhere within striking distance of the city."

"Oh?" Charlotte dared. "And where did you decide?"

"Oxford, dear."

"What...to...here?"

"Yes." More smiling.

"Oxford? Like Oxford-Oxford?"

"The one and, I believe, only. Isn't that marvellous?"

"It's..."

"We can meet for lunch all the time."

Oh, Christ.

Charlotte stared at her mother, covering none of her shock at the news.

“I’m looking for a cosy cottage,” Nicola continued. “Ideally somewhere quiet, but with easy access to the town centre. Summertown, Iffley Village, perhaps Osney Island for access to the train station.”

Charlotte continued to stare.

“I’m hoping to find something by spring and move in next summer at the latest. Then we can be best pals.” Nicola reached over and squeezed her hand.

She did not have the words.

Her mother looked over absent glasses and said, “Your mouth’s hanging open, darling.”

Charlotte’s past had well and truly ambushed her. First in the form of Millie. Why was she here in Oxford anyway? Especially when she’d moaned about the place pretty much constantly. And now her mother was getting divorced and moving here too. As fresh new starts went, this was as rank as a fresher’s underwear.

Charlotte hardly took in a word for the remaining meal. Her mother was handling some long-running, high-profile case. She usually was. That’s what experienced King’s Counsel barristers did. And after her mother had paid, Charlotte stumbled from the restaurant, out through the columned façade, mind churning with all the mud the encounter stirred.

Well, she told herself, dazed and reeling back on her heels, there must be a bright side. She may get irritated, down-

hearted or sassy at times, but she always looked for the silver lining. One of her strengths.

She put back her shoulders and took a deep breath. It didn't help. She was still overwhelmed.

At least, a corner of her brain piped up, she hadn't run into any exes.

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## Chapter 11

“Becca. Hi.”

Charlotte closed her eyes and allowed herself a deep sigh. Her shoulders sagged and her briefcase dropped to the pavement. It had been a day.

“Well, hello,” Becca purred.

Charlotte opened her eyes to her ex-girlfriend standing in the middle of Oxford on Cornmarket Street, blocking the way back to the safety of her temporary flat. Becca flicked long waves of golden hair over her shoulder, and beamed a glossy, satisfied smile. It was satisfied with herself, Charlotte realised, nothing to do with her.

Long lashes blinked over eyes that looked down at Charlotte even though they matched for height. The classic Burberry trench coat and scarf stretched over a large, round belly—

Whoa. Pregnant.

“Blimey, Becca. What? When? I mean, Hi.” Charlotte stepped back and reassessed her ex.

“Hello again,” Becca said, pursing her lips.

“Well. Ha! I haven’t seen you for years. And.” Charlotte stuttered. “Congratulations must be in order.”

Surely? That was definitely a pregnant belly. Or a watermelon stuffed up her coat, and holding that would be a feat worth congratulating too.

“Thank you, Charlotte. They are. Sprog’s due in a month’s time.”



Really wow. She had not envisaged this as Becca's future. At college, Becca only possessed enough love to cover Becca, rather than anyone else. Doting on a family was not what Charlotte had envisaged.

“So. What a change. Are you looking forward to being a mum?”

Becca laughed. “I have two kids already.”

“Do you?”

Had enough years passed? She supposed it had, and then some. “Kids already.” Charlotte shook her head.

“I know.” Becca laughed loudly. “Two enormous boys first time, then this one's a girl. She'll shoot out after squeezing out those two brutes.”

That was an image. And she knew Becca well enough for it to be vivid.

“So,” Charlotte opened her eyes wide. “You're in Oxford?”

“Just for the day, Charlotte.” Becca leant forward and patted her arm. “Don't worry. I'm not haunting you.” That was a relief. “I thought you worked in London, though,” Becca purred. “Last I heard on the grapevine.”

It was disconcerting that Becca still followed her.

“I've just moved,” Charlotte said, “to a new practice here. New to me, that is.”

“Aaaaaah,” Becca said, nodding. “We're over in Marlow. Settled as soon as Henry's trust fund matured.”

“Henry?” Was that a Henrietta?

“You must remember Henry Harrington?”

Becca had been busy, and those were some changes. A husband and kids were not on Charlotte’s radar at all. Settled down with family and a man, not what she’d predicted for her ex, who’d royally messed her around at college.

She remembered Millie keeping schtum about Becca, although she patiently listened to Charlotte recount every disappointment and break up. And Millie picked her up off the floor every time and gave her a hug.

When, after a year, Charlotte finally asked out loud, “Tell me what you make of Becca. Please.” Millie had looked pained.

“I think she messes you around and doesn’t suit you at all.” Millie had held her face and stroked her cheek. “You’re not me. You don’t thrive on casual. You’re searching for the one. If not the one, then the one that’s going to last a few years. And that’s not Becca. She will break your heart every time.”

Millie had been right, of course; infuriating considering what came next. But here was Becca. Settled down with a man. This really was a day.

“We married two years after college.” Becca looked distant, and Charlotte genuinely hoped it was authentic happiness for her. “We met at the Regatta when he competed in the eights.”

Rowing. Charlotte reminded herself. Becca had been a boatie at university and the Regatta was likely the Henley Regatta.

“How about you?” Becca said. “How’s your life panned out?”

“Me? Oh.” Single. Failing to hit career milestones. And personal goals. And desperately trying to get back on track in Oxford. “Great.”

“Married?” Becca pressed.

“No. Not yet.” Apparently, she had plans though? Charlotte rolled her eyes at herself, unable to let the lie-by-suggestion go. “I’m single and too busy for anything else, if I’m honest. New job. Need a new home. No time for a girlfriend.”

There.

Becca nodded wisely. “Tragedy of the career girl.”

Really? From Becca? Who was the epitome of ambitious at college?

“I always had a sneaking suspicion,” Becca looked at Charlotte down her nose with a smirk, “you’d be a homebody with little ones.”

“What?” Charlotte laughed.

When did she give Becca that impression? Charlotte’s self-image reflected professional lawyer, geek and library nerd. Standing there a few years after their involvement, it became clear they’d never known each other. Which, she admitted, might have been their problem all along. But a family? Charlotte? Whose sole interaction with children belonged to her niece and nephew, who showed every sign of taking after their grandmother Nicola.

“God no,” Charlotte said, and she stared at Becca’s enormous belly, trying not to be alarmed at the thought of mini Beccas running around in the world, or indeed more Albrights.

“So?” Becca smiled and nodded.

“So.” Charlotte nodded and sighed.

It was difficult to know where to go after that, for two people who’d never understood each other in the past and didn’t show any interest now. In fact, Charlotte’s legs twitched, like they might take flight any moment.

“Well,” the very pregnant Becca said. “I always thought you’d end up with Millie. You were besotted with her.”

That was just the limit.

Millie.

Again.

Charlotte was a patient, good-natured woman, but this went beyond reasonable.

“You know.” Becca cocked her head to the side. “I expected you’d be married to her by now.”

“Really?” Charlotte barely managed the words without growling. Becca clearly had no idea who Millie was either.

“You were made for each other.”

She was about to force a laugh again, but shockingly Becca appeared honest. Her ex looked at her, not down the nose, but interested in the answer.

“We were good friends,” Charlotte admitted. “Very good friends.”

“I tagged you as soul mates.”

She couldn't laugh this time because that had been the problem. She'd thought so too and, damn it, if it wasn't frustrating as hell when you met your soul mate and they were straight.

Charlotte gathered herself. “Millie's straight. Or at least, never wanted me.”

“Hmm.” Becca shrugged. “Well, you know what they say about spaghetti?”

She did, an analogy that always conjured a weird mix of images.

“And people change,” Becca said. “Look at me.” She raised her arms and thrust her unborn towards Charlotte.

It was alarming. The whole day was frankly.

“Well, take care, Charlotte,” Becca said, the genuine interest evaporating into glee at Becca's own situation.

“You too, Becca,” Charlotte growled. “I mean it.”

She did, even though it didn't sound it. But Becca remained pleased enough with herself for it not to matter. Her ex waved and disappeared down a narrow side-street between the timber-framed Pret and an ancient city church.

Charlotte picked up her briefcase and stomped down Cornmarket.

“This day,” she growled. “This...day.”

She couldn't bring herself to use the top-tier swear word, even to herself. She hadn't bumped into Millie all week, but it was like she followed her everywhere.

Charlotte had recovered from the shock of meeting Millie and learning she lived in Oxford. She'd reconciled herself to perhaps bumping into her every few years, even months, a reasonable frequency given the size of Oxford. Then came news that Millie worked in the same street, and it might be every damned Tuesday and Thursday. Which had been bad enough, now she acknowledged it. She'd been polite, however. "Give me a wave," she'd replied cheerily. Then today, it had become abundantly clear she'd have to live with constant reminders of Millie every hour of the day. She'd never escape.

Out of habit, she patted her jacket pocket irritably for her phone. Flat. She patted again. Nothing inside. She stopped and squeezed her fists together and growled at the sky. And now she'd forgotten her sodding phone.

She spun on her heel and marched back up Cornmarket. Her face must have been thunderous, given the parting of the waves of students, tourists and townsfolk. Her heels clicked and echoed down Beaumont Street. As she reached the door of Bentley and Partners, blonde curls emerged from a doorway further down the street.

Charlotte inhaled noisily and deeply through her nostrils.

"Don't even think about it," she willed towards Millie. "Do not bound up without a care in the world, Millie Banks." She would not be responsible for her actions.

Charlotte could see Millie's smile from this distance, her biggest, brightest feature. Too much. She snapped her head towards the door and stamped up the steps into the building.

That was rude.

Because it wasn't Millie herself who'd caused the irritation today. Although she was damn well its source in the past. Charlotte's mind stumbled over all the cursing she'd indulged, which sobered her further.

She reversed her steps down onto the pavement. Millie stood further along the road, the grin gone, but still staring and holding a bicycle lock.

Charlotte couldn't manage a smile. Or a cheery wave. Or even a neutral one. She shot a palm into the air, in a mix of curt acknowledgement and traffic-officer stop gesture. That was all she could give today. Then she resumed her march back inside the office.

## Chapter 12

“Shit.”

So, Charlotte was still cross with her.

Millie stared up the street at the space Charlotte no longer occupied.

That was definitely someone who didn't want to stay and chat. Not surprising in the scheme of things, given years of silence. It's just that Charlotte had messaged, “Say hello if you see me,” and Millie's mouth hung open, ready to do that.

“Bollocks,” she said, holding the padlock and bike chain.

She'd been bursting with hope that her best buddy would come round and they'd be friends again. Millie had hugged her phone when that message came through. The nugget of hope grew out of proportion all week, so that now Charlotte's curt wave of dismissal kicked her in the gut.

Millie pushed her bike up the street, too distracted to leap on and pedal home. She marched along Broad Street, past college buildings, with a glimpse into a leafy courtyard. Then her eye caught her reflection in a shop window. Blackwell's Bookshop. The historic frontage, with multi-paned Georgian windows and shutters, was a deceptively modest facade to what opened into a cavern of academic books and labyrinth of rooms. A first port of call for students arriving at university, it had been an eye-opening moment for Millie when she arrived as a fresher.

She remembered Charlotte wandering around the store in the first year and piling her arms with books from the



reading list. Millie had been the naïve one in this respect.

“Don’t the libraries have them?” Millie had said. The university, law department and college held collections.

“They’ll have five copies of the book everyone needs the same week for the same essay. My sister told me to get personal copies of core texts.”

Second-hand shelves emptied before Millie even thought to look. She’d be early the next year, but at the beginning, knowing no-one who’d attended Oxford, she stood with an armful of new books she couldn’t afford.

Charlotte had noticed her lack of movement. “What’s up?” she said, concerned and holding Millie’s arms, perhaps thinking the books too heavy.

“There’s no way I can afford this.”

And Millie had fumed at tripping over the first hurdle. Because feeling like you didn’t belong was easy at Oxford. Other students dropped her when they heard she attended state school, or couldn’t afford the Oxford Union, or wasn’t skiing at Christmas, but instead working in a pub. This shitting place that assumed you had money and turned noses up at the likes of Millie Banks. She’d been about to rant full volume at Charlotte when she noticed her friend wittering about something.

Charlotte had taken the books and put them on a table. She leant over them, tucking her long hair behind an ear, completely oblivious to Millie about to erupt.

“...because we can share this,” Charlotte said, piling up a book and turning over another. “And this one. We’re next

door to each other, so it'll be easy."

In fact, they worked side-by-side for three years.

"We'll need a copy each of this," Charlotte continued, showing Millie the price of a small paperback and still not noticing Millie's annoyance. Which in fact was evaporating as she gazed at her oblivious friend. Charlotte carried on in her own little world, sorting affordable books for Millie. This goofy smiling girl Millie had met at the end of the corridor, in this otherwise stuffy institution, helping her with transparent generosity.

"My mum's covering my books, so I'll get these," Charlotte babbled on, holding up two of the driest books known to humankind. "How's that?" Charlotte said standing straight, beaming with pink on her cheeks.

By which time Millie was smiling at her so fondly, almost proud, she could have picked Charlotte up and hugged her.

What struck Millie most about Charlotte's offer, she realised now, was its authenticity. Charlotte helped Millie because she simply liked her. Millie always read her friend easily. She was an open book who bound Millie strongly in this foreign world of heirs, airs and graces, of clubs, favours, falsity and money.

When Charlotte smiled, she shone with genuine joy, whether happy to see Millie or cracking up at a joke. Millie had basked in it. And while she socialised like a whirlwind, there was no-one so supportive as this generous and genuine friend, who was Millie's home. It was exhilarating and nurturing, all at the same time. She'd craved that security in

the intervening years. And, honestly, she'd always been a little addicted to making that beautiful smile appear.

But now, Millie realised as she stared at her reflection, Charlotte's openness was telling her exactly how annoyed she was with her.

“Fuck.”

She tore herself away from the shop window and swung her leg over the bike. It still nagged at her as she cycled home with the wind whistling past her cheeks.

Was it lunch with her mother that had soured Charlotte's mood? Millie bumped into Nicola Albright in the morning, on her way to buy the cheapest sandwich she could find, and Nicola heading to a classier lunch in the museum restaurant.

Guilt pinched hard. The combination of Nicola and the Ashmolean reminded her of that bet with Charlotte years ago. And another sharper pinch reminded her how unwise it had been in retrospect. If she'd known what she did now, she wouldn't have done it.

Was that the start, or the beginning of the end? And did Charlotte blame her?

The image of Charlotte in the distance, waving with polite fury, said she did. Although when Millie looked back, and she had often, she didn't think it was that kiss. She was sure it was later.

Millie hurried straight to her room when she arrived home, not in the mood for banter with Virginia. She fell onto the bed and stared at the off-white ceiling, the familiar cracks

and brown stain of an old leak for company. Is this how it would be now? Constant reminders of how Charlotte hated her while she missed her friend, and she remained on the bed while the light faded outside and the room grew dim.

A buzz, then beep, from her pocket snapped her to attention, and she snatched her phone from her jeans.

Message from Charlotte: “Look, do you want to go for a walk?”

Charlotte was grumpy. Millie almost felt it through the bouncing dots – little irritable points leaping up and down. It was likely Charlotte grumbled for hours before sending off this non sequitur.

Millie sat up in bed, her mood lifting sky-high at Charlotte getting in contact. But she waited for the dots to calm down and another message to appear.

“That is, I would appreciate it if we could meet up.”

It was so Charlotte that Millie laughed. The sass, then reeling it in with a polite follow-up. She heard Charlotte’s voice in the message, could see the mild pink fury on her cheeks, and fondness glowed inside, even at this irate exchange.

“I would love that,” Millie tapped out with her thumbs. Then added. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“Thank you,” fired back. “How about Sunday? Are you free?”

Sunday was good for Millie. Sunday was great for Millie.

They set a place and time, and she put down her phone. She inhaled and breathed out slowly until her stomach caved. This was make or break, she knew it. Either they found a friendlier footing, or they never set eyes on each other again.

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## Chapter 13

### *Second year university, twelve years ago*

“For fuck’s sake,” Millie muttered into her backpack on the floor. She leant down from her chair and desperately rootled around pockets in a way guaranteed not to find anything. She sat up next to Charlotte, writing lecture notes in the junior common room before their next tutorial.

“I’ve run out of tampons,” Millie said.

Except Charlotte already held open a bag on the table, a hybrid brown leather satchel-briefcase, with a row of tampons in the pencil loops. She passed a couple to Millie with a smile.

Millie reeled in her outburst in the face of her considerate friend. “Thank you,” she said, getting up and squeezing Charlotte’s shoulder as an apology.

But Millie was sore, and in more ways than one. Her periods were like clockwork. You could time the phases of the moon by them. Except every so often, it would be late, just to scare the crap out of her.

Sometimes her life felt like one long anxiety swing between, “Where the fuck’s my period?” and “Fuck, it’s my period.”

This one had her freaked for a week and saving pennies for a pregnancy test. Tears of relief followed along with the heaviest bastard period to add insult to injury. It felt like her insides were falling out.

She washed her hands in the basins of the JCR loos and stared into the long mirror, her face pale in harsh light and eyes smudged with fatigue. God, she wished she was a lesbian sometimes. How lovely to have sex and not worry it'd ruin your life, although Millie took it in her stride more than most.

“What would you do if you became pregnant?” Charlotte had asked her once, as they'd washed their hands side-by-side in the loos.

Millie had shrugged. “Have a baby. Don't have a baby.”

“Really?” Charlotte's nose wrinkled in confusion, her middle-class sensibilities coming through. “Doesn't it bother you?”

“Does being a single mum sound horrific to you?”

“I don't know.” Charlotte wrinkled her nose some more. “Don't you worry about how people would treat you?”

“No,” Millie said, laughing. She shook her head at Charlotte, who had married parents and two perfect daughters, all who'd made it to Oxford.

“A single mum's my normal,” Millie said. “Mum loves me to bits and stands in my corner. She's everything I aspire to be. Although Mum would have strong words if I didn't acknowledge it's bloody hard work and she needed support from family.”

Charlotte still frowned. “Don't you mind what people say about you?”

That pinched, hard. Millie heard what people called her. Some of those private-school boys who couldn't accept

her sleeping with several men a term but staying within her rights to say no to them.

“Why shouldn’t I have sex with whoever I want?”

“Because,” Charlotte shrugged, “it’s different for women. You can end up with a baby.”

“This isn’t the middle-ages. We have birth control. Abortion. Paternity testing to hold men as accountable as women, but people still cling on to shaming to control women. It’s the shittiest of traditions.”

And Charlotte had smiled. “I know. You always pull me up on those.” Charlotte would wrinkle her nose in confusion, then adjust every time, assimilating another perspective.

Yet, here Millie was, staring into the JCR loo mirrors, fraught and exhausted.

Bloody Dominic.

Becca was Charlotte’s Achilles heel and that six-foot-five boatie with absurd shoulders and muscly thighs was Millie’s. Yes, he viewed Millie as an accessible body and frankly she treated him the same, but he got under her skin and left her needy. She hated herself for it. Yet underneath that need, and what she assumed love, he was the last person she’d want a baby with.

Millie sniffed and wiped away a tear. She marched back to the common room, her body tense and protective around her sore and vulnerable state. She slowed approaching the table. Charlotte sat, back turned, shoulders hunched over her work, but on the table in Millie’s place were new items. A



mug of tea, steaming and fresh. Just the sight of it was comfort. A snack-pack of chocolate shortbread biscuits – sugar and fat that Millie’s body and soul craved. And a strip of paracetamol. Perfect gifts.

Millie choked a little, then laughed out a sob. She leant down and threw her arms around Charlotte’s shoulders, buried her face in that luxurious mahogany hair scented with acacia honey shampoo.

“You are perfect,” Millie sighed.

Charlotte squeezed her hand, kissed her fingers and carried on writing. Millie held her a little longer. She wondered if this was the secret to happiness. Find someone who smelled of honey and knew when to pass the pain relief and refined-sugar snacks.

“Marry me,” Millie said.

“Of course,” Charlotte replied, and Millie could hear the laugh in her voice.

## Chapter 14

### *Present day*

The knot in Charlotte's stomach had tightened since waking. She'd been up for hours already when she sat beneath the trees in the early morning. The chill in the autumn air nipped enough to stuff her hands deep into her woollen coat pockets and she shivered so deeply her loose cheeks and open lips said "flubulubulub" into the air with a puff of steam.

She crossed her legs, then recrossed them and sat back on the Tolkien Bench in the quietest reaches of the University Parks. A small tributary of the Cherwell River swelled beneath trees, their deep green leaves of summer burning into yellow and red. Behind, the parks spread up the riverbank into trees, pitches and grass courts, leaving the city centre far from view. And over the waters, meadows stretched so that she could have been in open countryside. The tranquil scene was about as far removed from her internal state as possible.

"I can't," she muttered, leaping off the bench and pacing back and forth, unable to sit still.

She was early and Millie wouldn't be late.

Charlotte had deliberately chosen somewhere quiet, in case she became upset and humiliated herself by using the kind of words she'd thrown at Millie a decade ago. She felt unprepared after running the gauntlet of emotions these past two weeks and paced quicker. The surprise meeting with Millie at Worcester College, and all of fear, elation and curiosity through their conversation at formal hall. Then

temptation had turned to caution, tumbled into irritation, so by the time Charlotte bumped into Becca she was as close to blind fury as she ever came.

All over the petite woman who now stood on the elegant curving footbridge over the river.

Charlotte stopped.

In the distance, Millie opened her mouth and raised her hand. Charlotte mirrored the movement, from open mouth to hesitant wave.

Her image of Millie from their college days was so strong, she still expected the student, even though she'd seen the more mature Millie twice. No longer with flowing curls, but a tighter shorter style, swept over the head and behind the ears and cropped into the neck. The long camel coat was luxurious and beyond Millie's old student budget, and Charlotte guessed it came from her city lawyer days. She was still wrestling with the opposing versions when Millie strode along the river path and stopped so they stood a few paces apart.

It was weird, the distance between them as strange as the fluctuating feelings and images that flickered through Charlotte. The habit of being close was ingrained and she nearly embraced Millie to walk off arm in arm together. But ten years and arguments made them strangers and demanded distance. The two competing sensations pulled and pushed at her as if someone toyed with her on a string.

Nervous.

She breathed in to steady herself. "Hi," Charlotte said.

The petite woman, so familiar yet with an unnerving potential for difference, lifted her chin. Her expression quivered on the edge of a smile, tempered and restrained, the tension in her cheeks visible.

Was Millie nervous? Perhaps even more so, it struck Charlotte with surprise. Millie had always been vivacious, sure of herself and energetic, rarely the hesitant woman who stood in front of her today.

“Hi,” Millie said, squeezing her black-gloved fingers into fists and stretching again.

“You’re...” So many things Charlotte could have said but, “actually shorter than I remember.”

Millie’s brow crinkled for a fraction of a second. Then she threw back her head and laughed loudly, as if the old Millie poured into her that moment. It was also lucky, because even that snippet of conversation revealed too much about the importance of Millie to Charlotte – the recalled size disproportionate to the real-life woman.

Millie tilted her head in consideration, exuding cockiness, and amusement flushed on her cheeks.

“Would it shock you that I’m actually average height for a woman in the UK?” Millie challenged.

“No,” Charlotte replied in disbelief. Her face dropped so quickly you could hear it. Genuinely, that was a surprise.

Millie threw back her head again. “I knew it. You have no idea, do you.”

“I...” Charlotte found herself wrinkling her nose in confusion.

“Do you ever describe another woman as anything but ‘short’?”

“I’m sure I have. There’s... There’s...” Oh god, who was there. “Olivia!” Charlotte jabbed her finger to stress her point.

“And how would you describe her?” Millie crossed her arms.

“I suppose she’s my height.”

“Which is?”

“We’re both quite tall?”

“The pair of you are bloody Amazonian.” Millie rolled her eyes. “Just because everyone looks shorter to you, doesn’t mean we’re all tiny.”

Millie grinned at her, always there to shift Charlotte’s perspective, challenge her assumptions and make her laugh. Trust Millie to break the tension and wriggle her way into Charlotte’s comfort zone.

“Come on, lanky,” Millie said. “How about that walk?” She stepped closer, still a couple of metres apart but not the glaring distance of before.

Charlotte’s nerves danced, but the morning didn’t seem so impossible now Millie was here. “Where to?”

“Lead the way,” Millie said. “You always knew the best places.”

And Millie’s look had a sparkle, which gave away how genuine she was, sprinkling compliments about Charlotte as generously as she’d take the mick a second later.

“OK,” Charlotte agreed, the familiar warmth of Millie’s company soothing her nerves a little more.

As they walked in silence, it reminded her of when she watched Millie study across the table in the law library – a beam of sunlight shining on golden curls, neat eyebrows furrowed in concentration, long eyelashes blinking over eyes with shades of green and blue, shimmering between each depending on the light. The neat nose and prominent cheeks of her heart-shaped face. My goodness, she’d thought Millie beautiful.

Millie had exuded fun and charisma all day long, with naughty looks or loud laughs that consumed her whole body. It was Millie so often, that the quiet moments caught Charlotte by surprise – the shining smile subdued, makeup gone, and just as appealing.

Millie was the same now, quiet under the dappled shade of the autumn oaks, her face possibly even more beautiful, a flash of green-blue eyes, as Millie glanced towards her, the best feature of all. At university, Charlotte could have gazed into them all day, appreciating how astonishing they were.

Charlotte stared at the ground. Was she in trouble already, admiring Millie? It wasn’t like you could look at her without noticing how attractive she was, although Olivia had assured her it was more than possible.

It was Millie. She was beautiful. That didn’t mean they couldn’t be friends again.

“How’s Bentley and Partners shaping up?” Millie asked.

They wandered along the narrow river, the park empty except for the odd jogger puffing past.

“It’s good,” Charlotte said automatically. That was the polite response. Except this was Millie, and out of habit she corrected to, “It’s OK.”

“Tell me,” Millie encouraged, as if there to help, either as a sounding board or with genuine advice, of which she was capable with her background.

“The caseload is right up my street.”

“IPR and technology?”

“Yes. But I’m running into the same old problem.”

Millie raised her eyebrows in question.

“I should’ve made partner at my last firm but didn’t.” She peeked at Millie, unsure if she wanted to admit this to someone she felt vulnerable about.

“Yes?” Millie said gently.

“I don’t speak out enough.”

Millie crossed her arms and tilted her head towards Charlotte, eyes to the ground. She listened.

“I don’t know how to sell myself while doing a conscientious job. I’m not even sure why it’s necessary.”

“I’m not sure either. You were exceptional at complex scenarios and new industry. I could never get my head round tech.”

“My mother says I should put myself forward, for my sake and clients.”

Millie's eyebrows shot up.

"And it's easy for her to say," Charlotte continued. "She's quick on her feet and excels in court. Me?" She sighed. "I'm not my mother."

She'd spent her whole life trying to measure up to Nicola Albright, and being measured by others, and always fell short.

Millie stopped and turned towards her, expression serious but supportive. She could tell Millie burst with opinions, but years apart perhaps made her old friend hesitate. Unusual for Millie. Charlotte couldn't get used to seeing her nervous or reticent.

"No, you're not your mother, Charlotte," Millie said at last. "Don't I know it."

Oh. Perhaps not as supportive as she'd hoped.

"You're a different person. I'm sorry she makes you feel inadequate by holding up herself and your sister as perfect role models. Put them aside. Don't let them dictate the standard. Because if they held themselves up to you, they'd find themselves lacking too. They don't have your tenacious hunger for detail. Or your patience. But they wouldn't consider themselves failures for it. And quite right too. Everyone's different and it's all perspective."

Yes, Charlotte did see that. She smiled and said, "When did you get so wise?" But Millie had always been astute. She came with intelligence, sass and broader experience.



“There you go again,” Millie said. “Comparing yourself to me instead. I have qualities you don’t, but Ms Charlotte Albright, author of *IPR Explained*, you have many I lack.”

A smile twitched on Charlotte’s lips and she couldn’t help her mouth from rising. “You read my book?”

“Of course not.” Millie grinned. “I don’t go anywhere near law if I can help it. But maybe I looked you up from time to time.”

“You knew about my book.” Her cheeks ached from grinning, because Charlotte was proud of her work.

Millie relented at last. “I knew about your book.”

“Do you want a copy?”

“No, I don’t. Well, I’d love a signed copy, but don’t make me read it.”

And Millie beamed with such affection that Charlotte’s heart thud slow and strong. She faltered a second. Did she need to worry about this? Her smile waned and heart rate settled with no accompanying pang of jealousy or yearning. No, she was all right here.

“Come on,” Millie said. “Let’s head over to Park Town.”

And Charlotte left the park through a gate in the black railings, Millie at her side, and they headed through the streets of generous Victorian mansions.

This was nice. She gazed again at Millie. Charlotte needed this if they kept bumping into each other in Oxford.

“So,” Millie said. “You’re working with Olivia now?”

It was funny. From anyone other than Millie, Charlotte would have said it sounded jealous. Millie had already surprised her with nervousness this morning, but she dismissed jealousy as a possibility.

They’d reached the middle of exclusive Park Town and the two grand crescents of stone houses and central gardens. Their shared past leaked in again, filling her consciousness and their surroundings with more layers. When they were envious students, they’d strolled around the address pretending to be residents, Millie putting on her 1950s BBC accent and complaining about their fictional neighbours, Caviar and Esme.

“This could be you soon,” Millie said now, sweeping an arm around the four-storey crescent.

“What do you mean?”

“When you and Olivia run Bentley, perhaps you could afford a house together.”

So that was what Millie implied. Honestly, she did sound jealous.

“If you marry someone like Olivia, this really could be you.” Millie said it with a smile, but one tense around the edges. “With your perfect children, Fritillary and Persimmon.” The smile became naughty.

Charlotte rolled her eyes. “We’re not together.”

“Hmm?”

“Olivia and I are not a couple.”

“Oh?” Millie’s expression lost its tension and became playful.

“Millie,” Charlotte grumbled. Her old friend was such a troublemaker. “Olivia and I are purely friends, and now that we’re working together it will definitely remain that way.”

She thought she’d said it with an even tone and delivery, but something clearly piqued Millie’s interest. Her sharp friend regarded her.

“What?” Charlotte said, peeking from side to side, as if trouble was about to pounce from behind, when it plainly stared her in the face.

Millie crossed her arms and leant her weight on a heel.

“What is it?” Charlotte grumbled again.

“You slept together,” Millie said, smirk still in place.

“Excuse me?”

“You had sex.”

“I know what you meant.” She was aghast that Millie had said it though. “That’s a bit personal.”

“You had sex once, and it was dreadful.”

She double-checked to see if Millie was serious, but she wore the same damn smile she did at college when she played with Charlotte’s attitudes. She’d bait her, while challenging her assumptions, all with great affection.

But this wasn’t college anymore. And it was too bloody much.

Charlotte gasped in outrage. “I beg your pardon.” It was too late to counter the accusation though.

“You slept together, because it made sense,” Millie said matter of fact and with a nonchalant shrug. “I mean, you’re a lawyer. She’s a lawyer. You’re both intelligent and well-presented, with a comparable background. Why wouldn’t you make a suitable couple?”

That chill on Charlotte’s face, that was colour draining away and mortification taking up residence.

“But when you slept together, you were so devoid of chemistry it was embarrassing.” Millie shrugged again.

“That is...” Charlotte ground her teeth. “That is so disrespectful, judgemental and arrogant. You think you know me and Olivia well enough that...” She growled to stop herself and barely controlled the urge to stamp her foot.

The wind seemed to fall from Millie’s sails and her shoulders dropped. The vulnerability that nerves hinted at rushed in again. “Sorry. I’m being an arse.”

“Yes, you are,” Charlotte couldn’t help agreeing. She was too annoyed. “Just because you’re good at people doesn’t mean you’re always right.”

Millie understood people easily, particularly Charlotte, perhaps another reason why she flared up so rapidly.

“No, I’m not always right,” Millie said. “And I’m not that good at people.” She paused. “I just know you.”

Charlotte stared at her in question.

“I always found you easy to read and your reactions gave it away.”

See. There she was, being completely transparent to Millie. Definitely one of the reasons she'd become so annoyed. The remaining reason being that Millie was right. The accuracy was enraging. And a flash of mortifying memories brought the colour back to her cheeks. Oh god it was embarrassing.

She'd slept with Olivia and it was dreadful, for all the reasons Millie had said. Charlotte wouldn't admit it though, despite the temptation being huge. Something had always compelled her to tell Millie everything. Millie had done the same with her. Every heartache and fear about partners, every secret and forgotten embarrassment, would come out during a game of spin the bottle. Except for the big secret that Charlotte never admitted then ignored for too long.

“You're being mean because it's Olivia,” Charlotte said instead.

“Yes, I am.”

The admission took her by surprise. And damn it, a smile returned to Millie's lips. Charlotte threw her hands in the air. “Why did you two have such a problem?”

“She had the problem, not me.”

“You goaded her.”

“She was pompous and arrogant.”

“Olivia has high expectations of people.”

Although Millie had a point. There was having high expectations, then there were supreme Olivia standards. It was no surprise the woman didn't have a serious girlfriend. Who on earth would ever measure up to partner Olivia?

But Charlotte persisted with, "You tolerated others who were arrogant and pompous."

"Yes," Millie said. "She wasn't the first to have a shitty attitude with me. It's not that. She was jealous."

"Jealous?"

"She wanted to get into your knickers and thought I was in the way."

She couldn't deny Olivia's attraction to her, given the leaping into bed that one time. "But you weren't in the way. I dated Becca while we were at college with Olivia."

"Exactly," Millie said, chin raised and victorious. "She was unreasonable."

Charlotte didn't think Millie was being entirely reasonable either, and she knuckled her hands onto her hips.

"I don't think you're being fair to Olivia." She'd had enough of her two friends snarling and pulling each other down in the past. She wasn't putting up with it any longer. "If anything, it's like you're acting jealous now."

Everything paused, like Charlotte could hear the whole avenue inhale. She shouldn't have said it. Yes, it had nagged at her several times over the conversation, which was getting very close to full-on argument territory. But she knew it wasn't true. It was wishful thinking, a vestige of hope that Millie felt

the same way about her. She feared it would never go away entirely.

Millie looked at her with an unwavering gaze, any semblance of teasing or humour gone and the vulnerability back.

“Of course, I’m jealous,” Millie whispered.

That wasn’t what Charlotte expected.

A pained shadow flickered over Millie’s expression before she said, “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t understand.”

Millie expanded her chest, a waver in her breath and eyes suddenly evasive. “Because Olivia got to be your friend. And I didn’t.”

She flinched, the honesty and rawness of Millie’s admission shocking. Then came another blow, because Charlotte realised Millie’s unusual hurt was caused by her.

“I’m sorry.” Millie gulped in the silence. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Millie turned and walked a few paces away, her back turned, shoulders rising and chest expanding with quick breaths. It sank in that Millie really was upset. And she was right. At least Olivia had remained Charlotte’s friend. But it seemed ridiculous that Millie should be jealous. Charlotte had been in love with her, not the other way round.

A wave of guilt chilled over her. Millie had lost something too. A friend. Perhaps Charlotte’s lower self-esteem had prevented her from acknowledging that. Self-preservation

also stopped her from seeing it from Millie's point of view. It hurt enough from her own.

Yet, Millie had always reached out, and another wave of guilt engulfed. If ever Charlotte had imagined them meeting, she pictured the conversation veering too close to their past and scratching at things that should remain undisturbed. But not once did she envisage Millie being the one distressed and needing to walk away.

Charlotte approached and stood beside her friend. They stayed that way in silence, perhaps neither knowing what to say.

“How about...?” Charlotte started quietly. “Would you like to stop somewhere for a bite to eat? Maybe a coffee?”

Millie still faced away but nodded, took a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose. She tucked it away in a flurry, as if wanting to hide the need from Charlotte.

“That'd be nice,” Millie said at last.

“OK,” Charlotte whispered. For a moment, she was tempted to take Millie's arm and hug her close. “OK,” she said, again.

They set off, walking a distance apart, but closer than before.



## Chapter 15

Millie stopped to talk to a man when they turned down Banbury Road into town. Charlotte waited a few paces away. She tried not to watch Millie talk in her animated way. The man was tall and lean in running gear, his black hair shining with perspiration and brown skin glowing. He was typically handsome, and when he smiled broadly at Millie something stirred inside her.

Stop it.

She turned away. She had no right to feel jealous. A timely reminder and caution perhaps. Charlotte never had an issue with Millie flirting with handsome men, and them flirting back at college. Until suddenly she did, then couldn't bear it. It seemed like everyone but her caught Millie's eye.

Charlotte twitched her shoulders to shake off the old feeling. When Millie appeared at her side, the man jogging away up Banbury Road, her lips were pursed perhaps reading Charlotte's thoughts.

"He's from my running club," Millie said.

Excuse me? What? Her mouth dropped open.

"I jog around the park during the week but run with a group on Sundays."

Her mouth still hung open.

Millie tilted her head in confusion. "It's nice to see people who aren't from work."

"You..." Charlotte was having difficulty with this.  
"You run?!"

Millie laughed, then stifled it in mock consternation. “Yes, I run,” she said, her smile remaining, as if daring Charlotte to ask again.

And of course, she did ask again, because things took time to sink in for Charlotte. “You? Run?”

It was just so unexpected. People changed over the years and the current Millie, whose mature face and voice with the rounder tone, was slowly settling into her psyche as the new norm. But running? Curvy Millie Banks running? Well, she assumed Millie was still curves beneath that coat. In fact she knew from Millie’s bosom bursting from her red dress at Worcester formal hall.

Millie smiled, challenging her. “It’s good to stay fit for work and stops me from going crazy the rest of the time.”

“Running,” Charlotte said, sounding stupid. “I never imagined you as a runner.”

“Me neither to be fair.”

“It’s just...”

She couldn’t help her gaze dropping to Millie’s chest. She snapped her errant eyes back to her friend’s face. Charlotte swore she wasn’t checking Millie out, but there was no ignoring that Millie’s physique presented challenges when it came to gravity and bounding around the park.

Millie raised her eyebrows. “OK, I wear a fuck-off big bra when I run and it plasters my breasts flat,” she conceded.

Charlotte laughed out loud.

Still Millie. Running, but Millie.

“Wow,” Charlotte said. “I was going to suggest G&D’s for brownies and ice cream. But do you fancy that?” She wrinkled her nose in confusion.

“Of course, I do,” Millie replied.

“Well.” The running had really thrown her. “I wondered with your fitness drive.” She indicated up and down Millie’s body. How fit was she underneath that coat? Millie with curves and muscles. That was quite a prospect. “I thought you might abstain or something.”

Millie gave her a look that was very familiar. It called her stupid in nicer words. “I don’t do all that frigging exercise not to have cake. Come on, lanky. I want a brownie, ice cream, sprinkles, the works.”

Millie hooked her arm through Charlotte’s and gave an encouraging tug. She didn’t leave it there, but it was long enough for Charlotte to appreciate how toned Millie’s arm had become.

“Yum,” Charlotte said.

She hoped she referred to dessert. For the sake of her sanity and amicable footing with Millie, she prayed she meant the dessert.

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Charlotte gawped at Millie eating her treat with rude gusto. Her friend did it like everything – with excessive enjoyment. At Oxford’s own George and Davis ice cream

parlour on Little Clarendon, Millie had asked for ice cream, brownies, whipped cream, chocolate sauce and sprinkles, which towered from the small cardboard tub as Charlotte looked on in awe. Then Millie had scooped it vigorously with the wooden scoop and now ran her finger around the bottom crease and licked it clean with no self-consciousness at all.

Millie's all-consuming love of pleasures used to delight her, the abandonment refreshing after Charlotte's upbringing. Then it had annoyed her. Right now, though, she marvelled at Millie being here, all these years later, the same woman in this slightly different body. She became less different the more they walked. It was already shifting, the friend in her head turning into the Millie of the present, and the knot in her tummy eased.

Millie slurped her fingers clean and popped the tub and spoon into separate holes in a bin. "I could eat all that again."

Charlotte rolled her eyes at Millie and her appetites, while she was still halfway through her single scoop of chocolate ice cream, chipping away at tiny, delectable morsels. She circled back wordlessly towards the parks, Millie in sync, or the other way round, the day turning warm and sun baking on the university buildings. They passed Keble, the elaborate neo-gothic college, made from red bricks and patterned with pale yellow lines.

"I always think Keble looks like a great big cake," Millie said.

"You're obsessed." Charlotte felt her cheeks rise again, the familiarity too enjoyable and compelling to resist.

Millie shrugged. "Just hungry."

“You can’t be hungry after that ice cream,” Charlotte spluttered.

“Of course I can.”

“I never understood how you packed so much food into your petite body.”

“Hips and boobs, my love,” Millie said. “It all goes there.”

And Charlotte giggled. She remembered being shocked when she met Millie’s mother at the end of the first year. Coming through the college gates, a tiny little thing. Not just short like Millie, but a waif in comparison. She was beautiful, but elfin and slight.

Charlotte had stopped dead and blurted at Millie, “Where on earth do you get your curves from?”

“What these?” Millie had said, turning back and stroking down her hour-glass figure. She stuck out her bum and pouted like a classic Marilyn Monroe photo. “Pie and chips, darling. That’s my secret. Pie and chips,” and Millie had blown her a kiss before throwing back her head in laughter and running off to meet her mother.

Charlotte shook her head, still marvelling at the disparity.

“What’s more puzzling,” Millie said, as she bumped her hip against Charlotte’s upper thigh, with a warm nudge, “is how your Amazonian body survives on less.”

Slow metabolism, she nearly said. Slower at everything, she grumbled to herself. Compared with Millie, she felt pedestrian in almost every way. Then she pulled

herself up as Millie's earlier words rang in her ears. Millie was her marvellous self. That didn't mean being different was lesser.

Millie looked at her with a smile.

"What is it?" Charlotte said.

"Whatever you're doing, you're looking good on it."

Millie nodded. "You look wonderful."

"Thank you." And she grinned wide, before realising her teeth were probably smeared with chocolate ice cream, but she didn't care and carried on grinning.

Millie winked at her but, for once, was polite and didn't say anything.

Ice cream gone and back in the parks, Charlotte succumbed to a thought that nagged since Millie had bumped into the man jogging. If she was honest with herself, it had whispered for attention since she first met Millie again, but all the worst ideas and curiosities did that.

"So, how about you?" Charlotte said. "How are things? How are things with Alec, was it? The man. The man from dinner?" she asked clumsily and her curiosity obvious.

"Oh, we're not together," Millie said, seeing through it immediately. And she laughed, a lot.

"What is it?" What had tickled Millie so much?

"There's no man less interested in me. It's one of the reasons I adore him." Millie looked to Charlotte as they walked further into the parks. "Alec and I have been friends since he brutally turned me down. Actually, he was very polite

about it, which made it worse. And ever since, he's found me consistently unappealing."

Millie grinned, as if this was more delightful than being accepted.

"I'd trust him with my life. His wife's a friend too. They're so suited to each other, that if a naked model begged him to ravage her, we're certain he'd politely turn her down and offer his card in case she fell on hard times and needed affordable representation. He'd make it free, if particularly enraged by the injustice of her case."

Charlotte smiled. "He sounds nice."

"He's a gem."

Another curiosity, and something she shouldn't ask, but she couldn't help it. "I wondered if you'd end up with Dominic." He'd been the only man to get under Millie's skin.

Millie visibly twitched. "Frightful Dom?"

"You were potty about him."

"No, I wasn't."

"You were absolutely gaga," Charlotte squeaked in disbelief. "The only man you were sappy about."

"Was not to be." And Millie looked away.

Again, Millie seemed more vulnerable than Charlotte remembered. She steered the subject away at realising Millie's discomfort. "I see he's part of the government already."

"Not surprised. Not with Daddy's connections."

"He's working for the equalities minister, I think."

“You’re kidding?” Millie stopped and stared at her.  
“That homophobic bastard?”

Ah. That shone new light on the past. Charlotte had always suspected. Difficult not to when Dominic looked at her as if vermin.

“No, I didn’t keep in touch with Dominic. And recently, I’ve been busy,” Millie said. She was about to walk again, then hesitated. “In fact, I haven’t dated anyone for over four years.”

“Oh,” Charlotte couldn’t help saying aloud.

She knew plenty of contemporaries who lost their life to work, but Millie? She hadn’t expected that.

“Besides,” Millie added quickly. “I’m too busy with a new job and getting by financially to think about dating.”

Charlotte didn’t know what to say. It wasn’t the outcome of her digging she’d expected.

“So,” Millie added, “I have plenty of free time, although sometimes not much energy, for friends.”

Was Millie trying to reassure her? Did she offer a chance to catch up without the old pressures? Was that even a good idea?

“Same, to be honest,” Charlotte found herself saying. “New job. Need a home. I’m in way over my head without worrying about a girlfriend too.” Like she tacitly gave permission, the all-clear, to spend time together.

Millie gazed at her without saying a word, perhaps acknowledging the possibility they could be friends and had



the opportunity.

Charlotte walked on, Millie beside her, in silence and hardly a gap between them.

She remained silent with her stomach in knots to the end of the park. Millie was quiet beside her as they reached where the river curved into a generous meander beneath the trees. Another place where memories haunted of Millie stripping down to her underwear in hot summers and wading into the waters at Parson's Pleasure bathing place, her laugh always in the air.

It was time for Millie to leave across the meadows and for Charlotte to turn back into town. The question hung in the air. Would they talk again?

Charlotte didn't know if she was ready yet. Was she comfortable enough to invite Millie in again? She hesitated, not only for herself this time. She hadn't envisaged Millie's rawness and wondered if this was good for either of them.

"It surprised me to find you in Oxford," Charlotte said, still not knowing. Then quietly, "Why did you come back?"

"I needed a physio course." Millie shrugged.

It was off-hand and dismissive, as if Millie didn't want to dwell. Charlotte could tell Millie hadn't changed her opinion of their university contemporaries. And though townfolk were more diverse, there were many of that type.

"Why Oxford, of all places?" Charlotte pressed, puzzled.

"Because," Millie said quietly, her eyes meeting Charlotte's, "despite every person who made me unwelcome, I

met an amazing girl. A friend. Best I ever had in fact. And she showed me it was also beautiful.” Her eyes sparkled, even though sadness tugged at the corners. “I love the place.”

It hit Charlotte like a blow to the chest. She didn’t know what to say. She’d vastly underestimated how Millie had been affected by their friendship and her time at Oxford. Charlotte had stewed in hurt after university, then tried to blank Millie from her mind. It felt insensitive now. Especially when Millie stood before her, for whatever reason, looking like someone who could do with a friend.

Was she going to regret this?

“Millie?”

“Yes?”

She closed her eyes. Was this a mistake? “I had a lovely time,” Charlotte said, opening them again.

And it was like the sun coming out on Millie’s face. “Me too.”

“I am busy,” Charlotte said. Still cautious. “But would you like to meet again? Coffee maybe?”

“Yes. Coffee. I would love that.” Millie nodded.

“OK,” Charlotte said. “OK.”

“That’s great.”

“Good.”

She gazed at her old friend, at the tentative hope obvious in Millie’s eyes. Then Millie nodded and lifted her hand to say goodbye. Her lips remained resolutely shut,

perhaps fearful of saying something that would change  
Charlotte's mind.

Millie turned at last to walk across the meadows and  
Charlotte watched her the whole way.

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## Chapter 16

“This is Olivia,” the message from an unknown number said.

Of course it was Olivia, Millie thought. It was such a blunt, officious start, who the hell else would it be.

“We need to meet. I’m free for coffee at 10 o’clock, Saturday morning,” it finished.

Millie heard Olivia in the text, with her silky-smooth precision and expression disdainful. It wasn’t a question or invitation. It was a presumptuous order. Millie was tempted to message back and forth, rearranging times, to make a point. She decided over-friendliness would be more fun.

“What a lovely idea. Looking forward to it.”

Olivia may have been too busy to reply, but she liked to imagine her stumped at the other end.

“Fine,” eventually came back. “Grand Café.”

Millie had always shared a prickly relationship with Olivia, with no reason to spend time together other than their mutual buddy Charlotte. They often sat in St Hilda’s library with Charlotte in the middle, Olivia studying for finals while Millie and Charlotte revised for first year exams. She irritated Olivia with an endless stream of casual boyfriends, while in turn she found Olivia’s disapproval tedious. Charlotte mediated.

Except for the time on the balcony, where Millie seethed about Professor Massey. He grilled her on obscure

cases, when he'd credit anyone waving a private-school tie with the most obvious recall.

"Are you sure?" Charlotte had said.

Millie was about to get annoyed with Charlotte, whose detailed focus sometimes missed the broader point. "Yes, I'm sure."

"I'm sorry, I hadn't noticed."

"I have," Olivia said emphatically. "He's the same with me. Grills me beyond everyone else, then sits back satisfied when he catches me out, implying that I'm not up to scratch."

"There!" Millie had said, shooting out hands to emphasise the point. "He's a bigoted, elitist, old bastard if he's trying to undermine Olivia, who is the obvious star of her year."

"Oh," Charlotte said. "Is he really?"

"Yes. A bigoted, elitist, racist, old bastard." Olivia nodded in agreement, her smooth delivery perfection.

Millie grinned. Olivia nodded, with a small bow and smile.

It was a beautiful moment.

Then Millie made a crude remark about a handsome third year and Olivia rolled her eyes, and they had resumed their usual barbed toleration of each other. Charlotte patiently continued mediation when she wasn't engrossed in detail and blissfully unaware anyway.

Saturday morning, and Millie drew her bike up to a railing near the café, a small but ridiculously opulent

establishment with columns around the windows trimmed with gold. Always close to history in Oxford, the café stood on the ground of the first coffee house in England, embedded between stone colleges at the quiet end of the High Street. It wasn't expensive, but beyond her budget, because pretty much everything was.

Millie opened the door to see Olivia, who'd arrived early and sat cross-legged in black trousers, silky cream shirt and blazer, sipping a coffee. Impeccably presented, Millie had always been envious of Olivia's black hair, which hung with precision along her elegant jawline. Icy, impenetrable and unforgiving of fools, Millie wondered if she'd warmed since university, when Olivia's deep brown eyes fixed on her and the temperature of the room dropped. If she'd warmed at all, then it didn't extend towards Millie.

"Morning," Millie beamed. She plopped herself in the chair beside Olivia, sweating, red-faced and bike oil smeared on the calves of her jeans.

It was as clear as day why Olivia had summoned her. But Millie was going to spin this out to annoy her, because Olivia wouldn't see the point of not getting to the point as quickly as possible.

"What a beautiful morning," Millie enthused, ridiculously over the top. "Thank you so much for the invitation. I wouldn't have been out to appreciate the day otherwise."

Olivia sat up, bristling.

"How wonderful to catch up and chat," Millie carried on. "How are you?"

Olivia's eyebrows formed a vexed V, but she said, "I'll let you order before we start," when the waitress arrived.

Millie ordered the cheapest hot drink on the menu, tea. She smiled at Olivia preparing herself for what she seemed to think was a meeting.

"So," Olivia said, pulling forward. She placed her coffee cup precisely on the saucer.

"So." Millie smiled.

"I won't insult your intelligence with idle chitchat," Olivia said, in a velvet voice. "You know why I've asked to see you."

"Yes, I do." Millie laughed. "And you didn't really ask."

Olivia blinked, but her expression didn't change. "You saw Charlotte last weekend."

"I did." Millie beamed. "It was lovely, thank you."

Olivia's brow flickered, irritated with her in record time. "Do you think that's a good idea?" Olivia said, always polite, always in an even tone. It was the expressions you had to watch, and right now the eyebrows said it all. She was displeased.

Millie was about to open her mouth when Olivia added very pointedly, "Do you think that's a good idea, for her?"

"I think it's a splendid idea." Millie couldn't help dropping into her mock 1950s accent. Olivia inspired it, especially when officious and apparently deciding what was

best for people. Millie added in her 50s finest, “Charlotte is a big gal now and can choose her gal pals herself.”

Olivia pinned her with a look. It was one of Olivia’s best. Millie was tempted to compliment her on it.

“That’s not why I asked you here,” Olivia said. “So, could you be serious for a moment?”

“Could you be honest?” Millie replied with a shrug. “It’s not like you’re neutral about Charlotte or who’s good for her.”

Was Olivia still in love with their mutual friend? It had been bleeding obvious to Millie at university. Not to Charlotte who, bless her, was a little slow in some matters. Refined Olivia Sachdeva had been an attentive college parent, but no matter how her fine brown eyes lingered on her friend, Charlotte was distracted by women like Becca or hung out with Millie.

Olivia meanwhile, treated her with suspicion, irritated that lovely Charlotte spent all her time with irreverent, crude Millie Banks, and Millie finding the whole web of relationships hilarious.

“All right. To be honest,” Olivia said across the café table, “I don’t particularly like you.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” Millie replied with a smile.

“Some things I don’t like a lot.”

Millie laughed. “Actually, that’s something I appreciate – your brutal honesty.”



“I still don’t like you.”

Millie shrugged. “I don’t care.” Except it made things difficult with Charlotte.

“I do, however, like your friend Alec.”

Ah. Millie had forgotten him in her irritation with Olivia. She was playing with their old hostility but needed to behave for his sake. Millie sat up and rested her elbows on the table, fingers entwined, in an impression of propriety.

“Have you met up with him?” Millie asked.

“Yes, I have, and I’m interested in his new charity. Now we’re fully staffed again at Bentley, I’ll have time for *pro bono* work and I appreciate his group has a local focus but isn’t confined to that.”

“Good. I wouldn’t want our...” Millie, for once, paused to phrase it delicately.

“I won’t let our animosity taint my work with Alec,” Olivia said, saving her the effort.

That was another thing she liked about Olivia, she was fair. Olivia would compartmentalise her disapproval and be as even-handed as possible. That didn’t mean Olivia would hide her displeasure, and that didn’t mean Millie would admit her respect, but she nodded in thanks.

Millie’s tea arrived, and Olivia sipped at her coffee. She watched Millie, cup poised at her lips, dark eyes hidden behind a veil of rising steam, as if spying and about to pounce.

“Why?” Olivia said, simply.

Millie raised her eyebrows, while also balancing her teacup by her lips, determined to mock Olivia.

“Why aren’t you helping Alec?” Olivia pressed.

“I’m no longer practising.”

“Exactly. Why? Why does a talented lawyer throw it all away?”

“Is it so hard for you to imagine? Not having law in your life?” Millie batted back.

Olivia placed her cup back on its saucer, spun it round so that the café’s name in golden italics aligned with that on the saucer.

“You worked hard through university,” Olivia said. “I saw exactly what you were up against. Charlotte may have been surprised by the resistance you encountered from tutors, but I wasn’t. You launched a star career at Durnst, then suddenly vanished. Until one day, I spotted you entering a surgery on Beaumont Street. I should have asked what you were doing there, but I didn’t think for a minute it would be work.”

Millie went cold.

“So, why?” Olivia calmly insisted. “Why the sudden change?”

Olivia picked up her cup and sipped again, her eyes never leaving Millie’s.

“Not everyone is as single-minded about their careers as you,” Millie replied.

She bet Olivia quoted precedents to her parents when negotiating treats as a toddler.

“And it’s possible to get sick of law,” Millie continued. She couldn’t help her voice tightening in defence. “I’m not like you and Charlotte. I didn’t have my heart set on Oxford, jurisprudence and a law career since I was knee high. It just seemed a good wheeze to make money when the careers service asked.” She shrugged. “I got tired of it.”

Olivia hadn’t even blinked. “I don’t buy it,” she said.

Millie wanted to shrug it off. Usually, the conversation moved on quickly, so she didn’t dwell, like it had with Charlotte who embraced her new career. But tenacious Olivia took her by surprise and hadn’t let go.

“I don’t buy it, because you were the most talented lawyer in your year with best all-round skill – detail, oratory, broad experience, and you brought an insight to the place that was sorely missing. You had Nicola Albright encouraging you to apply for pupillage which she’d never hinted at with her own daughters. Then you gave it up. Because what? A bit tired?”

Olivia raised a single eyebrow.

Millie felt sick.

Olivia’s lawyer insistence had her crumbling. That cold emptiness inside, which took hold four years ago, sucked in everything. Her head spun and she grabbed the edge of the table. She blinked to right herself, willing the chill to subside. Her head steadied enough after a few moments, although the frozen weight remained within.

She hadn't hidden her reaction, and Olivia's face mellowed with something approaching concern.

"Why did I give it all up?" Millie said, finding her voice. She sipped at her tea, trying to rid the chill. Then she sat back, faced Olivia and smiled, the expression creating the genuine feeling. "I don't like lawyers."

Sympathy evaporated from Olivia's features, and she rolled her eyes. "Is that apart from Alec and Charlotte?" Olivia replied, irritated now, an achievement which improved Millie's recovery.

"There are always caveats."

Olivia inhaled through her nose, which was far too inviting.

"Is this one of the reasons you 'don't particularly like me'?" Millie mocked.

"As a matter of fact, yes. You're rude and irreverent."

Millie was ecstatic at the response. She thrived on this. "And love indulging my energies on men and pleasure?"

"I could never see the appeal." Olivia crossed her arms.

"And I slept with many, and I'm not ashamed of it?"

Olivia's jaw knotted.

"And I had absolutely no rules about who they were. That I think the law is an ass. That you're an ass. That I hurt Charlotte. And I'm here again. And arrogant enough to think those are the reasons and obnoxious enough to tell you."

Olivia stared at her. Her mouth was doing the tight cat's bum thing. "That pretty much covers it."

Millie was satisfied.

“But mainly, don’t hurt Charlotte,” Olivia said. “The rest are incidental.”

Oh.

Millie had to hand it to Olivia. She always kept her eye on the ball. Millie breathed in and modulated her tone into simple sincerity. “I promise not to hurt Charlotte.”

“And you guarantee that how exactly?”

Because she had to. Because the walk with Charlotte was the only thing to soothe the emptiness in a long time. And although Millie had been tense that morning, and struggled to stay polite, and failed, she made Charlotte laugh anyway. And even though they’d verged on arguing, being in Charlotte’s company again was like reclaiming her home and past, like she’d misplaced parts of herself and found them again.

She’d wanted to throw her arms around Charlotte when she’d suggested coffee and say how much she’d missed her. Millie had agreed to the invitation, trying not to smile too hard, and not daring to turn round when she left. Because she’d cry, or wave frantically, or hug Charlotte tight and tell her how good it was to be back.

They could be friends now without Millie tormenting Charlotte with a string of lovers. Not that she assumed Charlotte would fall in love again. But Charlotte clearly nursed a wound from the first time, which she didn’t want to aggravate. Millie was single now. Just her, work, odd-ball friends of Alec and the landlady. And she wanted her best friend of all.

Olivia had unwittingly clarified how much Millie needed Charlotte. But how would she ensure Charlotte didn't get hurt and walk out again?

"I guarantee it," Millie said quietly, "because I'm willing to do anything to get Charlotte back in my life."

Olivia's face dropped, the incisive, calm lawyer wrong-footed. It was disconcerting and very satisfying.

"Right," Olivia managed.

Millie laughed. At the same time, her heart rocketed because of everything she'd thought. Even trying her hardest, she might not get Charlotte back.

Olivia sipped at her coffee, apparently stuck for words.

"We done, then?" Millie said.

"Yes," Olivia replied, recovering. "That is all."

Millie sipped from her cup.

"Are you going to leave?" Olivia said.

"When I've finished my tea."

So, they stubbornly sat in companionable awkwardness, Millie grinning and Olivia frowning beautifully. She couldn't deny Olivia was beautiful. Stunning, intelligent Olivia would make a lesbian obscenely happy one day, but she was glad it wasn't Charlotte. Something like the jealousy at the park with Charlotte fluttered inside, and Millie gulped a mouthful of tea to hide it.

"Thank you for the drink," Millie said, and got up to leave.

“We need to pay,” Olivia huffed.

“If you get these, it can be my shout next time?” Millie smiled. “I’d love to catch up again.”

Olivia gritted her teeth, the tight knot of muscle visible in her cheek.

“Fine,” Olivia said.

And Millie left the cafe, grinning from ear to ear while her heart cantered and the block of ice weighed inside.

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## Chapter 17

“You’re humming,” Olivia said from Charlotte’s office doorway. It was an accusation.

“Hmm?” Charlotte said, lifting her head from a contract.

“Are you trying to be funny?”

“No. Sorry.” Charlotte giggled, realising what she said. She’d been checking over a contract, prepared by one of the junior associates, and humming to a song in her head.

Oh dear. Olivia was in a mood. Granted she could be frosty, but Charlotte usually saw the warmer, loyal woman beneath. This, however, was impressive. What on earth had got into her?

Her irritated friend shot hand to hip, held a white card box high in the other and marched into the room. “Here,” Olivia said, thrusting the box onto the desk. “My mother made you sweets for Diwali.”

“Oh, thank you,” Charlotte said, immediately distracted by food. “Your mother is wonderful.”

Charlotte lifted the lid and prised the tissue paper apart with care, as if treasure lay inside. Thin diamonds of sweet kaju katli, cubes of pistachio mohanthal fudge, and balls of coconut laddu, her favourites from years of visiting Olivia’s family in Iffley Village. She started nibbling.

“I don’t know why she’s made them.” Olivia tutted. She crossed her arms and half sat on the corner of the desk,



her foot and high heel hanging in an elegant line. Olivia looked chic even when stropping. Charlotte always envied it.

“Erm, religious reasons?” Charlotte suggested, with a puff of dried coconut from her mouth.

Olivia gave her a look. It wasn't magnanimous. “She's as religious about Diwali as you are with Christmas.”

“I mean cultural tradition,” Charlotte said, poking a nut into her mouth that had escaped over her bottom lip.

“Yes, we celebrate every year. I meant, why has she made some for you?”

“Because I love them and her?” Charlotte mumbled through another sweet.

Charlotte wondered if Geeta wanted appreciation of her cooking, because Olivia, let's face it, was in a foul mood and had been since the weekend. Charlotte took a selfie with the sweets, beaming an appreciative smile, and fired off a message to Olivia's mother.

A reply appeared instantaneously. “A time for renewal and to celebrate your new start.” Then lots of kisses.

“What's the matter with people at the moment?” Olivia snapped, looking over the top of Charlotte's head and out of the window.

Charlotte could ask the same, given her friend's mood. Perhaps Olivia had been working too hard. Charlotte should encourage her to leave work early. Have dinner. Send her on a date.

Further messages pinged on Charlotte's phone and snagged her attention. Geeta was obviously at a loose end. Another two messages followed.

"I think your mum's possibly lonely," Charlotte said, puzzling at the number of replies.

"Really?" Olivia said.

Charlotte thought it over. "Your brother's left home. And I know you're still in Oxford, but how often do you see her?"

"Festivals, birthdays, occasional weekends." Olivia gave a neat shrug. "Isn't that enough?"

Charlotte offered a pained look in return.

"Well, I'm busy, and if I went home too often she'd start wiping my face like I was a toddler again."

To be fair, Geeta did mother elegant Olivia, who really didn't require it.

"And your dad's always been a workaholic," Charlotte said. "Does she have friends to see?"

Olivia ignored the suggestion, apparently still intent on being irritated by whatever.

"I think your mum's lovely anyway. I hope she's OK."

"Why are you so impressed with her when you have Nicola Albright KC?" Olivia muttered.

Because it felt like Charlotte had a barrister representing her, not a mother.

"Swap you." Charlotte grinned.

“Swap mothers?”

“You get career advice from Nicola Albright, and I’ll get hugs and food from Geeta.”

Olivia glared at her with an intensity that Charlotte suspected was nothing to do with Geeta’s sweets or joking about swapping families. She decided to drop it. She probably should have dropped it several exchanges ago, given how she took a while to cotton on to things. Something clearly ruffled Olivia. Charlotte had told her about seeing Millie at the park, and Olivia visibly bit her tongue while listening. She’d only turned grumpier since.

Charlotte didn’t dare admit they messaged more often. Millie sent photos of obscure parts of Oxford to test and entertain Charlotte. An old doorbell on Holywell Street. A gargoyle on Magdalen College – too easy. But Charlotte was stuck on the latest, a close-up of a statue’s bare bum, and Charlotte hadn’t placed it yet.

“You’re grinning like a fool.” Olivia glared at her.

Oops. Charlotte didn’t want to admit she was thinking of bare bottoms, or worse, Millie.

“What’s with all the singing, humming and smiling?” Olivia waved her hand in the air.

Charlotte laughed. “I’m just happy this morning.”

She’d been ready to ask Olivia to visit a house with her, but Olivia wasn’t in a generous mood. She’d probably tell Charlotte she was a fool for even thinking of buying a house. In fact, Olivia had left the desk, turned on her heel and was making an elegant exit.

“See you... See you later then?” Charlotte called after her.

Olivia waved dismissively over her shoulder.

Charlotte breathed out so heavily her lips flapped. The house viewing loomed.

A small, terraced cottage advertised in East Oxford had leapt out and grabbed her heart and wouldn't let go. Two bedrooms, less than three metres by three, making them nowhere near big enough to swing a cat. Tiny bathroom, single room downstairs and a description of “needs updating” was putting it mildly. But a home with sash windows, a walk from the office, albeit a long one, was Charlotte's dream.

New on the market and not yet priced, she'd called to make an appointment and ask the likely price range. The estate agent's answer had brought on tears to her eyes and an early mid-life crisis.

She should probably cancel. But her imagination had raced ahead to waking up in her own house in Oxford for years to come, painted with fresh cream paint with red window-box flowers, and the dream had taken hold.

Two devils appeared on her shoulders. One had Millie's voice.

“What the actual fuck? You could buy a whole street in Hull for that.” The voice told Charlotte what else around the world that amount would purchase.

But there was potential for a small attic conversion and another bedroom, Charlotte mentally pointed out.

Did Charlotte realise she'd be living on instant noodles with that kind of monthly repayment?

She did.

“And I still need somewhere to live,” Charlotte muttered out loud.

The other devil was more composed but agreed. “A very risky investment given how stretched you are to afford the mortgage,” it said with Olivia’s knowledgeable voice.

Charlotte could tell this was an imaginary conversation because Millie and Olivia would never agree in real life.

“But guys,” Charlotte said out loud. “It’s the only place in walking distance I can afford. And if I don’t grab that, I’ll never find anywhere inside the ring road.”

“Then move out of Oxford,” Olivia’s devil said.

Which annoyed her because Olivia already owned a smart three-bedroom house. Then she admitted that wasn’t fair, because it wasn’t actually Olivia who’d said that. But she so would.

“I can nearly afford it,” Charlotte muttered.

With the generous deposit her grandmother had left and borrowing above the usual limit, she could scrape together enough for that tiny home.

“It will bankrupt you,” Olivia-devil said.

“But it would be gorgeous,” Millie-devil whispered.

Charlotte picked up her phone and tapped out a message to Millie.

“Can I ask you a huge favour?”

“Do you need a kidney?” came back instantly.

“Not that huge.” Charlotte smiled at her phone. “Are you free Saturday morning? I’m viewing a house and would like someone to check I’m not making a colossal mistake.”

“Of course. What time?”

Charlotte hadn’t finished. “I meant to say I’d buy you lunch afterwards.”

“Lunch would be fab.” Smiley faces.

She’d made the right decision and asked the right friend. Olivia spent hours carefully handling people at their lowest ebb in divorce, which meant erring on the side of caution. Millie, though, could propel hopes sky high. Charlotte needed someone to check she wasn’t making a mistake, not Olivia who’d say she definitely was. Because Millie would factor her heart into the decision, while also keeping her feet on the ground when it came to money.

And Saturday morning, Millie was waiting for her at The Plain, a roundabout by St Hilda’s College and the start of Cowley Road. The sunshine brought out the golds of Millie’s curls and when she swung round to greet Charlotte, she beamed.

That’s what Charlotte needed. That exuberance. That energy to build her up and get life going in the right direction.

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## Chapter 18

Temptation tugged at Millie.

She wanted to sweep up Charlotte's arm and march her along Cowley Road. This was their old stomping ground where they'd rented a house in a side street the year they lived outside college. Town left university behind and tiny restaurants, pubs and small shops brought colour and variety. The morning air thrilled with the scent of coffee, fried eggs, spices, and fruit and veg from Asian supermarkets. Chatter broke through open windows of cafes, and students and other residents bustled along the pavements, and Millie wanted to inhale it all.

She walked beside Charlotte, her friend's arm brushing hers every so often. And maybe it was the familiar surroundings, but she felt their friendship building again, a warm, tangible link pulling them together.

Millie smiled. She couldn't stop.

"Thank you for coming with me," Charlotte said.

"You know me," Millie rattled back. "I'll do anything for free food."

She'd do anything for Charlotte full stop. And Olivia was probably busy, but Millie liked to think she'd been chosen especially and notched this one up. She beamed even more and almost took Charlotte's arm out of habit and the happiness of being together. But she shouldn't. Not yet. She read Charlotte easily and knew her friend needed that distance.

Charlotte's shimmering hair bounced around her shoulders and flowed in the breeze as they walked. The cool

air dusted her cheeks with rose and her neat eyebrows knitted together, probably worrying about housing. Millie could spot Charlotte overthinking things a mile off. And they headed past the shops to where dense streets of Victorian terraced houses struck off the main road and criss-crossed into a residential grid.

“Here,” Charlotte said, stopping midway along a quiet street of tiny, eye-wateringly expensive houses. It was a pristine terrace of brick cottages with sash windows upstairs, a bay version on the ground floor and classic six-panelled doors painted in glossy reds and blues on all houses, except one.

Millie drew in breath. Oh shit. Tact was needed here. “It’s...”

Peeling window frames. Rotten door that wouldn’t deter half-hearted burglars. A whole ecosystem evolving in the guttering.

“The only house I can afford within walking distance,” Charlotte said, before Millie put thoughts into words. “And if I can’t get this...” Charlotte looked at the house with a longing that made violins audible.

“Come on then, lanky,” Millie said. “Let’s check it out.”

She squeezed Charlotte’s arm in encouragement. Charlotte stepped forward and knocked on the door, tentatively.

The short woman, she really was short, who answered the door was as old as the window frames, but immaculate. She welcomed them inside, stepping into the main room



immediately from the front door. Everything inside was as ancient and orderly as the owner. A shining-veneer wooden table stood beneath the front window with a tea-set that looked as if it waited for guests a lifetime.

She hung back as the woman drew Charlotte inside the long, cosy room. It was shady on the street side, but blazing sunshine beamed through double back doors, leaving the sitting area bright with a view onto a garden. This could make a nice pad.

“You’re the first couple to see it,” the woman said over her shoulder. The owner dropped into a galley kitchen, which extended from the back-right corner, another bright space from sky lights.

“Oh, we’re not...” Charlotte started, looking back apologetically at Millie.

Millie waved off Charlotte’s worries, and the woman had already moved on to offering tea.

While Charlotte followed the owner, Millie tapped on walls like her mother did checking out new rentals. Covered with wallpaper from a different century, the plaster held firm. And the light switches weren’t the same adventure with death as the yellowing versions in Virginia’s house. And although the carpet was threadbare, the boards beneath looked solid wood when Millie rubbed a bare patch for a peek. She pictured her mum rolling up her sleeves with a verdict of: “some TLC and a lick of paint and we’ll have ourselves a home.”

“Go ahead, dear,” the owner called from the kitchen. “Have a good look.”

“Thank you,” Millie said, and she leaped up the steep stairs direct from the living space. She found the first floor in a similar state, and after a thorough poke around she wandered back to check what delayed her distractable friend.

Millie caught her from halfway down the stairs – Charlotte cosied up in an armchair beside the owner, their backs to Millie and each holding a cup of tea with steam rising in the sun’s rays.

Millie dropped onto the step and sat watching her friend through the railings. She rolled her eyes. If Charlotte aimed to hold out on the owner and negotiate hard, she was failing miserably. The woman had brought out a tin of shortbread, and with Charlotte’s sweet tooth, she was a goner already.

“It’s not fully on the market yet,” the owner said, “but I’m looking for a price to cover moving to my son’s house. He’s converting an annexe for me and I’ll need a caravan while it’s renovated.”

Charlotte nodded with a slight frown and her sincere concentrating face that Millie knew so well, and asked questions about the woman’s son. Millie narrowed her eyes and wondered if the old lady buttered Charlotte up with this information. If the owner did, she’d be unprepared for what happened next. Because even if she didn’t know it, this was where Charlotte shone. Open, without guile, thoughts dancing on her face, Charlotte would make a terrible barrister. But when negotiating contracts, arbitrating between parties for everyone’s benefit, Charlotte’s fair-mindedness and good

nature dazzled. And right now, this little old lady was putty in her hands. Millie watched.

“Do you have pictures of your grandchildren?”  
Charlotte asked.

Magic words.

“Would you like to see?” the woman said, eyebrows shooting up in delight.

“Of course,” Charlotte replied, with the same eagerness.

And two albums later, with seat pulled up to Charlotte, they inclined together as new friends, the woman irrevocably charmed by Charlotte with adoration on her face. She sighed with delight, as if she'd adopt Charlotte right there and then.

Because for someone who wasn't fond of parties or socialising, and it always astonished Millie who hungered after that, when Charlotte met people she liked, she glowed in a way ridiculously honest and charismatic. Catching the moment could be elusive. If she wasn't fond of the company, she'd quietly extricate herself from the group and no-one but Millie would remember her there. But when you did notice, when she smiled at you, there was something in the air. And this old woman was besotted. Give Charlotte an hour with a king or queen, and the monarch would give away state secrets.

The old woman said something that made Charlotte laugh out loud. There it was. The Charlotte smile that was pure magic. The most charming of all. It caught people unaware because Charlotte's smile was already so beautiful. But this one, accompanied by a musical laugh, sparkle in her creased

eyes, face flushed so that all her features glowed, like happiness shining in a starburst.

Millie wanted to rush down, hug her and lift her in the air. Instead, she remained on the stairs, beaming and chest bursting. It was the same at college when that laugh and smile caught Millie unaware. She'd gaze at her oblivious friend across a library table, or mesmerised while they giggled in their rooms, and Millie looked on with loving pride.

Charlotte reached out and held the woman's hand. Millie could see the bond grow between the women downstairs. Millie rolled her eyes again. Now Charlotte would feel obliged to buy the property, no matter its state, and the woman would take whatever Charlotte offered. There was no hope for either of them.

"I'll let you two look around and speak in private," the woman said, heaving herself off the seat. "Oh, your tea, dear," she said in Millie's direction. "It's gone cold."

"No worries," Millie replied, getting up from her position and wandering downstairs. "I'll glug it down."

She crossed her arms, smiled indulgently at her friend and followed the dazed Charlotte through the tiny house as she gazed at damp corners as if made of gold, and outside into the long narrow garden. A lush lawn was dotted with gold diamond leaves that fell from silver birches over the fence in the wildlife reserve and allotments. It was perfect for someone like Charlotte, who needed quiet and greenery. Charlotte spun around in the garden, taking in the house and perhaps the idea of it being home.

“It needs completely redecorating,” Millie said, pinching her lips and trying to suppress her amusement.

“Yes.” Charlotte gazed up at the rotten bedroom window at the back with love in her eyes. She’d not heard a word.

“Bathroom re-tiling and a new shower?” Millie said, more emphatically.

“Mmhmm.”

“New external doors and windows? Wiring, plumbing, new walls, replace the roof, new sky above and earth below?”

“Yes.”

“Leprechauns rehousing. Fairy squatters moving on from the compost heap.”

Charlotte laughed, coming out of her trance. “I love it though.”

Millie stepped forward without thinking and cupped her friend’s cheeks. “I know.”

It was written on every inch of Charlotte’s face. Millie stroked her thumb across her cheek with affection.

Charlotte’s eyebrows raised with comic concern. “What do you think? Am I being a fool?”

Yes. Millie thought loudly. Foolishly in love with this cottage. Charlotte was always so readable to her.

“I’m going to be broke.”

“Yes, you are.”

“I’ll be knee deep in plaster and paint for the next year.”

“Probably the next five.”

“I’m going to do it,” Charlotte said. She lifted her hand to squeeze Millie’s against her cheek.

And whatever Charlotte said next, she didn’t hear, because her best friend was holding her hand again, and nothing could distract her from that.

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## Chapter 19

Charlotte did it.

As soon as they stepped out of the house, she called the estate agent and put in an offer. Charlotte told Barbara she would. Lovely Barbara who'd raised three children in that house, all sleeping in a row in the loft space.

She offered the maximum she could borrow, deposit and four times her salary, tapped to end the call and prayed it was enough for the owner. She only held back the minimum for fitting new windows, a front door and shower. The rest would wait or she'd learn to do herself.

She was a vaguely practical person, wasn't she? How hard could it be? Because she had done precisely zero DIY.

"Oh god." Charlotte wobbled. "What have I done?" She grabbed Millie's arm. "I haven't got a clue how to do it."

Her heart rate rocketed, and she gasped towards hyperventilation.

"Come here," Millie said.

Her friend took an elbow, and a few steps later Charlotte's bottom bumped onto a bench and her head dropped between her knees. She'd been in this position before she realised as the blood rushed to her head – Millie taking care of her on other panicked occasions.

When the world stopped spinning, and her cheeks burned full, she sat up and took in the surroundings. She sat in a tiny community garden, hidden from view among wall-beds

of lavender and a carpet of golden leaves beneath her boots. A peaceful space under cool blue skies and low autumn sun.

Millie sat beside her, glowing in the autumn light with a smile on her face.

“People can help decorate your house,” Millie said.

“Really?” Charlotte squeaked.

“Well, there’s...” Millie pulled down her mouth in thought. “Olivia?”

“Olivia?!”

“Of course. If beautiful disdain can paint a room, she might be useful.”

Charlotte nudged her. “Oi. You need to learn to get along.”

Millie skipped right past the suggestion. “And I’m sure Nicola Albright is a dab hand with a brush.”

Charlotte tutted. “She was never home long enough.”

“And the rest of your family?”

“Dad...” Charlotte sighed. Much as though she adored her father who’d been present at home, he wasn’t always that dependable or practical. “...is Dad.”

Millie pursed her lips in response, understanding enough of her father. “Your sister?”

“She’s too busy breeding.”

Millie raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Twins. And they’re ‘trying again’.” Charlotte shuddered at the activity required between sister Bryony and



her brother-in-law.

Millie laughed. “And there’s me.” Millie shuffled up closer and nudged a shoulder against her. “I always helped Mum paint when we moved. A new coat can cheer up the scruffiest of places.”

“You’d help?”

It didn’t surprise her that Millie was multi-skilled and talented, more that she’d want to support her. She felt her eyebrows rising, as if begging.

“Course. There’s no need for the big eyes.” Millie grinned. “I can do loads. That back garden just needs a tidy. Put a trellis on the wall and a vine in the ground, it’d look spectacular by summer.”

“You’re green-fingered too?” Charlotte spluttered.

“That’s a recent development with Mum. She hit middle age with a compulsion to grow things. I think the grandma-hormones kicked in, and with nowhere to channel nurture energy, it’s gone into the ground.”

Cool regret tugged inside. How long until Millie found someone, tried for babies and became too busy for times like this?

“Maybe she won’t have long to wait?” Charlotte said quietly.

“What’s that?”

“Maybe you’ll find someone and have kids soon.”

When Millie didn’t speak, Charlotte murmured, “Is that what she wants?”

“She’ll be waiting a long time,” Millie snapped.

Charlotte twitched. It was unusually sharp for Millie, especially when talking about her mother. Was there an issue there? They’d always got on so well. Charlotte envied their ease and respect for each other. Charlotte knew Belinda lived in Northern Ireland now, so it wasn’t simple for Millie to see her, but she assumed they called each other often.

Millie made no sign she wanted to talk further.

“You’d have the pick of the dad material anyway?” Charlotte said, with a tentative smile, hoping to lighten the situation and offer a way out.

Millie didn’t respond. Her mouth hung open, as if on the verge of saying more, and Charlotte waited before whispering, “Millie...?”

“So,” Millie said, snapping up her head and hoisting on a smile. “I’m here. I can help.”

“OK,” Charlotte replied quietly, relief and confusion mixing.

She knitted her eyebrows together but didn’t press. Even though they sat close, Millie’s hand on her arm, their familiarity wasn’t yet healed. She shouldn’t overstep her mark. Charlotte hoped everything was fine between Millie and Belinda and held her friend’s hand as they sat back against the bench.

She sighed and took in the surroundings of the peaceful spot where she dreamed of living. In a cute little Victorian street. In a phenomenally expensive little cottage. With windows so rotten they could fall out at any moment.

Charlotte slapped a hand to her chest. “God, it’s giving me palpitations.” She registered a squeeze of reassurance from Millie. “Why is everywhere so expensive?”

She wasn’t badly paid. Nowhere near in fact. But saving a deposit while paying sky-high rents for most was impossible.

She suddenly thought, “How do you afford to live in Oxford?”

“Me?” Millie said. She perked up and grinned in a very Millie way, able to turn round moods on six pence. “I rent a single room, from a landlady whose concept of prices is stuck in the 1990s and who wants me for her body.”

“What?” Charlotte wrinkled her nose.

“I give her free physio.”

“Oh.” Charlotte laughed, then sighed again. “Why’s it so difficult? We’re meant to be grown up by now. I have so not got this.”

Career stuttering, no house, no girlfriend. She once had a car, but that died on the M40 up from London, leaving a trail of exhaust pipe on the hard shoulder.

“We are grown up.” Millie laughed beside her. “See.” She pointed out three fresh-faced students who wandered down the street. One wore a pristine St Hilda’s scarf. “Must be a first-year.” They joshed and tossed a football between them. “We used to be them.”

“What?” Charlotte stared as they passed closer. “They look like children. Are they children?”

“No, it’s because we’re old.” Millie nudged her. “Don’t you remember when I dated James? Everyone treated him like a dirty old man.”

“How old was he?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Twenty-six?! That’s how we look?! Like James Chapman. With the stubble, laughter lines and skin like he’d been lost in the desert.”

“See, you do remember him.”

“Oh my god. We’re ancient to them.”

“As I said, we’re proper grownups. I can stroll into Hobbs without staff trailing after me as if I’m about to nick something.”

“You went into Hobbs? What did you want to buy?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to freak out the sales assistants. It was horribly disappointing.”

Charlotte laughed. There was Millie again, making light when she needed it. “What would you do?”

“I’d snap it up.” Millie snatched at the air with her hand. “It’s a gorgeous little cottage, in a beautiful city you adore. And if you run into trouble, you can take in a lodger.”

“Really?” Charlotte still couldn’t believe how attached Millie was to Oxford.

“Buy it. Don’t you dare take the offer back.”

Charlotte nodded, feeling resolute and determined. “I will, and I’ll never leave, because I won’t be able to afford to

go out.”

“Do it. You’ll be happy in your tiny, ridiculously perfect home.” Millie grinned. “I’ll visit and bring Thai takeaways.”

That was it. That flippant suggestion, though Millie offered it without seriousness or real promise, made a cosy image and swayed her completely.

“I will,” Charlotte said, happy with her decision at last.

How had she gone this long without her friend?

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## Chapter 20

### *Second year university, twelve years ago*

Charlotte lost herself in a Sarah Waters hardback, when she wasn't peeping at Millie that was. Her friend had her nose stuck in a battered paperback. When she finished, they swapped so that Millie now devoured *Fingersmith* and Charlotte sniggered with Marian Keyes.

They lounged on the lawns beside the river in the baking summer sun of Trinity term. Charlotte lay barefoot in a loose summer dress and Millie sat beside her in a tight vest and pair of shorts cropped right up to the groin.

Charlotte tried to keep her eye on the words in front of her, but they bleached in patches of sunlight reflecting off the page and she found herself drawn to her friend. She gazed at tiny beads of perspiration that glistened on Millie's chest, the soft skin at the limits of her shorts, and down bronzed legs to her painted toes, always red nail varnish.

Millie suddenly dropped the book on the grass and peered over her sunglasses.

"What?" Charlotte said.

Millie raised her eyebrows above the large shades, like a film star. "So that's what lesbians do in bed."

A blush warmed everywhere from Charlotte's roots to her cheeks, even though she didn't recall any graphic detail.

"I..."

“Well, you never tell me,” Millie said with accusation. A smile curled in the corner of her lips.

“You can imagine, Millie. Vividly,” Charlotte said, the blush deepening.

“Me?” Millie said, with mock innocence.

Charlotte harrumphed and put her nose back in her book, deliberately ignoring her friend. But she could tell Millie still watched over her glasses.

After a few moments, Charlotte dropped her novel and snapped, “Now what?”

Millie smiled and leant towards Charlotte, boobs squeezed prominently between her arms as she flipped into seductive vamp mode. She did that so easily, with pupils darkened and voice dropping into sultry.

Millie reached forward and a soft finger stroked beneath Charlotte’s chin to tilt her lips towards her, so that warm breath shimmered over Charlotte’s mouth. Millie gazed at her lips, long eyelashes blinking with entranced languor, and murmured the quote, “You pearl”. And it rolled off her tongue in so suggestive a manner that it touched Charlotte deep, deep down.

Then Millie cackled, rolled away, snapped up her book and carried on reading.

Charlotte sat, stunned.

And although no poetry nor literary quotation had ever stirred her, and neither had it since, when Millie purred, “You pearl,” it went right down into her knickers.

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## Chapter 21

### *Present day*

“It’s a clear breach of contract,” Richard said. “We can win a large pay-out on this.”

“Charlotte?” Hugo nodded towards her in question from behind his desk.

“I’d like to re-examine the case in more detail, before we issue unequivocal advice,” she said.

Richard leant back, resting his foot on one knee for breadth. He swung back and forth on the swivel chair, consuming even more space.

“It’s straightforward,” he said, dismissing the need for Charlotte’s involvement with a wave of his hand.

“Erm, even so,” Charlotte persisted. “It’s a detailed contract and I understand there’s disagreement around the proper method of using the software component. I’m not sure it’s clear cut.”

“Richard?” Hugo queried.

“If Charlotte needs more time to catch up on details, we can postpone a couple of days.”

The implication was clear – that she wasn’t as lightning quick as Richard, particularly aggravating because she doubted he’d assessed the case with suitable care. He’d likely asked a junior associate to look over the details. Rachel with hazel eyes and a shy smile, especially when Richard sat on the corner of her desk.

“I’m...” she tripped over his arrogance more than her words. “I’m very familiar with the contract.”

The effort required for that short sentence was infuriating. First, she tolerated Richard’s slight. Then spent more energy pitching her reply so it didn’t dismiss Richard but stood assertive enough. She sighed at the constant overhead of dealing with her colleague rather than them both working together.

“We should bring the parties together again, see where the difficulties lie,” she continued calmly, determined to keep a clear head. “It’s not in the client’s interest to sue for breach of contract at this stage.”

“Well.” Hugo thrust his arms towards both. “Always good to know the options and avoid court if we can.”

Richard paused. “Of course. I submit to your experience always, Hugo.”

Was it just Charlotte or was it a micro-aggression every time Richard spoke, one of a thousand small blows to grind away her confidence, or sycophancy to higher ups. No, she wasn’t the fastest when it came to sizing people up, but she rarely had such a visceral reaction. Tall, broad Richard had been determined to belittle her from the moment they’d met, and it’d been downhill ever since.

She mulled it over, checking she wasn’t being unfair. He’d arrived first for the meeting, a benefit of an office next door to the senior partner. Then he’d taken advantage of access between meetings and persuaded Hugo of his plan before she’d joined the discussion.

She ground her teeth as they left Hugo's office and her head spun.

Richard rubbed his hands together as they strode out of the door. "This will be a personal best. Probably the highest pay-out I've handled since starting here."

And that. Exactly that. Beyond what she thought of Richard personally, this was the main problem. Richard wanted CV points. This wasn't in the client's best interest at all.

She was about to question the approach for the client, when he said, "So, who's the blond you hang out with?"

"The blond?" she replied, caught by the change in subject. Her head spun again.

He crossed his arms and leant back against his office doorway, biceps almost bursting from his pale suit. He narrowed his eyes to consider her. Generous thoughts were not happening behind that look, even Charlotte caught that.

"The one with curly hair?" he said, with a glint. He was talking about Millie. "Girlfriend of yours?"

Her mouth dropped open, rendered stupid by the accusation. She wasn't in the closet, and wouldn't want to be, but she shuddered at Richard knowing her sexuality. He used it in a way that violated and Charlotte shivered again at his eager interest in Millie.

"I thought you and Olivia bent that way," he prodded.

"Millie," she said. "She's called Millie and she's my best friend from university."

“I didn’t think she looked gay,” he said, satisfied with himself.

Every word rankled. She wanted to ask him what gay looked like, but his answer would likely wind her up more. She stood up straight, keeping composure.

“Sniff around somewhere else, Richard.”

“What do you mean?” His act was nonchalant, but he knew.

Charlotte looked him straight in the eye. No, she wasn’t the most perceptive and observant at times. She couldn’t read a room instantly like Millie. But she wasn’t mistaken here. She clearly saw Richard’s hunger when he asked about her friend.

“I’ve seen it a hundred times,” she said. More.

If Millie wanted, she could walk into a room and make it light up. When Millie switched on her sexual persona, men would swarm. She drew everyone’s eye, not all favourable.

Years ago, they’d attended Charlotte’s sister’s wedding together, Millie subdued and under the weather. It’d been strange. She didn’t draw people as usual, while Charlotte found her equally magnetic when quiet, without makeup, or slumped in a baggy jumper, probably more so.

Olivia had said something catty like, “not the centre of attention tonight then, Millie”. Millie’s hackles had risen and challenge sparked in her eye. She’d slipped off her shawl, stuck out her chest and said, “Can I get you ladies a drink?” and strutted to the bar.

Everyone sensed the sea change. Conversations stopped. Heads turned. It reminded Charlotte of iron filings following a magnet. The flow of the room altered entirely on Millie's whim and everyone watched that tight dress and bottom sashay across the room. Millie had peeped over her shoulder and blown Olivia a kiss.

So yes, Charlotte knew exactly what Richard sought here.

"Leave it, Richard," she said, and she turned on her heel.

She felt sick. It was bad enough seeing Richard during the day at work. If he started dating Millie too...? She drew in breath. It would be unbearable.

She stumbled on the stairs up to her office and clutched the railing as an image of Millie flashed in her head. They were at a post-finals staircase party at Magdalen College with other lawyers. The memory was strong. Far corner of the quad, rooms open on all three floors. The anxiety of climbing the stairs consumed her as if there again, except this time she burned with humiliation too, knowing what she'd find at the top.

"Stop it." Charlotte covered her eyes, as if that would prevent her from seeing the past.

It was so vivid though.

"Stop it," she whispered again.

She stumbled into her office and closed the door.

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## Chapter 22

### *End of university, eleven years ago*

“Millie?” Charlotte called into a small-lounge and bedroom ‘set’ off the staircase.

The living-room brimmed with students laughing and drinking and Millie wouldn’t have heard above the noise. Bottles rolled on the floor and spilled onto the carpet. No-one cared. They were done. They’d made it past finals.

Charlotte peered into the bedroom; none of the inhabitants had Millie’s golden curls. She stepped over legs of students sitting on the landing, accidentally kicked a crushed can which clattered down the steps. She checked every set that opened onto the landing and headed to the top floor.

“Millie?” she called again, definitely audible this time over the braying laughter of Magdalen men downstairs.

Quiet settled as she stepped onto the landing and padded towards the only open door. She peeked inside, about to call her friend’s name, when she stopped.

The room was dark except for the small attic window with blinding sunshine outside. The square of light framed a couple’s silhouette, as if for a loving portrait, and she instantly recognised Millie’s curls and generous curves. Millie’s companion stood a little taller and with long straight hair, but similar curves. Millie was kissing a woman.

Did Charlotte’s heart stop? Was that why her blood ran cold and she halted dead in her tracks? Why her breath failed

and muted further words.

But her entry was enough to startle the couple. The silhouette broke in two and a girl's shape erupted in colour as she ran past Charlotte with bright scarlet cheeks and out of the room.

Millie laughed, her outline leaning back and curls flowing. "She wondered what kissing a woman was like!" The shape moved and swaggered over to Charlotte. Millie's gleeful face came into view, her eyes chasing the fleeing woman. "So, I satisfied her curiosity."

Charlotte felt sick.

The number of men Millie kissed were too numerous to remember. It hadn't bothered her at the start. Then Charlotte had to turn away quicker and quicker before the sharp pang would strike, no point watching what hurt the heart, and she'd survived by averting her gaze. But this?

"What the hell, Millie?" Charlotte gasped.

Millie's focus switched to her. "Hey?" she said, her eyes creasing with concern. "What's up?"

"What do you mean, 'what's up'?" Charlotte's tight throat pitched high.

"I don't know what's wrong. Tell me?"

Still the surprise.

"Come on, Millie," Charlotte said. It was obvious.

Millie stared at her, the stupid lack of understanding infuriating.

"Do you have to sleep with *everybody*?"



“What?” Surprise turned to irritation on Millie’s face. “Jesus Christ, Charlotte. I never thought you’d throw this bullshit at—”

“I don’t care that you sleep with god knows how many men. But...” She’d regret this, but she couldn’t stop. “Do you have to fuck everybody?”

Millie stiffened.

“Did you sleep with every man in the university, so now you have to do the women too?”

“What the fuck? Seriously, Charlotte?” Millie’s hands shot to her hips. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this from you. You know I get this shit from everyone else.”

“It’s not that,” Charlotte snapped.

“Sounds like it.”

“For god’s sake, Millie.” Charlotte swallowed. “Don’t make me say it.”

“I’m not making you say anything. You’re just throwing the same old accusation as those tossers do. Why the hell are you being judgemental like them?”

“Because... Do you have to fuck everybody...” Charlotte said, anger and upset choking, while Millie stared at her with fury. “Do you have to fuck everybody...but me?”

She’d said it. The thing that started out so little. The thing that shouldn’t have bothered Charlotte at all. Except somewhere along the line, she’d fallen in love with Millie, and the thing had grown so big.

“You’re.” Millie paused, face contorting through waves of affront and confusion. “You’re my friend.”

Charlotte stared at the floor while everything burned red on her face.

“If you just wanted sex.” Millie even coughed out a laugh. “I’m sure we could have managed it long ago. But you’re too important for that.”

Still Charlotte stared, her chest lifting and collapsing with heavy breaths.

“You’re my friend,” Millie said again, desperation creeping in.

“Millie...” Charlotte said.

Did she have to spell it out? Even more clearly, even more shamefully? She looked her friend in the eye. Millie’s expression pleaded, but Charlotte had to say it. “I’m in love with you.”

Charlotte waited for her reaction. Waited for surprise and understanding perhaps. But there was none.

A flicker across Millie’s face betrayed her, and she looked away with no sign of shock. That made it so much worse.

“You know, don’t you.” Millie wouldn’t look at her. “You already bloody know,” Charlotte realised.

Of course, Millie did. The woman who entered a room and spotted those susceptible to her charms in seconds. Of course, she knew.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Charlotte whispered.

Millie's head dropped further. "I just hoped..." She breathed in and blew out hard again. "I hoped it would go away."

"That I'd go away?"

"No, not that. Never that." Millie reached out for her arm. "I hoped it would pass and we'd go back to being friends again."

"And what?" Charlotte pulled away. "You thought fucking more and more people would snap me out of it?"

Because it seemed that way. After Millie split with Dominic, and not even Becca came sniffing round for Charlotte, Millie was on a mission to sleep with everyone. And no, Charlotte wasn't being fair, but she couldn't reel in the words.

"If you would just stop, for one minute. Stop fucking everyone," Charlotte said, squeezing her fingers tight into a ball. "It's embarrassing, for god's sake. It's humiliating being your friend."

Irritation erupted on Millie's face, but Charlotte added, "It's humiliating because everyone," and even Becca accused her of being Millie's lapdog, "and I mean everyone, can see I'm in love with you. And you don't care."

Millie stepped back as if Charlotte physically pushed her. She took several moments to recover, her eyes locked on Charlotte's the whole time.

"It's not that I don't care," Millie whispered. "But I can't lose the best friend I've ever had." She said it like the

most important thing in the world. “The best friend I ever imagined.”

Charlotte could hear the truth in Millie’s voice, see it in her face, that woman who could flit from flirt to friend in a blink of an eye. But that image in the window. What Charlotte felt when she saw Millie kiss another woman.

She swallowed. “I coped when it was only men. That was easier. But this...”

It hurt too much.

“Please don’t be jealous,” Millie begged. “Please don’t do this.”

“What?” Charlotte coughed out a laugh that fell into desperate pieces. “Be strung along? Act love-struck and pine, waiting for... I don’t know what.”

“I didn’t realise it was this bad for you.”

“Really?” Charlotte could hear the cynicism cracking in her own voice. “You’re the most perceptive and socially adept person I’ve met, and you didn’t notice?”

“I realised you found me attractive. And, yes, that you wanted more. But I didn’t think it was bigger than us. I thought you liked me, my company. Jesus, Charlotte, we’ve been friends for years and I’ve never been closer to anyone. I didn’t want to fuck that up with a quick shag.”

“Don’t,” Charlotte snapped. “Don’t dismiss my love for you like that. I’m not after a quick shag.”

“Then don’t dismiss my friendship.”

Charlotte paused.

But that image wouldn't go away, and it hurt more and more. All those years, she'd consoled herself that Millie only wanted men. But now she was kissing women. It was just that Millie didn't want her.

"I can't do this," Charlotte said.

"Doesn't our friendship mean anything to you?"

"Of course, it does," Charlotte stared at her with burning tears. "It means everything. But I can't put myself through this." The realisations were coming thick and fast. "I'm in love with you and missing out on relationships because of it."

Millie watched her and swallowed visibly, as if around a painful stone.

"I wasn't even upset when Becca finally left, because it was you I was in love with."

Millie didn't counter it.

"My dates never have a chance, because I always come home to you. I've no room for anyone else, because I only look at you. And..." Charlotte was out of energy. "And all you do is fuck around having it all."

Millie flinched, her face white. "But—"

"No," Charlotte said. "I can't do this anymore, Millie."

And she meant it. They both knew.

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## Chapter 23

### *Present day*

“Come in!” Charlotte shouted at the office door.

It opened slowly, Olivia’s head appearing around the side, one eyebrow raised.

“Come in and close it,” Charlotte said, quieter.

She shuffled on her chair, embarrassed at yelling at the door. Olivia took a seat opposite, crossed her legs and entwined hands on her thigh, while curtains of glossy black hair wafted perfectly into place along her jawline.

“What’s the matter?” she said.

It was very Olivia. Direct. Genuinely concerned, but to the point. There wasn’t putting much past Olivia Sachdeva, and that was why she made such an effective divorce lawyer.

“Oh,” Charlotte growled. “Everything!” She threw her hands in the air.

“Can you be a little more specific?” Olivia said.

No, she couldn’t, because that would mean admitting she was upset with Millie and would trigger a whole spiel from Olivia about avoiding her old best friend, or a stern look which meant the same.

Besides, Charlotte wanted to moan at the world right now, not fix it. There was a process, which Olivia didn’t always appreciate. Sometimes you needed to vent a little

before being constructive, and sometimes you needed to vent a lot.

Olivia waited, two eyebrows raised in question.

Charlotte went with, "It's Richard."

"Ah," Olivia replied. She smoothed a wrinkle, barely a blip, on her skirt then entwined her hands again. "I had noticed a little tension."

"A little tension?" Charlotte coughed.

"All right, an appreciable amount of tension." This was also very Olivia, always measured and striving for accuracy.

"He's impossible to work with."

An elegant frown rippled across Olivia's brow. Even that was sophisticated. "Hugo's very pleased with his progress. He's taken on an impressive workload."

"Has he?" Charlotte grumbled. She wondered if credit was due elsewhere. Was it coincidence that Richard chose junior associate Rachel to assist him, with wide eyes for Richard and a habit of working late?

"Is there an issue with that?" Olivia pressed.

"No," Charlotte said, "I don't know."

She didn't want to raise suspicions unnecessarily with Olivia. They were friends, but this was work and Charlotte wouldn't start unfounded rumours.

"He is devious though." Charlotte was sure of that now. "He outmanoeuvres people. He's sly. He physically pushes people out by blocking them. He's disrespectful and takes credit for work by speaking over and for others."

“Hmm,” Olivia said.

That was it?

“I know what you mean,” Olivia added, carefully. “But Hugo hired him for these qualities.”

“Really?”

“Aggressive in negotiations. Outgoing. No qualms asking new clients to join the firm.”

“Does he have to,” Charlotte clenched her fists to force out the word, “crap on colleagues while doing that though?”

Olivia nodded ever so slightly then asked, “Are you sure this is just about Richard?”

Credit where it was due, Olivia wasn’t being partisan, but she knew Charlotte and was unerringly there for her.

“Maybe not,” Charlotte grumbled.

She was upset. Richard asking after Millie had thrown her, and she couldn’t steady herself. She took a deep breath, trying to clear her brain of stormy thoughts and the turmoil of the past.

“He makes it difficult to work,” she said objectively. “Hugo hired me for a reason, and I want to do a good job. Richard is obstructive. He makes poor decisions for personal gain. It isn’t helpful to me and ultimately won’t be for the company either.”

Olivia pursed her lips unable to comment and, for once, Charlotte cursed working together. As a senior partner, with information and the power that entailed, Olivia couldn’t always share her thoughts with more junior colleagues like



Charlotte. And, honestly, Charlotte only respected her for that, but right now she needed a friend.

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Charlotte glanced through the office window. Night had fallen and the regency terrace glowed orange in the streetlights.

She'd made it. The end of the day and week. She was finished on time, ready to meet Millie, laugh with her friend, browse Blackwell's bookshop and have a bite to eat, her treat to Millie. Hopefully that would soothe, because the vivid reminder of old jealousy had upset her. She shook her head, trying to reset to the present.

An email pinged on her laptop as she tucked papers into her briefcase. A meeting request. She clicked on it, while throwing her wool coat around her shoulders, flapping out an arm that had turned inside out, then paused.

"You're kidding."

Richard had arranged a meeting between their troublesome software client and defaulting company without checking with her first. And for Monday. First thing in the morning.

"You..." She pursed her lips.

This blew her weekend. A detailed re-read of the contract and background checks on the company they might sue had to be within her grasp by nine on Monday.

She read the last line of his email. “Hope you can join us?!”

He had a cheek. They were jointly tasked with this client and Richard had no business taking the lead. She shoved the laptop into her bag and snapped it shut, intending to have words with him on the way out. Charlotte didn’t stamp down the stairs, but her tread was most definitely firm. She was about to knock on his door, but it was open and his office lay empty. Fine. She wouldn’t waste any more of her weekend and an email with very direct wording would be coming his way.

More firm steps down to reception and Charlotte tried to lift her mood to say goodnight to the receptionist.

“Charlotte,” Zain said, before she passed. “I have a package for you.”

“Oh.” She stopped with a double take and swivel round on her heel. “Thanks Zain.” She leant on the tall divider of the reception desk.

“Give me a minute,” he said, sorting through envelopes. “It might be in the office.” He disappeared into the admin team’s room behind the desk.

She waited, watching Zain moving across the doorway, searching for the package. Something drew her attention outside, perhaps laughter or the cool breeze on her cheek. She gazed through the grand front entrance, the door wide open.

Millie waited for her outside, gold curls shining in the streetlight, a smile on her face, the gorgeous one where her mouth opened with a laugh. She wasn’t alone.

Richard. He stood with back towards the office, legs planted apart, running fingers through his hair. Millie laughed again, beautiful like a gurgling stream, except it fell like ice over Charlotte. Voices murmured, deeper insinuations from Richard, the words unclear but the intention unmistakable, then Millie's playful tone in reply.

Charlotte closed her eyes and tensed as a wave of jealousy hit. Was it the memory? Was she reliving the hurt of when Millie kissed anyone but her, or did she feel the same after all these years?

She recognised the play outside between the two people. The flirtation, the laughter, first steps in an encounter that quickly moved to bed. Could Charlotte ever witness Millie do that without grieving it wasn't with her? Had anything changed at all? Then a burst of laughter from Richard made Charlotte shudder. Her skin crawled at the prospect of him slipping into her personal life and taking the best from that too.

"Here you go," Zain said, bringing her to attention. He passed over a manilla envelope. "From Taylors with extensive revisions."

"Right," she managed quietly, while her head buzzed with confusion and upset needled her eyes.

As she flicked through, the front door closed and footsteps thudded behind her. She glanced at Richard striding past, tapping something into his phone with his thumb as he went.

Another chill. Millie and he perhaps another step closer, swapping numbers.

“Sorry, thanks Zain,” she said.

Charlotte slipped the envelope into her briefcase and approached the door. She spotted Millie through one of the small glass panels, hands stuffed deep into her camel coat pockets, shoulders hunched against the evening chill. Her friend stared up the street, eyebrows furrowed.

What did Millie intend with Richard? Did Charlotte have a right to ask? She pushed open the door knowing she didn't, even though it ate her inside.

“Hey there,” Millie said, her face immediately brightening.

“Hey,” Charlotte tried to say cheerfully.

“Let's go. They shut soon,” Millie said without missing a beat, and linked her arm through Charlotte's.

They walked, Millie setting their pace.

“I keep meaning to ask you,” Millie said, with enthusiastic words as quick as their steps. “What're you doing for Christmas? I don't have many days off and neither does Mum, so I can't pop over to see her in Belfast. I wondered if you're staying in Oxford too?”

They carried on walking, while the chill persisted deep inside Charlotte and thoughts buzzed like bees. Millie's arm felt wrong through hers. She wavered between wanting to pull her friend close and pushing her away, repulsed by Richard and his advances but desperate to enjoy Millie's company.

“Hey far-away girl. Christmas?” Millie prompted when Charlotte didn't answer.

Was Millie not going to mention her conversation with Richard at all?

“I don’t know,” Charlotte managed.

“Tell me when you’ve settled your plans,” Millie nattered on, “otherwise I’ll be spending Christmas with my grumpy landlady and staring at a patch of damp on the ceiling. Hey, I tell you what—”

“Stop it,” Charlotte gasped.

She halted in the middle of the pavement, paralysed between regretting her snap at Millie, but overwhelmed and unable to listen to her witter as if everything was fine.

“What?” Millie said quietly. Her friend dropped an arm from Charlotte and came round to face her. “Hey, what’s up?” she said gently.

“Do you have a date?” Charlotte said. She hated that she asked.

“Sorry?” Millie laughed, as if in disbelief.

“With Richard?”

That Millie flinched wasn’t good. That she didn’t answer was worse.

“Do you have a date with Richard?” Charlotte repeated.

Confusion flickered on Millie’s face before she slowly looked Charlotte in the eye. “No. I do not have a date with Richard.”

Millie swallowed afterwards. Was she appalled Charlotte asked, or was it simply too early for a date?

Charlotte really shouldn't press. But why didn't Millie just tell her?

"I saw you talking to him," Charlotte said, the jealousy as plain as if she'd painted the words in green.

"Charlotte," Millie said quietly, her eyebrows raised. "I'm not dating anyone."

"Richard's a colleague. I work with him."

Millie shrugged at a loss.

"You can't date him."

"I'm not going to," Millie said, with a quiet laugh, as if obvious.

"Then, for Christ's sake, why do you have to flirt with him?"

"I wasn't—"

"Come on. I know you well enough to spot it."

"I was being friendly," Millie said. She was firm, but matter of fact. "I assumed he was a colleague of yours, so I was polite."

"He's a dick."

"I can believe it. But I didn't want to make your life difficult by being rude to him."

But the feelings and Charlotte's words had begun to avalanche.

"He's a complete and utter arse, Millie. You should spot that. You're quicker than me, and you'd pick that up in

seconds. He's an arrogant arse. In fact, given your taste in men, he'd suit you down to the ground."

As soon as the words left her lips, Charlotte knew she'd regret it. The moment she cooled off, she'd hate herself. But she ploughed on. "You can't help yourself, can you."

Millie looked away, her face flushed and arms crossed.

Old frustration flooded Charlotte again and she stared at Millie. Her friend didn't speak. And Charlotte didn't know what Millie could say either. Nothing would make this evening better.

"Let's just visit the shop," Millie said. It was heart-breakingly quiet. "Let's get out of here."

"No."

"Charlotte?" All colour drained from Millie's face.

"I..." The words, familiar ones, stuck in Charlotte's throat, but they were the only ones she could think of. "I can't do this, Millie."

The phrase echoed back to the staircase party years ago and Millie flinched. She heard them too.

"Just..." Charlotte started. She needed to cool down, away from work, Richard and memories, so she wouldn't say anything worse.

"I can't right now."

And she walked away, again, wishing she'd never fallen in love with Millie, wishing she could have stopped it, so she didn't have to lose her friend.

## Chapter 24

Two years. That's how long it took to fall in love with Millie.

Charlotte smiled despite herself. Twelve years ago, end of the second year of university, and she remembered it as clear as day.

She'd sat in her college room, let down by Becca, wishing she stared at the bottom of a pint-sized ice cream tub. Instead, she made do with a jar of peanut butter. It wasn't even slightly satisfying as sorry-for-yourself food. Charlotte had been licking a patch stuck to the top of her mouth for five minutes and was beginning to gag.

Maybe this was how it ended, stood up by a girl and choking on claggy spread.

But a knock at the door interrupted. It was Millie's knock. Charlotte recognised it by then. A short one-two that asked to come in, knowing Charlotte was there. When she opened the door onto the halls of residence corridor, although it was Millie as expected, it wasn't the Millie she was expecting.

Her friend stood with a gentle smile on her face, hair pulled elegantly into a bun and curls spilling around her face. An extra touch of makeup and her eyes sparkled, heart-shaped face glowed and naughty, full lips pinched. Her gown hugged every, single, delicious curve, the ruby-red bodice supporting Millie's generous chest and tapering over her hips before falling loose around her legs.

"Wow," Charlotte sighed.



“Hey, lanky,” Millie said, tipping up her chin, her smile bursting. “Fancy coming to the college ball with me?”

Charlotte needed a moment to recover. “Ball? The dress? Where did you...?” Charlotte took a breath. “The Queer Ball?”

“The Queer Ball.” Millie grinned.

Charlotte was meant to go with Becca that evening, but Becca decided she’d rather attend a party in London. She’d given Charlotte two weeks’ warning. It had been Becca’s most considerate and romantic gesture, buying a pair of tickets to an Oxford ball, and it shrivelled into their usual mess when she changed her mind and decided to sell the tickets.

“But there aren’t any tickets left,” Charlotte said.

Millie pulled a hand from behind her back and fanned two shiny tickets between her fingers.

“How on earth did you get those? Becca was furious she couldn’t sell hers. They’re like gold dust, but she lost them.”

The smile on Millie’s lips curled into naughtiness. “She didn’t lose them,” Millie said.

Charlotte stared at her friend. “Millie?”

“I may have overheard your conversation.”

Charlotte blushed. It had been loud – Charlotte upset and disappointed and Becca noisily irritated. Of all the crappy things Becca had done, this was the most spectacular. The promise had been special: attend the college ball as a couple with all of queer Oxford, a chance to enjoy a special piece of

student life but remain unashamedly gay. Over the moon and giddy with excitement, Charlotte brought a new dress with her grandmother, especially for the occasion. Then Becca cancelled, because some rich friend in London had a glitzier do, and Becca didn't invite Charlotte.

“I may have heard,” Millie narrowed her eyes, “that Becca intended selling the tickets.”

“Millie.” Thoughts were slowly, always so slowly, forming in Charlotte's mind. “How did you...?”

Millie shook her head from side to side and made a motion to seal her lips. Her friend had ways at her disposal, like scouts turning their back while cleaning rooms. A favourite with the cleaners, Charlotte often found Millie having a cuppa and a gossip with college staff. She had the porters wrapped around her little finger.

“But...but that's stealing,” Charlotte stuttered.

“We'll make it up to her.” Millie shrugged. “So how about it, lanky? Wanna come to the ball with me?”

Charlotte grinned. Of course, she did. Her smile squeezed tears from her eyes, that's how much she wanted to.

“I know you wanted to be the dream lesbo couple and go with Becca,” Millie rattled out. “And I would have given the tickets back if she'd changed her mind—”

“Millie,” Charlotte couldn't stop smiling. “I would love, more than anything in the world, to go to the ball with you.”

And somehow, Millie shone even brighter at her response. “Then let's get you into your glad rags.”

Charlotte had an hour before the event began. And she had Millie.

A quick shower and Millie fashioned Charlotte's hair into an elegant half-ponytail. Her friend even trimmed Charlotte's long fringe. Millie brought makeup and painted Charlotte's lips with a dark red, which suited her skin more than her friend's bright version. Millie knelt before her, Charlotte sitting on the edge of the bed, and lightly applied mascara. Charlotte loved how Millie looked when she concentrated, her neat, dark-blonde eyebrows furrowed.

"You have eyelashes to die for," Millie murmured, but she only gazed at Millie's, slowly blinking over blue-green eyes as her friend concentrated.

Charlotte slipped into her gown, an emerald green that complemented Millie's ruby, and they stood before the full-length mirror on the wardrobe door. Millie draped Charlotte's long, dark hair over her shoulders. The style wasn't her usual, but with her off-the-shoulder dress and neck exposed it was flattering and elegant.

Charlotte paused with surprise. She looked pretty.

Millie put her arm around her waist. "You look bloody gorgeous." And Millie pushed out her lips in an appreciative pout that made Charlotte believe her.

They descended from halls down to the college lawns as dusk fell. Trails of lights surrounded the perimeter and paths to the dining hall, the main room for dancing. Couples came in ball gowns, trios in tuxes, gay guys in shining silver suits and lesbians in skinny khakis and blazers. Charlotte's gay heart was full. Waiters in white jackets and gloves held trays

of bubbling Bucks Fizz aloft and music from a violin quartet whispered into the night.

Charlotte had the most beautiful woman on her arm. Millie shone. It seemed she laughed and joked with vulgarity most of the time, to detract from how gorgeous she really was. Charlotte had never seen anyone as beautiful, on screen, in magazines, anywhere, as Millie looked that night.

They wandered through the ball – the lawns, college and the two of them transformed. Millie hugged Charlotte's arm and looked up at her, face softened by the evening and occasion.

“May I have the first dance?” Millie said, enchanting Charlotte with huge dark eyes.

It was rare she saw this side of her friend, like seeing a different person, then Millie broke out into a grin, her personality blazing across her face, and Charlotte didn't think she could love her more. Of course, she didn't refuse.

People took their places for the opening dance, and Charlotte glanced around nervously. A couple who entered professional competitions took to the centre of the floor and announced a waltz to open the evening. She was about to suggest they sit the formal dances out when Millie rested her fingers on Charlotte's shoulder and raised her right hand.

“Would you lead?” Millie asked.

“You dance?” Charlotte blurted.

“I can keep up with a few waltz steps.”

“When did you learn to waltz?” Charlotte said, in amazement.

“A couple of weeks ago, when I found some tickets lying around.”

Charlotte giggled. “How? With who?”

“Private tuition with Hermione Wellington-Fig-Smyth.” They both laughed this time at Millie’s fictional upper-class twit characters. “I joined the ballroom society for a taster session, just so I could dance with you here.”

Charlotte didn’t have words to express how much it meant, all of it, because she was too full to speak. She raised her left arm to support Millie’s hand in her palm, the silk from Millie’s gloves soft on her skin, and her dress shimmering in the spotlights. For once, Charlotte felt the centre of her own universe and it was the best place to be.

“Do you want to lead?” she checked.

“I’m happy to follow you, Charlotte Albright. This is your night.”

The string quartet struck high in the air and plunged into a one-two-three rhythm. And they spun around the room, treading on toes, tripping on skirts, laughing and spinning, and swaying and grinning. The most inept waltz Oxford ever saw, because Millie was a novice and Charlotte the epitome of inelegance. But Charlotte had never felt so wonderful, circling a room full of queers with her best friend in the world, the thought of this night with Becca pale and eclipsed.

They drank too much cheap fizz and when the music and ball turned raucous they danced again, Millie pursing her lips and shimmying with Charlotte in the rudest way. When speakers blasted The Scissor Sisters, *I Don’t Feel Like*

*Dancin'*, it seemed the whole queer world did want to dance and Charlotte couldn't remember a night so comfortable, so happy, so special and wonderfully ordinary at the same time. She'd never had a better night, and all because her friend had enabled it.

When they posed for an official couple photo, they struck several poses. The first ludicrous and romantic with fluttering eyes. Then back-to-back buddies who'd always be there. And one caught in between poses, both in hysterics. She later bought all three from the photographer.

Gone two in the morning, they took a break in a quiet corner by the river. Charlotte covered them with her shawl and they fell asleep with the ball still in full swing. She stirred at first light, a breath of dew fresh on her face and mist rolling over the river. She looked at the woman asleep beside her. Millie's makeup had smudged beneath her eyes and the lipstick rubbed away hours ago. And when Millie came to quietly, eyes blinking open to the light, she focussed on Charlotte with cheeks plumped in a warm smile.

That's when Charlotte realised she was in love. Because Millie was beautiful and charming and there for her at every turn. And when someone wakes up in the morning with panda eyes and burger mashed into their ball gown, and you still think they're the vision of beauty, it was time to admit you were truly smitten.

And Charlotte hadn't fallen in love and got hurt because Millie did something awful. It was because she was wonderful. And she was Millie. And Charlotte wished she could go back in time and quiet her beating heart.

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## Chapter 25

Millie lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

Dull. Grey. Outside the window was also dull. Grey.

The Saturday afternoon was one of those autumn days where it didn't get properly light. She felt bloody rotten, her falling out with Charlotte the cause and the only remedy Charlotte herself.

Millie closed her eyes and wished her friend there, curled around her body as the big spoon like she did when Millie had horrible period pain at college. They'd spent most of a weekend like that once. Charlotte snuggled behind her, one arm around her stomach cuddling her close, and the other holding a book to read. Millie started reading too and Charlotte held it for them both, then read out loud when Millie wanted to close her eyes. She'd drifted in and out of sleep, with swirling dreams that leapt out of the story and went wild, always surfacing to find Charlotte around her.

Endometriosis, Millie found out later, probably made her periods worse. At the time, she'd received little sympathy for it, apart from Charlotte who wrapped her in cotton wool when she saw her struggling.

Millie wanted her friend back.

She hiccupped with a sob and covered her mouth to stop it.

“Fuck.”

She couldn't afford to feel like this.



Creaking emanated from the landing outside, quickly followed by a rapid knock at the door.

“I know you’re in there,” Virginia’s clipped accent shouted from the other side. “Are you decent?”

She wiped her tear away and sniffed. “I’m dressed, but can’t say more than that,” she yelled from the bed.

The door opened immediately.

Virginia stood and regarded her over glasses, wild grey hair a frizzy halo around the landlady’s head. She held a thin box in the air.

“I was right. You’re glum,” Virginia said.

Millie looked at her, then shrugged. She didn’t have the energy to leap off the bed, throw back her shoulders, shove her tits forward and launch into a good mood like usual.

“Yup, I’m glum.”

“Budge over then,” Virginia said, sitting on the bed and bumping Millie out of the way with her bottom. She lay alongside and rested the box on her tummy.

“I bring chocolates,” the landlady said. “You looked as if you needed them from the moment you woke. You’ve been a sad sack all day. Most unlike you. I don’t like it.”

“I’m fine,” Millie said, with resignation. She would be, but also wasn’t looking forward to the journey there. “But thanks for bringing treats.”

“You are evidently not fine. And let me check the chocolates are in date before you thank me.”

Millie sniggered.

“I received them for Christmas,” Virginia said, tipping the box from side to side.

“Which one?” Millie cracked.

Virginia gave her a look, then said, “Actually, I’m not sure. There must be a date on here somewhere.” She looked underneath the box and stopped. “Do you think it’s a bad sign that it’s worn off?”

“Probably.”

“Let’s just dive in. What doesn’t kill you...”

“Ends up an extended stay at the John Radcliffe Hospital.”

“Quite. And you can visit. Someone will cook for me and I fancy having a flock of nurses attending. When alone, I have this dreadful fear I’ll have a stroke and be left on the floor for days fending off hungry cats.”

“Keep a bit of Roar cat repellent in your pockets, just in case.”

Virginia snapped her head round. “You really are in a dark mood, aren’t you.”

“Yeah.” Millie shrugged. “Sorry.”

“Here, try this. It’ll sweeten you up again.” Virginia passed over a rectangle of dark chocolate.

“What is it?”

“Possibly fudge.”

It wasn’t. Millie guessed strawberry when she bit inside. Its colour was definitely past its former pink glory

though. It tasted kind of pleasant, or at least benign.

“What’s making you glum then?” Virginia said, patting her leg and popping a chocolate into her mouth.

“It’s a friend. We had a falling out.”

“When?”

“Ten years ago.”

“And it’s taken until now to feel bad?” Virginia’s eyes went wide in mock consternation.

“No.” Millie elbowed her. “We were at college together and planned on renting a flat in London together, but we fell out at graduation. She’s come back to Oxford recently, and I was hoping to be buddies again.”

“Tell me about her,” Virginia said, picking out another chocolate.

Millie breathed in. “We met the first day of university.”

She remembered the tall girl who’d wandered into the corridor’s tiny kitchen, limbs loose and a slight smile on her unassuming face. She’d taken a shine to the awkward girl from that first impression.

When Charlotte spoke, it was with the same openness her initial manner suggested. Charlotte was inelegant, goofy and charming as fuck. Every thought flickered on her face, and it drew Millie in irresistibly. Millie made fun of everything, including Charlotte very gently, just to make her laugh and see that happiness bloom on her friend’s face.

“She’s very proper in her own way. Nothing like me,” Millie said.

“My dear, I wouldn’t have you any different,” Virginia said.

“Thank you. But she loves rules and people playing fair. She’s one of the few lawyers I met who joined the profession believing it made the world a better place.”

“Good lord.”

“I know.”

“Is that why you entered the profession?”

“Course not, I wanted to make heaps of cash.”

“Well, you’ve royally arsed that up working for the NHS.”

“That’s another story.” And one she didn’t want to tell Virginia. “Charlotte once said that law ensured everything was fair and if not, you needed better laws.”

“And lawyers. And politicians that make the laws.”

“That’s the flaw, and I always pointed it out. But Charlotte was sure of her reasons.” And she believed principled Charlotte, who took pride and pleasure in being good at her work. “She rarely drinks or swears.” Although Millie brought that out when she’d really hurt her. Charlotte had to be pushed hard to curse, and Millie acknowledged she had pushed very hard.

“I never trust people who don’t swear.”

Millie gave her landlady a look.

“Well, I bloody don’t.”

Virginia said things like that, which made her suspect the landlady hadn't been a professor or not only a professor. She imagined the ancient leather suitcases stacked on the landing were full of cold war bugging equipment.

"It jars with her though," Millie continued. "She genuinely doesn't like alcohol or swearing."

"Fucking preposterous."

Millie chuckled. "You should see her. Charlotte finds it impossible to be in a foul mood without apologising."

"Oh, my dear, this woman sounds annoying."

Yes, frankly, she was. And sometimes Charlotte had her issues, like everyone, including Millie.

But Millie would have hated Oxford and left within a week, except for that goofy tall girl who found her funny and loved her cheese toasties. Who jumped at being her tutorial partner and cuddled her all night long when Millie's period pain was really shitty. Charlotte kept the door open to Oxford, that many shut in Millie's face. She was always there, keeping it ajar, telling Millie to come in and look because it was beautiful.

And working-class, eighteen-year-old Millie got to punt along the river on sunny evenings. She had tuition her intellect thrived on. She danced at balls, laughed at parties in spectacular gardens, cycled between medieval walls and beneath ornate bridges. She stayed, and loved her life, with Charlotte its beating heart.

Virginia regarded her. "Is this why you came back to Oxford? In case she did too?"

Millie didn't answer straight away.

She came back because life had gone wrong in ways she couldn't tell Virginia, and not even therapist sessions had scratched past the surface. She'd fallen back on Oxford and her rich history, the place with open arms in the form of Charlotte. And even though Charlotte wasn't there, comfort lingered. Millie came back to regain a sense of herself and stability. She hoped that in Oxford, with its special touch, she'd recover and be reminded of how lucky her life was.

She stayed silent, and Virginia took her hand and held it a while. She stared at the ceiling, with its numerous cracks and the damp patch in the corner that was creeping outwards.

"You should tell your landlady to get that fixed," Virginia piped up.

Millie rolled her head towards Virginia, who gazed at the ceiling without even so much as a smirk.

"She'd probably stuff an old chocolate in to fix it," Millie replied.

Virginia chuckled, patted her leg and rolled off the bed to stroll to the doorway, before peeking back.

"I'm here, if you need me," Virginia said, "if you want to talk."

Millie nodded with a smile. "Thank you."

"You're a wonderful, generous woman, Millie. Whoever your friend is, she doesn't deserve you."

"You're talking bollocks."

"But did it help?"

Millie laughed. “A little.”

Virginia smiled, the rare one that showed she really cared, then drew the door shut.

Millie closed her eyes and now that Virginia’s distraction had gone, the longing for Charlotte gripped again. For the millionth time, she regretted how things turned out at university.

“Fuck,” she breathed out.

At college, she always cut a fine line with her flirty humour, but with Charlotte it spilled over too often. At the same time, she’d been self-aware enough to realise experimentation with Charlotte would lead to definite heartbreak. Millie didn’t want to be tied down at eighteen or twenty-one. She saw school friends married before twenty and happy with kids now, but that wasn’t her. She valued Charlotte above all others, and knew not to dabble at university, and hadn’t been inclined anyway.

But somewhere along the line, Charlotte had crossed over and Millie didn’t feel the same way. Millie had expected too much of her friend afterwards.

She remembered that staircase party. She’d seen it again, raw in Charlotte’s eyes yesterday evening. Millie had hoped they could be friends again, that time would heal them both, but she asked too much of Charlotte to come this side of the line again.

Her phone beeped on the bedside stand. A message from Charlotte. She noted the coincidence of Charlotte

messaging while in her thoughts, but her friend had been there all day.

Millie tipped the phone towards her without getting up.

“I’m sorry,” said the message preview, and Millie’s heart sank. Always an apology from Charlotte, but no change.

Millie forced herself to sit up to reply with apologies of her own. She tapped the message open then stared at the screen. On a new line read,

“Can we start again? Xxxxx”

She stared at the phone, heart thudding in her chest, gripping it with both hands, as if someone might tear the phone and chance away from her. Then, before that could happen, she tapped out a message with her thumbs.

“Yes.”

“Please.”

“I would love that.”

She fumbled out the rapid succession of messages.

Almost immediately came back, “Friday was completely my fault. I wasn’t even upset with you. It’s Richard. He makes my life at work impossible.”

“I understand,” Millie replied.

The dots hadn’t finished bouncing though, and Charlotte was halfway through another message. “It’s difficult to explain in a text, but he’s awful to work with. I don’t want him in my personal life.”



Millie tapped on Charlotte's name and called her, snatching the phone to her ear and begging the ring tone to start.

Charlotte answered immediately. "I'm so sorry, Millie," she said. "I really am. I was out of order on Friday. I was horrid to you."

"Doesn't matter," Millie said. She couldn't help the audible sniff or the tear that crept down her cheek.

"It does matter," Charlotte replied. "Richard was winding me up all week and especially that day. I took it out on you."

"He's an arse," Millie said. "He's an absolute fucking arse."

"He really is," Charlotte agreed. Her faint voice on the phone sounded upset too, even though she laughed at Millie's outspoken opinion.

"Look," Millie said. "I spoke to him for five minutes while waiting for you and found at least ten different things to dislike."

"I'm all ears," came Charlotte's quiet voice. "I seem to be the only one who either notices or who it impacts."

"Not just you. He's the most egotistical, narcissistic, mendacious, devious, sly, misleading, utter cunt I've met in a while."

Charlotte was laughing more now, and Millie couldn't stop smiling.

“Hey,” Millie said. “Where are you?” She heard the wind buffeting Charlotte’s phone and voices in the background.

Charlotte hesitated. “I’m out for a walk to clear my head.”

“Nearby?”

“University Parks.”

“Stay where you are.” Millie leaped out of bed.

“Are you at home?”

“Yes, I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

“I’ll walk towards the Marston cycle path.”

“OK.” Millie was breathing hard as she snatched a padded coat from the back of the door and slipped on her running shoes. “I’ll see you in a minute.” She didn’t want to put down her phone and lose the connection to Charlotte.

“I’ll be here.”

She made herself press end and rushed out of the door.

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Charlotte raced along the path, heart thumping and breathing hard, eager to meet Millie. She crossed the bridge by the weir, beneath the trees that began Mesopotamia Walk, when Millie came jogging round the corner. Her friend’s face was bare of makeup and shadows beneath her eyes betrayed a lack of sleep, and Charlotte knew she’d been the cause of that.

It grabbed her chest again, that horrible realisation. It was too easy with Millie's exuberance to think her invincible. And, of course, she wasn't. And of course, she was hurt.

Charlotte took a moment.

It was time to stop dismissing Millie, insisting she'd broken her heart and lost nothing, because they'd both lost the closest of friends.

Charlotte reached out to her. "Can we get off the path?" she asked quietly, taking Millie's arm.

Millie nodded, jaw tight, the corners of her eyes caving in an effort not to cry. They walked beneath the trees beside the weir and the rollers for punts in the summer, quiet this grey autumn day.

Charlotte cradled Millie's arm. "I'm so sorry, Millie." Too often she'd shy away from tackling something head-on. Not this time. She owed Millie too much.

Her friend looked up at her, puffy eyed from lack of sleep or upset. Either way, that face was Charlotte's fault.

"I'm sorry for every hideous thing I said. I won't do it again."

Millie's mouth opened.

"I promise," Charlotte added, before Millie could refuse her.

"There's nothing there. I don't date anymore. I'm not interested."

"I don't care. I have no right. And if, when, you want to date again, my promise stands." She paused. "I never had

any right.”

Charlotte looked down at the grass, brushing the tips of the blades with the toe of her brogue boot. It was uncomfortable admitting it. Excruciating. For too long, she'd blamed Millie for everything. But it all needed to come out.

“I'm sorry I didn't handle things well. Now and in the past. I...” Charlotte breathed out, raw from hurting Millie on Friday. “At university, I didn't know how. I should have taken a break, talked to you, anything but let it grow and get out of hand. I was just...”

“Young?” Millie murmured. “Inexperienced? Learning about love and people?” She smiled up at Charlotte, affection and understanding apparent in her face, while her eyes still blinked upset. “And I could have helped.” Millie paused, as if sore with her own admission like Charlotte was with herself. “I should have been a lot more bloody sensitive in the past. I'm sorry too.”

That helped Charlotte, although she didn't let it absolve her blame. “Thank you,” she said. They'd both been right and wrong.

She gazed at Millie, this more mature version. Charlotte wanted to know her. Although a small part would always be in love with college-Millie, she loved too many things about her friend to let that jealous seed grow large and ruin everything again.

“I want to be friends,” Charlotte said. “I have missed you. And honestly,” she paused, a flurry of concerns about work, life, family, all blizzarding in her head, “I could do with a good friend right now.”

“Same,” Millie said. “All that. The same.” She swallowed and looked more vulnerable than ever. “I erm... I haven’t had the easiest time the past few years and I could do with another friend.”

Millie paused again, and Charlotte wondered if she’d say more about the years apart and Millie’s life that she’d missed. But Millie finished with a fragile, “I need my best buddy back.”

That broke Charlotte. “Will you come here please.” She put her arms out to Millie, feeling the cool autumn day as a mile-wide gap between them.

Millie nodded, her eyebrows turning up and eyes glistening, and she buried herself in Charlotte’s arms. She hugged Millie’s head to her chest and kissed the top of her curls, because it hurt too much to see how she’d made Millie feel. She squeezed her, wishing away all the pain she’d caused, and anything else that ailed Millie, and let Millie’s apology and closeness soothe her too.

“Tell me if anything bothers you,” Millie said, warm and muffled beneath Charlotte’s chin.

“I will.” Charlotte kissed her curls again. “And you, too. Goes both ways.”

Millie hesitated, then pulled tighter before releasing her. She took a small step back, sniffed and wiped her eyes, then tried to smile at Charlotte to make everything light, because that’s what Millie did.

And Charlotte sniffed and wiped her eyes and laughed, a little out of embarrassment and because she was

overwhelmed, because that's what she did.

“So,” Charlotte said, hugging herself, for something to do with her arms. “OK,” she said next.

“Do you want to...erm.” Millie smiled, recovering quicker, hands on her hips, a little of her innate chutzpah surfacing and lifting her chest. “Do you fancy getting a coffee or something?”

“I'd love to,” Charlotte beamed. “I really would. But,” she deflated, “I need to prepare for this damn meeting on Monday. A quick one? Please?” Because she didn't want Millie to go. Every part of Charlotte craved her friend while they healed.

“Well,” Millie considered, dropping her weight to one leg and curving a hip. “Do you fancy company? I'll grab a book. We could hang out while you work and I read?” She shrugged, to make it inconsequential and easy for Charlotte to refuse.

As if Charlotte would resist. “I would love that.” She had to pause and let a wave of poignant nostalgia wash over her. It'd be like old times, working together in their rooms or the library. “I'd really love that.”

“Come on then, lanky,” Millie said, still needing to sniff but her eyes sparkling again. She sidled up and slipped her arm through Charlotte's. It was immediate, warm and comforting. “Let's get you caffeinated and that big brain in gear.”

Charlotte started, her friend falling into step beside her, and they strolled together towards town. She suspected her

face was as red and damp from tears as Millie's, but they both had smiles so big she could burst.

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## Chapter 26

Charlotte froze with pen poised above the contract.

Her meeting wasn't going smoothly before, but when her client outright shouted, she flinched as his arm crossed her vision and jabbed towards the opposite side of the meeting room.

“Your specifications are lies, plain and simple,” he accused the team across the table.

Charlotte, Richard, the client CEO and technology officer sat on one edge of the long table and faced another lawyer and the subcontracted company.

“They're accurate with proper usage and appropriate hardware,” the software architect opposite said. The woman's eyes stretched wide behind large glasses, clearly uncomfortable at the aggressive tone in the room. Somehow the woman kept an even voice. “As I've said, with appropriate usage, the component performs as stated in the specification and contract which—”

The CEO next to Charlotte stood abruptly and towered above her. “Our load-testing stats prove that's not the case. You have it black and white.”

“We offered you an alternative API—”

“It's too late.” He raised his hand. “You've wrecked our product launch with a component that is unfit for purpose. I'm not interested in excuses. I want compensation and to switch to another company.” He turned and marched from the room.



Richard stood too, buttoning his suit jacket. He wore a contrite expression, as if nothing could salvage the situation. He pointedly ignored Charlotte.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing further to discuss. I’ve tried.” Richard followed the CEO and closed the door firmly.

Charlotte flinched. Again.

She sat in stunned silence, they all did, the CEO’s voice still ringing in the air. Her pen remained poised above her notes. The client technical officer remained to her right. Across the table, a wide-eyed young lawyer sat with the software architect, face now ashen, and the company owner, a quiet bearded man who looked equally shocked.

Richard had riled the CEO before they set foot in the room. He’d entered in no mind for resolution, and it was downhill from there with big egos and enough yelling for a football match.

Charlotte had kept her head and focussed on tracking the details, not wanting to take her eye off the ball. She needed to steady the room now though. If she’d been the target of the aggression, like the software architect and owner opposite, she’d feel physically threatened. It rattled her enough on this side.

“OK,” she said.

It was quiet now, at least. She pulled her chair closer to the table.

“I know tempers have flared, but we haven’t reviewed all options yet. I think we should investigate those.”

She checked around the table to nods of agreement on pale faces. Both sides wanted a better solution.

“As I understand it,” Charlotte referenced her notes and addressed the team opposite, “you’ve patched your component specifically for our client.”

“Yes. That is true.” The architect across the table nodded.

“And over several releases, there’s been a misunderstanding regarding how it’s used.”

“I think that’s fair,” the architect accepted.

Charlotte turned to the remaining member of her client company, the middle-aged technical officer in black jeans and jumper.

“Honestly, yes,” he acknowledged. “We’ve been pressuring for fast-track changes to meet our product launch, but we’re using their product as specified.”

“The specifications are outdated,” the woman opposite said firmly. “We warned you that documentation would not track your requested release schedule.”

Charlotte put her hand up to calm the room. “So, there is a misunderstanding and we’d have to bring in a third-party specialist to examine the software to arbitrate if needed.”

They both nodded.

“I understand,” Charlotte carried on, “you already have a schedule to work around these issues.”

“That’s why I’m confused,” said the bearded owner of the small company. He leaned on the table. “We planned a way

forward. Why the sudden escalation?”

“I think it likely,” Charlotte said carefully, keeping her voice low and soothing, “compensation is due here. It’s a matter of how much and deciding the best way forward.”

The man was sweating and wiped his forehead with a sleeve.

“The schedule and budget’s too tight for Ed,” the technical officer beside her said.

He was quieter and more considered than the CEO, and Charlotte had read from the client company background that the two college friends went back decades. His tone spoke of years of patience. Of the pair, he was more likely to be reasonable and Charlotte was glad he remained.

“Trying to re-engineer, stress test and release is going to cost us thousands,” he said.

“But we came to offer you expertise as part of the renegotiation,” the owner across the table said. “Our engineers can work with you. These are highly specialised guys.”

The owner waited for a response from Charlotte. They all did. Every single person in the room looked at her with quiet hope.

“OK,” she said. This looked more optimistic. She’d opened the door to possibility again. “We’re missing Ed, as CEO, and the financial officer. But are the right technical people here to thrash out the development side of the negotiation? If you find a workable solution, we’ll look at compensation if that plan’s agreed. Otherwise, we’re left with

the nuclear option of my client abandoning your component and a costly case.”

There were nods round the room. She was certain everyone wanted the former plan to work.

“Right.” She smiled. “We have a way forward.” She stood up. “Excuse me while I find my colleague and Ed.”

The room seemed to sigh as both parties put their heads together and Charlotte closed the door.

She took a moment in the corridor. She was a little shaken but had steadied negotiations. Millie had told her to have confidence in her abilities, and she’d done just that. Now, she needed to bring back the rest of the client team.

So, where was Richard?

In the pub entertaining Ed, the CEO, was the answer. Richard sent her a curt text back when she called, then ignored her. Charlotte sent a message clearly stating he needed to return, but predictably he ignored that too.

After several deep breaths, and counts to ten, Charlotte spent her efforts on keeping the teams comfortable, and several hours later the teams were still in deep practical discussion but making good progress.

Ed stumbled back into the meeting room close to five o’clock, his face ruddy from alcohol instead of anger, and dozy from whatever Richard plied him. For a tense moment, Charlotte wondered if the CEO would become belligerent under the influence, when his friend and technology officer muttered close to his ear, and he took a seat at the table. He seemed perplexed, but more placid and open to discussion.

Richard stood at the doorway, stone cold sober and clearly furious.

Charlotte met him in the corridor and gently closed the door in time for him to growl, “What’s going on?”

She checked through the glass panels of the meeting room door, then looked at him, resolute. “What they should have done from the start, negotiating.”

“I set Ed on a course of action,” Richard growled, “and you’ve gone behind my back and undermined the entire strategy.”

“You walked out,” Charlotte said. “You left negotiations.” Richard loomed over her, but she refused to be intimidated. This wasn’t right for either company. “We agreed with Hugo to look at all options and I’ve been facilitating that.”

“I’m driving the best deal for my client, while you’re fraternising with the enemy and giving them everything on a plate.”

“There’s no enemy here.” Charlotte was too incredulous to waver. “Just two small software companies with everything to lose by turning on each other. There are enormous opportunities for them together. I’m trying to navigate through this mess, otherwise they’re looking at a very expensive case and bringing in multiple third-party specialists.”

“Which makes lots of money for lawyers.” He jabbed his finger towards her.

“Have you looked at these companies?” Again, she couldn’t believe his attitude. “They’re still reliant on investor funding for their initial product development. Any legal issues and they’ll be hampered or out of business. Either way, our client is guaranteed to suffer an enormous loss. That’s not in anyone’s interest.”

Well, apart from Richard, she realised now, who wanted a short-term win on his CV.

“And since when were you an expert on these two companies?” he said.

Charlotte stood up straight. “Since I did my due diligence at the weekend and checked their backgrounds. Something I’d normally do during the week, but you organised a meeting without agreeing with me. That was not appreciated, Richard.”

She was firm. Uncharacteristically so. But on the back of defending her client, it was out of her mouth before she could doubt herself.

He glared at her, straightened and shook his head. “I heard you were difficult to work with,” he said and he marched to his office, leaving Charlotte lost for words.

Her mouth didn’t close for a good minute. She’d kept her head and composure at every point, and still Richard accused her of being difficult.

A presence sidling up brought Charlotte from her reverie. She glanced round to find Olivia, arms crossed and considering the empty hallway left vacant by Richard.

“I hear you’ve brought our warring software companies back to the table,” Olivia purred.

“Yes,” Charlotte said, “I have.” Now she had time to think, she was proud she’d managed it.

“And prevented Richard from bankrupting at least one company.”

“Exactly.” Charlotte said emphatically. See, Olivia understood the situation.

A smile curled on her friend’s lips. “Well played,” Olivia said.

“I’m not playing though. I’m trying to do a good job.” It was all Charlotte focussed on.

“And it’s funny,” said another voice, “how much better we have to do the job to get the credit.”

Liz Oduwole, the office manager, appeared at her elbow. These two made a habit of this. It was like they were everywhere and knew everything. She wished Olivia could explain the office politics she was privy to sometimes. They clearly had a plan. And Charlotte, as always, about everything, was the last to know.

“Richard’s probably on his way to Hugo,” Olivia said, raising an eyebrow in gentle challenge.

“So be it,” Charlotte said. “I’m happy to talk Hugo through everything.”

“Good,” said Liz.

“Excellent,” added Olivia.

They gave Charlotte a knowing look, then glided away as if never there, leaving Charlotte's head spinning.

Exhaustion kicked in suddenly. Her adrenaline was running out and she'd exceeded her limit of people today. Charlotte climbed the stairs to take a break in her office, grateful for the quiet space on the top floor.

She took out her phone.

A new message. "How did it go?"

"Millie," she whispered with a smile. Charlotte tapped out a reply. "Better than if I'd not prepared. Thank you for keeping me company at the weekend."

And for listening to her grump about Richard. And the pep talk to refocus on Charlotte's strengths and prepare for where she might trip up. And laughter afterwards, the good company at a cheap-eats dinner at the end of the weekend, and the hug before Millie went home. Everything to the message of "sleep tight", like another reassuring hug.

"My pleasure," Millie messaged back, followed by one big smiley face.

Charlotte grinned at her phone.

Millie was back in her life, and she in Millie's, and this time she wouldn't let anything get in the way of their friendship.



## Chapter 27

“Millie?” Nicola said, arms crossed and chin down. She looked at Charlotte as if over glasses. “Millie came to look at the house?”

So much said, in so few words. And they’d only just met in East Oxford. Her mother parked her shiny Mercedes near Charlotte’s home to be, the expensive car standing out like a juggernaut in the narrow, terraced street with small cars perched half on the pavements.

She gazed at her mother who stood beside her, wearing jeans and leather boots in a way that somehow looked formal, as if Nicola could walk into court and still command respect in muddy shoes. Charlotte put back her shoulders and stood straight, trying to keep up in stature.

“I wanted another opinion and Millie always tells me hers.”

“Doesn’t she just,” Nicola retorted.

Charlotte wrinkled her nose. “You used to like her. What’s the problem?”

“Oh, I like her enormously,” Nicola said, eyeing the little terrace. Her gaze travelled up and down, over every crack and loose peel of paint. “But I assumed you’d be more removed and sensible about your involvement, given your past, but you’re already looking at houses with her.”

“I...” Charlotte bit her tongue. This was trickier than knife-edge negotiation at work. “She was very helpful. Millie has decorating experience.”

“So do I. You should have asked me.”

Charlotte drew a blank, then had so many questions. When had her mother done anything but throw money at decoration and “got some men in”. Had Nicola Albright ever rolled up her sleeves to work on the basics?

Charlotte tried, “I imagined you’d be busy.”

“I’m cutting down my case load. I could have fitted you in.”

Charlotte’s shoulders twitched at the idea of being scheduled.

“Anyway,” Nicola said, “Shall we knock on the door and have a look round?”

“No,” Charlotte spluttered. “I was only showing you the outside.”

“I’m sure the owner won’t mind.”

She stared at her mother. Just because Nicola had no shame asking for what she wanted and got it, didn’t mean people didn’t mind.

“I don’t want to bother Barbara,” Charlotte said.

Nicola paused, then looked at her. “Fine. We won’t bother *Barbara*.”

“What’s the matter?” Because there was meaning in that sentence.

“Nothing.”

“There’s something.” There always was with her mother.

“You strike up the oddest friendships and loyalties,” her mother said, a slight dip in those impressive eyebrows.

“She’s a human being.” Charlotte turned up her palms, not sure how to make her mother understand. “Another person? I’m treating her with respect.”

Nicola regarded her a few moments longer, before shrugging off whatever thoughts entangled her mind. “Come on then, let’s have a stroll and a bite to eat.”

Nicola marched off and Charlotte ambled after her, utterly ignorant of her mother’s thought process. They crossed the main road into Iffley Fields – terraces of family houses grander than the old worker’s cottage that Charlotte could afford.

“I’ve been looking for properties here,” Nicola said, eyeing a yellow-brick house with window-box flowers and a for-sale sign outside.

“Here?!” Charlotte spluttered, despite her intentions of keeping calm and confident.

This was close. Way too close. In some ways, it was touching her mother wanted to meet more often. But this immediate would test them both.

“My old stomping ground,” her mother preened. “I didn’t live ‘outside walls’ like you did.” The woman never missed an opportunity to belittle Charlotte’s college, Magdalen being rich enough to house students for three years while St Hilda’s wasn’t. “But we used to frequent the pubs along Cowley and Iffley Roads.”

Charlotte struggled, yet again, to imagine her mother as anything but the seasoned barrister and pictured her leaning on a different bar fully robed. She shook her head, unable to imagine her mother at eighteen, although she'd seen photographs. Even in those, the woman had undeniable confidence. Charlotte didn't know how anyone got through teenage years with so little self-doubt.

“But...but...” How could Charlotte say this. “Don't you need somewhere nearer the station?”

“Possibly,” her mother replied. “You make an excellent point.”

Phew.

“But I love this side of town and Iffley Village is ideal.”

Hold that phew. The village up the river was still too close for comfort. A matter of twenty minutes on foot.

“I fancy a wander along the river to refresh my memory and see what's for sale.”

Charlotte deflated. At least it gave the rising tension in her shoulders a break. She walked after her mother, down the hill, leaving the Victorian terraces behind, past a 1950s development, over the road bridge and dropped down to the river path and open fields.

She found herself smiling at the quick access to the river, loving its leafy quiet route into town one way and fields towards Iffley the other. The village kept a rural charm, even though sat within the Oxford ring road, an idyll she didn't want her mother to invade.

“So, you’re all set to stay with your father at Christmas?” Nicola said, with deceptive airiness.

Her mother had moved the conversation on, but to a thornier issue.

“Yes,” Charlotte said.

Could she leave it there?

She really wanted to leave it there.

Nicola marched with more emphasis. Stones from the path pinged into waters on one side and scattered into pale damp grass on the other. A bird took flight from the field, something scurried into the river, as if everything including Charlotte wanted to avoid this conversation.

The previous year, the first since her parents split, they’d assembled for Boxing Day – mother, father, sister, sister’s husband and niece and nephew, as if nothing had changed. It had been frostier than a mid-winter dip in the Thames.

This year Nicola planned to stay with her eldest daughter in Scotland, while Charlotte jumped at the chance to stay with Dad, in the name of balance and fairness.

“We’ll miss you, of course,” Nicola said, looking ahead determined. “You can still come for a few days. Plenty of room, and your father will want to be with his new girlfriend.”

“Thanks, but it’s arranged now.” Far too late to change anything. Thank Christ.

“You should catch up with the children though. You’re their only auntie.”

“It’s difficult getting away to Scotland.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“I’m working right until Christmas Day.”

“I could postpone.”

And to be honest, Charlotte liked her father best. She’d never say that out loud. But realising her mother and sister didn’t respect her was an awful realisation over the last two years. It affected how she felt about them. Love and familial bonds would tie them to her forever, but Charlotte wondered if her mother or sister had ever appreciated her.

Charlotte wasn’t going begging to them for attention and regard when she had Dad, who looked at her like another human being. A low bar, but he cleared it with a lot of love and genuine interest. An image of running into her father’s arms after school flashed in her head. The sun shining behind him, his eyes wide with joy, swooping down to lift her up, with a euphoric sense of him loving her for who she was. No wonder she leapt at the chance to stay with him.

Her mother was right, annoyingly, about her sister’s children though. She did feel guilty about them. Her niece and nephew had been beautiful. She’d held both at a week old, with their impossibly soft skin, and a dependence that made her heart swell. She’d stared at them with adoration and a rush of broody hormones at their teeny tiny hands, and gummy, lovely smiles. Then they’d turned into mini-versions of Bryony and Mark and the hormones evaporated.

“You should see the tree,” Nicola continued. “Mark felled it himself.”

Of course he did. Perfect son-in-law cut down a Christmas tree from their woodland plot in their perfect four-bedroom Scottish retreat. She’d seen the photo on Bryony’s feed, which she checked sometimes to show her interest and muted the rest of the time. Otherwise, the constant drip of family and career perfection was debilitating. It resonated with childhood comparisons, in which Charlotte had always come off worse.

She found it incredible, that these closest relations made her comfortable life, for which she was grateful, utterly maddening. Mother’s constant comparisons were stark against the straight Bryony and hunky husband and two children, all with careers; not the children, although it probably wouldn’t be long. Versus lesbian Charlotte. Just that. Single lesbian Charlotte.

Cling to the facts. She closed her eyes and silently repeated a mantra, “I have a good job, in a city I love, with friends I adore”. It was something Millie had taught her. Perspective. What was miserable failure to her mother was incredible luck and excellence to others, and Charlotte would feel silly for ever having worried. But then her mother was a professional at this. It was literally her job to manipulate people’s minds to align with hers.

“Why can’t you join in?” Nicola said. “It’ll be a perfect family occasion. Bryony cooks so well and she’s told me all about the trimmings. Did you see pictures of the decorations?”

And gifts under the tree. Goodness. The ribbons. And I don't know where she found the time to..."

Charlotte entered a state of consciousness she suspected was a primeval defence mechanism, like animals playing dead, and kicked a pebble from the path into the waters with a satisfying plop. She was tempted to throw herself in.

"Oh, my word," her mother said.

"What?" Charlotte peeped up, wondering what she'd missed, because there was always something. She lived in a perpetual state of ignorance, she was at least aware of that.

"Olivia!" her mother called out with a wave and Nicola quickened her pace.

Charlotte's friend walked the towpath. Perhaps she'd been to visit her parents in Iffley Village. Olivia strode towards them, dressed in a long winter coat, elegant and black naturally, and wearing a smile of adulation. Charlotte rolled her eyes, while her friend's lit up at Nicola Albright KC.

"Olivia, darling," her mother rang out, before she closed the gap and held Olivia's hands. "How wonderful to see you!"

"And you! I was just reading your profile in *The Law Society Gazette!*" Olivia said, delighted.

"And I was about to congratulate you on your inclusion in 'young lawyers to watch'."

Charlotte braced herself for another comparison. She always admired Olivia's intellect and supported her success but was less fond of her mother using it as an unattainable



target for her. She and Olivia had different strengths. Charlotte nodded along to Millie making the point in her head.

Then Charlotte spotted another figure.

“Geeta!” she called out.

Behind Olivia strolled her mother in a breathy cloud, soft woolly hat and scarf. Charlotte hadn’t seen her for a couple of years. More white and grey mixed with Geeta’s long black hair that curled in waves from beneath the hat. But familiar brown eyes still shone in a welcoming, wholesome smile.

Geeta already reached out.

“Charlotte! Goodness, I haven’t seen you in an age. I must give you a hug. Please?”

“Of course,” Charlotte grinned.

This was someone who’d raised Olivia, so despite being warm and outgoing, she’d check before alarming anyone with a cuddle. The shorter woman threw up her arms around Charlotte’s shoulders and Charlotte leant down to squeeze her.

“I should let you hug me,” Geeta laughed. “But I’m a mum. I forget you children are big and I want to hold you under my wing.”

Charlotte squeezed her tight before letting go. “How are you?”

“I’m very well, thank you.”

“You look it.”

Middle age suited Geeta. Shorter and curvier than the slim Olivia, she had an easy relaxed manner and looked

comfortable with herself. The white and orange ochre striped hat made her brown skin glow and a smile lit up her eyes.

Olivia and Nicola already chatted earnestly about a recent high-profile case.

“Oh, they’re off.” Geeta’s expression fell, as did her shoulders.

She wondered if Geeta was aware of Olivia’s idolism of Nicola Albright, but it was a bit flipping difficult to miss. In the past Millie had muttered, “Just snog already,” which had Charlotte laughing then shuddering. Charlotte’s heart ached for the kindred spirit of Olivia’s mum.

“How are you settling in at work?” Geeta said, cheeriness returning to her face. “Olivia tells me nothing, so you must tell me all.”

“I’m good, thank you,” she replied with aching cheeks. Geeta asked with genuine interest and fewer traps than her mother. “It’s a lot of changes at once, but I’m getting there.”

“Does it help having people around who you know?”

“Yes. Although I see less of Olivia than I expected.”

“Oh?”

“She’s senior to me, so we can’t always hang out.”

“I see,” Geeta said, with an understanding nod. “Do you have other friends in Oxford?”

“Millie?” Charlotte couldn’t remember if the two met.

“Oh,” Geeta’s eyebrows shot up. “Is she the one with the naughty laugh?”

Yes, they'd met.

"The one with a classic film star physique?" Geeta put hands on hips and swayed from side to side while pouting.

"Marilyn Monroe hips and swagger?"

Charlotte sniggered. "That's the one."

She loved Geeta's wonderful, relaxed attitude. Her openness was like a breath of fresh air compared with Nicola's stringent expectations.

"She seemed fun. I liked her. Hey," Geeta said, clapping her hands together. "You should both come over for lunch sometime."

"Me and Millie?"

"Of course. The more the merrier."

"That would be lovely."

"Olivia's father's always at work and conferences, and my mother has a better social life than all of us. With Olivia and her brother left home, I enjoy having people to entertain."

Good job she'd accepted. Her earlier suspicion that Geeta might be lonely seemed on the right track.

"It's a date then," Charlotte said.

Geeta beamed. "You, me and Millie."

"Mother?" Olivia said. Charlotte knew her well enough to spot the strained caution. Her disciplined friend glided over.

"What are you doing?"

Geeta smiled at her daughter. "Inviting your friends for lunch to embarrass you, my darling."

Olivia's mouth tightened, just a smidge, but Charlotte knew how that extrapolated beneath the surface. "Millie," Olivia shivered at saying the name, "isn't my friend."

And the last thing Charlotte needed was Olivia adding fuel to Nicola's opinions on that person. She was tempted to take Geeta's arm, walk away and leave her mother and Olivia on the riverbank. She took a deep breath to suppress the urge.

"Would you like a drink with us?" Charlotte asked instead as a compromise between fleeing and propriety, Geeta acting as her life-raft.

"I need to make dinner, but a quick drink would be lovely," Geeta replied.

They turned to Olivia and Nicola.

The intake of breath was audible, and Charlotte swore her mother and Olivia inhaled through their nostrils in synchrony. Whatever their reservations, and there were many given the looks, they chorused, "How delightful."

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## Chapter 28

“What’s wrong?” Charlotte muttered.

She paired up with her mother, Olivia and Geeta following behind.

“Nothing?” Nicola said, raising eyebrows. She recognised her mother’s nonchalantly bothered look.

“Whatever makes you think something’s wrong?”

Charlotte may take years to get to grips with people, as far as her understanding ever went, but she knew this much about her mother. There was definitely something wrong. She just hadn’t fathomed what yet.

“We planned a snack and drink anyway?” Charlotte offered.

They turned off the towpath towards a white Georgian farmhouse with large garden and picnic tables – the Isis Tavern, unreachable by road and only accessible from the river.

“Indeed we did.” Nicola nodded. “But I hoped to chat with you in particular, given we won’t spend Christmas together.”

Charlotte had asked for that.

“And...” Nicola paused. “Geeta is, shall we say, challenging company.”

“Really?” Charlotte wrinkled her nose. Geeta? Challenging?

“Don’t you find her aggravating?” Nicola whispered.

“Not in the slightest.”

And it was surprising Nicola did. Her mother rarely put up with irritations. She swept them aside and bulldozed through with an alarming cordial laugh.

“The woman is intelligent, I grant you,” Nicola continued. “She raised a clever daughter in Olivia for a start, but good god she drones on about trivia.”

A picnic at college sprung to mind, where the two families met on St Hilda’s lawns. Charlotte’s father had relaxed into the occasion while Nicola twitched and checked her watch the entire time.

“It’ll be endless references to her husband, family and what blasted food she’s cooked.”

“She’s a clever, vibrant woman,” Charlotte said, bemused.

“That makes it more vexing. We’d have a decent conversation, but her mind is nothing but minutiae. Didn’t she have a science degree?”

“Molecular biology I think.”

“And yet she devotes her life to making dinner, cakes, domesticity.” Nicola said every syllable of the last word with disdain.

“How awful,” Charlotte muttered. “Imagine her poor family being well fed and emotionally supported.”

“What was that?” her mother said. They’d reached the front door of the tavern.

This was thin ice for them both. The times Charlotte needed her mother when growing up, and she wasn't there, were numerous. As were the occasions Nicola couldn't attend a play or performance because she was working. And even more prevalent, the times Nicola covered her disappointment in Charlotte with an impassive barrister mask or 'helpful' criticism.

Charlotte would have loved someone like Geeta, accepting her queerness and cheering her along. Olivia never appreciated Geeta, always in awe of Nicola Albright, King's Counsel barrister, but Charlotte would have been ecstatic with someone like her. It was very thin ice.

So, she said, "Nothing."

She spotted a free table by the door. "I'll get a round in," she added. "You all get comfy."

"Thank you, darling." A polite smile cracked on Nicola's face and she sat down. "White wine, please. I'll have whatever they're serving. You know me, I'm easy."

Charlotte almost snorted. Her mother was anything but easy. Strange how Nicola wanted to appear congenial when Charlotte had never seen her so tetchy. There were many targets for her mother's disapproval, but she rarely showed the compliment of irritation, just dismissed them as unworthy.

"Geeta?" Charlotte asked.

"I quite fancy a beer. Perhaps a pint of ale before I head back to cook dinner. It'll make my cooking more expressive." Geeta beamed.

Charlotte laughed before she caught her mother rolling her eyes. There was something about Geeta that got beneath Nicola's skin. So contained and impressive in court, she'd recommend anyone choose Nicola as a defence advocate. But something aggravated her mother here.

"Whatever your mother's having," Olivia said, sitting next to Nicola.

And it was Charlotte's turn to roll her eyes.

She waited at the bar, a couple of paces away and central to the large room, letting the rumble of afternoon conversation, scrape of chairs and clink of glasses wash over her. The pub was filled with warmth from an open fire and scented with Christmas ales, mulled wine, roast dinners and gravy.

She glanced over her shoulder, Geeta animated and smiling, Olivia pursing her lips. Nicola had crossed her legs and assumed a relaxed appearance, but Charlotte knew better and she willed the barman quicker.

A buzz from her pocket distracted.

Message from Millie. Charlotte smiled and opened an attached picture.

"Millie," she tutted out loud.

It looked like a photo of a bottom – Millie's favourite theme.

"Peach? Covered Market?" Charlotte tapped out and sent her guess. She hoped no-one at the bar peeked at the photo with the wrong idea and slipped her phone into the



lining of her coat. Her smile lingered with the warm companionship of Millie from her pocket.

Charlotte returned with drinks and packets of crisps snared between her teeth by the corners, to find her mother's strained politeness still intact.

“So, you live near here?” Nicola asked.

“Iffley Village. Oh, thank you, Charlotte,” Geeta said, smiling and taking her ale. “Olivia tells me you're looking in Oxford. If you're searching Iffley, I can send you news of properties coming on the market.”

Charlotte discerned a tightness in her mother's cheeks, subtle, but you didn't know Nicola Albright your whole life and not spot it.

“That's a kind offer. Thank you.”

Which Charlotte heard as, “No, thank you. We shall never speak of this again.”

They sipped their drinks and Charlotte struck up conversation with Olivia, mainly to avoid the discomfort of Geeta and her mother's interaction.

After finishing their drinks, hunger kicked in. Charlotte broke first and bought two bowls of chips, a chocolate muffin and a small packet of roasted peanuts because protein and dietary balance.

“I love this time of year,” Geeta sighed, looking around the pub with its strings of lights and snowflakes decorating the ceiling.

“Delightful,” Nicola said sipping at, surely by now, an empty glass of wine.

“So many events,” Geeta continued. “When the kids were growing up, every day seemed a celebration in autumn. Diwali especially for my mother. Everything from Halloween to Bonfire Night. Then I turn over the whole of December to Christmas. Because why not. Everything is dull and grey otherwise this time of year.”

“Precisely,” Nicola said, the single word clipped to the shortest response.

“It’s an excuse for the whole family to get together. I miss them so much.”

Charlotte winced. Perhaps Geeta didn’t know of her mother’s divorce and only she moved to Oxford. Nicola didn’t appear more irritated. Maybe she’d reached maximum already.

“We’ll have the Sachdeva side of the family over from Leicester,” Geeta continued. “Not many from my side. Not that Sumit, my husband, will appreciate it of course. He would rather work.”

Nicola remained stony faced. Charlotte bet her mother would work too if it wasn’t for perfect Bryony entertaining. She’d put money on Nicola preferring work to being here right now.

“You and Millie could come round after Christmas,” Geeta said, turning to Charlotte. “Or a garden party in summer, if I can pin down Sumit so he doesn’t disappear to the department or a conference.”

Olivia flicked a coat flap over her knees. She seemed pricklier than Nicola. She inhaled through her nose then said, “Mother, are you seriously inviting my friends...my friend and her friend round?”

Charlotte stifled a giggle at Olivia choking on calling Millie a friend.

“Why not?” Geeta said with a shrug.

Olivia twitched. “Well...” Charlotte’s eloquent friend was unusually inarticulate.

“There’s no law against it?” Geeta grinned.

“No.”

“And you, my clever girl, would know.”

“Yes,” Olivia snapped. She really was uncomfortable. “Just don’t let Millie see my old room,” she said in an uncharacteristic tumble.

“What’s wrong with your old room?” Geeta asked, fondness glistening in her eyes for both room and daughter.

Olivia’s expression couldn’t be more different. If looks killed, Olivia would be guilty of matricide.

“Hang on a minute,” Charlotte said, finally realising what perturbed her friend. “You still have your old room at home?” Charlotte blurted before appreciating the full tension of the issue.

“I do not.” Olivia crossed her arms. “But Mother has kept it unchanged for over ten years.”

A decade ago. Charlotte rolled her eyes skywards to think. That meant, “It’s the same as at college?”

“Exactly.”

Which also meant, “Right down to the Kate Laurence posters?”

Oh. Now Charlotte felt the force of Olivia’s death stare.

“How you adored her,” Geeta added, lifting her hand up with emphasis then resting it on the table. It didn’t lighten Olivia’s mood.

“Quite the celebrity crush,” Geeta continued.

Again, this wasn’t helping.

“Was it because she played that lesbian character when you were sixteen?”

Seriously wasn’t helping at all. How had Geeta not combusted in a puff of smoke from Olivia’s stare?

Charlotte was dangerously close to snorting. Usually, Olivia was the epitome of command, control and perfection, her only indulgences her love of ice cream and adoration of actress Kate Laurence. Two huge pictures of Kate used to, in fact still did, Charlotte mentally chuckled, hang in her childhood bedroom. Very tasteful film posters, but enormous and hopelessly revealing of Olivia’s infatuation.

One displayed that honey-haired actor with piercing, intelligent, green eyes in an award-winning historical film, and the other her laughing in a romcom. The latter had Olivia smiling giddily too whenever she watched it. Charlotte never let on she noticed, because it was lovely to see her friend relax and experience simple pleasures. In fact, if Olivia saw a

picture of Kate eating ice cream, her two indulgences together, Charlotte thought her friend might explode.

Slowly realising the extent of Olivia's discomfort, she stepped in to alleviate. "I was the same," Charlotte said, hoping to distract attention away from her friend. "Anyone our age crushed on her hard."

"I never noticed you had a particular regard," Nicola said, as if Charlotte was under cross-examination. "No posters at least."

Well, no, because Charlotte didn't have the relaxed, supportive household Olivia enjoyed with Geeta.

"I can't bear to throw out Olivia's old things. It's like getting rid of the child," Geeta said to Nicola, as if she would understand.

"A child who no longer exists, mother," Olivia responded.

"The crush on Kate Laurence does though," Charlotte stopped herself from saying. She thought it fondly, but Olivia wouldn't take it well right now.

"You're an adult. I'm fully aware," Geeta said to Olivia. "But I have no shame about missing you when you were young. I love how you've grown." Geeta clenched her fist to show the power of it. "I'm proud of my daughter. But goodness me, the love we have for our small children. You and your brother were momentous in my life and I want to remember it." She lifted her hands to cup her daughter's face but refrained a few centimetres shy. "It is too much to give up, a love and life like that."

Wow. To have a mother who said those things with such gusto. Charlotte sighed. Audibly apparently because it earned a sideways glance from her own mother.

“We must let them fly the nest,” Nicola countered. “And respect the adults they become.” Nicola raised her glass towards Charlotte, who had no idea to what respect Nicola referred.

“True.” Geeta smiled. “Although, I think everyone appreciates a mother they can fall back upon for support without judgement.”

Nicola didn't disagree, or agree either. She was particularly silent.

“I won't let anyone see your room,” Geeta finished. “I do respect you as a grown woman.”

This was a good idea. Especially if someone like Millie visited who'd show no restraint. Charlotte imagined Millie bursting with everything she could do with those posters.

“And I promise.” Geeta leaned forward. “I'll redecorate soon.”

“Good,” Olivia said, re-crossing her arms.

That seemed perfect. Charlotte smiled, the warm fire and the resolution lifting her mood. “Nurture the child, support the adult,” she thought out loud.

Nicola's head whipped round and pinned her to the spot. That was a withering look. My god, if she'd set fire to Bryony's Christmas tree, she couldn't imagine a more disapproving stare. Charlotte popped the chunky chip she held into her mouth, then reached for another as a lifeline.

Her fingers found an empty bowl. Her nails scraped desperately on the bottom. Then she awkwardly withdrew her hand.

Silence descended. Olivia scowled at the chip bowl. Nicola seemed determined to drink that non-existent last drop of wine. Geeta picked a fragment of crisp from her jeans and Charlotte stared at them all.

Oh, the tensions between the four. Nicola and Charlotte never seeing eye to eye. The same with Geeta and Olivia. Charlotte always desperate for approval, while also running away. The respect between Olivia and Nicola and the warmth between Charlotte and Geeta aggravating the mother-daughter combinations. It was quite spectacular, she began to realise.

Charlotte picked up the chip bowl, ran her fingers around the flakes of salt at the bottom and licked her fingers, just for something to do that wasn't sitting rigid, hyper-aware of how awkward they were.

This wasn't what she'd envisaged returning to Oxford. Throwing her mother into the mix stirred things up. Thank god she had Millie, their friendship apparently the least complicated relationship in her life.

## Chapter 29

They were back. Christmas season in Oxford for Millie, with Charlotte as her friend. Life was good. Life was fucking amazing.

She skipped the morning jog to join Charlotte for a wander through Christ Church Meadow. Gown had left for the holidays, which meant town enjoyed the place to themselves. A thick frost coated the meadows, Longhorn cattle snorted clouds into the air, and distant college buildings shone golden in winter sunshine.

She snuggled close to Charlotte, hands deep in pockets, envying the beanie Charlotte wore with her dark hair streaming in glossy waves from beneath. Hats always irritated Millie with her head of curls. Her cheeks and ears burned with cold, and she bet her face shone the same pink as Charlotte's.

She couldn't stop smiling.

"I need a present for Dad and my sister," Charlotte said, "then how about I treat you to pie at the Covered Market?"

"Perfect, thank you," Millie replied, and she linked her arm through Charlotte's.

She almost jogged to keep up with her friend, the walk as invigorating as the daily run.

Exercise kept Millie sane in recent years. The routine. Putting one foot in front of the other. A reminder she was still alive and her body not completely numb or simply a vessel. It stopped her mind from dwelling and drowning.



But today was different. Her heart pumped with their walk, shorter legs always hurrying after Charlotte's longer stride, but it was effortless, like Millie floated over the path, lifted by her smile.

She was happy. She was very happy.

In recent years, moments made her laugh and pushed her through the move back to Oxford, study and work. But to shrug off the weight like this. This was new. This was wonderful.

"I've no idea what to get Bryony," Charlotte said. "She's difficult to buy for."

Charlotte's perfect sister, and perennial measuring stick that Nicola Albright held against Charlotte. Millie knew them all well, and how they clouded Charlotte's day. Millie would have none of it. Life was too good for that.

She tilted her head. "Get her a mug. Scribble her name on it with a marker pen."

Charlotte smiled.

"Well," Millie shrugged, "didn't she always moan you found Charlotte mugs and gifts, but she couldn't find any Bryonys."

"She did," Charlotte said. "But don't make fun of her name. It's a lovely one."

"It's a plant." Millie threw up a hand. "Who wants to be named after a bush."

"Don't start with bush jokes."

Charlotte knew her so well.

“I would never be so vulva.” Millie grinned. “I mean vulgar.”

Charlotte elbowed her, because she knew Millie’s repertoire already. “I know what you’re doing,” her lovely friend said, with a side glance.

“What?” Millie feigned innocence.

“You’re trying to make me feel better.”

“Might be.” Millie pinched the corner of her mouth.

There was history. Charlotte’s mother and sister had achieved either the pinnacle of careers, or motherhood, or both and measured Charlotte by her lack of either.

“Your mother just feels guilty about Bryony and bigs her up.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Charlotte said, her nose wrinkling with charming confusion.

“Does too. Look, she’s trying to make up for essentially naming her sweet, first-born, baby girl, Brian.”

That made Charlotte laugh out loud. It was the best thing in the world making Charlotte laugh like that.

“It’s not based on Brian,” Charlotte said.

“It sounds like it. Is Keviny her second name?”

Charlotte laughed again.

“Come on. Let’s get Brian some lube.”

“What?”

“Help get that stick out of her arse.”

“You’re very naughty, Millie Banks.” Charlotte still smiled though.

“I know.” Millie grinned.

“I’ll start with the easy one. Whisky for Dad.”

They cut through Grove Walk, a leafy path between Christ Church and Merton, past the college chapel, the grounds lined with bronzed beech hedges. Around quiet lanes, cutting through a narrow alleyway, not even wide enough to stretch out both arms and with the undeniable lure of a secret passageway. Past the Wheatsheaf pub and onto the High Street. Not the quickest way, but Charlotte’s favourite. Millie knew this.

They dipped down another lane surrounded by medieval and Georgian buildings, and into the specialist Whisky Shop. A man in his seventies served – a sincere, gently spoken guy who looked up at Charlotte over his glasses. Millie would be in and out with several bottles in five minutes if she had the money. But Charlotte asked the man’s advice, and this shop drew on a deep well of knowledge and Charlotte was a woman with patience and an ear for older folk wanting to explain everything back to prehistory.

Millie sighed. They were in for an extended visit. She parked her bum on a set of wooden steps, crossed her legs and watched.

The appealing specialist shop, with walls lined with bottles of amber liquids and labels shining with gold trims, smelled of peat, wooden caskets and the Highlands. Millie blinked, sleepy and sozzled by suggestion. The old boy held up a bottle to Charlotte, who leaned down to examine the

label. He gazed at her when she smiled and pointed at the bottle. And there it was again. Like the woman Charlotte bought the house from, that look of adoration, as if he wanted to adopt her.

What was it with Charlotte? She seemed to have this gift with the elderly – someone older folk described as beautiful and a catch when contemporaries thought them uncool. But hit thirties and forties, and everyone appreciated those fresh-faced souls and what old folks understood all along. Suddenly appealing, in demand and even desirable to take home to Mum.

Was that why Charlotte was single? Not quite old enough for single lesbians to realise she was marriage material. Did it work like that in sapphic circles?

Millie curled up her lip thinking about it and shrugged to herself.

Charlotte was tall. Millie had always thought her beautiful. Sexy though? Would people see her that way? She definitely wasn't cool. Charlotte would laugh and snort a drink up her nose if anyone suggested it. But that open, slightly goofy quality, and her genuine smile? That was appealing and glowed today. In fact, Charlotte seemed to have grown in confidence even since they'd met again in Oxford. She looked good on it.

Millie sat, head tilted and cheeks aching in a smile as she appreciated her friend. She imagined all that could be sexy for someone.

Charlotte apologised to the man and sloughed off her thick coat. She draped it over an arm, her cheeks flushed from

the shop's warmth and the walk. Her tight ribbed jumper showed her figure. The Amazonian shoulders. Chest fuller than when a teen at college. The lines of the top flowed over surprisingly generous breasts. Millie raised her eyebrows. Waist not narrow but trim. Her athletic figure curved at the hips and thighs, hugged by tight black trousers down to boots with a slight heel.

Yes. Not long before someone snapped up her gorgeous friend. Someone would see how wonderful Charlotte was, surely.

Millie stood up when Charlotte walked towards her.

“Done?”

“Sorry. Yes,” Charlotte replied, putting a paper carrier on the floor.

Charlotte threw her coat around her shoulders, flicked out that luscious hair, which Millie had played with at college, letting it run silkily through her fingers when she was bored in lectures. And again, Charlotte flicked her hair from her collar the other side, breasts bouncing a little as she did.

“Come on, gorgeous,” Millie said. “You promised pie.”

Every day felt like Christmas at the Covered Market. From the ancient building with wooden beams and lanterns for lights, narrow arcades with small-tiled floors, opulent stalls of cheese, fish and abundant fruit shining like gifts. Jewellery sparkled from tiny shops. Christmas trees and wreaths scented the air outside the florists. And steaming hot chocolates tempted in cafes.

“Let’s get a seat early,” Charlotte said. She gently tugged Millie through the crowd shuffling through the arcade, mesmerised by delights on every side.

The small pie and mash café on a corner was already busy and filled with rich vapours of gravy and cooked pastry. Millie squeezed through to snag two seats on a back table opposite a couple. Charlotte put her bag of whisky by the large window onto the arcade while Millie took the aisle seat and gazed up at the board.

“I think I’ll go classic,” Charlotte said, taking off her scarf and coat. Millie glanced up at Charlotte’s face, flushed in the humid heat of the café.

“Same,” Millie said with a smile.

“Moo or Mooless Moo?”

“I’ll go veggie with Mooless.”

Millie pulled back to stand, but Charlotte rested hands on Millie’s shoulders to stay her.

“I’ll get these,” Charlotte murmured.

Perhaps it was the balmy café. Perhaps Millie relaxed for the holidays and her body glowed from their walk in the frost. Whatever the reason, when Charlotte curled fingers over her shoulders and squeezed, it was deeply pleasurable.

Everything slowed. Charlotte’s fingers kneaded around her shoulders, the tender massage lifting Millie’s chest and clothing so that instantly sensitive breasts delighted. The sure touch radiated up her neck, over her scalp, and Charlotte’s murmur resonated and caressed at the same time.

Fluid, warm and tingling, Millie lazily closed her eyes, as if seduced by an expert masseuse. Her neck relaxed and head lolled forwards. She almost groaned and asked Charlotte to squeeze harder, before rolling back in wordless satisfaction. And wordless she stayed when Charlotte's chest welcomed her. Soft breasts cushioned either side of her head, as she was enveloped by the sumptuous sensation of a woman. Millie sighed.

Then abruptly, her neck chilled and the satisfying pressure on her shoulders released. Millie snapped to and watched Charlotte walk to the counter.

Well.

Whoa.

Fuck.

That particular physical reaction had been absent a while.

She sat bolt upright. Scalp, neck, chest all cried out for Charlotte's massage and whinged in cool absence. It had been a different era since she recalled that sensation. She remained seated, shocked, the warmth still buzzing through her body.

Why had that flared up now?

Because she was happy? She'd been numb below the waist for so long, that a little intimacy, no matter how innocent, had her squirming. She blushed. Unexpected. She blushed deeper because Charlotte, of all people, elicited that. And again, because she really was not the kind of person to bloody blush. God she was out of practice. At least her friend

hadn't noticed. Oblivious, Charlotte smiled and chatted to the person at the counter.

"Whoa," Millie said out loud. "What the ever-loving fuck." She blew cooling breath up her face so curls bounced around her eyes. Then she blushed deeper again when the couple in front glanced at her in confusion.

"Hi," Millie said. "Sorry, just me. Carry on."

Fuck.

Just Millie inflamed by a casual touch from her very best friend. Melting at a mere shoulder squeeze. Her face blazed, flustered, with happy hormones and thoughts of pie. That feeling, that very pleasurable feeling, had worked deep into her body, not reaching all the way down, but close.

The couple turned back to each other and their pies, while Millie fanned her face and tried to keep out of sight of Charlotte at the till.

Charlotte wandered back, a beautiful smile on her face, chest swaying with every stride. Millie relived Charlotte's breasts cushioning her neck. In fact, her mind ran with it and imagined not the comfort of a ribbed jersey, but naked breasts. The detail of a nipple pebbling and stroking her cheek teased, all the way down low, and she imagined slowly turning her head and taking it in her mouth.

What? The fuck?

"All done," Charlotte said, squeezing past. She plonked herself down next to Millie. "Warm in here, isn't it," Charlotte said, her eyes flicking to Millie's cheeks.



Absolutely fucking boiling. What the bloody hell was going on? Millie stared wide eyed at Charlotte.

“Come here,” Charlotte said, unbuttoning Millie’s coat. “You’re going to combust. I’ll put it on my bag if you’re worried about it getting dirty.”

“Nuh,” Millie said.

Words. Some of her favourite things. Needed some.

“Yes, thanks. Great,” Millie said, pulling at her sleeves. “Actually. Don’t care, but, yes, thank you.”

They were words at least.

Millie breathed out. “Water,” she gasped. That was a good plan.

“Let me pour you some.”

Millie glugged hers in one and poured again. “So...” she said.

More words needed.

“How...how...how...?”

Some different words.

“How things. House. Is it?”

Words in the right order preferably, but Charlotte seemed to get the drift.

“Barbara’s signed the contract.” Charlotte grinned and wafted Millie’s face with her hands. “You should have taken that coat off earlier, silly.” She grinned more broadly. “But Barbara doesn’t want to move until spring, so it’s warmer for the mobile home while her son finishes the annexe.”

“Sense,” said Millie. “Sensible.”

This had thrown her. Charlotte talked and Millie stared while thoughts raced elsewhere. This was just a random thing, wasn't it? Millie had been a highly sexual person. But she'd been numb for so long, she wondered if that was history. She supposed it might come back, a little at a time, one day.

But now?

Here?

In the bloody pie and mash café?

With Charlotte?!

Maybe Millie just reawakened. She could be misfiring, out of practice, and Charlotte had been the nearest warm body at the time.

Lunch interrupted, as plates of round pies, on a bed of mash and rich gravy were placed in front of them. Millie ravenously tore into hers, as she mulled over what was going on. She realised she satisfied herself in another way as a distraction.

“You're hungry,” Charlotte teased.

“It's been a long time,” Millie murmured, still lost in thought.

“Since breakfast?”

“Since...”

Millie turned to Charlotte. Lovely, generous, oblivious Charlotte and best friend in the world, who looked at Millie with a beautiful expression that spoke of affection and naivety.

Millie breathed in, some sense of order returning. “Yes, since breakfast.” This was a small reawakening. That was all. Nothing to get flustered about.

“Shall we go?” Charlotte said when they finished and squeezed her arm.

See. There. Millie had a perfectly normal reaction to a squeeze of the arm. Not a flutter.

“Thank you,” Millie said, relieved. “That was lovely.” She meant both the pie and perfectly platonic arm squeeze.

They wandered from the café around the market with no particular aim. Millie carried her coat over her arm to manage her temperature at a nice, simple warmth, her belly full of good food. Calmer, she took Charlotte’s elbow and followed her around small shops and stalls, Charlotte on the lookout for a gift for her sister.

This was good. Nothing to be alarmed about. Everything was fine.

“My favourite shop,” Charlotte said, tugging Millie’s arm.

They’d reached a cake shop, a place of elaborate creations. Tiered wedding cakes of every style, edible versions of Oxford landmarks, rows upon rows of mini marzipan Santas, each hand-decorated. Best of all, they prepared desserts in-shop, and Millie gazed at Charlotte who watched the bakers through the windows, busily swirling trails of coloured icing to decorate snow people and Santas.

Charlotte leant down, with a beautiful smile of wonder on her face, to admire an icing reindeer on a Christmas cake.

“Look at this one,” Charlotte said, reaching back without looking and slipping her hand around Millie’s waist.

An innocent enough gesture, except as Charlotte gently encouraged Millie forward, her finger slipped beneath Millie’s shirt.

She closed her eyes, to the most delicate of strokes from Charlotte’s fingertip. No-one had touched her in a long, long time and it thrilled intimately. Millie’s whole body fluttered awake in expectation, the tiny touch and tender tease around her side luscious.

Then Charlotte stood up straight and turned towards her. But her breast glanced past Millie’s and, between the delicate contact of skin on skin and the stroke over nipple, Millie’s whole body reacted.

A rush of heat. The strike of arousal, from breast to core. It hit instantly and Millie almost folded into Charlotte. The temptation to turn into a kiss and cup Charlotte’s breast was overpowering.

Millie blinked herself back to reality to check she hadn’t fallen.

“This is my favourite,” she vaguely registered Charlotte saying, as she stared at her friend’s lips.

Her mind stalled in shock at what her body wanted, while it waited on the edge, screaming for the mind’s go ahead.

Well, hello libido.

It was definitely back. There was no mistaking that sensation between her legs and the compulsion to engulf

Charlotte. Want pulsed through her whole body.

Millie gulped.

Just when life was going well. Just when Charlotte and she were friends again. Her libido couldn't have picked a worse time, or person.

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## Chapter 30

No.

She refused to believe this was about Charlotte.

Charlotte did nothing that was sexy. She didn't flirt, at all. She had the finesse of a giraffe roller skating when it came to dealing with attractive women. Yes, she was pretty. And she'd matured beautifully and, yes, Millie had just been thinking how she could be sexy for someone. But she didn't mean her.

And Charlotte smelled of honey. And Millie liked it when her boobs bounced. And that kiss years ago had been surprisingly nice and she'd touched her lips whenever she remembered it.

Oh shitting fuck. Had this been on the cards all along?

But, but, but. Millie never had a strong sexual response to women. Not that she was blinkered, but men caught her eye, and she didn't experiment further because they thrilled enough.

No. This was a confused resurfacing of sexual appetite. Perhaps settling into her old pattern would take time.

What about her reaction to others? The receptionist beamed at Millie as she arrived for the physio clinic at Beaumont Street surgery on Christmas Eve. The tactile, outgoing woman, attractive in her mid-thirties, sidled up in the coffee room, rested her hand on Millie's shoulder, and they chatted and joked. But beyond that, nothing. Millie once caught her checking her up and down, but she couldn't imagine being tempted to even kiss her.

The newly qualified doctor snagged her whenever she attended the physio clinic. Tall, square shoulders, shirtsleeves rolled up over pronounced biceps and tie tucked in at his broad chest. He was attractive, but no matter how often he sat with her, legs apart, full attention on Millie, she felt nothing other than fatigued.

And the thought of being in bed with him? She had to shut that down.

So that was still there. That fear of sleeping with someone. But it didn't mean her body was dead.

Bodies.

Millie saw a lot of them. Old ones, wrinkly ones, muscly, frail, hairy, injured ones all day long. It was amazing how matter of fact and unattractive bodies were most of the time. They belonged to people needing help with back pain, tendons, sports injuries, accidents and wear and tear. Concentrating on the mechanics of bodies and healing people, while ignoring herself, kept her sane.

Bodies were everywhere.

So, what the hell was it about Charlotte suddenly that made hers so attractive? How had her friend turned into an irresistible arousing presence?

After work, Millie shopped with Charlotte, or rather she hung out with Charlotte who was shopping.

“Just a present for Dad's girlfriend now. I'm resorting to perfume or chocolates,” Charlotte said.

Her tall friend glanced at a list on her phone before disappearing down an aisle of confectionary and gift boxes,

long hair billowing, tall figure striding ahead with that appreciable curve at the hips and chest.

Millie rolled her eyes. So, her libido had risen from the grave. That's all this meant. It didn't have to be about Charlotte.

She stared at a back-lit poster of a man's torso in the men's health section, a black-and-white photograph of a peak specimen. Millie imagined running her fingers down his chest, admiring the ripples of the six pack and teasing lower. It elicited a flutter and slight stirring. But a real-life man? Did she think of any in that way? She experienced the sexual equivalent of tumbleweeds rolling through a desert.

She wandered further, pictures of beautiful bodies displayed in every direction. She stopped at an equivalent photo of a woman, tasteful in black and white again, but the energy of her pose undeniably sexual. The open mouth, the thrust of the model's chest, the fingers resting on hips and pointing suggestively into her bikini bottoms. And there it was. The tiny flutter again. That funny combination of admiration, a sprinkle of envy and touch of eroticism. Millie supposed that had always been there. Was it more significant than before? Not noticeably. And real women? Tumbleweeds again.

"Boo," whispered in her ear.

She knew immediately it was Charlotte, from the timbre of her voice to the tall warm presence above Millie's shoulder. It set every inch of Millie's skin alert. The scent of honey shampoo bathed her. Warm breath tickled her neck beneath the ear, and delight fluttered from head to toe.



Arms swept around her and hands clasped beneath Millie's chest. Charlotte snuggled against her back and those familiar breasts pushed intimately into the dip between Millie's shoulders. Charlotte rested her chin on the rise of Millie's neck, her cheek tantalisingly close to Millie's.

And, whoosh.

Flames ignited from deep inside Millie's knickers. Her nipples perked up so quickly she feared they pinged out loud. The hum of every cell in her body, the flush on her cheeks, the tingling of her lips, the swell of desire.

Fuck.

This was about Charlotte

This really was all about Charlotte.

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"You're grumpy," Virginia said, jabbing a forkful of Bernard Matthews turkey roll towards Millie.

They sat at the kitchen table with newspaper paper chains slung across the ceiling and holly poking from every crevice.

"I mean," Virginia mused, "granted you're in your thirties, and you find yourself alone on Christmas Day sharing a cheap turkey dinner with your old landlady. Even so, you're usually more sanguine about such things."

"Dear landlady." Millie grinned. "I've had worse Christmases."

They'd swapped chocolates, both boxes flirting with the best before date. Virginia's friend left a bottle of sloe gin that looked lethal. But it was festive. Millie had video-called her mum late Christmas Eve, and tomorrow she'd spend the day with Alec, wife and toddler. She couldn't wait to give the sprog the sloping wooden car track, which Millie had played with for an embarrassingly long time in the shop.

But yes, she was distracted, a bit grumpy and probably sexually frustrated as well. Eight billion people on the planet, and she got hot for the one she really shouldn't.

"I've got a problem."

"Don't we all dear," Virginia said, piling in another forkful of turkey and instant gravy. "Oh, you mean one to talk about now?"

Millie laughed. "I'm attracted to a friend, one I really can't be."

"Don't worry, dear. If you leap into my bed, there'll be no repercussions."

Millie laughed again. She found it easy to talk to Virginia because she wouldn't pity her. Sometimes she could cut through the serious stuff with a blunt person.

"Is it the annoying girl who doesn't swear?" Virginia asked.

"Yes. I mean no. She's not annoying. But yes. How did you know?"

"This unnatural relationship with her." Virginia waved a hand.

“What do you mean, ‘unnatural’?”

“From what you say, you were practically in bed with each other anyway.”

“We shared a lot, yes.”

Where did you draw the line at friends versus lovers? For Millie, it had been easy. Everything but sex. She’d have done anything for Charlotte, and more than for any lover. Had that been the problem? Did she draw Charlotte in so completely, all it left was sex? Had Millie teased her with a complete relationship but denied that?

“Friendships vary,” she said, defensively.

“Well, if you’re attracted to her,” Virginia said, “Why don’t you jump her bones?”

“Virginia!”

“What?” Virginia peered over her glasses, genuinely perplexed.

“Because...” it was the kind of crass thing Millie usually said. So, it annoyed her that Virginia got there first.

“Sex wears out,” Millie said. “Sex gets in the way and fades for most people. I’m fine with that. Enjoy it while you can, then move on.”

“So,” Virginia considered a moment, “shag like rabbits for six months, then go back to being friends?”

“It doesn’t always work like that. I’d move on but...”

Charlotte wouldn’t. And everything would change.

“Good lord, have relationships never tempted you? The spark doesn’t entirely disappear, you know.”

“Yes, I’ve tried.”

“How long for?”

“Six months.”

Virginia paused and again regarded her over glasses.  
“That’s diabolical.”

“And I despised him afterwards. This is not a great avenue.”

“Hmmm,” Virginia said, unconvinced.

“I don’t think I’m different from others, just more honest. I’ve seen plenty of couples exhaust relationships in that time and cling on miserably for several years afterwards.”

“So,” Virginia said, “longevity of romantic relationships isn’t your forte.”

“Exactly.”

“You make a jolly good friend though.”

“Thank you. Which is my point. I can’t slip. Not for a moment. Because I’d lose her.” It would confuse Charlotte. Hurt her. Then she’d never come back. “And that can’t happen, because Charlotte is forever.”

Virginia looked at her, intelligent eyes flicking over Millie’s features, before a smile warmed her face. “All right, dear. So, what’s the plan?”

“I wait until this crush wears off.”

Charlotte had done that, and now they'd become incredible friends again. Millie owed her the same.

Millie breathed in. Then out, long and hard. "I will just wait."

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## Chapter 31

Charlotte looked up at the small corner pub. Beautiful, ramshackle and centuries old. Part timber, part stone, two-storey in the middle, towering to three at the end, with pointed roofs and hanging baskets.

She could remember the first time she stood outside the Jolly Farmers, her debut queer establishment, and could almost hear Millie laugh beside her, “Of course the gay bar in Oxford would be a bloody medieval pub.”

Charlotte smiled and dipped her head through the front doorway, glad that one of the oldest gay pubs in England still opened its doors. And still serving behind the bar was Marta. Charlotte hadn't forgotten her deep hazel eyes, smooth voice with a hint of a Portuguese accent, and quiet welcome of someone used to strays wandering in to find new family.

On her debut visit, Charlotte had sat at the bar clinging onto beer she'd ordered in panic and the safe company of the barmaid. She'd been torn between terror and feasting her eyes on the whole place. Queer people were everywhere, like a miracle, and Millie had danced in the corner with gay boys.

She'd clung to her bitter-tasting pint, nervous about women and the prospect of a real live girlfriend, while Marta talked to another customer about finishing her legal transition. Charlotte hoped no-one noticed how wide-eyed and naïve she was.

Marta had wiped the bar and strolled over to Charlotte hiding in the small timber-framed snug. The server leant on

the bar, chin on hand, large eyes soft and understanding.

“You’re struggling, aren’t you?” Marta had said.

“Is it that obvious?” Charlotte squeaked.

“Of course.” Marta chuckled.

“You can really tell I’m a virgin by just looking at me?” Charlotte said, eyebrows reaching for the ancient beams.

Marta’s laugh stopped, to be replaced by an indulgent smile. “I meant you’re struggling with your beer.”

“Oh.”

God.

Heat had scorched her cheeks and a flush rose at the memory now. She strode into the bar, more mature and confident, and admired the tasteful, cosy pub on New Year’s Eve. She was ridiculously early, because even though Millie could party for hours, Charlotte wanted somewhere to sit. And don’t start on how tetchy Olivia became without a seat.

She rested hands on the bar and smiled broadly when Marta nodded towards her.

“You won’t remember me,” Charlotte said, almost laughing, “but I’m so glad to see you here and looking well.”

Marta took a step back and looked her up and down with an open mouth.

“Charlotte Albright!” she said, clapping her hands together. “I do remember you. And talk about looking well. You’re gorgeous!”

Marta reached over the bar to hug her, then dropped back behind the counter. “So, are you visiting Oxford?”

“I’m back permanently for a job,” Charlotte replied.

“Fantastic. I hope to see you in here more often. What can I get you before everyone piles in this evening?”

“Do you have anything light and non-alcoholic?”

“How about a flirty ginger ale and mint mocktail?”

Marta pouted her lips and gave her a wink.

“Perfect.”

With other customers coming in fast, she sought Olivia, and found her friend already in residence in the snug tucked away to the left. Olivia sat at a small table, glass of white wine held aloft in one hand and drumming her fingers on the table with the other. She crossed her legs elegantly beneath a black dress, almost indistinguishable from those she wore at work.

“I don’t know why we didn’t go to Hugo’s party,” Olivia grumbled. “We could be in Park Town with Champagne.”

“And happy holidays to you too,” Charlotte laughed. Something had Olivia tetchy. Something so often did recently that Charlotte gave up worrying about the cause. “Because...” She put down her drink, sat next to Olivia, and lay her coat on a chair to save it for Millie. “...I need to be dunked in queerness after days of non-stop heteronormativity.”

She’d stayed with her father and his girlfriend and caught up with aunts and cousins. And although mainly unproblematic, it was always tiring. And even though she’d avoided the trip to Scotland with her sister and perfect family,



her mother insisted on an extended video call that was almost as painful.

“After Christmas with my family, I want to be surrounded by queers and cheesy tunes.”

Olivia regarded her. “And is Millie coming this evening?”

Ah. That’s what prickled her impeccable friend. Olivia pinched at an invisible flaw on her black dress and rubbed whatever irritated her between her fingers to the floor.

“Yes,” Charlotte smiled. “She’ll be here any minute.”

Because while Olivia was an early person, and Charlotte classed herself as on-time with a cautious margin for error, Millie would saunter in on the dot when it mattered to her, and late when it didn’t.

“Marvellous,” Olivia replied, with all the joy of an old cat finding a puppy as a new housemate.

Charlotte looked at her. She hoped her expression said “behave”, but she didn’t always transfer thoughts to face with accuracy, and it could have said, “I have wind”. Photos over the years had taught her this.

“What?” Olivia snapped, returning her gaze.

“You two must learn to get along.”

Olivia’s fine bone structure became more pronounced as she ground her teeth. Many, many thoughts passed through Olivia’s head. Charlotte saw them whizzing behind those clever eyes. But she didn’t want to hear any of them. Charlotte doubted they differed regarding Millie over the years.

“Fine,” Olivia snapped. “But must we do it here?”

“I like the pub.”

“And will your best friend be comfortable at a gay bar?”

There was a lot to unpack in that question. Charlotte decided to pick on just one item.

“Of course, she is. Millie brought me here first. And she doesn’t mind any gender kissing another. She even kissed a woman once.”

“She’s a tease,” Olivia muttered. “I always disliked that about her.”

And so much more, but Charlotte let it slide.

Had Millie explored women during the intervening years? Had she gone further than a kiss? Charlotte shouldn’t ask. Because she’d be asking, did she have a chance now. And the answer to that was ‘no’. They were friends. Millie always made that clear. And Charlotte appreciated their friendship above all and wanted nothing to jeopardise that.

“She’s been lovely,” Charlotte said. “Supportive. And respectful. I want you two to bury the hatchet.”

Olivia looked at her.

“Please,” Charlotte added.

Olivia rolled her eyes, as close to agreement as Charlotte was probably going to get.

Charlotte checked her watch. It showed precisely the time they agreed to meet, just as the front door opened to another punter.

There she was.

Head of blonde curls, chin in the air, chest thrust forward and lips bright red. Charlotte leapt from her seat, laughing. Almost a week without Millie and Charlotte couldn't wait to see her again.

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Millie made her entrance, as she always did, the habit strong, but when her eyes caught Charlotte's, it was like she shifted into someone else.

Others occupied the room, shapes crowded around the bar, the background glowing in a rainbow of spirit bottles, music low, but her eyes refused to settle anywhere but on Charlotte. Her friend approached with the biggest smile, the one where happiness shone in a halo and flushed pink on her cheeks.

"I missed you," Charlotte said, throwing her arms around Millie's shoulders.

The scent of honey, blended with Charlotte's unique human warmth, enveloped her. She inhaled, bathed in the sense of the woman all around her.

"Missed you too," Millie murmured into her friend's shoulder.

She was about to call her 'lanky' out of habit, but it didn't feel right tonight. She squeezed Charlotte, before straightening and beaming at her. That gorgeous Charlotte

smile that she always loved beamed back. Had it become even better? Charlotte glowed, eyes deep pools in the softly lit room, but always sparkling when she looked at Millie.

Thank fuck for the week's break over Christmas, otherwise her reaction may have been a whole different calibre. Millie acknowledged she had a crush. She let the shocking realisation settle, and now her body was braced for it. She'd had many crushes and either indulged them or let them wear off. This was no different. A bit of patience, a bit of time, and it would sort itself.

And in the meantime, she could appreciate how beautiful Charlotte looked. She always had anyway. What was the harm?

"I have a present for you," Charlotte said, her smile widening and glowing even more. "I know we said we wouldn't, but I received two copies of this over Christmas."

Charlotte gently took her arm and led her into the snug. Her friend dipped into a bag on a chair and passed back a bestseller.

"Ooooo. That's fancy," Millie said. "A hardback. Thank you." She stroked the matt jacket, the texture pleasing on her fingertips, exuding a luxury she rarely indulged. "I had my eye on this, thank you."

She in turn dipped into her coat pocket. "I admit I got you something too." She handed over a small paper bag. "It's second-hand and not in pristine condition, but here. I spotted it in a charity shop and thought of you." Because she so often did.

Charlotte unwrapped the book of anecdotes, strange histories and oddities around Oxford that fascinated her so much.

“This looks amazing.” Charlotte flicked through, eyes wide and smile broader as she turned the pages. “Thank you.”

Did Millie warm inside more than usual at its reception? Why, yes, she did. But it wasn't animal lust. Something different.

She gazed at Charlotte, appreciating her every feature. The sprinkle of freckles over her nose. The crease beside her eyes when enraptured. Their particular shape when Charlotte became awed, pupils swollen and dark, eyelashes curved and luxurious. It was a different expression from when Charlotte laughed out loud. It had a soft, tangible appeal even though Millie didn't lift her hand to touch Charlotte's face. The tenderness of her skin and the velvet line of her eyebrow tickled imagined on fingertips.

Did her friend's appreciation lift Millie higher too? Charlotte's wide-eyed wonder and fascination with her gift drew her in. Its intensity made her heart beat slow and strong. A cocoon of warmth enveloped her, so soothing it seemed every cell of Millie's body loved life and belonged next to Charlotte in this moment. That wasn't lust, she reasoned. What a relief, she thought.

A loud, irritated cough broke Millie's reverie.

She didn't need to look. It was clearly Olivia.

Charlotte took a seat, revealing Millie's adversary – seated, glass of wine on the table, fingers entwined on thigh,

her look severe.

“Olivia!” Millie shook her curls, tipped up her chin and thrust out her chest. “I hope you had a wonderful Christmas. Hug?” She grinned.

The look on Olivia’s face was apparently cheerful before, because it noticeably soured. She stood and smoothed down her dress.

“Very well.” And put out her arms.

Oh.

That caught out Millie.

“Really?” She curled up her lip at Olivia.

“I insist,” Olivia said, looking down at Millie.

They shared a very distant hug. More a pat on the back. Awkward did not cover it. Olivia shuddered before sitting down again, and even Millie took a moment to adjust.

“There.” Olivia nodded towards Charlotte.

So that was it. Olivia made the effort for Charlotte’s sake.

“Aaaaah. The good cheer of this time of year,” Millie said, hands crossed on her chest. “Warms my heart.”

“Stop it.” Charlotte nudged her. “You two must try harder. Please.”

She softened immediately at her friend’s request. She’d do anything to make Charlotte’s life easier.

“Of course. So.” Millie turned to her foe. “My dearest Olivia. Could I interest you in another drink? It would give me

great pleasure to purchase one.”

Olivia tilted her head. “No thank you, Millie. Although you are most kind to offer.”

Millie beamed, delighted. “See how well we’re doing?”

Charlotte rolled her eyes.

“How about you?” she said softer, and she took Charlotte’s hand. Her fingers stroked over the smooth pad of Charlotte’s palm and slipped into the warm curl of her fingers, so tender it made Millie blush.

“I was going to buy you one,” Charlotte said, slowly squeezing her fingers, the whole sensation of Charlotte’s warmth engulfing her. It was so suggestive, Millie faltered a moment. A heart-skipping moment.

Not so safe this evening then.

“I…” Millie took a breath to steady herself. “I’ll get them. I don’t want you to pay for everything.”

“OK,” Charlotte murmured, the smile on her face understanding and beautifully uncomplicated.

Millie melted inside and blinked with heavy lids, succumbing to Charlotte’s presence by the second.

“You were getting a drink?” Charlotte murmured.

“Yes, I was,” Millie said with regret.

She slipped her hand from Charlotte’s, the intimacy still sensitive on her fingers as she turned towards the bar. She didn’t want to touch anything else while the memory of Charlotte’s touch tingled on her skin.

She waited, staring ahead at nothing, a busy Marta and another bartender blurring across her vision.

It was so different from the times they'd visited as students, Millie keeping Charlotte company then running off clubbing with a group of gay boys, while Charlotte preferred to go home early with or without a girlfriend. And here Millie was now, finely attuned to Charlotte's touch, her presence tugging at her back.

Millie had never seen this coming.

Was she different now? Had she always been, what, bi, pan?

Had that potential always been there? Were all the colours set, but different lovers varied the saturation, brought out a different hue, or was she fundamentally changed? She couldn't tell. Either way, she responded undeniably to Charlotte in ways already more complex than a week ago.

"Hi," a voice along the bar said. Millie turned to find a pair of dark eyes gazing from a fine-featured face, graced by dark flopping fringe and close-cut hair around the sides.

"Hi," Millie said, surprised.

"I'm Jay. They/them."

"Hello. I'm Millie. She/her."

"Can I buy you a drink?"

She didn't mistake the interest in their face. The lingering attention, then eyes flicking away, perhaps embarrassed. She'd observed the scene many times. Been a part of it often, although never the shy side.



“Thank you. But I’m buying a round,” Millie said.

Jay nodded and bounced on their feet a little.

“Oi,” someone behind shouted. A hand patted their shoulder. “Leave her, Jay. Don’t waste your time. She’s just a straight lady out with her mates.”

Jay’s face rippled with embarrassment, and they shrugged the hand off their shoulder. “Sorry about that.” They indicated behind.

Millie shrugged and smiled. “Friends, hey.”

Jay rolled their eyes. “So erm, are you?” They looked directly at her for the first time with deep, soulful eyes, the kind you didn’t want to lie to.

“I…” Millie hesitated.

It was funny saying it to a stranger, such a new admission and discovery.

“No. I’m not.” Millie smiled. “Funnily enough, it turns out I’m not straight. But I am out with friends tonight.”

Jay nodded, understanding what she said, but still with hope in their eyes. Millie hadn’t lost her touch reading this kind of encounter. “And, are you looking for anything else?”

Millie smiled and shook her head. “No, I’m not. Thank you.”

“Fair enough.” Jay smiled back then nodded in the direction over Millie’s shoulder. “I wondered if there was something between you and the brunette.”

“Oh.”

Was it that obvious? Millie flinched with sobering realisation that she was as readable as others.

“No,” she said, voice clipped and body language tightening in the equivalent.

It was Jay’s turn to smile. “Is that a no, but yes?”

They’d read her perfectly too, and she had to laugh. “That’s right.”

Millie turned and watched Charlotte as a different person than she’d realised. She wasn’t straight. And there was something between her and Charlotte. Something she could never let show.

This was going to be a tricky evening.

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## Chapter 32

“How can anyone not realise they’re a lesbian now?”  
Olivia said.

Millie put down her pint of beer, hoping to nurse this second one until midnight and keep the evening cheap and herself sober. Sober enough not to slip with Charlotte, that was.

“Lesbians are everywhere in the media,” Olivia continued, one hand across her stomach, the other holding another glass of wine in the air. She’d never seen Olivia drink as much, and it loosened her adversary’s tongue. What had got into her now?

“Why the big surprise when someone comes out? How does anyone even live twenty years and not notice they’re attracted to women?”

Millie twitched, wondering who she talked about, but stayed silent. This was a conversation she needed to steer away from by a thousand miles.

Olivia remained unimpressed with whoever she and Charlotte talked of. “I knew when I was ten.”

“Everyone’s different,” Charlotte chipped in. It was very Charlotte, always mollifying Olivia. She did the same for Millie, she had to admit.

“How old were you when you realised?” Olivia shot back.

“About nine?”

“Precisely.”

“Well,” Charlotte paused. “I think many women could be bi. They might love men, but if they met a woman they particularly admired, they might become interested romantically? Otherwise, maybe people don’t consider it, or bury it deep because there’s still a stigma?”

“I came out when I was sixteen,” Olivia said, in high-and-mighty mode. “And had to endure the stigma. I don’t see why others can’t.”

“Maybe they weren’t so desperate for a shag as you.”

Shit. It came out of Millie’s mouth before she even realised. She just couldn’t help it.

Olivia’s mouth dropped open. It was delightfully satisfying, but not enough to compensate for hurling herself into the firing line. Why the fuck couldn’t she stay quiet?

“I mean that as a compliment.” Millie switched into her usual flippant persona. “A sex-positive move by your sixteen-year-old self. Good for you.” Millie leant over and patted Olivia’s hand.

It was actually something Millie liked about Olivia – her absolute surety about pretty much everything. At best, confident Olivia was reassuring, and at other times enormous fun to disagree with and wind up. Although the way Olivia looked at Millie right now was not fun. Millie was a fool to jump into this conversation.

“Maybe she is bi,” Charlotte continued.

Her heart leaped again, even though certain they didn’t mean her.

“Oh please.” Olivia tutted. “People say they’re bi like it’s a trend.”

“Why can’t there be more pan and bi people now?” Millie snapped.

For the love of fucking everything, why couldn’t she keep her mouth shut? Ever.

“Isn’t it a good thing?” her mouth insisted. “Doesn’t it reflect that people are open to the possibility? That they’re safe enough to acknowledge it to themselves and in surveys?”

“I think so,” Charlotte chimed. “It’s healthy that people don’t have to hide it. Being queer is higher profile. People have more opportunity to recognise a part of themselves they didn’t before and are free to come out. Maybe there always were that many.”

“So where are all the boomers then?” Olivia said, mouth pursed. “Why aren’t my mum’s friends coming out as pan and putting up a flag?”

“Because she’s Gen X,” Millie said. It was petty. But this was Olivia, who had a habit of getting on her tits. And Millie was certain she did likewise.

Olivia skewered her with a look. “Then,” Olivia inhaled through her nostrils, “why aren’t huge numbers of older generations spiking in surveys when asked about being lesbian, or bisexual, or pansexual?” the words clipped and precise.

“They’re asking the wrong question,” Millie trotted out. “If they ask folks like my mum where they are on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, they’ll roll their eyes. And most won’t

talk about being sexually fluid either. But ask a middle-aged woman, would you run off with your best female friend, get a dog, small cottage and open fire, queer stats would skyrocket.”

Olivia paused. She regarded Millie over her glass of wine. She took a sip and swirled it around her mouth before visibly swallowing. Millie had the sense of being under examination.

“You’re very interested in this all of a sudden,” Olivia said, coolly.

Millie stiffened.

Olivia, with a slow controlled movement, pointedly raised an eyebrow.

“And people change,” Charlotte said. “Look at Becca.”

“Becca?!” Millie chorused with Olivia.

“What do you mean, look at Becca?” Millie added, appreciating the distraction.

“I bumped into her a couple of months ago. She’s shacked up with Henry Harrington, has two kids and another on the way.

“Wow,” Millie said. “Must admit, I did not expect that. That is quite a change.”

Well, well, well. The biggest dyke on campus was now married to a man, while insatiably straight Millie turned to jelly at the touch of a woman.

“Bet she’s still an arse though,” Millie had to add.

Charlotte laughed.

“Why can’t people change though?” Millie murmured, a thought out loud.

They both looked at her.

“Meeting someone different can open up a new avenue,” Millie continued. “Not everybody at eighteen has met someone gay, or non-binary, or pan, and who they find attractive. Sometimes you don’t know, until you know.”

And she was sure how her body reacted to Charlotte now. She carried on, as much to reassure herself as argue with Olivia.

“It should be OK not to know, to find something new about yourself. It’s OK to be fluid because your world, experience and needs change all the time. It’s absurd to insist that everything that appealed at eighteen should stay the same for life.”

And she had changed in many ways. How could she not?

Olivia looked at Millie over her glass. “You’ve been giving this a lot of thought,” she said, the insinuation clear.

Her heart cantered, and she took a sip of beer.

“Millie’s always been open minded.” Charlotte laughed. “I remember her listing actresses she found attractive when she was eighteen.”

“Really.” Olivia’s eyes fixed upon Millie. “Do tell.”

Charlotte carried on talking, but Olivia’s gaze didn’t flinch.

“It was Julia Roberts, Julianne Moore, Sandra Bullock. Who else was it?” Charlotte gazed at the ceiling, trying to remember.

Olivia’s gaze didn’t waver. She tilted her head ever so slightly, the perfect curtain of hair moving as one. “Really? Statuesque white ladies? Statuesque white ladies with dark hair and hints of red?” Olivia raised a single eyebrow, and it wasn’t wrong in its mark.

Shit.

How had Millie not noticed before? All these actors resembled her tall, gorgeous friend.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“Well...erm...they were the highest profile actors.”

Millie stumbled and Olivia knew it. And Olivia knew, that she knew, that Olivia knew it.

“This will make you laugh,” Charlotte said, coming to. “Someone said I reminded them of a young Julia Roberts last week.”

“Ha!” Millie said. “How funny.” And she made herself laugh more.

“Very interesting,” Olivia growled, taking another mouthful of wine. “Very enlightening indeed.”

Millie’s pint wasn’t going to make it until midnight. She glugged the beer like her life depended on it. Fuck. How had she not noticed? Yes, she’d been open about certain women being attractive. They were widely admired. But how did she not realise they all looked like Charlotte?



Christ, she was bi and had a type.

Had it been there all along, not only the potential for being bi, but a partiality for Charlotte? That frisson that tempted Millie to flirt too much. Why she stepped up the number of boyfriends in the third year, when she realised Charlotte was in love with her.

And now she had bloody Olivia realising at the same time.

She concentrated on her beer, Olivia stared daggers, while oblivious Charlotte chatted on. Millie pretended not to hear above the music, which had grown louder, and stayed out of the discussion. She reached the bottom of the glass too quickly and her head spun.

“I should go home,” she said. “I’ve drunk too much, and I won’t be safe on my bike.”

She needed to get out of there. Not drunk, but she’d swigged enough for mistakes to be made and secrets to escape.

“But it’s nearly midnight,” Charlotte said.

She hated seeing the surprise mix with disappointment on Charlotte’s face. “I’m sorry.” Millie threw her coat round her shoulders. “I really need to go.”

“I’ll see you out,” Charlotte said, standing too.

Music pounded and the pub heaved full of warm bodies. She pushed her way through the crowd, slipping an arm between backs and squeezing through. But suddenly the music stopped. Too late. It was already midnight.

“Wait, Millie. Don’t go now.”

Fingers curled over her shoulder and everything about that touch said it was Charlotte. She spun round and found herself pressed against her friend, the throng of bodies making it impossible to move.

Jostled from behind, Millie reached out and held Charlotte around her waist to steady them both. She sensed Charlotte's shape, her shirt thin and her warm tenderness vividly apparent beneath it. The sensation drew Millie closer and all she could think was how much she wanted to slip her hand beneath the material and caress Charlotte's smooth nakedness beneath it.

A countdown began. Above the crowd, Marta stood on the bar, beaming and shouting the numbers.

Crap. What a position to find herself in – arms around her best friend at midnight on New Year's Eve.

“Five, four, three...”

What the hell was Millie going to do?

“Happy new year!” the whole pub yelled, and streamers and hands flew in the air. A firework exploded outside, and colour flashed through the window. People everywhere flung arms around each other. Pecks on cheeks, full-on snogging; everyone was kissing.

She looked up at Charlotte in alarm.

“You don't have to avoid me, Millie,” Charlotte said. Her eyebrows raised in a roof of concern. “Don't look so terrified. Is this why you wanted to leave so suddenly?”

She couldn't speak. Her hand enjoyed the most wonderful sensation of this beautiful woman, her friend,

whose touch ignited at every turn now. Her arms pulsed, tempted to encircle Charlotte's body, wanting to slip thumbs beneath the shirt and circle ever lower to enjoy the softness that lay there. She blinked dizzy, overpowered with the compulsion to dip into Charlotte's underwear and slip her fingers deep, deep down.

"We can share a New Year's kiss, you know, without me getting hot and bothered and falling for your charms." Charlotte smiled, but sadness lingered around her eyes.

What was she meant to do? Turn her back and refuse. Dab Charlotte on the mouth with a cool, embarrassed peck, while she imagined Charlotte's wetness on her fingers.

Millie took away her arm. She closed her eyes and breathed. Once. Twice. She lifted her hand to cup Charlotte's cheek.

"Of course, Charlotte Albright. I don't think I'm an irresistible goddess," Millie made herself say, while at the same time succumbing to the powers of her friend.

"I know," Charlotte said, quietly. "But I used to think you were."

Millie stroked Charlotte's cheek, the love for her friend turning lust to tender care.

"Happy new year, Charlotte," she murmured.

Then she kissed her. Not the rough peck of a coy acquaintance at New Year. Nothing like the salacious smooch in front of Charlotte's parents. A simple kiss, light on Charlotte's lips, landing and meeting with the grace of a

butterfly. It was a kiss full of tentative regard and worshipped the woman before her.

Cheers, fireworks, party streamers and whistles all erupted, then passed and faded, and Millie still held Charlotte's cheek and lips with the softest of touches, while the sensation of them joined in this fragile pose sent soothing warmth through her whole body. Like a flower needing water, like sun coming out from behind a cloud, she bathed in their intimacy, needing and clinging to it. And she glowed. That kiss. It didn't elicit lust. It nourished all the way to her toes and filled her with well-being. She floated and never felt more vitally alive. What was that?

They pulled apart a little, so that the kiss lingered in the air between them, and elation pulsed through Millie even though they no longer touched.

She opened her eyes and looked up at Charlotte, her friend and the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen.

"See," Charlotte said, quietly, her smile a host of complexity.

All kinds of things haunted that smile. Sadness at what they'd never had, perhaps. Or maybe the years apart they'd lost as friends. Contentment at where they stood now.

Then her smile broadened. "I'm really OK with this, Millie."

Charlotte might be, but Millie was lost for words.

A face appeared over Charlotte's shoulder. It wasn't an amiable one. Olivia washed away any sense of well-being and a chill settled inside her.

“I need to go,” Millie said.

“We should leave too,” Olivia added, the edge in her voice freezing Millie further. “Charlotte?”

“Yes, I’m fine to go now.”

Olivia all but pushed her through the door into the quiet lane.

“That taxi is mine,” Olivia said, pointing up the road towards the main street. “I’ll give you both a lift.” She aimed the offer at Millie.

“I have my bike,” Millie said.

“Pick it up tomorrow. You said yourself, it’s not safe to ride home in your state.”

Stone cold sober, Millie replied, “But you live in the opposite direction, and—”

“I insist.”

Shit.

Charlotte sat squiffy in the middle of the back seat, chatting obliviously, while Millie and Olivia remained rigid on either side, the short ride to Charlotte’s flat excruciating. The moment Charlotte left, car door shut and engine running, Olivia turned with eyes wide and jaw set in fury.

“What are you doing?” Olivia hadn’t sworn, but her tone added the expletives.

Millie stared at the headrest of the front seat. She remained silent, not purely out of reluctance to speak to Olivia. Really, what was she doing? What was happening to her?

“Are you bi now?” Olivia pressed.

She opened her mouth, a turmoil of emotions swirling inside. Annoyed at Olivia’s question. Confused how she’d come to feel this way towards Charlotte. Afraid she’d lose her friend, but also of the changes inside her, all too new and raw to withstand this interrogation.

“That’s quite an intrusive question—”

“Don’t you dare play verbal games with me. When it comes to Charlotte, I will ask you every question necessary. Are you attracted to women?”

“Yes,” Millie said.

“And are you attracted to Charlotte?” Olivia snapped.

Millie breathed in deep. “Yes.”

They fell silent, both taking in the admission.

It felt huge in the back of the car, cloaked in darkness, the glow of Oxford buildings moving past the windows like ghosts, wheels rolling on tarmac and the regular bump of seams in the road the only sound. Millie’s heart thudded, exposed in a single evening to a stranger at the bar then defending herself against her old adversary.

Olivia sat back in her seat and massaged her brow with her long fingers. “You can’t do this to her.”

“I know,” Millie said, quietly.

Olivia twitched and stared at her, perhaps expecting an argument, or denial, some resistance at least.

“What the hell are you doing, Millie?” she said, more in confusion this time.

“I didn’t mean for this. To feel...”

Anything like this. Not the burning attraction. Not to be drawn to Charlotte like no-one else. Not to kiss her in a way she’d never kissed anyone.

“Yes, I wanted to be friends again.” More than Olivia would understand. “But that is all.”

“This not-dating-anymore business,” Olivia said, sharper again. “Is this all part of a scheme to get Charlotte?”

“No, it’s not,” Millie said firmly this time. That’s all she’d say to Olivia about that. She didn’t owe her anything there.

“You can’t sleep with her,” Olivia said, the ferocity back.

Millie sat paralysed in her seat.

“You must not sleep with her. Do you hear me?”

Millie dropped her head. “I hear you.”

“Do you promise not to sleep with her? Not once. Because it would wreck her.”

“Yes,” Millie whispered. “I swear.”

“I mean it,” Olivia came as close to shouting as she ever did. “You didn’t see her after university. You don’t know what it was like.”

Millie physically flinched. Because Charlotte was the one to walk away, and so resolutely that she imagined her friend marching on with life. Perhaps she hadn’t considered an alternative because she couldn’t bear imagining Charlotte

turning the corner out of sight after the fury had burned itself out.

She had watched Charlotte leave the party on the top floor of Magdalen college, after finding Millie playing around with a woman. She'd stared after Charlotte, sick that her best friend in the world walked out.

She would never have walked away from Charlotte, so it had been unthinkable that Charlotte could. For a long time, Millie reassured herself it was yet another case of sex getting in the way of life and relationships. Why couldn't people deal with it as a basic, ordinary need, and little to do with anything else.

"What happened?" Millie said, quietly.

"The light went out of her. She took a long time to bounce back. In fact, it's only recently I've seen her truly happy again. I won't exaggerate. Of course, she had girlfriends and pleasant times, but always more subdued."

Millie wanted to say everything became complicated after university, but a part of her inside, a guilty part, told her that wasn't the cause. Was she beginning to understand the complexity and depth of Charlotte's feelings for her, so different from hers at the time, or towards anyone?

"So," Olivia continued, "I put up with you, because you seem genuinely supportive and good for her. But don't you dare fuck this up." Olivia glared at her. "Because even if it's more than lust and sex, I don't for a second believe you've changed. And you would move on, and leave Charlotte in the wreckage, quicker than you can say 'nice six pack'."



It hit home, reinforcing everything she believed about herself. Olivia's vehemence and blunt words startled her, but she didn't disagree. Neither was she shamed by it. It was a prevalent part of human nature. Millie saw it all the time. Physical attraction and interest waned and exposed the couples who lacked a foundation underneath. There were many, in her experience.

She'd found her foundation in Charlotte and separated out the sex. Why the hell did she have to mess it up now, with whatever this tsunami of feelings was?

"Olivia, I promise." Millie turned to face her. "I don't want to see her hurt."

Although, god knows what it would do to Millie. She hadn't appreciated that until now, and Olivia clearly thought her incapable of being hurt. But Millie's response to Charlotte had her surprised.

"Don't lead her on in any way, shape or form, whatsoever."

Millie nodded, the movement slight. "I promise I won't even flirt with Charlotte."

Olivia drew back her head. "Well... Good." She crossed her legs and laid her hands neatly on the thigh. "Good."

Millie continued to watch her.

"I expected," Olivia raised her eyebrows, "more snark at least. I'm grateful you've agreed so quickly." Olivia still regarded her though, tilting her head and watching with a side

eye. “Have your feelings changed towards her? Is this more than sex?”

Millie paused. “Olivia, I promised. I meant it.”

“But have they?”

The taxi drew up outside Virginia’s house. She thanked the driver and opened the car door.

“Millie,” Olivia called out. “You didn’t answer.”

“It doesn’t matter what I feel. I won’t let anything show with Charlotte.”

She didn’t look back. She didn’t want Olivia to see any of the feelings she couldn’t hide or gain a full understanding. Because Millie wasn’t sure of it herself.

Neither said goodnight.

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## Chapter 33

“Congratulations, gorgeous!”

Charlotte looked up to find Millie walking through the door into her office and beaming. Sunshine shone through the window, lighting up Millie’s golden hair and glowing face. On the cusp of spring, the weather flipped between seasons, freezing some mornings and T-shirt weather by afternoon, and she sat with shirt sleeves up, baking in the window today.

Millie placed a white cake box on Charlotte’s desk and leant down. Millie’s soft curls tickled Charlotte’s cheek, followed by the delight of Millie’s face against hers. Then the softest lips known to humankind lovingly graced her skin. She closed her eyes, a habit by now, because why not appreciate a beautiful woman’s lips caressing her cheek.

“Congratulations on your permanent position,” Millie murmured beside her ear.

Charlotte smiled. She smiled a lot. Partly out of hysterical relief at passing her probation period, with her move to her tiny, phenomenally expensive house imminent. And it was spring at last. And here was lovely Millie with cake.

“Thank you,” Charlotte said, her face flushing with the warmth of spring sunshine.

“I can’t stay,” Millie said. “I’m cutting it a bit flipping fine for afternoon appointments. But I wanted to drop you off a treat.”

“See you after work?”

“I’ll drag you away from your desk.” Millie blew her a kiss, and hurried out of the room, hips swaying and gold curls bouncing.

She smiled as Millie disappeared down the stairs and stared at the space long after her friend had gone. Millie had a softer quality to her of late. Was this the more mature version that she was beginning to appreciate? She hoped so, because she liked it, a lot. Millie could make her laugh, open her eyes to a different point of view, frustrate the hell out of her. But lately, Charlotte found herself pausing, simply being with Millie and letting the world slow. She realised she was happy in a way the word content didn’t seem to cover.

Another figure inhabited the doorway. “You look happy.”

Liz, the office manager, came into focus and Charlotte took a moment to come back down to earth.

“I have cake!” she said, grinning.

“Is that all it takes for a smile that big?” Liz chuckled.

“And I’ve passed my probation.”

And Richard was away.

“The office is quiet,” she offered instead.

“I thought so too,” Liz replied. She wandered into the room and sat opposite Charlotte. “Which is why now might be a good time to organise the annual client dinner. Without disturbances.” Liz raised her eyebrows and widened her eyes so the white made a clear frame to her brown irises.

“Right,” Charlotte said.

Liz may as well have said “nudge-nudge, wink-wink”. But Charlotte admitted she was sometimes slow on the uptake and needed the lack of subtlety.

“Gotcha,” Charlotte said with a grin. “Because we women can take care of the mundane details.”

“And that’s quicker when someone isn’t jumping in to take the credit.”

Yes, they were definitely talking about Richard.

“We need to finalise the client list today,” Liz continued. “Here’s a print-out of top fee-payers and last year’s budget.” The office manager passed over sheets of paper. “We piggy-back on the college summer ball. After the undergraduates leave, we host our annual bash while the marquee occupies the main quad. It’s pre-dinner drinks outside, then dinner for clients and plus ones in the hall.”

“I see,” Charlotte said, flicking through the papers. “Blimey.” She stopped at the bottom of the budget sheet. “You could entertain the entire client list for that.”

The room was quiet. When she looked up, Liz regarded her with a pursed-lipped expression that could tip either way. Oh dear. It probably wasn’t appropriate to question the annual dinner at this traditional practice.

“I...”

“Are you saying it’s excessive for a small number of clients?” Liz said, evenly.

“I wouldn’t want...” Charlotte floundered.

“That we entertain the same clients year after year for an absurd amount of money?”

“I... Really?” Charlotte’s eyebrows collapsed into a puzzled frown. “It’s always the same?”

“Every single year.” Liz pursed her lips tighter.

“Oh,” Charlotte said. “But...” She flicked through the sheets again. “I might not appreciate the full cost of an event like this, but couldn’t we organise something less costly or that shows our gratitude to more clients? I mean, might these small-spenders send us more business if we engage them at the event.”

“Excellent idea,” Liz said, with an emphasis verging on comic.

Charlotte put down the list. “Is there scope for changing this?”

Liz drew her chair forward. “I’ll drop the pretence of being subtle. This event turns into a chummy get-together for Hugo and clients from way back. I argue every year that it’s a wasted opportunity but get overruled.”

“But if someone else independently came up with the idea, we might get away with it?”

Liz chuckled. “You’re much quicker on the uptake than Olivia said you’d be.”

Well thanks, Olivia.

“What did you have in mind?” Liz continued.

“Well...” Now Charlotte had done it. “Something on the scale of a summer garden party? Drinks, canapes,

entertainment too if the marquee's available?"

"Go on." Liz nodded.

"Are we giving clients a taste of Oxford? Is that Hugo's intention?"

"Everyone likes a nose around the colleges."

"Then, an Oxford garden party with dancing thrown in? A college-ball-light?"

"An event to treat clients and encourage good will towards the firm, without being excessive and frittering away money?"

Charlotte grinned.

"I'll put you in touch with Annie, the events manager at Worcester College. Have a chat with her. She can send costs through to me and I'll see how it looks."

"OK," Charlotte said.

Liz got up to leave.

"Am I risking Hugo's disapproval here?" Charlotte said.

"A little." Liz tilted her head. "Ready to take a risk, Charlotte Albright?"

Actually, yes, she was.

For the first time in years, she felt secure enough to take a chance. Supported and loved, if she tripped, Millie would help her up again, like in the past. And she was confident this was right for the firm.

"Yes." Charlotte grinned.

“Good,” Liz said, her smile even bigger. She turned, then said over her shoulder, “You’re in demand today.”

Charlotte wrinkled her nose in confusion before Liz turned sideways at the door to pass Rachel, the junior solicitor in the IPR and technology team.

“Hi,” Charlotte said, the smile genuine.

Rachel shuffled in while looking at a list, dark hair falling on either side of her face. “Sorry to bother you again.”

“You’re not bothering me,” Charlotte replied. “You’re doing your job.”

Rachel looked up, her mouth hanging open as if Charlotte had whipped the next line of her apology away.

“I know I shouldn’t need a senior checking my contracts,” Rachel said, quietly, “but would you mind doing a confidence check?”

“Of course. I like another pair of eyes if mine are more complicated than boilerplate clauses.”

Rachel hesitated. “It’s just, Richard prefers me to send contracts out without bothering him.”

Did he, indeed. Charlotte faltered, then put back her shoulders and lifted her smile. “Do you have a batch waiting for a quick check?”

“Yes, and they’re due today.”

“OK, how about you grab your laptop and we’ll blast through them,” Charlotte said, indicating the table she worked around with clients. “You can do the same for me.”



Rachel hesitated, as if checking that Charlotte joked or not. “That’d be great,” she said, a smile creeping onto the junior associate’s face. “I’ll get my things.” She started to turn. “You know, I expected you to be...” Rachel seemed to think better of it and said, “Thanks.”

She watched Rachel leave. What on earth had Richard led the junior associate to expect of her?

The thought was brief, because she had: “Cake.”

Charlotte rubbed her fingers together in anticipation before pinching the ribbons of the bow and opening the box of patisserie. She teased the flaps apart to find her favourite dessert.

“Strawberry tart,” she sighed.

She dived into the box and lifted the tart on her fingertips, delighting at the sight. A nibble on the buttery biscuit pastry broke the fluted edges. She licked at the rich crème pâtissière custard, before biting down on a refreshing strawberry.

“Mmmmmmm.” She took a second enormous bite of all three together, custard and strawberry juice slipping down her fingers so she had to lick them clean.

She held the dessert in one hand while she swiped her phone awake.

“Cake is amazing. Thank you!!!” she tapped on the screen.

She gave up with exclamation marks and switched to smileys that ran rampant across the message, because thin exclamations took too long and always became rather

disappointing. This was a cake and message that demanded smileys leaping across the screen in an effusive manner.

“A tart from a tart,” Millie replied. “Always the best.”  
Smiley face, with sticking out tongue.

Charlotte laughed and tapped, “Love you,” and send.

Sigh.

She put her feet on the desk and tucked into the patisserie, basking in sunshine and the sight of Oxford rooftops through the window. She drifted in a daydream and thought about Millie. She even let herself dwell on that New Year’s kiss. Once in a while, over the past few weeks, she’d let herself relive it. That perfectly respectable New Year’s kiss. An acceptable kiss between close friends. The one that made her think of sunshine, butterflies and flowers.

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## Chapter 34

Time and strategies were Millie's friends, as she tried to keep control around Charlotte. It was new, this need for restraint. She never held back with men. If she'd been attracted, then into bed she hopped, and there were plenty more when she lost interest.

Her libido had woken from dormancy, probably a healthy sign, but did it bloody have to be for this one, forbidden human being? This one woman, who she could not, under any circumstance, sleep with. This was her best friend in the world, and her body lit up every time Charlotte was in the room.

But Millie had managed.

Admittedly, she turned warm and fuzzy when Charlotte came near, and yes, she gazed too long at Charlotte's beautiful eyes, and those full lips drew her in. It was a relief that intelligent Charlotte was none too clever at spotting people besotted with her. And eagle-eyed Olivia always hovered, ready to pour on cold water.

But it wasn't easy. That was the trouble with tactile best friends, they couldn't be avoided. And if Charlotte touched her unexpectedly, she flushed with unequivocal arousal.

But this was under control, Millie told herself, as she chained her bike to railings beneath the trees in Hinksey Park, South Oxford.

"You've got this," she said.

She shivered under the canopy of conifers. Spring still bit in the shade while it burned in the sun. But she wasn't skipping sunny spring days to be pissed on with rain all British summer. And she jogged to the lido entrance and the 1930s outdoor swimming pool.

She changed in the building, stepped out poolside into sun and shaded her eyes with her hand. She scanned the butterfly shape of heated water and around the edges to a grassy area with trees behind.

A robed Olivia reclined on a lounge. Millie slumped.

Olivia waved from the grassy area on the other side of the pool with a similar level of enthusiasm.

Millie shook her shoulders, stuck out her chest and sashayed around the pool to join her.

“Morning, Olivia.” She grinned.

Olivia put down a magazine on her lap and peered over the top of large sunglasses. “Morning, Millie.”

Olivia didn't bother with anything like fake enthusiasm, so Millie persisted with, “What a beautiful day. Did you save me and Charlotte a lounge each with you in the middle?” Olivia had drawn one up on either side. “How thoughtful.”

She tried not to laugh at Olivia's divisive arrangement for separating them. But it was probably a good plan.

Millie sloughed off her towelling robe and lay it on the lounge, which baked in the late morning sun risen above the trees.

Olivia tutted.

“What?” Millie said, shuffling her bottom onto her robe and lounge.

“This is what you wear to swim?” Olivia stuck out her arm and gestured up and down from Millie’s bust to her bottom.

Millie peered at her own admittedly generous boobs, perfectly contained in a red bikini top.

“Yeah. What’s wrong with it?”

“Did you ask for the tiniest costume in the shop?”

“Well, what are you wearing?”

She swept her gaze down Olivia’s elegant body in full swimsuit, the coverage average, but Millie couldn’t help saying, “Shall I request a cart be drawn into the pool to protect your modesty, while you submerge into the water?”

Olivia’s mouth pursed in her most irritated cat’s bum impression.

Millie added, “I’m sure they have Victorian modesty contraptions at this historic establishment.”

“I’m not a prude. Just appropriate.”

But Millie stopped listening, because she stood without thinking at the sight of Charlotte arriving. Her friend sauntered around the pool, hips swaying, long legs appearing for brief moments from beneath her white towelling robe. The sun shimmered on reds in her mahogany hair. Her olive skin glowed and her smile...well, that took Millie’s breath away.

That generous smile spoke of a loving person inside. It glowed with good intentions, the kind that washed away any ill and made people feel like they shone too. It spread euphoria through a crowd. Turned a bad day good. Blew stormy clouds from the sky. And her cheeks ached, beaming at her friend.

“Millie,” Olivia snapped. “For the love of—”

“Keep your knickers on, Olivia,” Millie said with a laugh, one that didn’t even convince herself. She forced her eyes away from Charlotte. “I won’t leap on her at a public lido.”

“Make sure you don’t.”

“I told you,” Millie said, the exuberance of seeing Charlotte still lifting her. “I’ll never let anything happen.”

“Does that mean you’re past this attraction?”

But Charlotte arrived and gazed at Millie.

They stood close.

“Hi,” Charlotte said, her smile shining even brighter, if that was possible. “You look amazing Millie. I shouldn’t be surprised with all the exercise you do, but I hadn’t appreciated how fit you’d become.”

“Thanks. You are...” her mouth insisted on rising again. Maybe because she was shorter than Charlotte, or it was the first warmth of spring, but she floated up on her toes. “Hi,” she said, not really knowing where she stood or what she said.

“Morning, Charlotte,” Olivia snapped, with an irritated flick of her magazine.

“Hi, Olivia,” Charlotte said, while still gazing into Millie’s eyes.

“For the...” Olivia’s mutter faded.

“Have...have you been here long?” Millie asked, dozy and melting into Charlotte’s dark eyes.

“A few minutes,” Charlotte murmured, “while I changed.”

“Mmmm,” Millie said, mirroring Charlotte’s smile.

“I’ve reserved you a sun lounger.” Millie registered Olivia grumbling faintly in the background. “Why don’t you sit down.”

At the edge of Millie’s vision, Olivia patted the distant lounger, but Charlotte’s gaze didn’t waver and neither did Millie’s.

“Good idea,” Charlotte said.

Charlotte descended and Millie mirrored her movement, unable to part from that smile. Until Charlotte sat straight down on Olivia’s feet, to an uncharacteristic squeak from the latter.

“Are you, um, ready to move into your house next weekend?” Millie said, her tongue fluffing the words.

“I’m so excited.” Charlotte leant forward so their knees almost touched. “My things from storage are coming on Friday. They’re going to dump everything in the spare room, apart from my bed, sofa downstairs and kitchen stuff. Then Saturday—”

“We paint,” Millie finished for her, Charlotte’s infectious enthusiasm intoxicating.

“Mum and Olivia are coming too.”

Of course Olivia would insist on being present, but Millie was too happy to roll her eyes or check if Olivia sent a withering look.

“The bedroom’s in good shape,” Charlotte continued. “I think Barbara’s son stripped it and painted a couple of years ago. I want to start in the main room downstairs and clean and decorate while everyone’s there.”

“Good plan,” Millie murmured.

“It’s finally here.” Charlotte reached out and squeezed Millie’s hands. “My own place and my stuff back.” Charlotte sighed and looked distant, as if trying to spot her belongings travelling to Oxford. “Gosh, it’s warm today,” she said, distracted. Charlotte stood up, unwrapped her robe and let it fall on the lounge in a glowing white heap.

“For goodness sake,” Olivia said.

What was Olivia moaning about now? Was she that territorial about her lounge? Then, sweet fucking dyke on a bike, it was obvious the next moment.

Charlotte in a swimsuit.

Yes, she’d noted before how Charlotte had matured and shaped her dresses, but she hadn’t appreciated what lay beneath. Oh wow.

Millie couldn’t take her eyes off the curving lines of hips in front of her face and the smooth olive thighs revealed



by Charlotte's high-leg black bikini bottoms. Her gaze lingered where the material dipped between Charlotte's legs, the skimpy cut of swimwear way too suggestive for her imagination. Shit. She was staring. She jerked her head up.

But the rest of Charlotte's body was relentless. The smooth tummy rounded in a beautiful cushion. The dip and lip at the top of her belly button. The faint swirl inside that Millie recognised from lying on beaches as late teens. A patch beside it, a shade darker, that drew her eye and made her fingers twitch, wanting to reach out to touch. It was like a small pool of sweet milky coffee and she imagined curling out her tongue and lapping it up.

Oh. That was vivid.

Millie could almost taste Charlotte's belly on her tongue, a mix of her scent and the salt of a hot body. Vivid. Compelling. And warming. Millie squirmed in her seat. And different.

And she stared, very, very obviously.

In panic, she shot her gaze higher, but again found no relief.

Breasts.

Voluptuous, shapely, breasts. Magnetic blooming bounties of bosomness.

Where the hell had Charlotte's ample chest come from? Millie didn't remember that from summer holidays at nineteen. The luscious curve, the fullness cradled on the outside by sloping, soft, black material, the roundness so appealing she could feel them imagined in her palms. In the

middle, Charlotte's generous cleavage and curving mounds were naked to the sun. Millie stifled a groan.

Oh fuck. When did Charlotte get so sexy? It's like her whole body lured Millie in. Charlotte stood, hands on hips, staring at the sky. She had grown into herself, got comfortable with her body. And it suited her. Millie swallowed. Oh my god, it suited her.

"Can you believe this weather?" Charlotte said, shading the sun from her eyes.

No Millie could not believe this frigging weather, or this frigging heat when Charlotte was near.

Every time she thought this crush was under control, Charlotte would reveal, literally in this case, another side she found even more attractive. Her friend had kept that body under wraps autumn and winter, but it was coming out for spring. A woman's body had never done this to Millie. For crying out loud, there were half naked people lying everywhere. So why the hell did Charlotte affect her like this?

It wasn't like Millie hadn't seen naked women before. She definitely wasn't naïve about attraction and sex. Between conversations with many lovers, watching their porn videos and rolling her eyes at the male gaze, changing rooms, communal showers, holidaying with friends, she wasn't ignorant about women's bodies at all. So why did she react like this to Charlotte now?

Millie had slept with who knows how many men. She honestly had no idea and didn't care. But suddenly she was highly susceptible to this whole new body type. And she wanted to explore. What would it be like to stroke her fingers

down Charlotte's cleavage? To trail down the undulations of her tummy, between her lips, slide a finger in her moisture, while taking Charlotte's hot salty breast in her mouth.

Her breath juddered.

"Perhaps," a voice of reason and irritation snapped, "you should put on sunscreen?"

"Good idea," Charlotte replied to Olivia.

Charlotte stepped out of her sight to dip into a bag and Millie blinked. How long had she held her breath and stared wide-eyed? She didn't dare catch Olivia's gaze. Her physical reaction was humiliatingly obvious. Millie shuffled round on her bottom to face the pool and away from scrutiny. Perhaps she should lie down and stare resolutely at the blue sky.

Charlotte stood up and said, "I think I'll have a swim first, but you should have some, Millie. Here."

A bottle of sun cream appeared in her vision. She blinked coming to and reached out for a handful of lotion that Charlotte squeezed in a cool drop in her palm.

"Thank you," she said, a strangled, pathetic, gurgle of a response.

She needed to get a grip.

And Charlotte was right. As the palest of the three, Millie would burn quickly. She smeared it onto her legs, a useful chilling distraction from Charlotte's presence. She felt her close by though. Charlotte's hips brushed against her arm, a soft delectable graze, as she bent down to squeeze more lotion. Then Charlotte's breasts dipped onto Millie's shoulder

a moment, a cushioned kiss of a touch, and Millie melted with a quiet groan.

She couldn't remember anyone having this effect on her. What was it? The novelty of receptiveness to a woman? That new possibilities and exotic feasts of delight opened before her? That it was absolutely forbidden with Charlotte?

The gentle nudges of Charlotte's body were so tantalising, Millie wanted to turn and bury her head in her chest.

"I'll do your back," Charlotte said.

"What?" Millie gasped.

That was a bad idea. But before she could say anything else, Charlotte stretched one leg over the lounge, straddled behind and enveloped Millie in warm, utterly delectable thighs. Her body flipped into alert, surrounded by generous, cushioned limbs. She didn't even know she craved that, but it was sensational.

She should say something. She should apply her own lotion. Anything.

Millie opened her mouth and put out a hand, but all she found was Charlotte's tender thigh in her palm. Her thumb dipped where Charlotte's skin lay softest and the noise Millie made wasn't a plea to stop.

"Don't worry," Charlotte leant forward and murmured in her ear. "I'll warm it," she said, completely misunderstanding Millie's reaction.

Charlotte and her bloody obliviousness.

Millie opened her mouth again, but Charlotte's breasts stroked lightly on Millie's back so that a thrill quivered all the way up her neck and snatched speech from her lips.

Oh fuck. Her head spun in Charlotte's intimate presence. What the hell would touching her do?

"So," Olivia snapped. "Your mother's visiting next weekend?"

Charlotte hesitated at the sobering intervention. And honestly, Millie sighed with relief at Olivia's obstruction.

"She is," Charlotte said. "She's house-hunting and staying the weekend at a hotel."

Charlotte smoothed the cream on Millie's shoulders, the movement firm and absent-minded. A reprieve. Millie concentrated on the rippling waters of the pool, as Charlotte chatted and worked the cream into her shoulders.

"Goodness, you're tense," Charlotte said by her ear.

Charlotte circled her thumbs into the pads of muscle at the base of Millie's neck and Millie tried to relax.

"That's better," Charlotte said, and her voice turned away to continue conversation with Olivia.

Relax. Relax. Relax. She stared at the blue waters. Charlotte's thumbs circled behind her neck, and she felt them work magic with her head lolling forward. She was coping. This was fine.

But as Charlotte turned her attention to Millie's shoulder blades, her fingers dipped lightly around the sides of Millie's breasts and beneath the edges of her bikini. Every

innocent movement of Charlotte's thumbs had its mirror in her fingers, and massaged Millie's breasts together.

She closed her eyes. Her body ached. She yearned for Charlotte's hands to wander, to cup her breasts, massage them in great handfuls, slip oily fingers over her nipples and pinch them between finger and thumb.

"How about a drink?" Olivia's voice cut through the air.

"Great idea," Charlotte said, halting.

"What would you like?" Olivia snapped urgently.

"Oh. I don't know."

Charlotte dropped her hands in thought. Right into Millie's lap.

Soft, slick fingers rested on her thighs, dipping between her legs, so that she pulsed with expectation.

"I'll get you *both* something," Olivia said pointedly.

Millie couldn't speak or even nod to communicate thanks. Whatever they talked about, Charlotte absently continued while the shadow of Olivia flitted past Millie's closed eyes and disappeared.

"I'll go with pale and light," Charlotte said over Millie's shoulder. "A subtle shade for downstairs, bright but easy on the eye."

What the fuck was Charlotte talking about? How was Millie meant to follow with soft thighs surrounding her and breasts pummeling her back? Charlotte must be lost in thought, because she stroked back and forth along her thighs,

rubbing, squeezing, as if subconsciously continuing a massage she'd forgotten.

It was unbearable. Deliciously unbearable. Surrounded by this tall sexy woman, who kneaded and tugged at her thighs. The rhythm and movement teased at Millie where she swelled.

“Of course, the bedroom will follow,” Charlotte said, becoming lost in thought.

Charlotte slumped forward to lean on her, and with the movement, fingers dipped right between Millie's legs, so thumbs rested on the edge of her bikini bottoms.

For Christ sakes Charlotte. That was. That. Nyuh. That was an inch away from her clit. Oh fuck. Shallow breaths. Shallow breaths. She tried not to show her reaction.

She was going to pass out. There was not enough blood in her head so if she leapt up, she'd fall straight over. She was paralysed, consumed with lust, under the most oblivious of seductions. In Millie's many, many encounters, none touched Charlotte's for complete lack of finesse and ineptitude. But here Millie was, in paroxysms of arousal.

Two thoughts. So loud. “Don't move” and yet also “touch me!”. And the urge. That incredible urge to thrust towards Charlotte's fingers. She poised between the two opposing needs, on an edge in so many ways. A single movement would caress her centre and have her shouting out her secret attraction to the whole of South Oxford.

“Drink!” a sharp voice said, cutting through the haze.

Ice cubes clinked against glass in front of Millie's face. Her eyes shot open to a steamed tumbler of sparkling water and a slender brown arm reaching all the way back to a stern stare from Olivia.

"Thanks," Millie gurgled.

"Just what I need. Thank you, Olivia," Charlotte said behind her.

Millie glugged so fast, icy liquid chilled down her chest, into her stomach and she wished it lower.

"Right, you're done," Charlotte said. She rested her hands on Millie's shoulder and stood up. "I'm going for a quick dip." And Charlotte wiped her hands over her arms and strode towards the pool.

Millie stared ahead, watching her friend with Amazonian legs, curving hips and breasts to sell your soul for, as Charlotte swayed to the water's edge, submerged in the water and swam into the distance.

Good.

Fucking.

God.

Never had a seduction been so effective and unintended. Charlotte and her bloody distracted nature. What a powerful combination ignorant seductress and queer newb made. But Millie had been so thoroughly aroused with those tender agitations that she'd almost cried out, and moist tenderness ached and soaked between her legs.



Millie gulped and put her glass on the lawn. She didn't dare look at Olivia, although from the corner of her eye, she reclined on the lounge, sunglasses on and magazine open.

Could Olivia have missed her reaction? Millie had faced away and was almost certain she hadn't groaned. Almost. Although the scorching heat on her cheeks and two very perky nipples gave a massive clue.

Olivia cleared her throat at last.

Millie turned, agonisingly slowly. "Yes?" she said, the tremulous nonchalance hiding nothing.

Olivia pinched her glasses down her nose and looked over the top edges. "Need something waterproof to sit on?"

And Millie almost died.

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## Chapter 35

“Wait!” Millie said.

Charlotte paused, key in the front door of her new house, while Millie put down the two tins of paint they’d bought with a clatter on the pavement.

Charlotte had been vacillating between Wimborne White and pale Pavilion Blue, when Millie muttered, “you have my heart and I’d follow you to the ends of the earth, but for the love of Christ, can we get out of B&Q,” and Millie had hauled two tins of blue off the shelves.

This only cemented white in Charlotte’s mind and she’d squawked desperately after Millie. Her friend had backtracked with the biggest grin on her face. “Knew that would make your mind up.” And she grabbed Wimborne White instead and sashayed off to the counter.

“Photo,” Millie now said, holding up her phone. “Say, ‘I’ve got a tiny, cute house’.”

Charlotte laughed, with a patter of palpitations in her chest. “I have a hideously expensive, tiny, cute house,” and she pushed the key in and opened the door.

She stepped into the house, Millie at her side, shoes thudding on bare floorboards and echoing around the empty space. Carpets were stripped and all furniture gone from the two original downstairs rooms knocked into one long space in recent years.

She stopped and stared. It smelled like an empty house too, a bit damp and musty, but it was Charlotte’s for as long as she wanted.

“Oh my god,” she murmured.

“Congratulations, home-owner.” Millie took her arm and hugged it.

Charlotte couldn't speak, and she stared at the long bare walls. At the sun beaming through the double doors into the back garden. The small galley kitchen that lay through a right doorway into the narrow extension. Steep stairs leading up from halfway down the room. All hers.

Millie nudged her and whispered, “Tell me if you're going to have a panic attack.”

“I'm not panicking,” she said. “Not yet anyway.”

Millie beamed up at her. “It's going to be beautiful.”

She hoped so. Then she smiled, because Millie was here. Wonderful Millie. “Thank you,” Charlotte said.

“What for?”

“Thank you for coming today.”

“Of course,” Millie said. “You'd do the same for me.”

“Yes, I would. And I will.”

“So, what's the plan, sweet cheeks?”

Charlotte chuckled. At some point, Millie stopped calling her ‘lanky’ and instead used all kinds of endearments. And she looked at Charlotte with that soft expression and murmured in rolling intonations. Sigh. It was nice.

“Plan?” Millie said.

“Right,” Charlotte said, switching on her brain. Plan. “I've a bed and sofa due for delivery this morning, then my

things from storage later, so I wanted to paint while I wait.”

“OK,” Millie said. “On it.”

Rollers, brushes, tins of paint, step stools and sheets were spread on the floor in minutes. Millie peeled off her clothes down to shorts and a tight T-shirt, cropped low on the chest and high on the arms to show toned shoulders.

“Do you want to do edges while I roller?”

Charlotte gazed at Millie’s arms, the biceps curving in soft mounds as she offered up a brush.

“Mmmm,” Charlotte said.

Millie fortunately took that as a yes. “OK, I’ll start in this corner while you do the edges there?”

Millie stretched around her and pointed at the window onto the street. Her gaze didn’t follow where Millie indicated because it stuck on a view of fit arms and cleavage. How did Millie manage to be curvy and toned at the same time? She didn’t know and hadn’t fully appreciated it until recently.

“Mmmm,” Charlotte said again.

She watched Millie’s bottom sway to the back door where her friend started to paint. The view was good. Charlotte was treated to peeks of Millie’s midriff while she stretched high to paint the ceiling with a long-handled roller. Her friend almost had a six pack, Charlotte realised, and her fingers twitched wanting to touch Millie’s stomach. Just as tempting were wonderful shoulders above her fantastic chest, which had always been signature Millie.

The sight of Millie's body had stopped Charlotte in her tracks at the swimming pool. She'd taken a moment before approaching Millie and Olivia. Yes, they were friends, but she was only human. She took a deep breath, needing another human moment, before dipping her brush into the tin and starting to paint.

Charlotte was proud of her behaviour at the lido. She'd managed to collect herself, and offered to oil Millie, like they used to on holiday in summer. Admittedly, she'd had to chant "she's your friend" repeatedly at one point, then got distracted worrying about the house. Easy. She was very proud of herself.

Then that night, she had the filthiest dream about sex with a hockey team piled up in a sauna. She didn't need to look far for its inspiration. While the players did have faces, they were vague in a dream-like way, but all had a familiar body type.

She sighed, with another glance at her friend. She had to admit, that being attracted to Millie was likely a life-long affliction, which she needed to get used to. Again.

She felt the strong tug of it today though, constantly peeping round, unable to tear her eyes away from the way Millie moved. Sometimes Millie caught her, and Charlotte would flush pink.

"Just...just...seeing how you are doing?"

"Yes," Millie would say. "Me too." Her face also flushed, probably from the exertion of painting. And they carried on.

They were about to cross halfway along the wall when Charlotte gave up the pretence and simply watched Millie from high on her step. Millie's shoulders worked the roller. Her full breasts undulated in her T-shirt. Her tanned midriff peeped from beneath the material, with a line running down the centre of her toned belly. Her generous, curving hips and bum swayed. It was mesmerising and Charlotte watched in a daze.

Millie's eyes caught hers and she smiled. "You coming down? To cross over?"

Charlotte stepped onto the floor, paint brush in one hand and reaching out with the other for balance. She didn't need a steadying hand, but Millie was there, and she found herself curling fingers over Millie's firm round shoulders and stepping into her space.

Her chest gently nudged into Millie's, the fullness of Millie's breasts suddenly tangible against hers. It was a momentary physical connection, but a delicious lasting sensation. They parted a fraction when she stood up straight. The space between them held a warmth and her whole body wished for that contact again.

She remained with a hand on Millie's shoulders, the shape of her friend vivid and intimately human beneath her fingers. The compulsion to stroke along Millie's shoulders was powerful. To caress the rise of her neck, run her fingers through soft curls and gently tug a great handful so Millie would close her eyes with rapture and open her mouth to receive a kiss.

“Hello you,” Millie murmured, those soft rolling intonations luring her in.

Charlotte blinked twice to make sure she hadn't moved.

How beautiful Millie looked. She had that soft quality again today as she gazed up. Her smile never lost its potential for trouble, but Charlotte couldn't remember it so open and full of regard before. Perhaps they were growing up. Perhaps it was the increasing ease together. But there was something compelling that Charlotte hadn't felt before, not even when they were first friends. She could gaze at Millie like this for hours.

A sharp tap on glass grabbed her attention and pulled her gaze towards the window.

“Hello, darling!”

Her mother waved through the window from the street. Olivia stood beside her, arms crossed and scowling.

“Could you let us in?” Nicola projected, as if politely demanding in court.

“Yes, erm, yes,” Charlotte stuttered, with her arm still around Millie's shoulder.

Her eyes met Olivia's. For a moment she thought Olivia would literally wither them both with her gaze. Olivia shook her head, rolled her eyes and emitted a sigh that, even if Charlotte couldn't hear it through the glass, echoed guiltily in her head.

“Right,” she said.

“Right,” Millie repeated.

Charlotte took a step back with a flush of embarrassment erupting on her cheeks. She didn't entertain it for too long because her mother was here. Nicola Albright KC.

She took a deep breath and braced herself. Because no matter how far Charlotte came in the world, it would never be far enough for her mother. Criticism was waiting. It would be delivered in the politest way, but it would be forthcoming, because how could Charlotte live up to Nicola Albright and perfect sister Bryony.

She looked at Millie whose mischievous eyes sparkled. Millie put back her shoulders, as if encouraging Charlotte to do the same. It drew on all their conversations. Of course, Charlotte wouldn't live up to Nicola and Bryony, because why should she? Why should they set the aims and standards for Charlotte to abide by? Because they wouldn't live up to hers. They were all different people.

And it settled Charlotte again. Here she was, in her favourite city, best friend at her side, with a career somewhere in the vicinity of the right tracks and a roof over her head.

She smiled at Millie, a whole conversation between them in those looks.

“You can do this,” Millie said. Yes, she understood the thoughts tumbling through Charlotte's head.

She opened the door.



## Chapter 36

Charlotte had a reprieve because:

“Oh my god, Millie!”

Her mother breezed past, arms flung in the air, and made a beeline for her friend. Nicola filled the room, she always did, by sheer force of personality, but particularly in the narrow space with her stature, confidence and greeting for Millie.

Millie didn't let her down. She screamed and they hugged each other.

“You look incredible!” Nicola said, holding the shorter woman at arm's length. “What have you been doing? Do you lift men for a hobby now, instead of sleeping with them?”

Something rippled across Millie's features, which Charlotte couldn't process in time, before Millie threw back her shoulders, shook her curls and beamed.

“Talk about incredible. Look at you,” Millie said. “When I bumped into you on Beaumont Street, I didn't mention how I love your hair like this,” Millie said, teasing Nicola's hair through her fingers. “These streaks of grey really set it off. Mature, classy and gorgeous.”

“Thank you, Millie!” Charlotte's mother said. “Come here.” She took Millie's arm. “We must catch up properly this time.”

The two sat on stools and Millie played with ribbons of Nicola's hair. Millie gushed about her appearance, in the way straight girls sometimes did and Charlotte never dared. Not

with anyone she knew casually, out of fear they'd think she fancied them.

Nicola, still enamoured with Millie's physique, stroked and squeezed her friend's shoulders. Charlotte thought it indecent, frankly, but Millie possessed the chutzpah to carry it off. Then Charlotte blushed, because she'd done the same at the swimming pool, further proof she should never attempt straight-girl gushing like this.

It was odd how Nicola always took to Millie. Granted, Millie was ferociously clever, but they seemed opposite in outlook and background.

Olivia cleared her throat next to her. When she turned, her scowling friend regarded her with a mix of impatience and incomprehension.

"Well, shall we decorate?" Olivia said, pinching her lips with raised hands in the air, a bright yellow, perfectly fitted Marigold glove on each.

The sight was so ridiculously Olivia, Charlotte had to laugh. Look at them, standing stiffly side by side, while Millie and her mother nattered away.

"Do we hug enough?" Charlotte said.

Was Millie right, and they were hopelessly repressed grammar-school girls?

"We have perfectly appropriate physical contact," Olivia retorted.

"Do we though?"

“Yes. You have admirable respect for personal space.” Olivia smiled and patted her on the shoulder. “Now, shall we decorate?” Olivia stretched a glove and snapped it into place.

“Yes, please.” Charlotte grinned. “I’d be grateful if we finished a coat of paint before the furniture arrives.”

Which they managed. Olivia painted with frenetic efficiency. Whatever caused the irritation clearly fuelled the onslaught. Best not to ask after the source. Charlotte found this best over the years.

At one point, she caught Olivia muttering, “I give up. They are grown women. It’s not like anyone ever listened to me about these things anyway.”

And Charlotte dutifully neither listened nor asked further questions.

Her belongings from storage arrived and were piled into the spare bedroom. Two small sofas from Ikea slotted through the door and she arranged them to make the sides of a lounge area around her TV, with a view through the back door.

Millie and Nicola came over all butch and insisted on assembling the bed. They sent her selfies from the bedroom, filtered with beards and thick muscular necks. Their favourite, from the loud laughter upstairs, was a pose back-to-back with raised biceps.

How did Millie do this? She plain flirted with her mother, always had. And for someone slow to accept Charlotte’s queerness, her mother seemed particularly susceptible to it, which was aggravating.

Mid-afternoon, Charlotte opened the door to a knock from Geeta. Olivia's mum stood on the step holding out a baking tray towards her.

“A treat for while you decorate.”

“Geeta! Thank you!” Charlotte took the tray covered with a tea towel.

“I'm binge-watching Bake Off and had to make something,” Geeta added.

Charlotte pulled back the cloth to find golden, sticky cake beneath.

“Lemon drizzle cake,” Geeta said, just as the buttery citrus scent hit Charlotte's nose.

“Ooohhh,” she moaned. “This looks amazing. You are a domestic goddess!”

She imagined Nicola bristling at the words and was glad her mother remained a safe distance away. Nicola currently chatted about family law with Olivia in the garden behind the house. But Charlotte was always grateful for Geeta in her life. Geeta was the picture of an ally to Olivia, who really didn't appreciate it, and she brought cake for goodness sake.

“Thank you.” Charlotte leaned down and hugged Geeta with her free arm. “Do you want to come in?” she said, standing straight.

“I won't keep you,” Geeta said. “You have a full house already.”

“You're very welcome to.”

“And I wouldn’t want to tread on your mother’s toes.”

Oh. Geeta had noticed her mother’s frostiness then. She wanted to reassure her. But why the hell did her mother take against Geeta? What could she say in the absence of understanding? Geeta looked at her with pursed lips, both knowing that Charlotte couldn’t honestly reassure her.

“I’d make Olivia tetchy too,” Geeta added, breaking into a grin.

“Millie and I did that already,” Charlotte replied, and they both laughed.

Geeta waved over her shoulder and walked in the direction of the river and Iffley. “I’ll call again soon!”

“Please do,” Charlotte cried.

She turned and closed the door, hugging the cake, tempted to eat it all herself.

“Looking good in here, darling,” her mother said later.

Nicola slung an arm around her shoulder and they both looked at the downstairs space, brighter for the fresh paint. The scent already shifted the house into her own instead of the previous owner’s.

“I bought new linen for the bed and a light duvet,” Nicola said, “in case you can’t easily find your own from storage.”

“Oh, thank you.” That was a surprisingly useful offer from her mother.

“I picked matching curtains. You can put them up tonight, then use them for the spare room when you have time

to choose your own scheme. I thought it might help you settle in this evening.”

“That’s really nice,” Charlotte said.

Nicola gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Let’s go and sort your bedroom, then you can crash at the end of the day.”

She stood, pleasantly surprised at her mother’s thoughtfulness. But did it come with guilt-inducing conditions and implied criticism? Apparently it didn’t, and smiling she followed Nicola up the narrow stairs.

The back bedroom was clean and empty except for the new bed. It lay perpendicular to the room so she could lie on her side and gaze through the window at the trees. The sun shone on the tiny spring leaves of the silver birches at the end of the garden.

“It’s a gorgeous little house,” Nicola said, looking out of the window.

Charlotte joined by her side. “Glad you like it. It is small, but everything costs a fortune here.”

“Gosh, don’t I know it,” Nicola breathed in. “I search every week for a nice pad, so I’m aware of the market. Eye-watering. Besides,” she smiled at her, “it’s a much cosier place than the scruffy flat we had when you were a toddler.”

It was still strange, her mother alluding to a time that Charlotte didn’t remember. She always pictured her parents at the large family home where Charlotte grew up later. She still did, by force of habit, even though her parents separated two years ago, and her mother lived permanently in a chambers’ flat. She couldn’t imagine Nicola as the child from her

grandmother's photos or anything other than the lawyer now. That several versions of the woman had existed always disoriented.

“Olivia says you've settled in well at Bentley.”

“Did she?” This was news to Charlotte. Good news though.

“She says your quiet, diligent approach is winning approval and new clients.”

Wow. Fantastic news. Charlotte puffed up with pride at her mother's words.

It was true. Her level-headed, informed approach had won respect from both technical companies that Richard almost bankrupted, the client company full of praise and the other signing as a new customer. Word had spread too, with sizeable firms switching from big solicitors for a more personal and dedicated service.

Charlotte didn't want to count her eggs though. The company event approached, which might blow up in her face both publicly and spectacularly. But she nodded. She really was pleased at her mother's approval and Olivia's high opinion.

They moved to the bed, unwrapped the bedding and spread the duvet and cover between them.

“And you're seeing lots of Millie?” Nicola said.

“I am.” Charlotte couldn't help smiling. “She's so helpful. In fact, she's been there every step of the way.”

“Helped you settle back into the city?”

“Exactly. I knew Olivia of course, but finding Millie is an unexpected bonus.”

“And she’s very practical,” Nicola continued, “as well as fabulous company.”

“Definitely,” Charlotte said, on a high.

“And my god,” Nicola said, “she looks fabulous, doesn’t she?” Said with too much gusto, as far as Charlotte was concerned.

“Yes, she does,” Charlotte replied, battling with a pillowcase.

“Dangerously so.”

An edge of warning crept into Nicola’s voice this time, and Charlotte sensed her watching. She rammed the pillow into a case, silently cursing her mother’s conversation and the bedding.

“I can never do these,” Charlotte muttered. “Inside out and pull over the top, or stuff it in, neither way seems—”

“I see the way you look at her,” Nicola said.

She stopped and dropped the mangled pillow onto the bed. When she lifted her gaze to meet Nicola’s, the unwavering accusation was written plainly on her mother’s features.

Nicola must have caught them through the window, while Charlotte held Millie’s shoulder. It was so unfair. One lustful look in months. Apart from admiring Millie’s body at the pool. And the sex dream inspired by said body. But still, so unfair.



“Millie’s...” Charlotte breathed out, “...still attractive. I can’t deny that.”

“There’s being attractive, and there’s being irresistibly attracted.”

Toned and ripped, or curvy and soft, Charlotte couldn’t imagine not finding Millie attractive, no matter how her body changed. It was Millie. She exuded sex appeal. Which, perhaps, was what her mother was getting at.

“That’s all though,” Charlotte said. “I’m not pining after her anymore. She’s too good a friend to lose.”

“And what about Millie?”

“What about Millie?” Charlotte wrinkled her nose.

“How does she feel?”

“Millie is...Millie.” Charlotte didn’t know what her mother was getting at. “She’s the same. Millie wanted to be friends again and I’m grateful she patiently stuck around.”

Her mother looked at her, in a way that made witnesses sweat on the stand. But Charlotte had no idea what else she hoped to reveal.

“Good,” Nicola relented. “I like her very much. Always have. But... Take care of yourself, darling, won’t you?”

Charlotte abandoned her pillow, which resembled a reject sausage. “I am. There’s nothing to worry about. How’s Bryony?”

That was desperate, reaching for her sister as a distraction. And also a mistake. Her mother didn’t need

encouragement and they finished the bed under a monologue regaling the perfection of Bryony's home, darling husband, dear children, new furnishings, their hopes and dreams for another child.

Charlotte ground her teeth by the time they turned from the room. Exiting was painful and her shoulders rose involuntarily, as if to protect from the perfection of her sibling. She vaguely registered her mother moving on to a school friend, who also had a perfect family.

Then her mother looked at Charlotte's house anew, about its suitability as a family home. And how Charlotte may not have considered it, but even though she was a lesbian, it was worth thinking about, because you never knew.

Charlotte did know. She was not getting pregnant by accident this lifetime. But she found herself stuck in an awkward position, wanting to prove the house was perfect for raising children, thank you very much, and how dare her mother say that about Charlotte's plans, while not wanting to indicate she had plans, because she didn't. It was infuriating.

"Now," her mother sighed as they gazed down the stairs.

Olivia perfected the edges of the skirting board in her Marigolds. Millie pulled covers over sofas, plumped cushions and tidied an arrangement of flowers from the garden.

Nicola pointed her finger in the air to make a point to Charlotte who stood behind her. "Millie would make a great mother." And she descended the stairs.

Charlotte's jaw dropped. She watched her mother all the way to the bottom step. A good minute ticked by staring at the same space. Another quiet hour passed while they finished painting and Nicola chatted effusively with Olivia and Millie. Thirty minutes more before Olivia removed every speck of paint to her satisfaction. Then goodbyes were said, with an unnecessarily long hug for Millie from Nicola in Charlotte's opinion.

The light outside faded when Olivia accepted a lift in Nicola's black Mercedes and both women waved elegantly from the dark windows. And it was only then, when the polished car, shining in the last rays of the setting sun, disappeared at the end of the street, that Charlotte closed the door and said:

“What the hell did that mean?”

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## Chapter 37

“But... What...” Charlotte spluttered.

Her own mother didn't think she'd make a good one?!  
She and her damn house weren't family material?!

Then guilty of swearing at her house, she stroked the wall and mumbled an apology.

Charlotte had patiently, OK not very patiently, endured her mother's spiel on how well everyone did at everything Charlotte didn't, then implied that even if she'd been a mother, she wouldn't make a good one.

Her jaw hung wide open.

Just when she gained confidence in one area of criticism, her mother magicked another out of thin air.

“I've found your kettle and some biscuits and made us a cuppa...” Millie trailed off as she walked from the kitchen into the room. “Oh.”

Millie stood, mouth still in that letter's shape, holding two mugs of tea and a packet of chocolate digestives under her arm.

Charlotte knuckled fists onto her hips, while hot irritation rose from her belly, ready to flame on her cheeks any second.

She growled, “My...”

“Mother?” Millie finished with eyebrows raised.

“Yes, my mother!”

Millie shoved a box with her foot into the middle of the lounge area, put down the mugs and biscuits, and settled herself onto a sofa.

Millie crossed her arms. “Let it out, Albright,” she said with an indulgent smile. “Tell me everything.”

“She just...just...oh,” Charlotte growled.

If only she were as articulate as her mother or Millie, then there’d be trouble. As it was, she probably looked like a kitten having a tantrum.

“The only things she values are prestigious careers, marriage and children.”

Millie nursed a mug of tea, taking a sip and nodding her head.

“All I hear is who’s getting married, who’s promoted, with the implication that I’m failing at every measure.”

“She is very heteronormative and conservative.”

“Tell me about it. I mean, these people she talks about, are any of them happy?”

“I bet they’re very pleased with themselves.”

Charlotte snortled despite herself.

“Choose your own values, sweet cheeks.” Millie grinned. “If you must measure yourself, choose standards you care about.”

“I know, but it’s difficult in the face of an onslaught of disapproval.”

“Is it disapproval so much?” Millie pondered.

“Disappointment then.” Charlotte gave Millie a look. She raised her hands to emphasise her point, because this level of frustration called for over-gesticulation. “Unrelenting decades of disappointment, despair and inevitable disillusionment.”

“Fair.” Millie grinned.

“And she’s getting worse as I get older.” Charlotte threw a hand in the air. “She’s obsessed.”

“Worse as your parents have grown apart?” Millie asked, taking another sip and raising her eyebrows.

“Yes. I mean...”

Oh. Did that have something to do with it? Why would these things mean more to her mother when she shed the artefacts herself?

“She’s probably feeling insecure,” Millie said gently.

“My mother?” Charlotte spluttered. “I’ve seen granite boulders look more insecure.”

“Really?” Millie said softly. “I imagine she’s worked incredibly hard for a career, and had a family too. My mum had to make compromises all over the place, for herself, me, her job. Nothing ever got the attention it should. We understood that life was hard and the two of us made a tight team. But your mother,” Millie shrugged, “perhaps she’s clutching at the success and stability of others, while her world changes and doesn’t feel so stable.”

Charlotte stared at Millie. She always came up with another perspective. Millie might not be right, but Charlotte couldn’t say if she was wrong either.

“God. I have no idea who my mother is.” Charlotte shook her head in disbelief.

“You only get to see one side of a person – the side they are with you. It’s trickier understanding the other sides you don’t see.”

“Especially if I don’t talk to her about them,” Charlotte murmured. Guilt suddenly pinched, for shutting herself off from her mother, to be fair often in self-defence.

“There is that,” Millie said gently.

Charlotte slumped on a stool opposite Millie and picked up her mug of tea.

Why were people so damn complicated? She huffed into her tea, a hot splash landing on her lip and the end of her nose. Irritated, she wiped it away and found Millie gazing at her with a soft smile.

“You’re grinding your teeth.”

“I am. She was bad today.” There was no point denying it to Millie, who knew her so well.

“Was it anything in particular?” Millie asked with a smile, one perhaps a little exasperated, because they’d been here many times, but also projected patience for what Charlotte needed to say.

“It was all the usual. But...” She cleared her throat. Actually, it was a growl. “On top of my already established failings, my own mother doesn’t think I’d make a good one.”

“A good one of what?”

“A good mother.”

Millie looked at her silently.

“Well, it was upsetting,” Charlotte said, giving in to the need to clarify. “Aggravating, ridiculous and distressing.” She knew that she whined.

“Do you want kids?”

“No,” Charlotte said with wide eyes, as if obvious but she could still be upset about it. Children like her niece and nephew had convinced her never to try.

Millie threw her head back with laughter. “Why are you bothered then?”

“I’d still like to think I’d make a good mother.”

“What do you think makes a good one?”

“I don’t know,” Charlotte shrugged, ridiculous and sulky.

Millie laughed again. “It’s an unachievable societal aim – being a good mother. You can’t be in everyone’s eyes because everyone has different takes. Besides, no-one can cover all bases. But, of course, there’s an industry and societal power imbalance that thrives on guilt tripping and suppressing particularly low-income mothers.”

“Oh,” Charlotte said.

It was the kind of thing Millie had always commented on. Perspective again. And she usually ended up agreeing with Millie or at least modifying her view.

“Well, it still hurts that my own mother thinks I wouldn’t cut it.”



Millie sipped her tea, while her eyes never left Charlotte's. After five seconds, all patience depleted by her mother, Charlotte couldn't stand it any longer and said, "What?"

Millie lowered her tea, licked her lips and carefully placed her mug on the box. "If you must know, and for what it's worth," Millie smiled, "from my point of view, I think you'd make a wonderful mother."

If she could have closed her mouth, Charlotte would have done. But she couldn't, and she gaped.

"It's true." Millie laughed. She shuffled on the sofa, leaned against the arm with her feet up and gazed out of the back doors as if staring into the future. "I imagine you with two girls, a year apart, with long straight hair down their backs and cut into a perfect line." Millie made a snipping motion with her fingers. "Plaid pleated skirts for their respectable school and matching lunch boxes. They'd call you 'mother'," Millie nodded towards her, "and when they said, 'I love you', they'd sound hopelessly polite, but mean every word. At night, you'd hide the classic fiction grandparents insisted on gifting and read them diverse and gripping bedtime stories also of educational and mind-expanding value. And neither child would object, because they'd understand and appreciate the value too."

Charlotte was simultaneously confused and touched. She'd never pictured herself as a mother and was oddly flattered that Millie, for some reason, had. She didn't know what it meant, so awkwardly deflected with, "Exactly how do I have these perfect children?"

“Cloning. It’s the only way.” Millie turned to her and grinned. “But I will teach them to swear when you’re not looking.”

A compulsion welled up inside to have children, just so Millie would be there for years to come.

“But.” Millie swung her feet off the sofa to face Charlotte, resting hands on knees. “Most of all, you’d smile like a sunbeam and warm them through with love to last all day and night. That sunshine would make them bloom with confidence and fill them with enough love for a lifetime.”

And there she was again, captivated by Millie, her perspective and support and a compliment so lovely it made her want to cry. It happened more often these days, those touching moments. Was it because Millie was more complex, not quite so brash? Was it the way she looked at her, which Charlotte didn’t quite fathom but always left her feeling loved?

She agreed with her mother. It was easy to imagine Millie with kids. A familiar pang of fear followed the realisation. She’d lose Millie if she had a family. Charlotte swallowed, preparing herself for the loss of Millie to someone else.

“You would have adorable kids,” Charlotte said quietly.

Millie flinched at the change of focus.

“Well, you would.” Charlotte smiled. “I can imagine them with heaps of curls and way too much backchat.” Millie would make them laugh all day. “I can’t decide who’d have

the cheekier laugh, you or the kids. And you'd have the best fun on the planet. I can't imagine you ever complaining about having kids the way some people do. You say I'd smile at mine and fill them with love but—"

"I won't have any though," Millie said, avoiding her gaze.

She smiled. "It's your choice, of course. I'm just saying that, if you did, you'd be wonderful."

She stopped. Millie evaded her attention and Charlotte wondered if she'd irritated her friend, like Nicola had her.

Millie sat on the verge of speaking, a little breath in, and closing her mouth as if to stop the words. And again, as if they still wanted to leap out. She inhaled deeper, exhaling until almost all the air escaped, so it came out quietly, "I can't have kids."

"What?"

A deeper breath and quicker this time. "I can't have kids," Millie replied, the words abrupt and distinct.

The room fell silent.

Charlotte stared at her friend. Millie's face lost all colour, the pink on her cheeks fading to sickly pale. Millie opened her mouth but saying those four words depleted her. Her gaze dropped and she clutched her knees so hard her knuckles turned white.

A wave of realisation chilled right through Charlotte.

"What... Why...?" Charlotte whispered. Her mouth seized and lost all words.

“I can’t carry kids,” Millie said, her voice weakening with every syllable. She lifted her eyes to meet Charlotte’s, the movement slow as if against an immense weight.

“Why...? How can you tell—”

“I miscarried four years ago.”

Charlotte stared, in no doubt that Millie told the truth, but not wanting it to be true. The news was cold and cruel.

“Is that why...? Is that when...?” Charlotte struggled to find the words, then didn’t want to ask, because it clearly devastated Millie.

Her friend remained quiet, as if she faded and became smaller in front of her eyes. It was appalling to see someone, so large in life and personality, diminish.

“It was just a fling. You know me.” Millie’s eyes flicked up and darted away again, as if unable to speak and hold Charlotte’s gaze at the same time. “I became pregnant. It wasn’t the best timing, work was relentless, but when is? I wanted to keep the baby.” She had to pause, and her breath caught as she inhaled. “I wanted to keep her.”

It was like Millie had been physically struck and reeled, about to hit the floor any moment. Shock obliterated any other expression from her face.

“Mum planned to move to London and help raise her while I worked.” She swallowed. “And the guy wanted to be involved with her upbringing.”

Still, Charlotte couldn’t move or say anything.

“Six months.” Millie found it harder. She swallowed between words, her face flickering into grief. “I lost her. Then infection. I’m...” She breathed in deeply, her eyes searching from side to side, as if avoiding the full brutality of her experience. “Apparently I’m a bit of a mess inside.”

“Millie...” she whispered, paralysed in the face of her friend’s overwhelming grief.

“It’s why everything changed for me,” Millie said, as if answering a question Charlotte hadn’t managed to articulate. “Like I hit a wall and couldn’t get up again.”

Millie’s voice diminished to a whisper, so a louder sob took Charlotte by surprise. She sniffed, realising it had been hers.

“Oh Millie. I’m sorry—” she said, her breath snatched by another sob.

Sorry she hadn’t been there for Millie when she needed someone. For missing those years. For not knowing all this time. For that potential life and avenue of possibilities going into the distance, suddenly twisting and crashing into a dark wall.

“I’m so sorry—” Charlotte whispered, hoping Millie knew how, in all the ways. She tipped forward, walking, then kneeling closer to Millie.

“It was years ago now,” Millie said, her voice hoarse, “but I don’t talk about it much.”

Charlotte reached forward and gently laid her hand on Millie’s shoulder. Her friend didn’t move away, only curled smaller as the strength seemed to leave her.

“So that’s why...” Millie’s voice faltered and stayed silent.

“Millie?” Charlotte whispered.

There were no more words.

“Millie, please can I hold you?” Charlotte begged.

It was unbearable seeing her friend like this. Millie never looked like this. She was always so robust and sure of herself. To see her breaking was a horrible unknown.

“Please let me hold you.”

She slipped her arm around Millie’s shoulder a little at a time. Millie fell by degrees, until she finally let go, and Charlotte squeezed her friend to her chest.

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## Chapter 38

Millie wanted to say no.

When Charlotte whispered, “Please, can I hold you?” she tried to shake her head, because she couldn’t hold everything in if Charlotte hugged her.

Then her friend rested a hand on Millie’s shoulder, the smallest of touches, but like breaking the tension on water her resistance collapsed and grief refused to stay contained.

Charlotte enveloped her, and she tipped over the edge and fell.

Millie swallowed again and again, over the choking lump in her throat. Then she let go in steps between humid gasps that were captured and reflected on her cheeks by Charlotte’s shirt, so that her breath and her friend’s warmth bathed her face. First came a sharp hiccup of grief. Then a sob that gripped her ribcage. She buried her face so she could hardly breathe and clutched at Charlotte, clinging on while the bereavement took her.

She kept falling. With every sob, another barrier crashed down and released a larger wave. She cried until every wall fell and the depths of sadness lay bare. Millie cried and Charlotte held her, while her face and friend’s shirt soaked with tears.

She hadn’t let herself succumb for a long time, too scared to expose the wound inside. Always distracting herself, always running, she kept putting one foot in front of the other, because she feared if she ever stopped, she’d never start again.

They curled up on the sofa. Millie rested her head on Charlotte's shoulder and legs over her lap. Her friend ran fingers up her forehead and through her curls and stroked her scalp so that it soothed. The light faded outside, and colours in the room turned subdued.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Charlotte murmured.

She lifted her head to find Charlotte, eyebrows in a roof, and depth of concern written in every feature.

She should, to Charlotte at least. "I want to tell you."

Charlotte nodded and smiled in encouragement, while her eyes still expressed concern. "Is that when you came back to Oxford?"

"Yes." Millie nodded. "I went into freefall."

Remembering made her stomach drop with dread.

"I lost interest in work." She swallowed. "I found it repulsive concentrating on tiny details that meant one party got more money than another, when neither needed it. My heart wasn't in it because what I'd planned was so different." She trailed off.

It had shocked her down to her foundations. She was changed.

"You know how you envisage your life? Even if you've not planned it, you have an image, assumptions, your world view. If I ever became pregnant, I'd have a girl like Mum did and we'd raise her together. That was mine. Another generation of Banks girls, thick as thieves. Mum was all set to move in..." She faltered. "Then nothing. All that, wiped away. I haven't had a picture of my future since."



She stared into space.

“I didn’t have a sense of who I was after that, and I quit everything. If I’m honest, I still struggle.”

She clutched at the linen-shirt material around Charlotte’s belly, folding it around her finger over and over, the tightness of it comforting.

“I had my big plan, a vivid picture of my future and a small life I loved fiercely. And that can’t happen anymore. And I still don’t know how to deal with that.”

She used to tease Charlotte for being a mini version of her mother and father. A Nicola Albright KC in the making. But she was the same. Nothing like daddy issues or fear of commitment made her sleep with multiple partners. It was fun, acknowledged that people rarely stayed forever and was how her mum did it. Mum had a child. They shared a wonderful, imperfect life. Now, she couldn’t, and didn’t know who she was anymore.

“I left law and clutched at anything to take my mind off it.”

“Something completely different?” Charlotte murmured.

“Yes. I got lucky. It turned out to be a perfect distraction.” She tried to smile but could only manage a twitch. “It was hard, challenging, absorbing, but also rewarding. I hadn’t reached a stage where I could help myself, but helping others helped me.”

She’d gone, one day at a time, into the fog, helping others get lives back on track, helping them see their future,

while pulling herself through another day.

She breathed out, almost in a laugh. “I’m absolutely fucking broke, but…” She was here with Charlotte and grateful for that. It had kept her going and brought her to this moment.

“What about your mum?” Charlotte whispered.

Millie flinched. Damage had been done. They were still recovering, little by little. “Mum was there for me, but neither of us knew what to do. I was chaotic and grasping around at things and pushed her away because of it. I didn’t want her falling down the same hole. And when she met a fella she really liked, I encouraged her to move to Belfast after him.”

“But you must have needed someone.” Charlotte squeezed her tighter.

“I did.” And tears warmed her eyes again. “I really did.”

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there.” Charlotte’s words faltered too.

“Don’t.” Millie clutched tighter at Charlotte’s shirt. “We know the many reasons for that.”

Millie inhaled, breath juddering, knowing how much she’d craved her friend. She had thought of Charlotte, instinctively reaching out when her heart died.

She still remembered the small life inside with painful and vivid clarity. The gentle rolling. The fluttering in her belly. The monochrome scans, weird and wonderful. Little nudges on the side of her tummy. Feeling the tremor of movement

within and on her fingertips when she rested them on her side. “Hello baby,” she’d murmur, cradling her belly, voice full of awe and love already, never alone. Then nothing. And the memory hit again, so that she reeled with sickness.

Tears flooded.

“I’m here now,” Charlotte whispered.

Charlotte wouldn’t let her go home. They turned off the lights on unpacked boxes, closed the curtains in the bedroom and lay on the bed in their clothes. Charlotte wrapped herself around her, always the big spoon, and Millie clutched her friend’s arm around her belly, squeezing it tight as if to close the gap and emptiness inside.

She wore her friend around her, a protective shield to keep out the world. The waves of grief still hit. Now she’d let Charlotte in, she couldn’t hide the hurt anymore. Buffeted by waves, tears returning every time, she stayed safe in their cocoon and let the sadness engulf.

“I’m here,” Charlotte would whisper every time.

Exhausted, Millie slept deeply. Then flickering rays of low sunshine broke through a slit in the curtain, the silver birch moving in the breeze outside. Harsh on eyes and a soul raw from recounting the past, she rolled away from the brightness and found Charlotte still curled around her. Relaxed sleep had tilted Charlotte away, but she was still there, and her friend’s presence soothed again.

Millie raised her hand and hesitated over her friend’s cheek. She hadn’t seen Charlotte asleep in a long time, and she gazed at her. Smooth closed eyelids that looked too delicate.

The undulating shape of high cheekbones. The crease between eyebrows from when Charlotte frowned in confusion. Ribbons of deep mahogany hair with shining reds that flowed over face and shoulders. She smiled at her resting friend, still beautiful, even when her eyes weren't open and sparkling.

She stroked Charlotte's cheek, then tilted up to kiss her forehead. The flush of warmth on lips from Charlotte's soft skin flooded her with poignant longing and loss all at the same time. She held her lips in place, never wanting to let go, the compulsion so strong Millie wanted to sink into her friend.

She curled up closer, wrapping her arms around Charlotte, the only way that taking away her lips was bearable. And she drifted again.

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## Chapter 39

The room was brighter and warmer when Millie woke next. It must have been late morning. The sheets lay empty and wrinkled where Charlotte had slept and pans clanked downstairs.

She rubbed her eyes and slowly got up, aching from last night while also lighter because of it. Charlotte appeared at the bottom of the stairs as she descended, a mug of a steaming drink in her friend's hand.

"I was about to bring you a coffee," Charlotte said, her smile muted with concern, but still a Charlotte smile. When Millie stepped into the lounge, Charlotte put down the mug and reached out.

"Come here," Charlotte murmured.

Millie let herself be drawn beneath her friend's chin, arm wrapped around her shoulders and held snug, so they fit together alternating head and chest between shorter and taller woman. She closed her eyes and sank into Charlotte's embrace, the intimacy soothing and soporific. All cried out from yesterday, the emptiness remained, but the rawness had turned numb for now. She breathed Charlotte in. The familiar scent consoled and the tender touch of her chest, bare where her top buttons remained undone, spun her head.

"I've been out for bread and eggs and found the pans," Charlotte said quietly. "How about some breakfast?"

Millie leaned away reluctantly. "I should go home. I need to shower and get clean clothes." She tugged at her T-shirt.

“Borrow some?” Charlotte said.

She smiled. “Your clothes will make me look ten years old.”

“Bet you take the same size tops.”

“Yeah, I probably do,” she admitted.

Charlotte zipped open a suitcase and dug out a pink plaid shirt and new packet of knickers. “Here.” The corner of her mouth twitched. “You can have a pair of these if you don’t take the mick.”

Millie smiled remembering their old back and forth. “What? Take the piss out of your very sensible lesbian knickers?”

“I like hipster boyshorts,” Charlotte said, a sulky echo of past exchanges creeping in.

“I wear them too.”

Charlotte shoved a pair at her chest, the movement gentle though. “Go and have a shower.”

The small shower room had everything unpacked. Charlotte must have been up for hours while Millie slept. She turned the shower to scalding and rubbed herself clean, a habit to distract herself. The soft flannel shirt soothed like a gentle hug afterwards. And Charlotte was right. They were a comparable size on top though not the same shape. She caught herself in the steamed mirror, hair in dark wet ringlets, bust bursting from the shirt left open at the top. She looked comfortable. At ease with herself.

When Millie went back down, Charlotte's face flushed when it peeped up from under the stairs.

"You look..." Charlotte breathed in. "You look really nice in that." Her friend stood up with books in her hand, the flush and smile lingering on her face. "You should keep it. It looks amazing. Honestly." It came out in rapid fire.

"I wouldn't say no," Millie replied.

Soft and with the comfort of being Charlotte's, Millie stroked the front without thinking and enjoyed the sensation on her palm. When she looked up, Charlotte had that crinkle at the top of her nose.

"What's up?" Millie asked.

"Oh..." Charlotte shook her head. "Nothing. Hey, I thought I'd make this a reading snug under here. What do you think?"

She swung round the bottom of the stairs to see what Charlotte meant. Sets of shelves lined the walls beneath the steps, already full with Charlotte's novels and several framed pictures.

Millie grinned. "Scooch a chair under here, or get a lesbo mate to build in a cushioned bench." Then before Charlotte could object, Millie blurted, "You kept it." She pointed to a picture from the Queer Ball at college.

"Yes," Charlotte whispered. "Of course, I did."

Millie couldn't stop staring.

In the photo, they held hands and creased up with laughter. Millie didn't recall what they laughed about, but she

remembered the feeling – her stomach aching with laughter and the sheer happiness of being with her best friend on a wonderful night. Far better than with any date or boyfriend. The kind of night that stayed with you, a memory that said your life had been worth living.

“Do you want a copy?” Charlotte asked. “I can scan it.”

“No,” Millie said. She tore her eyes away to Charlotte. “No need. I bought one too.” An extravagant expense, but worth every penny, although she couldn’t face taking it out while they’d been estranged. “I need to dig it out of storage.”

Charlotte frowned again and looked at the photo, as if desperate to ask a question. The same expression as earlier, of many thoughts bursting to get out.

“Is this...?” Charlotte hesitated.

“What?” Millie said gently.

“It’s nosey, I’m sorry.”

“What is?”

Charlotte dropped her gaze to the book in her hand. “I wondered if you stopped dating afterwards. After losing... after everything. That’s all.” Her friend looked up with apologetic eyes. “It’s none of my business.”

But it was, increasingly so. Millie might need to explain what was happening to her one day, if this attraction didn’t pass.

“Yes,” Millie replied. “It had everything to do with that.”



Charlotte's gaze remained on the book in her hands, rubbing the cover with her thumbs and squeezing it while concern rippled across her face.

Millie stared, not focussing. "I couldn't go near anyone for a long time. Then I made myself go on a date. I thought I should get back to normal and start seeing people. Get back to my old self."

Her heart cantered. The fear rose even at the thought.

"I hadn't anticipated the anxiety about getting pregnant again. Actually, terror. I completely froze with one guy." She had to stop a moment. "Because if I did get pregnant, I'd lose the baby. And I can't face that again."

She swallowed.

"The fear snowballed. I couldn't stop it, even though I knew it didn't make sense. There's plenty I enjoyed without intercourse, but it put me off everything."

Her libido vanished, as if surgically removed. Anything that used to feel a thrill or compulsion, gone. She started running, cycling, swimming, anything physical, for the reassurance that she still existed. And everyone approved of how chaste and fit she became, while she'd never felt so broken.

Pounding the pavements and the park trails. Lifting weights at home. So her twitching yearning body had a rush and high without the terror, and she became so tired she'd sleep at night without memories intruding.

"Millie?"

"Sorry." She blinked.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. It’s me who should apologise for asking.”

“No, please don’t.” She reached out to Charlotte. “I want you to know this. I want you to understand who I am.” That she’d changed and lost her old self.

That picture. That girl. Was she gone entirely? Millie felt her most present standing here with Charlotte. Still inside perhaps.

Did the essence of a person remain? She was more muted, without a doubt. But that girl she used to be, who loved her friend fiercely, would do anything for her, and laugh like in the picture, at herself and them both, with the best feeling in the world. She squeezed Charlotte’s hand. Millie liked that girl in the photo. She wanted her to survive. She realised that’s why she’d reached out for Charlotte so powerfully again when they returned to Oxford.

Except they weren’t the same together either.

There was no going back. Millie might regain some aspects of herself, but never in the same way. Always a different shade or colour to before. People were never the identical person twice. Similar at times, but never exact.

Equally for Charlotte. And together. Because there was more for Millie now.

“I can do this later,” Charlotte said, nodding at the shelves. “Let me get you breakfast.”

They ate, unpacked, drank tea, then relaxed on the lawn in the back garden. They lay on their fronts. Charlotte read a novel and Millie half-read along while playing with

blades of grass and pretending she didn't gaze at her friend. It was warm in the sunshine and Charlotte's face flushed in the heat. Millie ached just looking at her.

Why did she find Charlotte so attractive now? When did it start?

Was it when Charlotte broke out of mould at that law society dinner? She'd stepped forward, keen to hear of Millie's career change, and the familiarity came flooding back.

Did she fall irreversibly in lust when Charlotte's robe dropped at the lido, beautiful body and olive skin on display? Or from the beginning, when she introduced herself at university, the top of her nose crinkling in confusion, and told her that she was always "Charlotte"?

Millie caught her own reflection in the panes of glass of the double, back doors. She wore an expression she hadn't seen on her face before. A silly, happy expression. She'd caught it on Charlotte's though, when they were at college.

This wasn't the sum of friendship plus lust. Her breath caught and her heart tumbled over several beats. This was love. Plainly and simply love. Only once had that happened for her, with Dominic. The kind of love that ate at her. She was besotted with the towering, arrogant Blues rower and craved him like a drug that slowly killed her at the same time.

Then this second love, like flowers, butterflies and sunshine. The sort of love that feeds and heals. A wonderful sort of love. She flinched because this was going to hurt even more.

Maybe that's where she'd changed most – no longer wanting, even able, to have just sex, but needing it as part of something else. And Charlotte had always been the biggest something else, and this attraction to her friend was fierce because of it.

Here was someone whom Millie trusted, who knew her, her body, knew bodies like hers. Who would come to the edge, and back away holding hands if they needed, or take a leap together. What was not fucking sexy about that?

Because this was Charlotte, comfort and yumminess, but with the exoticism of a body Millie had never explored before. Charlotte had unfamiliar curves and the lure of the new, with an erotic edge that scared Millie a little, while at the same time finding it irresistible. The heady mix had her spinning, euphoric and dazed with desire.

Millie wanted to kiss, strip her, explore every inch of her body, lay on top so every part of her touched every part of Charlotte, to writhe between her legs so they joined in the most intimate place of all.

She could go further than with anyone else because love and friendship stood behind it. The need was overwhelming. And still she lay there, gazing at her friend, turmoil inside and love written on her face.

How was she meant to bear this?

No, Millie was never the same twice, because she was in love this time, with the friend she'd loved forever.

## Chapter 40

“You’ve still got Toastie McToastie Face!” Millie squealed.

They’d come in from the garden and Charlotte watched Millie pull the old sandwich maker out of a box. Her friend placed it reverently on the galley kitchen worktop and stroked a finger over the case. They’d bought it together, second year at university, when Millie’s original gave up the ghost.

“Still works.” Charlotte grinned.

The large googly eyes they’d stuck above the handle, which was begging to be a mouth, drooped from years of heating, but it toasted.

“We should have a celebratory cheese toastie for dinner,” Millie said.

“Good idea. Especially since that’s all I’ve got in the fridge.”

Millie grinned at her. “It’s like we’ve come full circle.”

The light and sparkle had returned to Millie’s eyes. She stood with one hand on hip, the other resting on the surface, weight to one side and curvy shape accentuated. The flannel shirt folded open over her cleavage revealing Millie’s smooth skin, tanned from spring sunshine with a smattering of tiny freckles visible again. The deep pink material ludicrously flattered Millie’s complexion so that she bloomed.

My god. Millie in that shirt. She’d make such a hot lesbian.

Charlotte cleared her throat at the thought. She'd already slipped today, with a lust count of two.

She'd been fine in bed and had woken lying on her side with Millie in her arms. Her friend must have turned in the night. Millie's head of soft curls nuzzled beneath Charlotte's chin and face snuggled her chest. Charlotte hadn't wanted to move, ever. She'd laid still, lulled with the rise and fall of Millie's breathing and overwhelmed by the poignancy of holding her friend to heart. Tender, warm, real, she'd luxuriated in Millie cuddled close.

Then Millie roused a moment and raised her knees to nudge between Charlotte's legs. The contact swept between her thighs and lit a flame. Another wriggle teased, and the fire took hold. Millie's hand stroked down Charlotte's behind as she relaxed and nodded to sleep. And Charlotte lay tingling and yearning to reawaken her. She wished Millie would reach round, slip her fingers between her thighs and caress where Charlotte became wet. She shifted at the thought, the movement tantalising further and coaxing her several levels higher.

Her heart thudded. Cheeks burned. Sweat broke on her back. The ache between her legs cried out for Millie. Charlotte extricated herself carefully without waking her friend and took deep cooling breaths.

She was allowed that slip, surely? Someone thrusting between her legs, then stroking her buttocks. Come on. Charlotte was only human. But it wasn't supportive-friend behaviour. She heard Olivia tut inside her head.

But neither that realisation, nor the imagined disapproval from Olivia, stopped her jaw from hitting the ground when Millie came downstairs dressed in her flannel shirt. Because, my god, she looked good.

Stood close to Millie in the kitchen now, Charlotte still glowed from their earlier encounters. There was something about Millie today that drew her stronger than ever.

“You OK?” Charlotte murmured.

Millie looked up, a healthy glow on her face too, so that Charlotte couldn't resist pulling closer. She wanted her friend to smile again.

“Yes, I am,” Millie whispered, raising a hand to Charlotte's face.

Millie tentatively rested fingertips on her cheek. It was a delicious sensation. Charlotte's face thrilled. The downy hairs on the back of her neck rose. Her head spun.

“Thank you for letting me stay. And for talking,” Millie said.

“Of course,” Charlotte replied.

She reached out to Millie in a quick movement to reassure her. But when she held Millie's waist, the vivid physical presence stunned her. The soft flannel material on her palms and the very human warmth emanating from beneath. The tenderness of Millie's body. A mistake.

Temptation pulsed through Charlotte's fingers, eager to slip beneath the shirt. The sensation of Millie's soft skin teased her imagination and the compulsion to sweep her into a kiss was so potent she dared't move.

“I erm...”

She gazed into Millie’s eyes. They’d never looked so beautiful, with pupils large and the blues darkest sapphire, her long eyelashes making them exceptional. Charlotte stared, her chest rising and falling. Did she imagine it? Or did Millie’s chest flush and breasts rise with the same quickness?

“Millie...” Charlotte gulped.

She craved Millie’s intimacy. Charlotte wanted to unhook her bra and slip fingers under the cups and cradle Millie’s breasts. Drop to her knees and take a nipple into her mouth. Swirl her tongue around as it pebbled. Strip her lower, dive between Millie’s thighs, take her in her mouth and taste her.

“Millie...” she whispered again, more desperate this time, sweating. She was in trouble here.

Her friend stared at her, breathing hard with rose on her cheeks. Millie shot her arms around Charlotte’s shoulders and squeezed tight. Millie pulled so hard it thumped breath from her body. The embrace snapped Charlotte to attention, and she held on to Millie, closer, harder, while tensing her whole body to dispel the eroticism of the moment. She hugged her friend with fierce frustration, vexation with herself and love of Millie all in the power of that hug. And she held on, scared that she’d lose her.

When they fell apart, springing back with the force of release, they both breathed hard.

Did Charlotte need to say something? It had been obvious what she’d felt. But what could she say? Sorry for



getting hot about you? Deny being attracted to Millie? It happened at times. There was no use refuting it.

“I love you, Millie,” she said instead, quick and whispered and desperate, not wanting to lose Millie now and scare her with a host of complications like the past.

Millie’s eyes held hers, face and body filled with tensions and emotions that Charlotte feared.

“I love you too,” Millie whispered.

They stared at each other. Millie said it in a quiet, even tone so that Charlotte remained unsure of what her friend thought.

“I...” Charlotte tried. But it was too obvious what her body craved.

“It’s been an emotional weekend,” Millie said, and she pursed her lips.

“Yes, it has. Perhaps it’s just... I keep wanting... I wanted to comfort you and...”

Maybe it was just a desperate compulsion to bond with Millie, spilling over with intensity into physical need. They held hands and squeezed each other hard. The pressure helped to dispel the moment and her desire waned to less dangerous levels. They were going to be OK.

“Thank you for being here for me,” Millie said.

“Always,” Charlotte breathed, relieved her friend took it in her stride.

“Come on,” Millie said. “Let’s comfort-binge on cheese toasties.” And Charlotte relaxed.

Such a bad friend today.

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They sat side-by-side on the back doorstep, feet in the garden and chomping on toasties. Millie's bare legs in shorts rested against Charlotte's, which baked in her jeans.

Millie nudged her with an elbow. When Charlotte looked up, Millie did show-food, opening her mouth wide to gross her out.

Sometimes she wondered if Millie did this on purpose to appear unattractive. It made Charlotte laugh though, and she spat a crumb of toast onto Millie's bare leg.

"That," Millie said, eyebrow raised and in her 1950s British accent, "is unbecoming, Ms Charlotte Albright." Then Millie picked up the morsel from her thigh and ate it.

"Millie!" Charlotte said. "That's too grim!"

Millie grinned, delighted. "I will always out-gross you, Albright."

It made Millie sexy though, always taking things further than Charlotte would, giving everything an exhilarating and forbidden edge. She nudged Millie in the ribs and rolled her eyes at herself.

"What's next?" Millie asked. She took another bite of toastie.

"Oh," Charlotte's shoulders sagged with the reminder of boxes piled high by the front window. "I wanted to find

things for the lounge, then call it quits.”

“Want help?”

Charlotte nodded and smiled at her friend. “Yes, please.” Then fearful of what Millie might answer, she asked, “Do you have Monday bank holiday off?”

Millie nodded.

“Do you want to, you know,” she paused, “stay the rest of the weekend?”

Millie didn’t answer immediately, and Charlotte’s heart dropped into her stomach. Had she gone too far earlier? She didn’t think she could stand that.

“Is that OK?” Millie asked.

Charlotte peeped up. “I’d love you to. If you’re comfortable doing that?”

Millie nodded. “I’d really love it.”

“Good,” Charlotte said, her heart leaping again. “Good.”

“You realise,” Millie grinned, “I may never leave. This place is much nicer than staring at a damp patch on the ceiling. And every time I cook with Virginia’s wiring, I risk death.”

Charlotte laughed. “I wouldn’t mind if you stayed. You can have the spare room when it’s ready.”

It was out of her mouth before she could stop it. Not the wisest offer, given she’d slipped too far with Millie. Again, Millie hesitated. And again, Charlotte’s heart leaped, fearing she’d been inappropriate.

Her friend's expression remained soft. "Maybe," Millie said. "See how you feel when you've finished."

"I keep my promises."

"Really?" Millie smiled.

"Yes," Charlotte emphasised, a little irritated that Millie doubted she'd keep her word.

"If that was true," Millie raised an eyebrow, "we'd be married."

"What?!" Oh god, what had she done now.

Millie's smile grew naughty. "Don't you remember, you said you'd marry me at twenty-eight, if we were both single?"

"Oh!" Charlotte laughed.

She'd forgotten that joking conversation. Millie had been drunk, or at least had more alcohol. Charlotte turned silly on one drink as usual.

Charlotte tutted at them both. "I love how we thought twenty-eight was beyond the pale."

"Because that was so unfathomably old."

"Yeah. Twenty-eight though. Why twenty-eight?"

"Do you mean instead of thirty or twenty-seven?" Millie asked.

"Yes."

"Because I'd promised Bobby Pratt from primary school I'd marry him at thirty and thought better of it."

Charlotte drew irate breath. “You undercut him with me?!” She threw Millie an eyeful of outrage. “Then flagrantly disregarded both agreements?”

Millie laughed out loud. “We should renegotiate that verbal contract. I mean, the one with you not Bobby.”

Charlotte looked down at Millie. “But I know, that you know, how difficult it is to make verbal contracts hold legally.”

“Fine, you can have me in writing. Happy for you to draw up the contract.”

Charlotte smiled, carrying on their play. “So when are we officially past it?”

“Forty?”

“God, that’s on the horizon isn’t it.” Charlotte’s face dropped in mortification.

“OK fifty?” Millie shrugged, as if she didn’t care about the passage of time.

“But that’s definitely past it.”

“Past what exactly?”

But Charlotte wasn’t concentrating anymore. Because she realised that if Millie asked, honestly and truly, seriously asked, she would marry her tomorrow. She wouldn’t be able to resist. It wasn’t a prospect she’d thought through, but an instinctive reaction so strong it scared her.

If this was what they’d have. Waking up in Millie’s arms. Spending weekends together. If this was all Millie could offer, then Charlotte would snap it up.

She blinked and prodded down her fears.

“Fifty then,” Charlotte said, wishing the conversation done.

“I’ll be waiting.” Millie flashed a cheeky smile before shoving the rest of the toastie into her mouth.

And Charlotte thanked her lucky stars it was only the two of them that day, and not Olivia or her mother watching with a critical eye. She was guilty of a lust count of three, a close encounter and a marriage proposal.

She put this down as a very bad day.

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## Chapter 41

“Millie. Good lord,” Virginia said. “Where did you surface from?”

She looked up from the kitchen table on Tuesday morning. The sun shone low through the back window. She’d returned home Monday evening, having spent the entire holiday weekend with Charlotte. And now she couldn’t sleep. Her landlady, with wild morning hair, wrapped a silk robe across her chest and took a seat next to her.

“Vee, I’m in trouble,” Millie said. Her head ached from frowning.

“With the law or ladies, dear?”

Millie’s mouth hung open.

“Or one particular lady?”

“How...?”

“You’ve been mooning over this dreadful, non-cursing woman ever since I heard of her.”

Millie shot hands to hips. “I’ve not been that bad.”

“No dear, I exaggerate, always. But you haven’t been your ebullient self. Besides, who else would it be? Between that woman and your wretched landlady, there’s no time for anyone else.” She grinned.

“Alec?” Millie said, a weight of guilt plummeting in her belly.

“He’s been round again. I told him you were hardly home these days.”

“I’ll make time,” Millie said, determined.

She’d sometimes found it hard when he and his wife had a baby. She didn’t want him thinking she avoided them, because the tot was irresistible and she adored the whole family.

“Tell me your troubles, darling,” Virginia said, resting her hand on the back of Millie’s chair.

Where the bloody hell to start. “It’s out of control. I don’t know how to handle it. And I’ve no idea what to think.”

“This pash on your friend not wearing off then?”

“No,” Millie groaned.

“Didn’t think it would.”

Millie gave her a look. “It’s easy to say these things after the fact.”

“And sometimes blindingly obvious at the time,” Virginia quipped. “It was clear this was no ordinary friend or fancy.”

Millie breathed in deep. “Fair,” she acknowledged. “But we’ve always been close friends. We spent every day together at university. She had my back, and I had hers. That’s how we’ve always been.”

“Until?”

“Until...” One of them would go and fall in love. “Charlotte fell for me at university, and I handled it badly. I hoped her love would wear off and she’d get over it.”

“And now? For you?”



Fuck. Did she really have to say this out loud and show how stupid she was?

“Yes, I hoped this attraction to her would pass because it does for me. I get the hots for someone, and a few shags later we’re done.”

“My, how romantic.”

“Realistic.”

“But this woman?”

“Is my friend and I adore her already.”

“And she wouldn’t do the shag, fag and scarper scenario?”

“No!”

She appreciated what Virginia meant about vulgarity when she heard it applied to Charlotte.

Millie tutted. “She’s a traditional, fall in love, into bed, stay in the bed you made, no matter how bloody awful, kind of girl.”

“So,” Virginia looked over her glasses, “unable to sate yourself and move on, you insist on spending every waking minute with the woman, tormenting yourself instead?”

Damn it. Virginia had a point. The effort to resist Charlotte at the weekend had been colossal. Charlotte had wrapped her hands around her in the kitchen, gorgeous face flushed and confused, the moment charged with need and dangerously close to forming regrets. Millie had thrown her arms around Charlotte and hugged her to within an inch of her

life to resist kissing her. Because that kiss would have given everything away.

“But she’s my best friend. And I need her.” Millie looked to her landlady. “I really, really need her.”

The weekend showed that most powerfully. She’d needed a close friend four years ago and Charlotte in particular. Millie had thrown herself into being friends again and the effort rewarded her with wonderful richness and support, which she couldn’t jeopardise.

“Are your feelings deepening?” Virginia said gently.

“Yes.” Millie closed her eyes. “It’s like a boulder gathering momentum, and I’m rolling down a hill faster and faster.” She squeezed her eyes tight and hoped she survived the inevitable crash.

“Open your eyes, Millie.” Virginia squeezed her shoulder. “Be brave and see that, although you’re hurtling down, there will be choices. There always are. Maybe you’ll crash. Maybe plunge in a cave. Or veer away from that trap, across the valley floor and soar to the top of the next hill.”

Virginia squeezed her again. “I think it’s time you talked openly with her, even if that’s uncomfortable. Even if you need to take a break.”

Millie opened her eyes and looked at Virginia. “I know. It’s exactly what I thought she should have done at university.”

Virginia smiled. “It’s not always easy to do the right thing, at exactly the right time. Anyone who tells you otherwise is a giant arse.”

“What if...?” Millie’s heart cantered. “What if she wants a relationship?”

“Is that what you fear most?”

Millie gripped her knees. “I fear losing her, or that I’ll let her down. Maybe I am the commitment-phobe everyone implied I was, rather than a realist. What if we both change? Shit, I certainly have over time. I’m scared we’ll simply grow apart.”

Millie either dated one person, quickly followed by another and another, or had open arrangements. That was the whole point. Things were rarely forever. Why treat them as permanent? Why not acknowledge it probably won’t last, and proceed with respect from there?

“Things are rarely forever,” Virginia nodded in agreement.

“Exactly.”

“And rarer still, if you don’t choose to make them so.”

They were silent. The enormity of her decision and its repercussions filled the room.

“What if I change again?” Millie said, her heart aching with that fear.

“But what if you change together?” Virginia said quietly. The landlady shuffled in her seat. “Did you ever consider that you’re already in the most important relationship of your life?”

She looked at Vee, who appeared more serious than usual.

“That you have, in fact, always been committed to her?”

“As a friend,” Millie countered. “A friend is safe. I’d do anything for her. It’s different.”

“Is it? You said before that Charlotte is forever. Maybe you need to tell her, and find out what she wants forever?”

“It’s not the same.”

“Millie.” Virginia said it with a growling undertone that still spoke of fondness. “It seems nothing is more important to you than this woman. Why not embrace what that means?”

“Because she will walk,” Millie said. The words came out fast and heated. She breathed in, not wanting Virginia to bear the brunt of her frustration. But that was the truth of it. “If it goes wrong, Charlotte will walk away. She turned her back on our friendship before, when I never would.”

Her blood ran cold. She remembered Charlotte’s face on the top-floor of the Magdalen quad, the hurt and fury at Millie vivid. “I can’t do this anymore,” Charlotte had said with finality.

“She didn’t want to see me for years, Vee. I’m not saying she was wrong. Or that there was any other way. But it might happen again, and I’m scared.”

And losing Charlotte again would hurt too much.

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Later, Millie pushed her bike along the meadows path, too distracted to ride to work safely. Why did she have to fall for Charlotte? Because she unequivocally had.

She remembered gazing at her in the garden, sun shining on Charlotte's face, highlighting her smooth skin and the faintest of scars. A little dip near her eye, from childhood chicken pox Charlotte had told her once. Then a line on her cheek, a paper cut from a casebook in the second year – only Charlotte could have managed this. Millie had admired the light tips of her silky eyebrows, her plump lips, the creases beside her eyes when she smiled. The perfect imperfections and deep familiarity drew her in so strongly because it was all Charlotte.

Then that reflection behind Charlotte had caught her eye. It had been shocking to see her own face shining with love and adoration. Millie knew the same unreserved expression from Charlotte at university because Charlotte hadn't looked away and hidden it like Millie did. Charlotte would break into the broadest grins and fill Millie with unstoppable elation at the time. Charlotte's smiles, the whole range, always had. But it was terrifying to remember.

This is what Charlotte had felt for her. This unstoppable admiration and sense of falling deeper and deeper in love. Charlotte couldn't stay away from her at university, no matter how it hurt, and now it was Millie's turn to helplessly tumble.

Perhaps somewhere along the way, she'd crossed a line. She didn't know when or where, but she was on the other side now with no easy way back. Yes, sometimes people

changed, and sometimes they didn't, and that was the cause of all the problems.

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## Chapter 42

“This is a copy for you,” the Worcester events manager said, pushing a map towards Charlotte.

Annie swept long red hair behind an ear and pulled closer around the table Charlotte used for clients in her office.

“You can welcome guests in the main quad here.” Annie pointed at the plan. “While Hugo and senior partners socialise around the marquee and lawns. If it’s raining, you’re sheltered beneath the arcade arches.” She reached across and squeezed Charlotte’s arm in reassurance.

“That’s good,” Charlotte said, focussed on the plan.

“Once the guests have arrived and you join everyone, The Provost’s Gardens and playing fields will be open.” Annie pointed to the abundant green area on the map around a blue of lake. “And guests are free to roam during the event.”

“Excellent. I think clients will love having the run of the place.”

“I do too. In previous years we scheduled a tour of the gardens. But with increased numbers, Liz and I agree with you that a less formal event is better.”

“Then food and dancing later.”

“Yes, as evening falls, we’ll light up the quad. Food stalls and canapes are planned in front of the quad cottages if the weather holds, otherwise we’ll pull everything back into the hall and under the arcade. Beverages and seating are available in the hall throughout the evening.”

Charlotte leant back in her chair. “This is shaping up nicely. I’m actually looking forward to it.”

Annie nodded with a beaming smile. “It should be fun. You and Liz will make sure of that.” She squeezed Charlotte’s arm again.

Charlotte sighed. Annie was so easy to work with. Organising the event was a pleasure and it should go well. A shiver of anxiety interrupted her breathing. As long as Hugo accepted the changes. This was his event and college that she meddled with.

“Who are you bringing?” Annie asked, collecting up her things.

“Millie,” Charlotte said, still staring at the plan. “You may have seen her. She also works on Beaumont Street.”

“Millie?” Annie said, lightly.

“Friend of mine.” Charlotte looked up to catch a more relaxed smile on Annie’s lips.

“Good.” Annie nodded.

Charlotte nodded too, pursed her lips and wondered if she’d missed something. “How about you?” she asked, to be polite.

Would Annie bring someone to an event at which she worked? It wasn’t the same as Charlotte, who hosted. It was a silly question.

“No,” Annie smiled, generously. She held Charlotte’s gaze, and Charlotte wished she’d stop, so she could roll her eyes at herself. “I’m single,” Annie added.



“Hmm,” Charlotte replied. Two reasons then. “Right,” she said. She’d definitely roll her eyes at herself later.

“It’s been lovely working with you.”

“I was just thinking the same.” Charlotte smiled, because it’d been a breeze with Annie.

Then uncertain what to say next, she smiled some more. A level of expectation hung in the air. But, as was often the case, she remained unsure what exactly was expected.

A tap on the open door drew her attention. Olivia stood in the doorway, eyebrow raised. It resided halfway up Olivia’s forehead permanently of late.

“Am I interrupting?”

“No, we’re done,” Charlotte said, throwing up her hands and standing.

Annie stood too. “I need to finalise a few issues with Liz, then shall we walk through the grounds later?”

“Yes. I’d appreciate seeing the areas open for the evening.”

“Great.” Pink flushed on Annie’s cheeks.

The events manager flicked hair over her shoulder, hugged her Worcester College folder to her chest and nodded to Olivia on the way out.

Olivia remained in the doorway, eyebrow questioning. Charlotte smiled a few moments longer, the lightness of an easy meeting lingering, but still Olivia didn’t move.

“What?” Charlotte said, looking around the room for the invisible issue.

Olivia's eyebrows jumped in a shrug. "Nothing." And she wandered in, sat down and elegantly swung one leg over the other.

"There was a lot of substance to that 'nothing' a minute ago," Charlotte said.

Olivia had something on her mind, well always, but now in particular. Even Charlotte could see that.

"Are you going to ask her on a date?"

"Who?"

Olivia's dark brown eyes rolled spectacularly. "Annie," she said.

"Oh. No?" Charlotte said, as if obvious. "We work together. I didn't even know she was queer."

Olivia pursed her lips. This was bad, apparently.

"What?" Charlotte laughed again.

"She wears a rainbow badge."

"I noticed that. I wanted one."

"And has a tattoo of a rainbow heart on her wrist."

"That's pretty too."

"And she talks about her ex who studied at St Hilda's before we graduated."

"Oh." Charlotte knitted her eyebrows in concentration. "So she did. I wasn't paying attention."

"Clearly. Your mind is elsewhere these days."

“That’s not true,” Charlotte said, as if it were silly.  
“I’m blitzing contracts at the moment and—”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then,” Charlotte knitted her eyebrows tighter,  
“what?”

“Did you really not notice she’s interested in you?”

“No?”

She pondered. Annie was pleasant to everyone, including her and Liz. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Perhaps she didn’t need to visit Charlotte’s office today, given their meeting to tour the college later. And sending Charlotte her personal mobile number wasn’t strictly necessary, but perfectly reasonable. And asking if Charlotte was bringing anyone only polite. And Annie saying she was single didn’t mean... Oh.

She dropped into her chair.

There were quite a few signs.

Charlotte slumped and stared at the college plan. Her mind spun with so many thoughts it was a blur. She didn’t need them to settle to realise what her gut and sinking heart told her.

“I’ve done it again, haven’t I,” she said, looking at her friend.

Olivia tilted her head in response, eyes not leaving Charlotte’s.

“I’ve been so caught up with Millie, spending all our time together, I’m not available to anyone else. So I didn’t see

Annie right in front of my face.”

“Well,” Olivia said, “you do live in each other’s pockets.”

She’d been ignoring Olivia, hadn’t she. “Have I been a rubbish friend?”

“No. You’re fine. Work has complicated things. I’m sorry about that. I should have foreseen being a senior partner would introduce a level of distance. But,” Olivia snapped. “Sometimes, it’d be nice to see you without Millie.”

“Fair point.” She reached out for Olivia’s hand and squeezed it. “I’d like that too,” Charlotte added, and Olivia’s lips flickered into tight acknowledgment. “How about an ice cream and film night?”

“That would be nice. Thank you.”

“And as recompense, I’ll let you choose a Kate Laurence film.”

“I do watch others, you know.”

“Of course.” Charlotte’s mouth twitched. “I know you have broad and elevated taste in all arts and entertainment. So, we’ll pretend to consider others first, then fall back to Kate?”

Olivia said, “Fine,” with the beginnings of a smile.

It was refreshing to see. Her perfectionist friend had worked non-stop recently and a night in with a romcom and delectable ice cream was overdue and a sure recipe for contentment. In the face of Kate Laurence, Olivia’s smile would finally bloom. Few things brought such pleasure to Olivia. Tight contracts, obscure points of law and the divine

Ms Kate with ice cream. She'd be so relaxed on film night, Olivia might even squeeze Charlotte's knee in affection. She made a note to buy some pistachio kulfi, the ultimate iced and creamy dessert, for her friend.

"Good." Charlotte said. "That's a plan." She took her hand away and sighed with a slight growl of exasperation as her mind returned to Millie. "I have done it though, haven't I? It's like Millie's my girlfriend without the sex."

"Well." Olivia mused this time. "Friendships, partners, marriages are all as different as the individuals that make them. There's no rulebook to how often you see a friend or their importance in your life."

This was unusually generous for Olivia, but typically savvy. Astute with people, especially those who walked through the Bentley doors with messy divorces, but subsequent tolerance with friends wasn't always highest on her agenda.

Olivia caught her eye. "People are diverse, stubbornly unpredictable and vexing."

Charlotte laughed.

"I suspect," Olivia folded her arms, "you'll have to find your own way. The more I know about people, the more I'm convinced everyone's muddling their way through and winging it."

"We are. We really are," Charlotte said.

Olivia considered her. "It's immensely disappointing."

Charlotte laughed again. Olivia liked order and predictability and insisted on perfection for herself and others.

No wonder people disappointed so often, especially clumsy Charlotte and rebellious Millie.

“You’re very patient about Millie these days,”  
Charlotte realised.

“I do like her in some ways,” Olivia said, “despite being infuriating the rest of the time. Actually, the majority of the time.”

“But you think I’m a fool for being friends with her again.”

It hurt saying it, especially because she was falling headlong into the same trap as before. She had promised herself she wouldn’t and hadn’t fallen yet. But the attraction to Millie remained and would surely drive her past her limit.

Olivia paused with a sharp sniff through her nose. “I hate to say it.” She paused again. Seriously, it looked like it hurt. “But I think Millie will always be there for you.” Olivia looked Charlotte straight in the eye with alarming honesty, like she finally said out loud what lay unspoken a long time. “She always put you first.”

“How do you mean?”

“She was devoted to you. Not in the way you wanted.”  
Olivia put up a hand to stay complaints. “But when it came to the crunch, she always chose you.”

Charlotte bit her lip. It hadn’t felt that way.

“Like the time Dominic insisted she stay away from you,” Olivia continued, “Everyone expected—”

“What?” Charlotte sat up. “When?”

“In your second year?”

“I don’t remember that.”

“They were going steady, quite a change for Millie. You must remember it.”

“Yes, I remember them together. But...” She hesitated, uneasy. “They split up suddenly.” Charlotte frowned, the unease growing. “What happened?”

“He apparently gave her an ultimatum.” Olivia smoothed her dress, as if uncomfortable too. “Embarrassed that his girlfriend hung around with a lesbian, he told her to avoid you. He said it was non-negotiable.”

“I didn’t know.” Charlotte’s mouth hung open, feeling stupid at the ignorance. “What did Millie do?”

“She left him on the spot.”

“Oh.”

It hit hard. Dominic had been vicious about Millie after that. College gossip turned against her.

“Are you sure?” Charlotte asked quietly.

“I heard it from a friend of Dom’s who thought it hysterical. Also confirmed by another friend, so I don’t doubt it. I’m surprised you didn’t know though.”

Charlotte stared while letting this fragment of the past blend into her worldview. It chilled. A missing piece of information that changed the rest of the picture. Like someone turned a dial and fun, flirty, insensitive Millie blurred and instead an incomparable woman and friend came into focus.

It sunk in deep down, properly this time, how much Millie had lost when Charlotte walked away. And how careful she needed to be now. Because Millie didn't cast off every care like water off a duck's back, never had. Too distracted by her own hurt and jealousy, Charlotte hadn't noticed enough in the past.

She sank. "I took her friendship for granted. And god she was insensitive sometimes but..."

"Millie had feelings too," Olivia said. "Maybe you should check, from time to time, what those feelings are." She tilted her head.

"You're right. I should," Charlotte said, distracted by the shifting perspective of it all.

Olivia looked as if she'd say more but closed her mouth and rested her hands on her legs.

What should she do? Charlotte wanted to spend every minute with Millie. But that left no time for anyone else, no-one of romantic interest.

"Are you unhappy?" Olivia asked. "Do you feel like you're missing out since you became friends again with Millie?"

"No," Charlotte replied. She didn't have to think twice.

She was mature now, more at ease with herself and her sexuality than at college. She'd found a law firm where she might shine. Millie was there to say goodnight, in a message or in person when she stayed at Charlotte's cottage. Waking up to her that morning in bed was heavenly. As was reading in the evenings or watching TV with her legs resting on Millie's lap.



She realised, and it did surprise her that, “I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.”

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## Chapter 43

Millie ate lunch with Alec in the style they were accustomed to – cheap sandwiches and a tub of leftover pasta. But they sat on the grand steps of the Ashmolean Museum.

She pulled her jumper around her shoulders. It was sunny, but still cool enough in the shade, late spring, to chill nipples and have them pointing out historic landmarks.

Alec wore his best suit, thinning hair brushed forward tidy to make a good impression at his recent meeting.

“Olivia Sachdeva is wonderful,” he said through a mouthful of sandwich. “She’s head of family law at Bentley and knows her stuff.” He nodded, eyes wide and cheeks stuffed with value cheese and tomato. “I won’t bother her with standard cases on a *pro bono* basis. She’s agreed she’s more useful in an advisory role. Amazing. Simply amazing.”

Millie didn’t even roll her eyes. Credit where credit was due, Olivia was dedicated and extremely clever. She did roll her eyes at Alec though. He had that startled look of someone who’d met their hero.

“Did you hear she handled the McKenzie divorce?” he said, before taking another too-large bite.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Millie said with her tub of pasta balanced on her knees.

Alec took a turn to roll eyes. “The actors?”

“Nope.”

“Well, I suppose that was the point. Two high-profile actors and the divorce went so smoothly it didn’t hit the

papers. It shot round lawyer circles though. Looked like a big juicy case, but in Olivia's hands it was wrapped up in a blink of an eye."

Millie shrugged.

"She's fantastic."

Definite hero worship going on. Deserved too if Olivia was anywhere near as impressive as she proved at college.

"You haven't made the mistake of mentioning me then," Millie said. She couldn't help a wry smile.

"I did."

Millie looked at him.

"I won't again."

Millie laughed. "What did she do?"

Alec put down his sandwich in the cardboard packet. "A veneer of ice settled on the whole room, a particularly hard layer on Olivia. I don't think she moved for a good minute, except for the flare of her nostrils."

Millie laughed loudly again. "I thought she was getting used to me."

"You're right, she is. This was months ago when we first met. She brought your name up this time."

"Really?"

"We were discussing a case, and she snapped you'd have been the perfect lawyer to handle it, then ranted about how you gave up the profession."

“Oh.” Millie cooled, as always when someone prodded at why she’d walked away from the lucrative career.

Alec picked up on it straight away. “She doesn’t know, does she?”

“No.”

“What about Charlotte?” he asked gently.

“I told her.” Millie even smiled a little. “It was nice to. Well, awful. But I needed her to know.”

“Good.” Alec reached out and squeezed her knee and kept his hand in place. “I’m sorry if I made it worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“Having a baby soon after.”

“That’s not your problem, Alec Gooch.” She shuffled round on her bottom to face him. “And anyway, I adore you all. You, wife and little ‘un.”

Alec bunched his mouth in the corner, perhaps not convinced. “I wondered if you were avoiding us. I can meet you like this without the family reminder if you’re having a rough phase.”

“No. Not at all.” She couldn’t emphasise it enough. “I’ve just been seeing so much of Charlotte I’ve run short of time.” Sometimes she choked on what she’d lost when others enjoyed so much happiness, but that wasn’t why. “Sorry. I’ve been distracted.”

Unlike Virginia, Alec wouldn’t tell her if she’d been absent or grumpy. For a start, he was too busy with the toddler.

“Would be nice to see you though,” he said. “We appreciate your company. Come round for dinner.”

“I’d love that. But for now,” Millie sighed, “I need to get back.”

She clicked shut the lid on her tub of pasta, stood and brushed off her bottom and they wandered down the steps.

“And how are things between you?” Alec said, polishing off the sandwich.

“Between who?”

“You and Charlotte?”

Millie paused on the steps and put hand to hip. It was very unlike Alec to ask something personal outright. She tilted her head and squinted at him. He knew far more than he should.

“You’ve been talking to Virginia haven’t you.”

“More accurately, she’s been talking to me.”

“What did she say? Actually, don’t tell me.” Millie sliced the air to cut off the conversation.

Alec gazed at her, the corner of his mouth twitching, but kindness in his eyes – a soppy look that gave away he understood she was smitten at last.

“Stop it,” she snapped, more to prevent herself laughing than anything else. “Stop it now, Alec Gooch.”

He dropped his features so he resembled a hound, with wide eyes and the suggestion of jowls.

“This is all new for me. Christ, in so many ways. And it can’t be anything,” Millie said. “So don’t start.”

“OK,” he said, as they turned down Beaumont Street towards the surgery. “I’ll overlook that you disappeared off the face of the planet because someone stole you.”

She was ignoring him.

“And that it was obvious she was special from the moment you mentioned her name at Worcester College.”

Still ignoring him.

“And you’re the happiest and healthiest I’ve seen you.”

She smiled at that. “Stop it,” she said gently.

“I haven’t even heard you swear today.”

She’d noticed too, fuzzy and mellowed by whatever all this was that she felt for Charlotte. Like she walked around in a rosy halo of love hormones whenever she even thought about her friend.

“Bugger off,” she said, smiling.

Alec still had a silly expression on his face.

“Nothing can happen,” she said, “for all the reasons I’m sure Virginia told you.”

“She said they were stupid reasons.”

Millie laughed out loud at that. Then she sighed and became more serious. “I honestly don’t know what to do.” It seemed surreally complicated at that moment.

“Whatever you decide, I’m here if you need me,” Alec said. “For beer over heartache or for celebration.”

“I’ll be fine.” Millie looped her arm through his,  
“And...”

She trailed off at the sound of laughter. Charlotte’s instantly recognisable voice came from further along the street. Millie smiled and raised her arm to call out, then the words died on her lips.

Charlotte’s familiar mahogany hair flowed around her shoulders as she strode away down Beaumont Street. Less familiar? The woman who walked beside her. As tall as Charlotte, with enviably straight and beautiful red hair, the woman gazed at Charlotte with a smile only a little shy about its intention. Such an obvious giveaway. Millie froze inside.

A natural and striking couple, everything about the woman’s behaviour gave away her interest. The intent gaze at Charlotte, desperate to catch her eye. The laugh accompanied by a sidle closer. The hand that crept onto Charlotte’s shoulder.

Millie shuddered, the woman’s gesture as vivid as if she touched her, and she froze deeper at the intimacy of it resting there.

“You OK?” Alec asked.

She stared at the couple only half aware, Alec’s hand less distinct than the horrible tactile interaction between Charlotte and companion.

Did Charlotte show the same interest in the obviously attractive woman? She strolled with her characteristic long pace, her face hidden in the other direction, but inclined to listen to the other woman. Did she show a partiality? If not,

how long until she did, given how attractive and keen the companion was.

Millie was going to be sick. She wished herself anywhere but here, feeling anything but this.

Because this hurt.

“Millie?” Alec whispered.

This wasn't the kind of jealousy dispelled by taking on another lover. This was horrible. How did anyone bear this?

“Are you alright?” Alec asked.

“Give me a moment please,” she gasped.

Her world shifted beneath her feet, and she stumbled.

“Millie?” Alec asked again

Then more horrible still, another realisation. This is what Charlotte must have felt. All those years ago, at the end of university and their friendship. Charlotte endured this and, unable to cope, turned her back on Millie.

She understood now how unbearable that had been for her friend.

“Actually, Alec.” Millie gulped. “I'm struggling here.”

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## Chapter 44

It was here. The day of the Bentley event. And it had arrived far too quickly as far as Charlotte was concerned.

The past couple of weeks had flown by. Students sprinted to exams dressed in white tie and black gowns, a traditional red carnation pinned for their last exam. They'd emerge later to be covered in foam, fizz and food by friends, anything messy to trash their outfits. On her way to work, Charlotte had looked at them with nostalgic longing, then palpitations at the thought of exams. She still had anxiety dreams about her tort final. Then the streets were cleaned, balls held, undergraduates packed their suitcases into large cars, and it was suddenly the Friday of the event.

Charlotte sat at her desk, knee bouncing and jittery. An upcoming meeting preyed on her mind, as well as imagining every potential disaster for the firm's event. If the contract on her screen consisted solely of the word "elephant" she wouldn't have noticed.

She closed the lid of her laptop and took a deep breath. This event seriously trespassed beyond her comfort zone. One, she'd planned it contrary to the managing partner's wishes, and two, she'd be the centre of attention.

Her phone buzzed on the desk and she snatched it up, welcoming any distraction from her nerves and overwhelming sense of doom.

Message from Millie. "Good luck and see you later."  
Many kisses.

A drop of reassurance when Charlotte needed it, always potent from Millie. The words had presence and years behind them, like Millie was in the room with hand outstretched.

She hadn't seen her for days. Millie was caught up with Alec and family or was too tired from work to meet in the evenings. Charlotte seized the chance to entertain Olivia and organise the event, but she missed her best friend. An ache gnawed inside when apart too long. Any more than a day, and she felt out of sorts.

But Millie would be there tonight. The prospect grounded her again, so the room stopped spinning and the knot in her stomach eased.

“Right,” she said to the empty room.

Time for Rachel's review.

Charlotte descended the stairs, steps slow and mind on the evening. Figures passed below her in a blink – Hugo and Richard on their way to the large meeting room, she belatedly realised as she caught a snippet of their conversation. Richard's voice, always loud, made it up the stairs.

“I had nothing to do with the changed arrangements this evening. Charlotte went off-piste while I was away. Of course, I'm supporting their efforts for the sake of Bentley and Partners.”

A rumble from Hugo responded, but Charlotte couldn't make out the words and they disappeared into the meeting room. She paused on the stairs. Just when she was a bag of

nerves about the event, there was always Richard to undermine further.

“That...”

Charlotte thought of words she'd never utter out loud. Many she borrowed from Millie's description of the odious man. Then she smiled. Millie again. Always present. Always making her laugh at herself, and others, and giving perspective.

This day might go horribly wrong, but there was little Charlotte could do now. She put her foot forward and carried on walking. She shed her anxieties and put her paranoia to one side, because it was time to do this day, whatever happened.

Richard looked up, surprised, when she walked into the room. Hugo and Liz sat on one side of the long table and Richard the other. He rested his hands on the arms of his chair, elbows out, ankle on knee, spreading himself as wide as possible.

Charlotte leant over to pull out the chair next to him.

“What is it?” he said, and irritation wrecked his usual confident delivery. “Do you need help with something?”

“Not at all,” Charlotte said, almost amused. “I'm here to give feedback on Rachel's performance.”

“What would you know about it? You can't roll up to any performance review you fancy.”

He looked to Hugo. The managing partner raised his eyebrows and eyed Charlotte over his glasses.

“Did you invite her, Hugo?” Richard said, a laugh of ridicule in his voice.

“I,” emanated from across the table. The voice was from Liz, who paused to give the word gravitas and power. And my god, it worked. Charlotte envied the woman’s presence. “I called Charlotte here,” Liz finished with a smile curled on her lips.

“Beg your pardon,” Richard replied, but it wasn’t respectful. “I thought only senior partners decided promotions here.”

My god, the man even doubted Liz’s seniority.

“True,” Liz nodded, with a nonchalance Charlotte also envied. “But I handle the hiring and firing. As practice manager, I see everything, and I’m in the perfect position to give feedback.”

Hugo didn’t comment immediately, and his expression remained serious. Then he turned directly to Richard.

“Let’s make a start, shall we?”

Charlotte’s heart sank.

“So, you have everyday oversight of Rachel’s work.” Hugo looked down at a printed feedback form. “And although there’s nothing worrying here, I see you’ve recommended she remain as junior associate for now.”

“That’s correct.” Richard spun his chair towards Hugo and blanked the women in the room. “She’s a great girl,” Richard continued, “no complaints about her hire as a junior, but she’s not ready for the responsibility and independence of a full associate yet.”

Hugo nodded, as if in agreement. As managing partner, he'd have final say and Richard clearly had his ear.

"I'm happy she carries on under my wing," Richard said. "She's a wonderful worker but needs supervision and to grow in confidence before tackling more complex work."

Charlotte did a double take. Lacked confidence? Needed supervision? As far as she could tell, Richard was happy for Rachel to handle the workload with minimal input from him. She imagined the biggest factor in Rachel's lack of confidence was working for someone like Richard.

"Well," Hugo said, taking off his glasses. "You certainly seem to work well as a team and bring out the best in her. You've hit it out of the park with your workload this year. I'm very impressed."

Charlotte's mouth dropped as it became clear. Richard's impressive workload was all about Rachel hitting it out of the park, not him. Was he not going to credit her?

She'd seen this many times. Millie undermined at college. Her own abilities overlooked at previous companies. She hated that she'd doubted herself back then. It was easier to spot how people like Richard worked when she wasn't the target, and she saw clearly what he did here. Someone needed to advocate for Rachel.

Her heart sank. Already exposed with the changes to the annual event, this wouldn't make her popular with Hugo. And the evening might blow up in her face very publicly.

But she couldn't let this pass.

"I'm sorry," she said, putting out her hand.

All three looked to her - Richard in annoyance, Liz with pursed lips, Hugo with eyebrows raised.

“But while Richard has daily experience of Rachel’s work...” Charlotte paused and sighed. Stuff being subtle. “I disagree,” she started again, unwavering. She looked Hugo steady in the eye. “Everything I’ve seen about Rachel says the opposite.”

“When?” Richard snapped. “When have you observed this?”

“I worked with Rachel for two productive weeks when Richard was on holiday. I think both Rachel and I benefitted from the experience. Her maturity, judgement and work ethic impressed me and I wouldn’t hesitate to assign larger clients.”

“Two weeks superficial work isn’t comparable to my months of supervision.”

“And yet, none of what I saw,” Charlotte turned directly to address Richard, “resembles your representation of her. She is hardworking, independent and conscientious. I’d find it worrying if this organisation doesn’t value that. Very worrying.”

“Newly qualified lawyers are commonplace,” Richard said, shrugging. He addressed Hugo as if she wasn’t there. “This is a prestigious boutique practice, where clients expect skilled expertise beyond the standard delivery of the big firms. They want a personalised service with client-handling finesse.” He sat up taller in his chair, as if modelling an example.

“How does Rachel not meet those criteria?” Charlotte asked, genuinely confused. “She’s patient and clear, and possesses the hand-holding skills required by some clients.”

“She’s a workhorse. Zero charisma. She lacks flair.”

“Somebody has to do the work,” Charlotte said, incredulous. “And Rachel is competent, reliable and brings back clients. Repeat business and personal recommendations are the foundation of our section.”

“That’s fine.” Richard tutted. “I’m not suggesting we get rid of her. But don’t promote the workhorse.”

He adjusted his tie, posturing like the implied stallion.

She stayed focussed. “Treating Rachel like a workhorse, doesn’t mean she is one,” she said emphatically. “True, Rachel does more than her share. But assigning someone too much and overburdening them, does not make them a workhorse. Not allowing them to shine, also does not make them a workhorse. And, in fact, managing that workload takes a skill of its own and earns this practice many billable hours.”

She stood her ground while he remained turned away.

“I understand where you’re coming from,” she said.

She saw clearly that Rachel was the reason Richard’s contracts were handled efficiently and why his work rate was so high. Charlotte couldn’t accuse him without administrative proof, but it was obvious to everyone, surely.

“I understand why you don’t want her promoted and her working independently—”

“Thank you, Charlotte,” Liz interrupted, before she said too much.

“Yes, thank you, Charlotte,” Hugo said, brow furrowed. “Would you mind leaving us?”

Oh.

That wasn't a good sign.

She breathed in, and said, “Of course.”

Charlotte nodded and got to her feet. Neither Richard nor Hugo looked at her, and Richard was apparently staying.

Bigger oh.

Hugo's expression was, she tried to think, 'pregnant' sprung to mind. Whether it was due evil twins or a bouncing bundle of joy, she couldn't tell, and as she turned and walked from the meeting room, she sensed her job on the line.

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## Chapter 45

Charlotte's stomach climbed her throat as she strode towards Worcester College.

That had been a risky move. And with a mountain of mortgage, perhaps not the wisest. But she couldn't stand by and watch another woman side-lined by Richard, and her march became more emphatic as she marched through the gates of Worcester College in her evening wear.

It was done now. Decisions had been made. She'd taken her stand against Richard and the evening was in motion. Her reputation may have gone up in smoke. Hugo might be drafting a dismissal letter at that moment. But there was no turning back. Nothing would stop her now. Not her bra-less bouncing boobs in her backless dress. Not even the high heels she'd bought to match her Regency blue outfit and bolero jacket.

She flicked her hair from around her neck and stomped beneath the arches, shoulders back, determined, and almost straight into Annie.

"Hey, you." Annie stuttered to a halt beside Charlotte. "Oh, gosh." The events manager did a double take, then looked Charlotte up and down. "You look amazing."

"Thank you," Charlotte said, trying to smile.

"Nervous?"

"Determined." Charlotte nodded as if to emphasise the fact. "Yes, a little," she relented and she breathed in through her teeth. "Actually, quite a lot. I need this evening to go well, put it that way."

“It will.” Annie laughed and squeezed Charlotte’s arm, holding on longer than necessary. Perhaps Olivia had a point about the events manager. “The staff are here,” Annie continued, “and the food and drinks are ready.”

Charlotte gazed across the luscious lawn of the main quad, a perfect green at the start of summer. Food stalls lined the medieval cottage terrace on the left with staff preparing food. In the centre stood a marquee and temporary ballroom floor with a string quartet warming up in the corner. Elegant tables and chairs surrounded the floor and waiters in black trousers and white serving coats filled trays with glasses of Champagne.

Everything from the arched arcade to the imposing neoclassical terrace stood proud this evening, and a lantern-lit trail led the eye into the abundant gardens and pastoral distance.

“It looks perfect. The guests will be awed.”

“I hope so.” Annie smiled and tilted her head. “Call me if you need anything? Anything at all.” Annie walked away with a long look over her shoulder and vanished into the hall.

Olivia definitely had a point.

But there wasn’t time to think about that. Charlotte took a deep breath. The venue was stunning, and the evening held onto the warmth of the sunny day at a perfect temperature. They were all set.

But still those nerves jangled.

“Well, well, well,” wafted through the entrance.

Charlotte recognised the voice, even if the tone was a rare one, and she twirled round. Olivia strode beneath the arches, her long black evening dress lending exceptional elegance beyond even her usual. But it was her face that caught Charlotte's attention.

Olivia was smiling. Charlotte peered at her, afraid to be sure. Smiling was a good thing, right. Why was she smiling? It was unnerving, particularly this evening.

Olivia stopped in front of her, hand on hip. "Well, look at you," she said, the smile pinching into a satisfied smirk.

Did Charlotte have something on her dress? She scanned down, trying to spot a blemish, and twirled on the spot to check her backside.

"Am I OK?" Charlotte asked, confused, circling back to her friend.

Olivia tutted. "I didn't mean literally." The smile evaporated, leaving Olivia's standard vexation. Then it crept back. "I meant, look at you, standing up for Rachel."

"Oh!" Charlotte pushed down the nerves for a moment. "Did you hear? Because someone needed to say something against that lying," she took a breath, "person."

"Yes." Olivia beamed. "Liz told me."

"Did she think it was OK?"

"More than OK. There's no love lost between Liz and Richard. I can say that now you're advocating against him."

"Oh." Again. That wasn't completely reassuring. Charlotte had the impression of more happening behind the

company scenes than she appreciated.

“You did well,” Olivia emphasised. “I’d give you a high five, except you’d probably miss. But the sentiment is there. High five, Charlotte. Proud of you.”

“Thank you.” Charlotte’s cheeks ached. Her smile was that wide.

“I’ll catch up with you properly later. Liz ordered me to take up position in the marquee.”

And as Olivia sauntered off across the quad lawns, Liz wasn’t far behind. The office manager stopped with a grin blazing on her face, hands on hips and power stance in her black, tailored trouser suit. Her laugh rumbled beneath the arcade.

“There she is!” Liz boomed. “My god, girl, you delivered today.” She approached, shaking her head. “Put it there.” Liz raised her hand.

Charlotte laughed. “I’ve been reliably informed that I’d miss.”

“You! Put it up high!” Liz pointed to the sky.

She obliged. Liz held her arm in place with one hand and hit a high five with the other, so the slap echoed beneath the arches.

“There!” Liz said. “You took him apart in a steadfast, polite and honest way, and it was,” Liz paused, closed her eyes and smiled like a cat in sunshine, “delicious.”

“What did Hugo think? What did he say?”

“Never you mind Hugo. He,” Liz pointed her finger, as if telling off the air, “needs to have a good think about the price he’s willing to pay for hiring someone like Richard.”

That wasn’t entirely reassuring either.

“I’ve told him my experience,” Liz said, her obvious chagrin coming out in a growl. “And now we have your word as well. It’s always evidence and witnesses for Hugo.”

Charlotte mustn’t have looked happy.

“I have faith,” Liz said, peering at her with narrowed eyes.

Charlotte wished she did too, but she had a more vulnerable position than Liz.

“I couldn’t let it go,” she said, more to convince herself. “It was unfair to Rachel.”

“Neither should you. It was a delight.” Liz clapped her hands together. “Right, let’s make this evening one to remember and more evidence to sway Hugo. He can’t deny a success right in front of his eyes. Now, get ready. People are coming.”

That wasn’t a way to settle anyone. It sounded like hordes were about to charge the college gates.

Zain, the receptionist, joined her. He stood alongside to welcome clients, guests and staff, but Hugo was not yet among them. Did the managing partner think the same as Liz and Olivia and understand Richard benefitted neither clients nor company?

The quad filled with the murmur of awed guests and the clink of Champagne glasses. The smell of barbeque wafted Charlotte's way, so her head spun and she nearly walked away from her post despite her worries. She smiled at familiar clients and new ones who'd come on board because of her skills. Dusk fell, and the lights leant a soft glow to the scenery. When the string quartet struck a first chord, Charlotte turned round to find the event in full swing. A glittering and smiling crowd mixed and enjoyed the treat of the college and the evening couldn't be going any better.

But, no sign of Hugo.

Hope fought with nerves. She wasn't sure which would win. Surely everyone saw and heard how well it was going. But her heart bounded back into her throat to choke her. It was nerves, damn it.

Then she felt it, a wave of calm that washed away her anxiety.

Whether it was a sound, the unique footfall of her friend whether in running shoes or high heels, or the scent of favourite perfume that reached Charlotte in the air first, she turned knowing Millie was there.

"Wow," Charlotte breathed.

Millie glided towards her, the soft lights lending an exceptional glow. Millie's beautiful face blushed with health, eyes sparkled and full lips gently curved in a smile. Her expression held a multitude of feelings. But then so many coursed through Charlotte at the sight of her friend.

"You look..." Charlotte sighed.

Golden hair, dark and rich in dusk. Heart-shaped face and cheeks that she wanted to cup. The sublime fall of Millie's neck and rise of her clavicle. The dusky tops of breasts and depths of cleavage that plunged into a red evening dress. And that hour-glass figure. When Charlotte inhaled, her breath juddered in admiration.

“You're the most beautiful I've ever seen you.”  
Charlotte meant every word.

Millie gazed at her, with a subtle smile and dark eyes, as if too full of thoughts and words to say any. Millie reached out and Charlotte stared at the offered hand, the tapering fingers so familiar she felt them before they touched.

“Care to dance, Charlotte Albright?” Millie murmured.

“I would love to.”

She took Millie's fingers and slipped them between hers, and they descended into the quad and onto the dance floor. As they took to the centre, among couples dancing in each other's arms, her gaze never left Millie.

Charlotte spun towards her dance partner, so that Millie's fingers fell through hers only to catch them in her cupped palm. She caught Millie's waist and Millie took hers. The music flowed in a slow tempo and they moved together as one greater, whole presence, cocooned in the music and the glow from lanterns. Charlotte hardly noticed their surroundings or other people, too engrossed in her friend, whose eyes seemed to betray thoughts as deep as the ocean.

“I missed you,” Charlotte breathed.

Millie's eyebrows turned up in the centre. She raised her hand to Charlotte's shoulder and stroked along the curve of her neck, then held her head as if in longing.

"Missed you too," Millie murmured. "I had to catch up with a few things."

"I understand." Charlotte couldn't take her eyes off her tonight. There was nothing but Millie.

"I needed to think something through." Millie's eyes darted to the side before settling back on Charlotte. "In fact, I decided to book a holiday."

"Where will you go?" Charlotte asked, entranced.

"It's time I stayed with Mum, so I'm going to take a couple of weeks off."

"That sounds a good idea. Do you want me to come too?"

"No." Millie said, then more softly. "No, thank you. It's something I need to do on my own."

She squeezed Millie closer in reassurance. "Just say the word, and I'll be there if you need me."

Millie smiled.

"That's better," Charlotte whispered. Concern ached at her brow. "You haven't seemed so happy lately."

She wondered if Millie struggled with her past after sharing it. Or if the strain on the relationship with Belinda, her mother, worried her.

"I'm..." Millie faltered. "I'm OK."



“Talk to me later?” Charlotte pulled Millie in again, wanting to hold her as close as possible. “I’ll have to circulate a while, but I’ll be free later.”

“Don’t worry if you’re not.”

“I will be,” Charlotte whispered. Why would she not have time for Millie? “And tomorrow, a walk in the park and brunch at mine?”

“That’d be nice.” Millie glanced over Charlotte’s shoulder and her mood seemed to fade. “But don’t worry if something comes up.”

“It won’t,” Charlotte said lightly, thinking it wouldn’t.

Millie gazed up, eyes filled with unfathomable thoughts. She cupped Charlotte’s cheek, and Charlotte had to close her eyes the sensation was so heavenly. Fingers ran through her hair and stroked behind her neck, lulling her into submission, so she dipped forward and narrowed the gap between them.

They danced closer, Charlotte drawing Millie in around her waist, while Millie cradled her neck. Then a little at a time, they closed the remaining gap so that Millie rested her forehead on her cheek. Charlotte melted at the warm tenderness of Millie’s skin against hers. All of it delighted. The supple intimacy of their faces touching. The comfort of Millie cradling her head. The thrill of Millie’s fingertips curling over her palm. It was as if Charlotte was more alive and content than at any other moment in her life. This was perfection. A summer’s night, with the person she loved most, dancing with her heart beating slow and strong against the

chest of the one she adored. She had never owned her life and happiness as she did in that moment.

Charlotte roused with a groan at the loss of contact when Millie tipped her head away. Then she sighed, as it was replaced with a gentle kiss on her lips. She felt that kiss from its exquisite touch on her mouth, its delicate warmth, its love, years of it, to deep down into her soul. It reached every atom in her body. Every part of her being was touched, and she loved Millie with all.

They held the kiss as the quartet drew out a last note, and only then did she open her eyes to the most beautiful woman in the world. The look on Millie's face held no limits, no reservations. Standing before Millie like this was the most blissful sensation imaginable.

The ring of fork tapping on glass drew Charlotte's attention, and they parted a little as she turned to face the sound.

Hugo stepped out from the marquee, glass and fork in hand. He cut a tall figure in the crowd, and the guests and staff circled, their attention fixed on the managing partner.

"Good evening," he called out, with a benevolent smile on rosy cheeks.

Charlotte's heart rate picked up. She'd been in a pleasant stupor, cocooned in Millie's presence, lost in one of her kisses. A phenomenal kiss. The most wonderful ever. She struggled to pull herself out of its spell to concentrate on Hugo, but she needed to. This was judgement time. She shook her head and readied herself while holding Millie around the waist.

Hugo looked very happy. With a quick scan of the crowd, she checked for Richard's presence, but found no sign of him.

Hugo paused for everyone to settle and silence to descend, then began.

"I cannot tell you how pleased I am with this evening." He stretched out to figuratively encompass the whole crowd, while holding a glass with the other hand. "A Bentley annual event is not new, but this year we've expanded in scope. We've found more to enjoy, the further we spread our wings, and the conversations I'm hearing between a wider set of people and companies are exciting in themselves."

Murmurs and nods rippled through the crowd. Charlotte's heart lifted. This was good, surely?

"Worcester is my *alma mater*, of which I'm inordinately proud. Inviting everyone here gives me great pleasure. Now," he bowed a little, "the evening's success is owed to our practice manager, Liz Oduwole. Would you mind raising your hand please, Liz?"

The sea of people swirled in eddies towards Liz, who raised a hand.

"Liz, I should have listened to you earlier. You have tried to broaden the event for years and I've been intransigent and have resisted. I stand corrected and apologise for not listening sooner. And I don't think she'll mind," he raised his eyebrows in question and Liz nodded her go-ahead, "that we in turn owe our thanks to star associate, Charlotte Albright, for helping to make the event a success. You," he paused and held out his glass towards Charlotte, "are having quite the year."

Charlotte's cheeks burned and her heart rate cantered so fast it was a continuous tone. She managed to smile and wave in acknowledgement without poking anyone in the eye.

"So," Hugo regaled, "Please raise your glasses to a wonderful evening and to you all. Thank you!"

Glasses lifted around the quad. The night sparkled with lanterns and filled with murmurs of appreciation and giggles from too much Champagne. At a signal from Hugo, the string quartet launched into an energetic piece.

Hugo strode towards her, and Charlotte twitched with apprehension, smoothed her dress and clutched her hands together.

"Evening, Hugo," she said as he came to a stop. Nerves made her sound like a teen.

"I meant it, Charlotte," he said, beaming. "You've had an exceptional year."

"Thank you." She wished the red of her cheeks would subside.

"You've supported and nurtured junior staff, protected clients, brought in new business, and now this evening. An extraordinary few months. You're exactly the kind of person I want in a senior position at Bentley."

"Blimey." There was nothing like a compliment on her exceptional skills to reduce her to none. Hopefully, he'd overlook the lack of verbal finesse. "Thank you," she managed.

"You came with a glowing recommendation, and I hired you as an expert in your field. You have lived up to that,

and gone above and beyond, always in your own style. So, here's to you."

Charlotte couldn't stop grinning, and she lifted on tip toes even in high heels.

"Enjoy the rest of your evening," Hugo said. He turned to re-join the event before hesitating. "Oh, are you enjoying the attic office?"

"Very much," she said, rattling out the words at a pace. "I love the view and peace," she burred.

"Thought you might." He smiled. "My old room. Thought you'd appreciate the quiet." And he nodded and left.

Charlotte stood staring at the space he'd occupied while it all sank in. The adrenaline from the encounter with Richard, the evening's success, her acclaim from the managing partner and, above all, the foundation of love and intimacy with Millie. It was like she could burst. Everything she'd strived for was coming to fruition.

She spun round at a gentle tug on her elbow and opened her mouth to spill her thoughts and feelings to Millie.

But it was Annie who held her arm.

"Oh," Charlotte said, taken aback. She was sure it would be Millie.

## Chapter 46

Millie stared, brittle as ice, tingling as if the shock crystallised on her skin.

She'd stepped away when Hugo singled out Charlotte to let her take the limelight, then hung back, beaming at her friend finally getting the acknowledgement she deserved for her skills and hard work.

But now her friend blushed from compliments, not from Hugo, but the pretty events manager.

Such a change. Less than five minutes since Millie closed her eyes and soaked in the intimacy of Charlotte's embrace. She'd rested her forehead on her friend's cheek and taken in every sensation as if the last time they'd dance like that.

And that kiss. What the hell had Millie been thinking? That sensational kiss that made her feel like one with Charlotte. It soothed and made fluid every inch of her body. The hit of seeing Charlotte with someone else moments later shunted her from the comfort of humid warmth to raw Arctic. Nausea hit as she watched, much worse this time than the first realisation in Beaumont Street that someone else wanted Charlotte.

"Does it hurt?" a voice murmured. Olivia stood beside her.

"What?" Millie gasped incredulously.

"Does it hurt seeing her with someone else?"

Her best-ever friend? The love of her life? The woman she adored from morning until night, and round and round again forever. The one she'd give her last cheese toastie. The person whose laugh made her heart swell. The woman who was everything. Did it hurt that another moved on her right in front of Millie's eyes?

Millie swallowed, and her voice came out weakly. "It's fucking killing me."

The warmth of a hand hovered over her shoulder but didn't land.

"It's been months now, hasn't it?" Olivia murmured. "That you've been attracted to her."

Millie nodded.

Olivia paused before saying, "Is it the longest you've been interested in anyone?"

"By far."

The hand rested on her shoulder with a gentle squeeze. Millie closed her eyes and gave in to the sinking sensation, Olivia's sympathetic touch only hastening her collapse. Christ, it was really something when even Olivia showed compassion. Millie's state must be written on her face and whole body.

Olivia inhaled but paused again. "Is it time to tell her?"

"Don't you dare let me down." Millie whipped round. "For Christ's sake, not now."

Olivia frowned but her habitual disdain for Millie remained absent.

“You, of all people, should hold me back,” Millie snapped.

But Olivia seemed purely thoughtful. “Don’t you think Charlotte should know? If it’s this serious?”

“No,” Millie cried out. “Look.” She pointed towards her friend and the events manager. “She’s happy. Charlotte finally has everything she wanted. She’s secure, good at her job, owns a house. And now an attractive woman is showing an interest. I’m not messing that up by lobbing in, ‘Hey Charlotte, this is a decade late, but do you fancy a shag?’”

Olivia considered. “Is that really all it is?”

The ferocity evaporated from Millie, the energy gone and chill returning. “Nowhere near,” she said, and her eyes dropped to the ground.

She made herself turn, with heavy heart and body, to Charlotte in the distance. Both could see the red head flirted with her. It killed Millie every time. It physically hurt.

She breathed out. “I can’t stay and watch this.”

“Millie, if it’s that bad, how will you stay friends? What if they date?”

“I haven’t thought that far yet.” Millie stared at the ground, aware Olivia still watched her. “I don’t know how to do this,” she admitted.

Millie couldn’t meet Olivia’s eyes. It was bad enough pouring out her heart to someone so adversarial. Admitting her weakness and inadequacy was the last thing she wanted. But what she said was true.



“I haven’t worked out how to tell her, and the middle of the firm event is not the time.”

Millie peeped up at Olivia, who blurred in her vision. She sniffed, only now aware that tears formed.

“Look at me,” Millie laughed in despair. “I can’t face her without causing a scene and making people stare. I won’t do that to her.” Millie blinked to clear the tears. “I need to get out of here.”

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“Would you like a drink?” Annie asked.

Charlotte smiled. “Maybe I will.”

She glanced over her shoulder. Millie was deep in conversation with Olivia of all people, and for once they weren’t quarrelling, although she couldn’t see their expressions in the lantern light. Olivia even made physical contact and placed her hand on Millie’s shoulder. Perhaps they finally, grudgingly, accepted each other.

“Just one then,” Charlotte said, turning back, “now the event’s in full swing.”

“I’m going to indulge as well.”

The events manager swished hair over a shoulder and plucked two flutes of Champagne from a waiter’s tray. She handed a gently bubbling drink to Charlotte.

“Here’s to you,” Annie said, her smile broad and pretty.

“Thank you, although the credit goes to you and your team at Worcester.”

Annie nodded in acknowledgement. “It’s nice to be appreciated.” Her eyes lingered on Charlotte’s. “You’ve made a great impression at your practice.”

“Yes,” Charlotte said, breathing out and spreading her eyes wide in disbelief. “It’s come out of the blue. I’ve...” She trailed off. Did Annie want this level of detail? “I’ve been working hard for so long without getting anywhere, it’s suddenly come together this year.”

“You deserve it,” Annie said.

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do.” Annie smiled. “I’ve seen you in action and heard people talking about you.”

“Oh.” Charlotte nodded. “Thank you. That’s nice to hear.”

She’d accomplished everything she’d intended. All the reasons she’d moved to Oxford had borne fruit. She breathed in deep with satisfaction at standing on her own two feet and on her way to a partnership. She owned a small home. Even her mother made the odd noise of approval, and when she didn’t, Charlotte shrugged off her criticism, more or less.

And she had Millie back, something she hadn’t bargained on but valued most of all.

“I wondered,” Annie looked into her glass, “now we’ve finished working together, if you’d like to meet up sometime?”

Charlotte opened her mouth. Did Annie mean a date? The way she looked at Charlotte, the tentative smile on her lips, patiently waiting for an answer, rather than the fluid chat they indulged over event arrangements, even Charlotte could spot it.

“I...” Charlotte hesitated.

She should jump at the offer with someone like this. Why did she pause? It all came back to not leaving room in her life, didn't it? With her focus on work and her best friend, there wasn't time to think about dating. Yes, she'd done it again, like she'd realised talking to Olivia. She'd become so attached to Millie, there wasn't room for romantic relationships.

Before coming back to Oxford, she'd focussed on how it ended between them. She fixated on the sharp hurt to force herself to forget Millie and never look back. Though sometimes she ached for a hug, or turned to talk to her absent friend, she shut it down quickly so it couldn't take hold. And Charlotte had forgotten the good things.

Then over months, she'd let Millie in again. All the good things she'd denied crept back, from the colossal support to the everyday. So, at last, Charlotte realised why she'd been so attached to Millie the first time, why it was such a loss, and why she couldn't pull herself away now.

Her heart pounded.

“I'm flattered.” She gasped. “Really flattered. And I should be jumping at a date with someone so nice, intelligent and pretty...”

Annie was all those, but nothing beyond that for her. Nothing like the spark and magnetism of meeting Millie, not even that first time when Charlotte was excited to make a friend at university. And nothing like the depth of feeling and history they'd built in the years since.

Her heart pounded, overcome with longing and appreciation for all their times together. When Millie held out a tissue to wipe away her tears or when she had a cold. The bounce on the bed, as Millie plumped herself next to Charlotte and hugged her, because her friend knew before she did that's what she needed. Millie was the first voice Charlotte wanted to hear in the morning. And no day was better than those Millie stayed at Charlotte's home. Millie occupied her thoughts before drifting into dreams and was the person she told the best and worst of her day.

Her breath caught at the realisation. She never wanted to lose that again. With all her heart, she wanted her friend to always be there. And now, when Charlotte thought about it, she didn't want to make room for dating.

This year she'd accomplished everything she wanted with Millie's support, and if she had to choose one thing to keep, it would be Millie.

"So, thank you," Charlotte said. "But I'm—"

"In love with your friend," Annie finished.

The events manager looked to her drink and slowly back at Charlotte, disappointment flickering, then acceptance settling over her features.

“Yes, I am,” Charlotte whispered. “I’m in love with Millie.”

“I saw you dance, and it seemed clear, but I wanted to check.” Annie pursed her lips.

“Yes. It is clear,” Charlotte realised. She wanted Millie and needed to find her now. “Would you excuse me?”

Annie nodded with a smile. “Of course.”

Charlotte put her glass on a table and looked around for her friend. She had to find her. Because she wanted Millie in her life most of all.

This friendship was important beyond everything else. Charlotte had walked away from it before. And by pure chance Millie was there when she returned to Oxford. She didn’t want to lose this again.

“What do you need, Millie?” Charlotte thought, as she scanned round the quad.

Charlotte needed their companionship, their banter, mutual support and understanding. Her friend to lounge on the sofa with legs over her knees. The warm hug when they met or parted, which filled Charlotte with happiness and strength ready to face the world. And she could live on extraordinary kisses alone like the tender intimacy they shared on the dance floor.

“What do you need Millie?” she said, as she desperately sought her. “Because I need this. I need us. Whatever we are together, however it must be, I want us most of all.”

## Chapter 47

Millie had gone. Olivia talked with clients, but there was no sign of their mutual friend. Charlotte scuttled up the steps to the arcade and turned back to scan the quad.

Clouds of smoke and steam wafted from food stalls. Groups in black tie, suits and all colours of gown talked with animation. And music from the string quartet livened the air. Then a flash of red caught Charlotte's eye, and she saw Millie's bouncing curls disappear down a lantern-lit path into the gardens.

Charlotte tore across the dance floor, around the marquee. When she reached the small arched doorway in the back wall of the quad to grounds beyond, Millie was disappearing into darkness. Her shape blended into formal beds, the dark silhouettes of abundant summer growth about to hide her.

“Millie!”

She swore Millie heard. The music and chatter from the event didn't intrude into the larger grounds enough to drown her voice.

“Millie!”

But Millie walked faster and headed towards the trees.

Charlotte pulled off her high heels, skipped onto the grass, and ran after her friend. She curled around topiary bushes, faster towards the garden bridge beneath trees, before she'd lose Millie where the path forked around the lake.

“Millie, please wait!” she shouted.

It was clearly audible in the dusk, with no-one in the quiet expanse of grounds except a couple distant across the lake towards the pavilion.

“Please!”

The figure in red, with head of luscious blonde curls, slowed. Millie stopped beneath the first trees in darkness, so that Charlotte strained to see her detail. She remained turned away, shoulders raised and tense, holding up her dress to walk freely, as if she might march off any second.

“I need to talk to you.”

Charlotte came to a halt, breathing hard, face burning from exertion and the small amount of alcohol. She stood and waited for her eyes to adjust. The sky above the trees had fallen into deep saturated blue and Millie’s shoulders glowed pale in the twilight. Millie turned her head ever so slightly, the curve of her beautiful cheeks visible. She didn’t say a word.

Charlotte recovered enough to speak. “Millie, I need to tell you something.”

“Please don’t,” Millie replied, her voice as subdued in the falling night as the whispers of leaves in the trees.

“But I—”

“Is it about Annie?” Millie choked on the name. “The events manager?”

“In a way, yes.”

“Then, please, not now.” Millie shook her head as if it pained her.

“But—”

“Just,” Millie’s shoulders lifted, “another time. You can tell me all about her soon. Let me get through tonight though.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Please. I can’t hear it right now.” Millie gulped. “Give me time and…” She faltered and turned away, swiping at her face.

Charlotte stood watching her friend, as she took deep breaths herself, full of everything she wanted to tell Millie, all the feelings erupting inside. “But I want to know what you need, because—”

“Don’t Charlotte!” Millie shot her hands to her head as if trying to keep everything in. “I’m begging you not to do this right now. I will say something I regret.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Damn it, please.”

“What’s happened?” Charlotte took a step forward. “What’s wrong?”

“For Christ’s sake, stop!” Millie spun around.

She’d spat out the words in one movement, and Charlotte stared, her questions still obvious.

“What’s wrong!” Millie said with fiery hurt. “Is that I’ve fallen in love with you. That’s what’s wrong.”

Millie’s cheeks burned red and glistened with tears, her eyes puffy where she must have rubbed and wiped time and again. A fierce, painful upset gripped Millie’s face while she stared unflinchingly at Charlotte.



“I’m sorry,” Millie shot out. “But I asked you to stop, and now you know. That’s just how it is.” Millie glared, both defiant and devastated. “I went and fell in love with you.”

“But...?” Charlotte stuttered. “When?”

“Months now.” Millie’s chest expanded high and deflated. “I didn’t mean to. And I’ve tried to get over it so many times. But it won’t stop. All I do is fall more in love with you, and...” she breathed in fast so that it caught in her throat, “it hurts.”

“I don’t understand,” Charlotte said weakly.

She’d been ready to spill her own thoughts and feelings, and Millie had pulled the rug from beneath her and words disappeared.

“Neither do I,” Millie cried. “You’re the one person I can’t fall in love with, and I only have eyes for you. The one person I cannot crave, and my body longs for yours like nothing else.”

Charlotte blinked.

“And god, do I know the timing’s cruel.” Millie’s mouth tugged at the corners with frustration. “And god, I realise I’m asking you to bear a hell of a lot here. But.” Her breaths became louder and more upset with every thought she spilled. “I am deeply in love with you. I can’t think of anything but you. And it fucking kills me to see you with someone else.”

Millie bowed her head. “And what kills me more,” she paused again, blowing out a whole breath, “is realising this is

how you felt about me. And now that you're happy, I hate that I'm doing this to you."

"Millie," Charlotte whispered. She desperately looked to her friend and put out a hand.

Millie stepped back. "I've asked a lot of you over the years. I know exactly how much now. So, I realise this fucking sucks. And I'm sorry it took too long for me to want you. But I do. And I can't stop. And I keep trying, and all that happens is I adore you more."

Charlotte tried another step toward her friend.

"Don't." Millie shook her head. "Because I'm not lying here." She clenched her hands in frustration. "I can't keep away from you. And right now, if you touch me, I might cry or kiss you."

"Really?" Charlotte whispered.

"Really," Millie said, almost in a shout.

"But when? Since when were you attracted to me?"

Millie looked at her with despair, as if she were being cruel. She had an image suddenly of Millie, as desperate but not upset.

"Was it the weekend I moved?"

There'd been that moment where Charlotte nearly lost it, that palpable sexual tension which only broke when Millie squeezed her so tight it dissipated. Was it the same for them both?

Millie shook her head. "Before that. Way before."

“I didn’t realise, sorry,” Charlotte whispered. “I’m used to being close to you.” Is that why she’d not noticed? “I like being close to you.” Perhaps she was too distracted by her own enjoyment and cosy intimacy with Millie.

“You affect me in so many ways,” Millie said.

Charlotte leaned forward, about to take a step.

“You can’t,” Millie said, shooting out a hand to stop her. “Because a single touch from you can seduce me.” She stared as if daring Charlotte refute it. Then her expression softened, although the pain remained. “Another time, your touch will make me so light it’s like heaven. A gesture can reassure and support me. You’re my foundation and safe place. Other times, you’ll make me laugh until my stomach aches and I forget anything could ever be bad.”

Millie paused and gathered herself. “So, I wish, with all my heart, I could make it stop. Because I love you most of all in the world but falling in love with you was the last thing I saw coming.”

Charlotte did step closer this time and reached towards her friend. Her very beautiful friend, who stood defiant, upset, hands on hips in a posture that was Millie through and through.

“I came here,” Charlotte said gently, “to tell you that I need you, this thing we have together. And I wanted to ask what you needed to be happy too.”

Millie stared at her, eyebrows in a hurt roof.

“I came to say I want you in my life, every day. I wondered if you fancied that too. And if you like how we are

together then, could we do this forever, please? Because nothing means more than this – you and me.” She pointed to her chest, then to Millie.

“Yes, I’m happy with my life,” Charlotte acknowledged. “This year has been incredible. But if it doesn’t include you, the rest pales. I don’t want a girlfriend because I want to spend time with you. You’re the one I want to lie beside in the garden, to choose paint with and wake up to. The one to steal my books and leave infuriating dog-eared pages. Because you’re everything to me.”

Still Millie stared.

“So, if you want that too...” she paused, still unable to believe what Millie had said. Did she really want her? Like a lover? “If you want that too, you’ve got it. You’ve got all of me.”

Millie’s eyebrows only seemed to strain higher as her eyes glistened.

“I have been kidding myself.” Charlotte stepped closer, almost reaching Millie now. “Because I am still in love with you. Always have been. Sometimes, I keep it buried and distract myself with everything else we have together. And I’ve hidden it well because we have so much. But it’s always there. I can’t see it ever stopping. Do you know that?”

Millie looked away.

“Do you already know that?” Charlotte whispered. She reached out, tentatively closing the remaining gap between them. “Because you walked in here tonight, the most stunning woman I ever saw, and no-one can compare to you.”

No-one ever had.

There was a moment of silence. Charlotte wondered if she'd lost her somehow. Then Millie snatched her hands away from her hips, covered her face, and burst into tears.

Charlotte closed the last distance between them, scooped Millie into her arms and pulled her to her chest.

“I love you, Millie,” she said, with her friend sobbing beneath her chin. “I love you so much. I will have to say it a thousand times for it to mean what I feel.”

Millie's arms left her face and encircled Charlotte, pulling her tight and blubbering into her cleavage.

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## Chapter 48

“I’m sorry,” Millie said.

She nestled in Charlotte’s chest, face dewy with tears and encircled by her friend’s arms. “I thought I could hold on this evening.”

“I wish you’d told me sooner,” Charlotte murmured above. Her lips stroked Millie’s forehead as she spoke.

Millie drew up her gaze to find Charlotte’s face, soft in the dusk, but the gentle smile clear.

“For a while, I didn’t know what I felt or if it would pass.” Millie rested her hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “Then it grew and...” She breathed hard, not wanting it to take her again. “I didn’t want to cause a scene. I knew Annie was interested, but I thought I could cope.”

“Millie.” Charlotte’s face tightened with concern although her embrace only comforted closer. “What were you going to do? Is this why you planned a break?”

She nodded, ashamed of her dishonesty.

“I wondered if you were pulling away,” Charlotte said. “I was too busy to dwell on it and I was so sure of our friendship that—”

“Please don’t say any more.” She put her fingertips to Charlotte’s soft cheek, to stop any further words. “I didn’t know what to do. This is very new for me.”

“That I’m a woman?” Charlotte asked.

“That, and you’re the first person I’ve been attracted to in a long time. That I’m in love with you. And you’re my best

friend who I can't lose. I didn't see a way through all that.”  
Her head still burned with the chaos of it all.

“Let's take it slow then?” Charlotte whispered.  
“Nothing has to change overnight. I'm here, and I want you,  
and I want us to be happy.”

Millie found herself nodding and gazing into her friend's dark eyes. She stroked her finger down to Charlotte's mouth and those beautiful lips. No longer a friend.

Millie tilted her face to meet Charlotte's lips with her own in a gentle kiss, one that spoke of love and regard, the kind they'd indulged from time to time before. But it could be more tonight, and Millie opened her mouth to take it deeper. To taste and feel Charlotte properly. The kind of kiss that made her salivate, and warmth spread so it loosened her body and made her hands wander.

She deepened the kiss, slid her fingers through Charlotte's luxurious hair and curved her body to fit snug into hers. The movement was met by a hitch in Charlotte's breath which had Millie exploring urgently, wanting to take in the woman she'd craved. She stroked beneath Charlotte's jacket, down her back left naked by her dress, over her hips. A simple movement, but full of intention. Her arousal leapt as Charlotte responded by slipping her hand over her buttock, pulling Millie closer, so they met where Millie had become sensitive.

A moan escaped Charlotte and she pulled out of the kiss. “OK.” She inhaled. “You really are attracted to me.”  
Disbelief still haunted her whisper.

“Yes, I am,” Millie murmured.

“It’s taking a little while to sink in, that’s all. I didn’t believe you at first.”

“Believe me,” Millie purred. She stared at the full, sensual lips of her companion. “I’m very attracted to you.”

And as she took Charlotte’s mouth again, an old confidence returned. Millie moved closer, a thrum of excitement flooding her, fuelled by the same need apparent in Charlotte’s desperate hands.

This was escalating rapidly.

Charlotte stopped for breath. “Do we...?” Her voice still held disbelief, but also happy surprise. “Do we need to go home?”

Millie nodded and stroked along Charlotte’s primed bottom lip, the delicate suppleness evocative on her fingertip. “I think,” she said, smiling and welcoming the sensation, “maybe that’s a good idea.”

She could have laughed when Charlotte’s eyes widened with awe and excitement.

“We can just sleep,” Charlotte said between breaths. “If you want. We can do anything.”

She heard the conflict clearly in Charlotte, wonderful readable Charlotte, trying to be patient while yearning for anything but. The simultaneous caress of Millie’s buttocks was likely subconscious but very revealing.

“I’m not sure that’s possible,” Millie purred in reassurance.



Charlotte looked around the gardens. “I need to sort a few things.” Then she kissed Millie again, as if unable to tear herself away.

Millie couldn't help her hands wandering higher, the obvious bra-less shape of Charlotte's chest in her evening dress irresistible. Without thinking, she cupped Charlotte's breasts, enjoying them with a rhythmic massage, flicking her thumbs over nipples that rose in response.

Charlotte pulled away, gulping. “I need... Let me sort the event out.” She stretched an arm out stiff, as if needing to keep Millie distant but unable to let her go.

They walked back towards the main quad. Millie kept looking at Charlotte and found her gazing back, the expression changing from concern to longing, then laughing because she'd find the same longing in Millie.

They stopped and kissed again. And again. And by the time they reached the party, both were giddy and held hands. They found the quad as busy as when they'd left, the event in full swing late into the night.

Charlotte's face sank. “I thought most would be gone by now. I don't know when I can leave.” But she didn't let go and stayed close.

A figure, elegant in black, cut its way through the glittering crowd. The saunter was familiar, as was the raised eyebrow. Olivia stopped two steps away. Her gaze flicked to Millie and Charlotte's joined hands, then to each of their faces in turn, the eyebrows climbing further. It was a phenomenal feat. The woman had levels of eyebrow quirk. She executed an entire conversation with them.

“Look, Olivia,” Charlotte said with a sigh towards their friend. “Before you say anything about Millie and me together, I want to—”

“Go home,” Olivia said, a smile twitching.

“But this is important. I want you to accept—”

“I don’t need to hear another word,” Olivia said, slowly and emphatically. “The senior partners can stay and close the event. Hugo’s in his element, and Liz and I have it covered.”

Millie observed silently for once, watching the conversation ping from Charlotte to Olivia.

“But I—” Charlotte started.

Olivia snapped up a hand, a palm forbidding any further detail. “It will be done.”

“But Millie and—”

“For the love of all things holy, just go, get a room, be home already. And try not to break each other’s hearts for a while.”

Millie tried not to grin at the shock on Charlotte’s face. She tried very hard. And failed very badly.

“Did you...?” Charlotte faltered. A frown crinkled between her eyebrows in that way Millie adored. Charlotte looked from Olivia to Millie and back to Olivia again. “Did you know?”

Olivia’s eye roll was spectacular, a whole event in itself. “I’ve always known with you two. Now go!” Olivia

turned on her heel with two hands in the air. “I don’t need to know the details.”

Millie still grinned while Charlotte stared mouth open at Olivia marching away.

“Did you tell...?”

“Olivia just knows things. It’s alarming, frankly,” Millie said.

Then she smiled as she dropped her eyes to Charlotte’s lips, turned into her delectable body and rested a hand on her chest.

“I think we should do as Olivia suggests and get out of here.” And she couldn’t help trailing her finger to tease the top of Charlotte’s cleavage.

She was delighted when Charlotte gulped and said, “Let’s go home.”

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A taxi ride to East Oxford, and night had fallen. She hesitated in the bedroom doorway while Charlotte switched on the bedside lamp to cast a glow over the room. When Charlotte stood and turned, her features were softened by the gentle light and her adoring expression.

“Nervous?” Charlotte asked, quietly.

Millie hadn’t been. The rollercoaster of emotions had propelled her here, but now away from Charlotte’s arms where every touch seduced, she fluttered with anxiety.

“A little,” Millie admitted.

It had been a long time since anyone. A long time since her exuberant confidence in bed. And this was entirely new.

Charlotte came to her and slipped a hand around her waist. “We can just go to sleep.” Charlotte squeezed ever so slightly, the one full of assurance and patience tonight. Then Charlotte caressed with her thumb, the tiny movement enough for a flood of interest to awaken Millie.

“I’m not sure I’d sleep, not lying next to you.” Not a chance if Charlotte touched her. And otherwise, Millie would lie and take her in with her eyes all night.

Charlotte lifted a hand and stroked beneath her chin, and Millie blinked compliant and drowsy with the seductive gesture.

“Anything you’re not comfortable with, tell me,” Charlotte murmured. “If you need a moment, let me know. We have all the time in the world.”

And this had her succumbing even quicker, body hungry after fasting so long, and finding release with someone irresistible and understanding with who she could let go.

Millie nodded, eyes fixed on Charlotte’s lips, which she swore were the most full and irresistible she’d seen.

“I will,” Millie breathed, hypnotised and lured and slipping her own lips around them.

It was different this time. She met Charlotte’s lips with mutual acknowledged desire, hungry and greedy. She held Charlotte’s head, hair spilling over her fingers, and opened her mouth to enjoy her lover. Her tongue licked at Charlotte’s lip

and tasted her way inside, the tip finding Charlotte's, shy at first, then tantalising, the firm tenderness evocative again, so that Millie ached between her legs.

Her breathing already heightened, she rolled against Charlotte's body, with waves of pleasure and spiralling desire igniting a craving for every part of Charlotte, the same mirrored and escalating in her lover's response.

Charlotte pulled away for a moment. "Can we undress?"

Millie nodded.

"Will you...?"

Charlotte swept her long hair away from her neck to expose the rise of her shoulder, the graceful line and beautiful olive skin, as well as Charlotte's words, inviting touch. Millie reached behind to find the zip, encircling her and stepping into Charlotte's heady warmth. She held the low-cut hem in one hand and gently pulled the thin zip downwards, the sound so suggestive her heart pounded. Into the dip of Charlotte's back, over the rise of her behind, she slipped her finger all the way to Charlotte's underwear.

Millie stared into Charlotte's eyes, the deep hazel darkened into black in the subtle glow of the lamp, as she stroked a finger into the slit of the dress. She took in the same curves, naked to the touch this time, as she ran her fingertip up. How soft Charlotte was. How delectable her body on the sensitive pad of a single finger. It filled Millie's entire body with want.

She paused, her hands about to pull Charlotte's dress apart.

"Can I?"

At Charlotte's nod, she slipped the dress from around Charlotte's shoulders. She had to hesitate to take in the shape of her beautiful, statuesque lover. Even the slight reveal was appealing. The shape of her shoulders, the tone of muscle at the top of her arms, the beginnings of the rise of breasts.

"You really are beautiful," Millie whispered, tracing the line of Charlotte's neck and shoulder. She licked her top lip, moistening in anticipation, then smiled at what she'd done.

Charlotte's eyes sparkled, laughter lines creasing a little. "Like what you see?" She must have caught the gesture too.

"Yes, I do," Millie replied, her smile full.

But it faded into awe as Charlotte slipped the dress from her arms, so it folded away from her chest, gathered at her waist and left her breasts exposed.

Millie's short breaths were audible to them both. Charlotte looked incredible. Breasts that had beguiled in a bikini were perfection unhindered and naked. The lack of support allowed them to rest in their natural shape, the fullness in Charlotte's underneath and her dark nipples tilting up.

"I'm sorry," Millie said. She was staring.

"You're allowed to look," Charlotte said, a smile apparent in her voice. "And touch."

Charlotte lifted Millie's hand and placed it around a breast, so that its supple warmth filled her palm.

"Oh," Millie gasped.

Its fullness was hypnotic in sensation. The pleasure made her entire body ache and thrum. She gazed on, while Charlotte reached behind her neck and unzipped her dress. And only when Millie's evening gown fell away, and her own breasts tingled against the cooler air, did she realise what Charlotte was doing. She came to, as Charlotte stroked the dress away around her hips, and Millie stepped out of her gown without thinking.

Charlotte paused and Millie looked up, afraid something was wrong, but Charlotte's expression said there was anything but.

"Good god, Millie," she whispered.

Charlotte inhaled, just as affected by her body, and reached out, mouth open, eyes wide and irresistibly drawn to Millie's chest.

"Let's lie down," Charlotte murmured, shifting out of her dress and approaching the bed together when she nodded.

Millie lifted the duvet, slipped beneath and lay back mesmerised as Charlotte pulled alongside, a soft breast nudging into hers. Fingers stroked curls away from Millie's eyes and over her head, and Charlotte gazed down at her, pupils large, cheeks flushed, lips ruse. The anticipation, from just looking at Charlotte was overwhelming, so her body pulsed before her lover even touched.

And when she did, when Charlotte ran her fingers around her cheek, delicately down her neck to her clavicle, it was as if she touched everywhere simultaneously. Charlotte leant down and kissed beneath her jawline, and Millie arched towards the butterfly kisses that descended her body. Long, dark locks fell and hid Charlotte's face. The tickling ribbons of hair swept down Millie's chest, so that for a moment she didn't realise where Charlotte was, then a warm, wet sensation around her nipple took her by phenomenal and delighted surprise.

"Oh," Millie released, as full awareness of being taken into Charlotte's mouth took hold.

"Fuck," she thought, when Charlotte swept a tongue around her nipple, which pinched and pebbled quickly in response. A wave of arousal engulfed her, lifting her off the bed.

In a smooth movement, Charlotte rolled onto her, arm held beneath Millie's back and pulling her firmly into Charlotte's mouth. At the same time fingers fluttered down Millie's belly and she closed her eyes as the seductive touch traced lower to find the waist of her underwear.

Charlotte shifted further, laying between her legs and Millie moaned in despair when Charlotte's lips left her chest, only to be silenced and pleased again when hands massaged her craving breasts.

Millie lay entranced by the rhythmical squeeze, while almost frighteningly aware of Charlotte's face hovering over her underwear and other hand trailing ever lower. Millie squirmed with every movement as Charlotte's finger stroked



over the front of her underwear and found the line that plunged between her legs.

“Oh Christ,” she breathed.

She couldn't remember her body being this heightened. It was as if every touch elevated her senses to another level. And every time she reached a height to tumble from, Charlotte would take her up again. And they weren't even completely naked yet.

“Can I take these off?” Charlotte whispered.

Millie opened her eyes. Charlotte took her hand away a moment to swish her hair over her shoulder and gaze at Millie.

That was a hungry look. Millie had never seen that in Charlotte before. It was unnerving in the very best way. Another thrill. Another level. And Millie didn't know if she'd hold on for long.

She nodded, then fretted a moment. She reminded herself she'd gone out in the evening washed and freshened.

“Am I clean enough?”

Charlotte's breath tickled over her mound, its warm humidity pooling where Millie was clearly wet.

Charlotte looked up at her with a smile of satisfaction on her face. “I'm very happy here. How about you? Are you OK with this?”

“Very. Happy,” Millie stuttered, before having to swallow.

She closed her eyes as Charlotte's finger stroked inside the waistband and tugged at the side of her underwear, then

lifted her bottom for Charlotte to ease them down. Her head rolled back, and chest thrust up. Millie tried not to thrust her hips too, although she wanted to. She really wanted to.

Soft fingers stroked over the top of her thighs, encouraging them apart a little further. A coolness thrilled between her legs as her wetness became exposed to the air. But it was only a moment, and her gasps stuttered as she realised Charlotte's face now lingered there, her breath on Millie's nakedness caressing her soaking centre.

Fingers stroked Millie's lips, gently parting them, so that she was completely exposed. She spasmed at the sensation of Charlotte's nose resting on her mound. Again, with a shudder, as Charlotte's tongue slipped between her lips. Then she was silent, breathless, in anticipation of what was coming, and her centre ached so much it almost hurt.

The soft tip of tongue made the slightest of contact and Millie's whole body caved as she groaned out loud. Hands quickly slipped behind Millie's buttocks to steady her, as lips closed around Millie's clit.

The cry from deep in Millie's throat contained so many things. Release. Poignant relief that she hadn't lost Charlotte. Fear of how high Charlotte took her.

Long slow licks lapped at her, every single one thrilling her whole body which tingled from toes to the top of her head. She thrust in time and finally opened her eyes.

“Oh my—”

She was not prepared for the sight. Charlotte between her legs, tongue relaxed and loving what it found there. She

looked entirely different. Millie never imagined Charlotte so engrossed and seductive and confidently sexy as this, and it was powerfully arousing.

“Charlotte,” she breathed.

Too turned on, she was going to come soon, no matter how gently Charlotte took her. Charlotte seemed to know and pulled her in, strokes firmer so that they moved Millie deeper, more satisfying, pulling her orgasm from depths that engulfed her whole body.

She grasped the sheet in one hand and slapped the other on the bed, body tensing and rising from the mattress. Then she convulsed, taken by wave after wave after wave.

It was like she forgot where or when she was, and she opened her eyes still breathing fast. Her first thought was that she wanted to hold Charlotte.

“Come here please,” Millie gasped.

Then she melted as Charlotte left a long, gentle kiss on her clit, as if to seal in the pleasure permanently. Just the tenderness of how Charlotte touched her tugged in a way she hadn't felt before. But she was too desperate to hold Charlotte to wait long.

“Please let me hold you.”

When Charlotte looked up, hunger still betrayed her smile with cheeks flushed and full lips aroused, but it also held a sweet satisfaction. Charlotte climbed higher and stopped with hands on either side of Millie's shoulders, bathing her in the shadow of her body heat.

“I love you,” Millie gasped, looking up at her.

Charlotte swept her hair over and down one arm. Her breasts swayed gently with the movement, and Millie lifted her hands to meet them without thinking. She couldn't help it. She gazed at Charlotte while greedily exploring her body in a gentle frenzy.

“How the hell did you get so sexy?” Millie said in a single gasp.

Charlotte laughed above her, a quiet, beautiful sound and the smile she gave Millie was full of adoration and longing.

Millie stroked down Charlotte's back, unable to take enough in at once to satisfy the urgency of love and longing, even though her orgasm had peaked. She shifted lower in the bed, deeper into steamy warmth and letting one of Charlotte's breasts nuzzle against her cheek. Its surprising heaviness enticed. She opened her mouth to take in Charlotte's nipple and elicited panting from above. Charlotte must be close.

Millie took a breast in her mouth with great, indulgent kisses, her lover groaning in time to the sweep of her tongue. Millie stroked lower with her hand, over the curve of Charlotte's buttock, intending only to enjoy the shape of Charlotte's body. But she slipped behind and down suddenly, into the depths between Charlotte's legs. The wetness there was shocking on her fingertips. Charlotte was dripping wet. She stopped a moment, not realising how far she'd explored, and was about to apologise, when Charlotte gasped above, “Don't stop.”

She didn't need any more encouragement. Millie gorged herself on Charlotte's breasts and stroked her fingers

over Charlotte's pert and tender clit. She wrapped her arm urgently around Charlotte's hips to hold her in place, while Charlotte pushed into her, in time to Millie's touch.

Charlotte's gasps turned to moans with every sweep and thrust, arms shaking so Millie supported her from underneath.

"Millie," she cried, before tensing rigid and the orgasm stifling the cry.

Charlotte arched above her in powerful silence, pushing hard against her fingers and Millie luxuriated in firm, slow, deep circles to release Charlotte's pleasure.

They both collapsed at the same time, rolling onto their sides, Millie exhausted and gulping for air, Charlotte's hair cascading over the pillow and face. Millie desperately parted Charlotte's hair to see her expression.

"Are you OK?" she whispered, not sure without seeing Charlotte's face.

A few more ribbons and she found lips. They smiled. They smiled a lot. And with a little more teasing apart, stroking the soft locks behind Charlotte's ear, she found dark eyes gazing at her with a new look again that she hadn't seen on her friend before.

Millie stopped and stared at the euphoria glowing in Charlotte's eyes. She was so beautiful.

"Hi," Millie whispered. She stroked her face. "How do you feel? Are you OK?"

"Yes, I am," Charlotte laughed, the happiness so large it formed tears in her eyes. "I feel fucking amazing."

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## Chapter 49

Although Millie was beautiful arriving at the event that night, Charlotte had to admit that post-coital Millie, gazing up at her, naked and nuzzled against the chest, was her favourite.

She stroked through Millie's soft curls, admiring the heart-shaped face, the high cheekbones and darkest eyes that radiated happiness. Millie leant up and kissed her, a simple relaxed kiss they held on to, eyes closed to savour each other.

When their lips drew apart, she opened her eyes to a sleepy but naughty smile from Millie.

“You smell of sex, Charlotte Albright.”

“I know.” Charlotte sighed with satisfaction.

“You smell of sex with me.” Millie's sleepy smile broadened, so she looked hysterically happy. “And do you know another amazing thing?”

“What's that?” Charlotte replied.

“We don't have to share polite conversation. We can fuck all night because we already know each other.”

Charlotte laughed and squeezed Millie tighter.

“It's true,” Millie said, her voice still lazy. “No awkwardness. No surprises. We can just do it constantly. It's amazing.” She closed her eyes with a dopey, silly smile.

“So, you like this?”

“I do,” Millie purred. Her eyes opened a smidge and lingered on her lips. “I really do. And these.” Her eyes dropped lower. “I really, really like these.”

Millie traced a relaxed finger around Charlotte's nipple, which awakened her body enough for a glow to take up residence.

"We are going to do this a lot," Millie murmured, resting a hand on her breast.

And Charlotte drifted off into a blissful haze of sleep.

She roused once in the night to Millie turning over, although the need to stay joined tugged them tight. She reached around and snuggled as the big spoon, and Millie hugged her arm to her chest. Charlotte drifted again, whole body wrapped around Millie's, so intimate that the rise and fall of Millie's chest felt like her own.

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"Hello, sleepy head," followed by a kiss on the forehead woke Charlotte.

She smiled before even opening her eyes. She found Millie sitting on the side of the bed, gazing down, face bare of makeup but wearing her evening dress.

"Morning, gorgeous." Millie glowed, eyes trailing around her face and taking her in.

"I must look a state," Charlotte realised.

"You look relaxed and beautiful and happy." Millie grinned. "And the smudged makeup only adds to the effect." The smile said she believed every word.



“You have to go?” Charlotte said, waking up properly now. She sat up in bed and the duvet fell around her tummy.

“I do but,” Millie’s eyes dropped with no subtlety at all, “I don’t want to.” She started to reach out before thinking better of it. “I mustn’t.”

“What have you got on today?”

“Private session at North Oxford Tennis Club. Many elbows and knees to attend. What about you?”

“Nothing. I planned absolutely nothing. I thought I’d be coming down after the event last night. Come and see me afterwards? I’ll make dinner?”

“Yes, please,” Millie whispered, and the keen expression melted Charlotte. Millie leant forward and kissed her cheek, teasing the corner of her mouth and letting the kiss linger so that she floated. Millie released her with a sigh that said she regretted leaving as much as Charlotte did seeing her go.

“Right.” Millie stood up, hands on round hips and chest thrust forward, her breasts almost bursting from her evening dress. “I’ve got quite the walk of shame this morning. As far as the bus stop anyway.”

“Hurry...” Charlotte almost said ‘home’. “Hurry back.”

“I will.”

Millie leaned down for one last kiss and when she opened the bedroom door she peeked back at Charlotte naked in bed. She shot her one last lascivious look, blew her a kiss, and still paused, eyes growing large.

“I love you,” Millie said.

“I love you too.” Charlotte laughed. “Go fix knees.”

Only then did Millie step through the door, arm reaching back as if wanting to hold on until the very last second.

She stared at the open doorway as Millie’s shoes clattered on the steps and became muffled on the rug downstairs. The airy sound of the outside filled the house, before being snuffed out again with a click to.

Then, nothing.

Charlotte sat in bed, ears ringing in the silence. Just her, the heat of summer baking on the closed curtains, and an untidy bed that had held her friend.

She blinked, unsure it really happened. It seemed too good to be true. She blinked again, taking in the ruffled sheets that told of a wonderful night. She stroked where Millie had laid, snug in her arms, her voluptuous friend with toned legs, arms and abs. A twinge between Charlotte’s legs remembered too, and she couldn’t stop grinning.

She caught her breath at the memory of how Millie tasted, her suppleness on the tongue, the way Millie touched her in return laying beneath. Cheeks flushed with the rapid response of her body, wanting to relive it, and she took a deep, cooling breath and blew out long and hard.

“Oh wow,” she gasped.

It was a lot to take in. Sometimes changes settled in waves for Charlotte and with a pinch of anxiety she wondered if it could really be true. Could it be this good?

“Stop,” she said out loud.

She swung her legs out of bed. Distractions were needed to get through the day.

She showered and dressed and shopped on Cowley Road: prawns, pak choi, ginger, and chilli for a stir fry. Bread and butter pudding ingredients because Millie would want a dessert if main course trespassed anywhere near healthy. And so would she. Snacks for perhaps a film later, dips, crisps and Bombay mix because those were Millie’s favourites. Plus a light lager for Millie, she found her friend’s favourite, and a zero version for her.

And by the time she returned home and packed away the food in the fridge, it was past lunchtime.

Quiet again.

Unbearably quiet.

Charlotte’s heart and life were full to bursting and an empty house too disconcerting. She flung open the double back doors and let in the air and birdsong to stop herself from spiralling in the silence.

Her phone buzzed on the coffee table. A welcome diversion.

Message from Millie: “I miss you and I love you.” So many smiley faces. Many, many hearts.

Charlotte grinned so much a tear escaped her eye, and she tapped out her reply.

Then she stopped. She’d done it again. She’d typed, “Hurry home”.

Would Millie want this to be home?

Because it made sense for Millie to move in, and Charlotte wanted it all to start now. She'd had a question for Millie last night. What did she need? It had come out in so many answers and they'd taken a leap together. But she was left wondering where they'd leapt to and her head spun.

They were together, but Millie wasn't here. Still the fear kept rising.

Charlotte patted the cushions on the sofa to distract herself, then clutched one for reassurance and stroked the plush material. She'd bought them with Millie.

Over the arm of the sofa lay Millie's orange fleece she'd left behind last week. And on top, open in a roof, a novel which Millie had started.

The flowers in the vase? Millie again – blue cornflowers picked from her landlady's garden.

Millie was here. She was everywhere. From the paint on the walls that she'd steered her towards, to helping apply it. The shape left on a sofa cushion where she'd sat, feet up on the coffee table, reading the Maggie O'Farrell book. The sandwich toaster from years ago. Their picture in pride of place, the two of them laughing at the Queer Ball.

Charlotte stared at the photo, the one of the evening she fell in love with her best friend. And here she was, a decade later, her best friend in love with her.

She covered her mouth with her hand. But it didn't stop it. She sniffed loudly and the photo blurred. Because it

was all too much to take in, and Charlotte couldn't believe how happy she was allowed to be.

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## Chapter 50

Squealing bike brakes, feet clattering on the pavement, a thud into the wall and Charlotte wondered if Millie had crashed into the house.

The rattling of a chain suggested she was in one piece, but the quick succession of lock click and hammering on the front door had Charlotte opening it and worried at the emergency.

“Hi,” Millie said, breathless, pink, eyes and smile wide, then her expression creased into concern. “What’s up? What happened?”

“I was about to ask you the same,” Charlotte replied.

“Have you been crying?” Millie asked, stepping through the door and holding her arms. “Come and sit down,” she said, leading Charlotte to the sofa.

She was bundled into the lounge area and gently seated. Millie knelt between her knees, worry written over her face.

Charlotte felt a bit silly. “It’s nothing, I’m fine.” She tried to smile. “I spiralled with you gone.”

“What triggered that?” Millie asked, stroking a ribbon of hair from Charlotte’s face. The concern and care in Millie’s eyes made her heart swell. Millie was here. They were together.

“It’s hard to believe something this good has happened,” Charlotte said.

“Did you have a panic attack?” Millie replied, still serious and checking her.

“No, not quite.” Charlotte laughed in exhaustion. “I’m OK.”

“Are you sure?” Millie stroked the hair behind an ear to peer up at her face unhindered.

“Yes, I am. It’s just...” Her breath caught again. She was not OK. It had completely blown her away. “It’s hard to take this all in.”

“Really?” Millie took it the wrong way and anxiety crinkled her forehead.

“I mean, it’s hard to allow myself to accept you’re truly here.”

Still the concern remained.

“That the love of my life, because you undoubtedly are,” Charlotte added, “is right here, right now, and saying the same things to me.”

“Oh,” Millie said, before her face rose in a smile that Charlotte had seen on her friend in recent months. She recognised it now as being filled with love.

“Millie,” Charlotte pulled closer, “for me, you’ve been the most attractive woman for so long, I’m awestruck you’ve laid in my bed.”

“You’ve been left alone with your thoughts all day, haven’t you?” Millie’s lips twitched.

“Yes, I have. It’s something I need to go through.”

“That’s OK.” Millie was beaming again.

Some things took a little time to sink in, and she was only catching up now after Millie's absence. Was this really happening? After all this time? She kept questioning, not daring to enjoy it.

Millie sloughed off a small backpack from her shoulder and opened the top.

"I brought a few things: toothbrush, clothes. I hope that's OK? Can I leave a few things here?"

"Please," Charlotte said. The gesture gripped her heart. "Bring whatever you need. I want you here as much as possible."

Millie nodded and cupped her cheek. "I want that too." And the way Millie looked at her drew her so strongly there was no doubt.

"Good." Charlotte smiled. Relief and happiness settled deeper inside. It was real. They were doing this. "Hey," she said gently, "I distracted you. What was the problem?"

"Nothing wrong," Millie said nonchalantly. She put down the bag.

"But you were in a rush?"

"I wanted to see you."

"Millie, you almost collided with the house."

"Oh, that." Millie swallowed and took a deep breath. "I was just really, really," she closed her eyes, "horny."

"What?" Charlotte stared at her friend.

Millie opened her eyes and a dark longing settled there. "I've been thinking about you all day. And I mean *all* day."



She breathed out.

“That’s the emergency? That’s why you crashed into the house?”

Millie leaned forward, the warmth of her body apparent between Charlotte’s legs. Millie slid her hands beneath her buttocks. “You’re not appreciating how much and in what way I’ve thought of you today.”

“Oh.” Charlotte’s voice pitched in surprise.

“I have pictured you,” Millie purred, “every single minute of the day, doing every single thing imaginable.” And Millie’s purr made it sound ten times ruder than the suggestion. “Honestly,” Millie gazed at her lips, “this is going to be an issue.”

Charlotte stared at her friend, imagining everything too. Warmth rose in her cheeks as desire bloomed in her body, at the despicably lovely things Millie might do to her.

She shook her head. “See, there you go.” Charlotte’s voice tightened with despair. “It’s really hard to believe you think of me that way.”

“Oh, believe it, Charlotte Albright,” Millie said, her voice husky and eyes darkened.

“Is it because I’m a friend and safe?”

“Not just safe at all.” Millie’s mouth curled full of intention. “Do I trust you? Absolutely. Does that make me want to go further with you? Do the filthiest things? Oh my god, yes.”

Charlotte gulped.

“I’ve been imagining you all day. Remembering your touch. The noises you make. Your scent. I can barely recall what I said to the woman with tennis elbow. I sent her away to do Kegel exercises for all I know.”

“Millie!” Charlotte slapped her shoulder in mild rebuke but couldn’t help laughing.

Charlotte had been patient and sure last night, knowing Millie was fragile and new to women. But in Millie’s absence, it was her confidence that crumbled. Meanwhile, Millie’s old assurance seemed to have bloomed again, and her eyes flashed with sexual prowess. Millie gazed at her, with flushed cheeks and obvious rude thoughts, pupils filling her eyes and her breasts heaving in her low-cut T-shirt, luring her in. God, Millie was hard to resist.

“Shall I show you,” Millie rested her finger on Charlotte’s lower lip, “what I’ve been thinking of doing with you?” Charlotte’s mouth dropped. “I can demonstrate many things.”

That smile on Millie’s lips, so full of promise and indulgence. Hypnotic. It was like a drug, bewitching her completely.

“I... I might like that.” The twinge between her legs agreed.

“Because,” Millie continued. “I’ve been trying not to picture you in bed for months.” Millie’s eyes never left Charlotte’s lips, though she moved closer, so her breasts tempted a fraction away from Charlotte’s. “But now,” Millie paused, her breath caressing Charlotte’s lips. “There’s no reason to hold back, and I couldn’t stop even if I wanted.”

Charlotte's breathing lifted in anticipation.

"Come upstairs with me," Millie whispered.

A finger ran lightly along Charlotte's lips, down her neck, and plunged to the top of her cleavage so that her body lit up all the way into her jeans. She nodded, the power of speech disappearing for attention elsewhere.

Millie's smile broadened into delight, a very hungry delight. She stood, took her hand, and they climbed the stairs together, Millie leading the way.

In the bedroom, Millie's eyes never left her while they undressed. Millie pulled the T-shirt off over her head to reveal her toned shoulders and arms. Then her bra was gone, the generous breasts that Charlotte had tried not to admire for years, gorgeous and nude. And the toned stomach, which had Charlotte's fingers twitching, wanting to run and tease all the way down. Then Millie's jeans. The pop of the button, the slide of the zip, and she succumbed to all kinds of sensation in her own underwear as Millie took off hers.

Naked, Millie sauntered towards her, and Charlotte stared without words at her curvy friend, who'd always been the epitome of sex on legs for her.

"Come to bed," Millie whispered. "I want to show you exactly how much I'm attracted to you."

Charlotte stepped backwards and sat on the bed, her progress into horizontal encouraged by Millie's fingertips on her chest. Millie's eyes burned into her, and she fell completely under her spell.

When Millie straddled her, a warmth tantalised a fraction above her mound. The heat radiating off the woman left no doubt about her desire. Millie leant over, breasts stroking over Charlotte's stomach then teasing over her chest.

"I will show you how I love your every single feature," Millie murmured by her ear. The warmth between Millie's legs now teased over her stomach and Millie's breasts dabbed, supple and silky, on the rise of her chest.

"From these sleek eyebrows," Millie whispered, running a finger along so that Charlotte was suddenly aware of every hair on her head and neck standing on end.

"And these beautiful eyes."

Charlotte closed them as Millie's warm whisper caressed her eyelid. Millie paused a moment, so that Charlotte longed for her touch, then Millie licked her eyelid. Delicate. With the very tip of her tongue. So suggestive it resonated as a lap between Charlotte's legs and she moaned in appreciation.

"And this straight nose," Millie hummed, sounding just as aroused, "because another wouldn't be the same. A nose worthy of a stunning Amazonian woman like you."

As Millie moved lower, the tiniest hint of slick moisture dabbed on Charlotte's tummy and sent her body into a frenzy.

"These lips," Millie groaned, as if unable to speak.

A finger ran along Charlotte's bottom lip that had her clit reciprocating in appreciation. She tensed, wanting to lift her hips towards Millie. Every part that Millie touched echoed lower, so she pulsed with need and expectation.

Millie's warmth now hovered as torturous temptation above where Charlotte ached. She could feel her millimetres away.

"And these breasts," Millie gasped. Charlotte opened her eyes to find Millie's face gazing down at her body in uncontrolled want. "Oh, these breasts," Millie breathed.

Her breast was cupped with care, then her nipple gently pinched between finger and thumb. She squirmed again, desperate to meet Millie.

Millie's breath turned hoarse as she massaged Charlotte's chest, her buttocks tensing in the same rhythm as Charlotte, face slack, bravado gone, given into the need and the spell of them together.

Suddenly they touched, Millie slick and wet on Charlotte's mound, and the groan from Millie was filled with such insatiable desire Charlotte shuddered in response, like a first orgasm in empathy.

"Please," Charlotte said.

She thrust up, wanting them to meet. She stroked around Millie's soft buttocks, grabbed them and pulled Millie onto her. Her senses exploded with the pleasure of Millie's body, soft in her hands and soaking wet upon her. She stared as Millie moaned with every movement, her fit body tensing, shoulders strong and taut, breasts squeezed and thrust forward between her arms, chin raised and mouth open in ecstasy.

Charlotte never saw anything as sexy in her life, while she was simultaneously bombarded by sensations of Millie, erotic and juicy on her body.

“I want to get closer to you,” Millie gasped above and sat back and hooked a leg underneath Charlotte’s. For a moment, Charlotte glimpsed between Millie’s legs. Dark. Swollen. Wet. Even though she was afforded that sight, that arousing warning, when Millie slowly descended onto her, the warm succulence of their joining shocked her.

“Oh fuck,” Charlotte cried out.

The delicate, deeply arousing, impossibly intimate sensation was powerful. And the look on Millie’s face, the need crinkled on her brow, cheeks locked in desperate arousal as she pulled them close, lips to lips, tender sensations filling Charlotte’s body, she’d never seen anything as sexy. It burned into her memory.

Millie rhythmically thrust them together, while Charlotte lay groaning and overcome with the delicate intimacy.

“I’m very close,” Millie panted. “I don’t know how long—” A breath took the rest of the words, before she managed, “Do you need more?”

She arched in response, desperate to catch Millie who responded by running her hand lower, slipping her finger between them and over Charlotte’s clit. She closed her eyes, consumed by the slick strokes over her clit, then blinding lights flooded her vision.

“My god, Millie,” she gasped, the words shuddering out, before one long continuous moan escaped her. As she tipped over the edge, she held on to Millie, senses exploding, coming together in a loud cry.

Exhausted, she lay back. She trembled – legs, arms, neck, everything. Above her, Millie’s head hung with exhaustion, limbs shaking and loose. Millie slipped her leg from beneath Charlotte’s and leant over.

“Charlotte Albright,” Millie gasped. She babbled the rest of her sentence as one word, “you are the sexiest thing on the planet,” before collapsing on Charlotte’s chest.

And honestly, at that moment, luxuriating in phenomenal after-glow and adulation, Charlotte believed it.

Trust Millie to be the one to make her feel that way.

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## Chapter 51

They ate the dips and the crisps and the pudding. As far as Charlotte was concerned, the rest could wait, because more immediate activities occupied that evening and several times through the night. It was only by Sunday morning they were satisfied, for now.

She smiled the moment she awoke. Millie's hand rested on her leg, fingers dipping between her thighs. She ached in a dull way from constant love making, but a flicker of interest still registered and tingled through her body.

Millie roused too, like a sleepy, satisfied cat.

"Mmmm," Millie said, nuzzling close, fingers slipping deeper between Charlotte's thighs. "Morning," she purred.

"This is a nice way to wake up," Charlotte said, cheeks aching with happiness.

"It's the very best."

Charlotte ran her finger down the curve of Millie's back and over her voluptuous behind. It was too tempting, and she spread her fingers in a good, soft handful.

"We'll never stop fucking, if you do that," Millie murmured.

"Says the woman with her hand between my thighs."

Millie grinned. "It's just resting there," she said, all innocence, though her smile showed anything but, and Charlotte squeezed Millie's bum to draw her closer into a kiss.

Buzzing from the bedside table made her pause. Millie leant back and flipped up her phone.



“It’s just Mum. I’ll call her back later. We usually chat on Sunday mornings.” And she swiped her phone and let it drop. “Now,” Millie said, turning back, eyes full of intention and travelling her body. “Where were we?”

Charlotte giggled. “You were innocently touching my thighs.”

“Oh, yeah,” Millie sounded dopey with lust. “I remember.” She rolled on top. “I was getting ahead of myself, because these breasts need attention first.”

“I’m not complaining.” Charlotte’s whole body welcomed the softness of Millie on top of her.

Millie’s curls fell and caressed at her cheek, and the kisses trailing her neck had her awakening in pleasure. Millie stroked a finger around her breast and drew back as if to admire Charlotte.

“Have I told you how irresistible your boobs are?”

“Not this morning.”

“Well, they are.” And as Millie dipped down to take Charlotte’s nipple between her lips, Charlotte sighed in anticipation.

“Is now a good time to say I’m on the phone?”

She froze. As did Millie, mouth above her pert expectant nipple. Millie snatched back her head with eyes wide open, “What the?” and shot out an arm to the bedside table to flip up the screen.

“Morning ducks,” said Millie’s mum. Her grinning face on the screen was plain to see.

“Millie. Jesus. It’s a video call.”

“Mum! Shit!” Millie scrambled off her body.

“Point it the other way,” Charlotte said in a desperate whisper.

Millie fumbled and dived under the sheets, paying no attention to where the screen was pointing.

Belinda helpfully added, “I think she means point anywhere except her naked breasts, love.”

“Fuck.” Millie tossed the phone onto the bed as if it burned.

They both stared at the black rectangle, face down on the fluffy cloud of duvet.

“Sorry,” Millie said, breathing hard next to her. She looked terrified as she stared at the phone.

Charlotte’s cheeks burned. It had been a good while since she’d seen Millie’s mother. Belinda had been used to Charlotte wandering around in swimwear when staying during university holidays, but this didn’t mean she wanted to bare everything to the woman now. She was distracted from full embarrassment by concern for Millie. She wasn’t out to anyone yet, except Charlotte, inevitably, and Olivia.

“You OK?” she mouthed silently.

“I’m really sorry.” Millie seemed more thoughtful for Charlotte than anything. “Do you mind if I answer?” She nodded to the phone lying on the bed.

“I suppose we’d better.” Charlotte shrugged. This was a bigger deal for Millie than her. “It’s a bit late for ‘now’s not

the time’.”

Millie grinned at her, apology in her crinkled brow and adoration in her eyes. “I love you. And I’m so sorry.”

She clutched the duvet to their chests and Millie retrieved her phone.

“Ready?” Millie asked.

“As much as I can be, given I’m naked in bed with my lover’s mother.”

Millie had the audacity to laugh. She tipped up her phone. “Hi, Mum.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, and now she was covered she smiled easily. “Belinda. Hi. It’s, erm, nice to see you.”

A familiar face beamed back at her, a little older but recognisable. Belinda had the same energy as her daughter.

“Nice to see you too, love, although I wasn’t expecting to see so much.”

Charlotte’s cheeks roasted. “Yes, and I know who to blame for that.” She side-eyed Millie.

“I won’t keep you,” Millie’s mum said. “Or ask what you’ve been up to lately.” Belinda outright laughed. “But you,” she pointed to Millie, “call me later, love. Catch up with you soon, Charlotte. Take care of each other until then.”

“Will do, Mum,” Millie said. “I have news, but you know that now.”

Belinda laughed and waved a hand at her. “Look after her.”

Millie tapped the screen to end the call and sat loose limbed and apparently unconcerned.

Charlotte stared at her. “Is that it?”

“What do you mean?” Millie said, putting down the phone.

“Is that all you need to say to your mum?”

“Oh, we’ve got heaps to talk about later. We always do.”

“I mean about being found in bed with a woman?”

“Oh.” Millie shrugged. “It’s Mum. She’ll be fine with it.”

“Really?”

Admittedly Belinda never blinked at Charlotte being gay, not even when Millie introduced her as a ‘massive dyke’, just to contrast with her home-counties appearance. And Belinda always asked after her girlfriends, listening with more approval than Nicola ever did. But was that the extent of her reaction to Millie coming out and Charlotte being her lover?

“I mean,” Charlotte continued, “she’s always been open-minded and tolerant, but she’s just fine with her daughter in bed with a woman?”

“Course she is.”

“And you’re fine with being out and being...”

“Bi? Yeah.” Millie shrugged again. “And it’s you.”

“What? Why does that matter?”

“She always thought I should run off with you, rather than a fella.”

Charlotte stared again. Then managed to say, “Right.”

Could it really be that simple, coming out to a parent? That unfazed and unproblematic? She stared at her friend some more, the one who’d been unperturbed by Charlotte being queer, and now seemed comfortable with her mother’s knowledge. Maybe it could.

“What about my mother then?” Charlotte said. If she could quirk an eyebrow, she would have done. “Ready to come out to her?”

They’d been invited to lunch by Nicola. Summoned more like. Charlotte wasn’t sure she’d manage the duration without revealing how much she and Millie shared now.

Millie cupped her cheek. “Whenever you say the word, I’m fine with Nicola or anybody else knowing.”

Charlotte breathed in deep. “OK then.”

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Charlotte gathered herself before walking through the doors of the roof-top restaurant of the Ashmolean. So many things had changed since last meeting her mother here months ago.

She’d established herself at Bentley and Partners by doing what she did best, grown in confidence, survived the shark attacks of Richard and impressed many folks she

respected. She'd taken a chance, but also remained true to herself. Not so much a different woman, but one happier in her own skin.

Charlotte was ready now. Whatever her mother threw, however she undermined, whichever oratory tricks she used, Charlotte wouldn't waver or let her love for Millie and happiness be diminished. Nothing could do that now.

"Darling!" Nicola stood to greet Charlotte. Her mother had snagged her favourite table at the café. "Millie not with you?"

Charlotte stumbled. "No, she's not with me. Well, she is. But not..." She took a deep breath. "She'll be up when she's finished calling her mum."

It had been rather sweet. Millie had showered, dressed and phoned her mum back while Charlotte got ready. She heard Millie from upstairs laughing and giggling, and overheard her name mentioned so many times and with so much love, she didn't think she'd ever stop smiling. And the two still chatted when they caught the bus to the museum.

"Well sit, darling," her mother said, indicating the two seats opposite.

"Right," Charlotte replied.

Nervous. She wouldn't be Charlotte if she wasn't. And nervousness was nothing to fear or judge herself for. She set her own standards now, not her mother. She was happy. She had a home in a city she adored with a rewarding job. Nothing would sway her, not even soul-destroying disappointment from her mother. And she had Millie, the love of her life.

She sat.

“Before we start, mother, I wanted to say,” deep breath, “I’m seeing someone.”

“Oh yes? Is it Millie?” Nicola said, without even looking up.

“What...? I...” Charlotte paused, mouth open, probably in an unseemly way. “How?”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes. But how did you know?”

“Well, that’s a relief.” Her mother laid a serviette over her knees. “I was wondering when she’d put you out of your misery.”

“But Millie is, was, straight.”

So how the hell did her mother know?

“People change,” Nicola said, pouring a glass of water for Charlotte.

Didn’t they just. She wouldn’t have expected that observation from her mother in the past.

“And sometimes they don’t,” Nicola added, which was less encouraging.

“Just how did you tell?”

“The way she looks at you,” Nicola said, as if obvious. “She always adored you and did everything for you. But it was different when we were decorating. It’s all still there, but with a passion.”

“I...”

“Then there’s the way you look at her.”

“Has that changed too?!”

“No. Not a bit. You always looked at her as though she walked on water. Walked on water while belting out a bawdy laugh, but nevertheless.”

It was a perfect way of describing how besotted Charlotte had been with Millie. She supposed being a barrister for over three decades didn’t leave her mother without observation and verbal skills.

“I’ve never really believed in love,” Nicola said, screwing the cap back on the bottle of water.

Not a surprise, but it wasn’t exactly encouraging, given the topic.

“Not true love,” her mother continued. “All this romantic nonsense. When there’s so much to balance – work, a roof over your head, children, aging parents, trying to live responsibly with climate change and the future for us all. There’s too much to accomplish without waiting for a fabled true love. I respected and loved your father, up to a point. We were a good match in some ways, and we’ve brought up two children between us. But,” she paused, her expression wistful, “to do that with someone like you have with Millie, I’ve nothing that touches that.”

Charlotte stared.

“I envy you,” her mother said, eyebrows raised. “At nearly sixty years old, I don’t envy your youth, I had mine. I don’t envy your good nature because I benefit from that. But I envy you’ve had someone like Millie.”



“What? How...?”

Her mother never gave a hint she approved of any relationship, let alone one with Millie.

“I’m sorry I’m slow to support you.” Nicola frowned. “I...” For once her eloquent mother became stuck for words. “I never took your relationships seriously because I couldn’t imagine it. I couldn’t see its importance to you with little frame of reference. All my acquaintances and the stories about how life should be weren’t about settling down with a woman. I didn’t know how that went.

“I understood it was harder for you though, and didn’t want that, so I ignored it and hoped you’d get over your experimentation. I’m sorry for that. But seeing you and Millie together, it’s impossible to ignore. You light up when you’re together. She didn’t take her eyes off you that day we decorated.”

Charlotte’s heart lodged firmly in her throat.

“So, I’m getting there,” Nicola said.

Well, this was a big first step, even though a long time coming.

“Silly really,” Nicola mused. “I mean, how different can it be?”

A silence descended because neither had a clue, Charlotte devoutly lesbian and her mother, well, Charlotte wasn’t sure Nicola had really loved anybody, always too busy working as far as she remembered. It was difficult to imagine her mother doing anything else. God knows what she’d do if she took early retirement.

Well, this was unexpected, and a welcome start to changes in Nicola's attitude. Life still had surprises in store for Charlotte.

"So," her mother said at last, apparently back on form. "My comprehension is evolving. And I understand congratulations are in order. Here's to you." She raised her glass of sparkling water.

"Thank you, Mum," Charlotte said, and she clinked her glass against her mother's.

"Ah, here she is!" Nicola said with penetrating projection.

It must have reached Millie across the room because she turned a shade paler. Looking worried wasn't something that Millie did. This clearly meant a great deal to her, and Charlotte wanted to hug her tight.

"Hi Nicola," Millie said, when she reached the table.

"Good afternoon, Millie," Nicola replied with a smile. "You look well. Do sit down."

Millie peeked at Charlotte as she sat, and Charlotte held her hand.

"I hear you've finally jumped into bed with my daughter," Nicola said.

"Excuse me?" Millie's eyes shot wide.

"Mother!"

But Charlotte laughed. Definitely a welcome change to Nicola's attitude, although something could be said for her subtlety.

“She knows,” Charlotte said. “I told her straight away. I was hoping to make it less awkward.”

Something her mother seemed resolute on denying her. Always.

Millie continued to stare. Her mother looked delighted, out-doing Millie at what she usually did best.

“Well, Millie, who’d have thought,” Nicola continued. “Your cheeks have turned the colour of a beetroot soup my mother makes.”

They had. If it had been a cold day, she’d have heated the entire room.

“Oh,” Millie said, then laughed seemingly at herself. Her eyes flicked between Charlotte and her mother. “And is everything OK?”

“Yes,” Charlotte replied.

“Indeed it is, my dear,” Nicola added.

“Good,” Millie said, her smile pinching naughtily, like it always did with Millie. “Then you won’t mind me doing this.” She turned to Charlotte and gazed into her eyes. “Because I love you, Charlotte Albright. I have forever and now in all ways.”

Millie stroked under her chin and gently kissed her, one of those sweet ones that lifted Charlotte in the air. When she opened her eyes at the end of the kiss, adoration still shone in Millie’s. Charlotte didn’t even care if her mother was still in the room, because they were really doing this. Charlotte believed deep down now.

She cupped Millie's cheek, leaned forward and took her turn to hold her lover spellbound with a kiss. And when they parted, Millie looked as dopey as her magical kisses made Charlotte, something she'd never have imagined possible all those years ago, when she met the brilliant woman in the small kitchen at the end of the corridor.

Charlotte sighed. "I love you, Millie Banks."

THE END

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