

the sisters of dorley

SECRETS

OF

DORLEY

HALL

alyson greaves

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The Sisters of Dorley

Book Two

Alyson Greaves

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This story engages with some reasonably dark topics, including but not limited to torture, manipulation, dysphoria, self-injury, nonconsensual surgery, eating disorders, and kidnapping. While it isn't intended to be a dark or dystopian story, the perspective characters are carrying a lot of baggage, and the exploration of the premise might be triggering for trans readers.

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ONE

WHAT SHE'S LOOKING FOR

2019 NOVEMBER 9 — SATURDAY

Everyone will know soon. All the women of Dorley, from Beatrice on down, will know about him. Already he can feel their eyes on him, stripping him, flaying him, judging his womanhood, finding it wanting; finding it absent. And what if they're right? What if, now that he's been exposed, he's discovered as a fraud? How can you know, *Stefan*, what it is to feel like a woman when you've spent your whole life hiding from it?

What if it was just a fantasy all along?

Stupid boy. Stupid, lucky boy. Doubts are meaningless here. His gender was decided for him, long before his clumsy confession, and no amount of denial or fear can break down the ironclad procedures of Dorley Hall. He'll be transitioned whether he likes it or not. Whether he participates or not!

Isn't that why he's here? He's too weak, too broken, too ashamed to do it himself.

And they all *know* that now.

He twists in the bed, ties the covers in knots. So stupid, to let himself be discovered. Sure, keeping up the façade had been painful, and his assumed maleness — not to mention his invented and redacted but still vividly implied recent history of

abuse — had been an obstacle to his friendship with Pippa, but there'd been a comfort in it all the same, one he recognises only now, when it's gone. When they thought him a man they expected nothing of him.

Horrible to realise that misery has a comfort all of its own, a predictability.

He doesn't know how to be a woman, doesn't know how to act, who to be. And they'll see this and they'll know that of all the broken boys taken in this year, this one is by far the most pathetic. This one *dreams*...

Stupid girl! Stupid, spiralling girl. Why would any of them think that? He told Pippa, confessed everything to her, and she didn't judge him, didn't pity him. She was delighted!

But she had reason to be, didn't she? Sponsoring him's been hard for her. She's a true believer, the same as the others, and considers herself without a doubt to have benefited from her sponsor's intervention, but surviving the programme is one thing; putting someone else through it is quite another. His coming out untangled the knots in her conscience. So she isn't, necessarily, a good barometer.

So what about Christine, then? Her reaction, now he thinks back to it, was a lot like Pippa's: she believed him quickly and easily and moved on to practical matters.

Almost as if people can see it in you, idiot.

Like Pippa, she didn't judge him; she simply accepted him. Tore up her life just to help him. Abby, too; she's known about him almost as long as Christine, and she's never acted towards him with anything but compassion.

Pippa's kindness, Christine's, Abby's, all genuine. If he thinks carefully about it, if he stops assigning malicious intent to people who have displayed no evidence of it — towards him, anyway — then he has no reason to believe *any* of the women at Dorley Hall will think unkindly of him for this. Nor to believe any of them will have expectations of instant, perfectly performed womanhood; they were once boys, just

like he tried to be. Worse: abused and abusive boys, all of them.

He frowns at his ungenerous description and discards it. It's a relic, his own self-hatred pushed outwards, imprinted on women who have only ever acted in what they believed was his best interest. Better instead to embrace the truth: they're women, without caveats or qualifiers or the stains of their former identities. Christine claims and clings to her gender as fiercely and with as much conviction as any woman Stefan's ever known — despite her insistence that she's not trans, which carries with it hints of an inferiority complex Stefan's wanted to interrogate for weeks now; hah! like *he* has room to talk — and berated him for being gauche enough to draw attention to her once-maleness. Pippa likely would react similarly, though Stefan's gut recoils at the thought of accusing her as harshly as he once did Christine, back in that cell.

'Not trans'. What are they, then? Do they even have a word for it? 'Coercively reassigned female'?

Perhaps just call them women, Stef, and leave it at that.

He stretches some of the tension out of his limbs, rolls his neck, cracks his fingers. Concentrates on the physical sensations, imagines nerve endings firing, blood vessels flowing, lungs inflated. Positions himself firmly in his body. The exact inverse of his older mechanisms for dealing with dysphoria, back before he was capable of properly naming it, adapted for his new circumstances; because it's not really all that bad being in this body, now he knows it's changing under him. As long as he doesn't do anything stupid, like let self-loathing convince him that a building full of women who once looked very much like he does will judge him for wanting to follow in their footsteps.

So.

What now?

At least he can talk to the sponsors without them treating him like a monster. As much as things have been moving that way for a while — helping Aaron after Declan knocked him down in the shower seemed to change something in Maria's attitude, at least, if the exasperated glances she's been sharing with him recently are anything to go by — knowing that it's over for good is a profound relief. They know now that he's exactly like them.

Mostly like them.

In broad terms.

A chime from his PC startles him out of his thoughts, and when he's untangled himself from the wreckage of his bedsheets and sat up he can see a prompt on the screen, requesting he create a PIN. That's new. He pushes off the bed, grateful for the distraction — he's spent a solid hour deep in thought, most of it unproductive and highly self-critical, and has come up with nothing more useful than 'stop overthinking things'; laudable in concept, unworkable in practice — and taps in a PIN. He picks the number from his old debit card, presumably cut in half by Pippa, because it's the only four-digit code he can reliably remember.

The PC makes another noise and quickly reboots, and when the desktop reappears — after prompting him for his PIN again — there are twice as many icons. There's also a text file, placed centrally on the screen, labelled, *Read me!* — *Christine.*

Hi Stef!

Congratulations on putting the cat among the pigeons, depositing the fox in the hen house, shouting fire in a crowded theatre, etc. Things are weird here again! Abby's thrilled. So's Maria, I think. She's got this smirk on her face that I'm pretty sure you put there, and it makes sense: she's been basically running this place for years, and you're the first genuinely new thing to happen since we stopped tweaking the intake

guidelines. If you hadn't come along I think sooner or later she would have invented you just to relieve the monotony.

So, as of the moment you entered that PIN you gained a hell of a lot of access privileges. You're actually on a custom profile I've set up, because Maria is being cautious and wants granular control over your shit.

To break it down:

- *Your door access is unchanged, so for now you can't let yourself out of the basement or into the boys' rooms. Anything with a red light is still locked for you. We don't want you accidentally using the wrong biometric reader because you're sleepy and letting yourself into, I don't know, Martin's room by mistake. But you WILL be able to leave the basement on request. It'll require a bit of organisation — we don't want one of the boys seeing you strolling up the stairs — so you can't do it on a whim, but it's something we can make happen (and I should probably warn you, now you're 'officially' in on the joke, they might ask you to attend the Christmas party, apologies in advance for that, I suggest you start thinking up an excuse NOW). Only thing you won't be able to do is leave the Hall without an escort — you're on second year rules, basically.*
- *As for networking, your PC has an unrestricted mode — which you're in now, reading this — and a restricted mode. Hit the shortcut on the desktop to switch between the two, or slap ctrl-alt-delete if you're in a hurry. In unrestricted mode you can access our network and use our streaming accounts and you can go online. BUT: no social media, no email, no nothing. Consider the internet a read-only resource for now. And we monitor that shit, so just be sensible about it.*
- *If you want to get a head start on things like voice training — not shifting your pitch, obviously, unless you want to spend the next several months whispering to the boys and pretending you've got a REALLY sore throat, but expanding your range, practising your breathing and*

finding your head voice will all be helpful to you when the time comes, believe me! — there are training documents and videos on our network, all open to you in unrestricted mode. Have a poke around, there's all sorts of useful shit on there.

- *Your phone is unchanged for now. Like the door locks, it's a precaution, not a lack of trust: it'd be too easy for you to slip up and accidentally show someone something he's not supposed to see. Maria says we can revisit this stuff when you're more accustomed to being a free(ish) woman.*

Pippa's okay. She's mad at ME because I've spent a month lying to and manipulating her, and that's fair enough I suppose, so I kind of want to ask you a favour: be her friend? She's lonely, and I fucked it all up.

Anyway. That's everything. You can reach me on Consensus if you want to but otherwise, congrats! You don't need me any more.

Take care, Stef,

Christine

He reads the last paragraph through a couple of times. 'Congrats! You don't need me any more'? That's unusually self-deprecating, even more than he's come to expect from her. Does Christine think he's angry with her? He's perplexed by her, sure, and feels ugly and masculine in her presence, but he sees a lot of beautiful, confusing women these days and he's a lot more on top of the discomfort he feels around them than he used to be.

Before he can hop on Consensus and call her an idiot, someone knocks on his door. He grumbles under his breath — he's getting a little sick of people dropping by today — and considers pretending to be asleep, but then the knocking starts up again and doesn't stop.

Fine.

He takes a second to make sure the computer's back in restricted mode, looks quickly around his room to make sure nothing's amiss, and then opens the door to a nervous Aaron, still knocking, now waving his hand uselessly against air.

"Hi," Stefan says, stepping aside to let him in.

"Hi, Stef," Aaron says, hovering at the perimeter, reluctant to step inside. He starts twisting his hands around each other, and he looks smaller than usual.

"What's up?"

"Hey. So. Look." Aaron looks left and right, as if checking for witnesses, and then continues in a whisper, "Are you okay? Feeling good? Or good-for-the-basement, anyway? Nothing ticking over in that head of yours, waiting to explode? Are you going to seem completely fine and then snap like a fucking twig and scare the shit out of me again?"

"What are you talking about?" Stefan says, frowning and sorting through the apparently endless events of the day.

"Declan!" Aaron says, finally coming inside, ducking under the arm Stefan's holding the door open with and perching on the edge of the bed. "I'm talking about Declan." He looks at his hands as if suddenly and for the first time noticing his habit of gesticulating along with his speech, and sits on them, holding them still. "And about what happened after. It's been *hours*, Stef, and we only just got out of lockdown and I spent the whole time thinking they were lining up to kick the crap out of you. You didn't hear me banging on my door, yelling your name?"

"Oh. No. Sorry."

"Not your fault. I guess the soundproofing has to be pretty good here. But you're okay?"

"I'm okay."

"Because, man, they dragged you away! Back to the *cells!* Like you'd done something *wrong* by smacking the world's dumbest rapist in the teeth! And all I got from you after was a

thumbs up through the fucking common room door, and for all I knew they could have *made* you do that, and I *know* there's another exit near the bedrooms and I don't know what happens when you wash out and I thought I was going to be *alone* down here again and—”

“I'm okay, Aaron.”

“No beatings?”

“No.”

“And you're not going to freak out and try to hurt yourself again?”

“No.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“Jesus's big fat floppy dick,” Aaron mutters, and flops back on the bed. “Stef, mate,” he continues, voice slightly strained from the unusual position his upper body's ended up in, “I thought I was going to have to talk you down from, I don't know, something drastic and awful. Or I thought I'd never see you again. What *happened*?”

“I got the talking-to of my life,” Stefan says, slightly taken aback by the intensity of Aaron's reaction. Possibly the boy just doesn't want to be left with only Will and Adam to talk to, an understandably horrifying concept. Stefan sits down at the head of the bed and arranges the pillows for comfort, throwing one to Aaron and using the time it takes to situate himself to cover for the thinking he needs to do. He knows he'll have to wing this conversation, to feel out what elements of the truth he can use to spin his latest lie, and he suppresses a moment's irritation that Beatrice didn't leave him with any instructions beyond, ‘Don't tell them anything.’ Perhaps improvising a cover story is his first task as an official collaborator. “But that was all it was. I had to promise I wouldn't hit anyone else.” He shrugs. “It was more about Declan than me. He was on his last chance, and he blew it: he's washing out.”

“For good?” Aaron says, breathing out heavily. “You know this for sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Who told you?”

“Pippa. And Maria, a little bit, as well,” Stefan adds, borrowing a bit of her authority, certain that if Aaron asks her to confirm any of it she’ll lie as smoothly and professionally as she does when she tells Aaron he’ll leave Dorley ‘a changed man’.

Fuck. Because that’s still happening, isn’t it? To Aaron; to all of them.

Aaron, sitting up against the wall himself now, head resting on the pillow Stefan gave him, ankles tucked under, frowns at Stefan as if he senses his disquiet, and well he should: it’s different now. Which doesn’t entirely make sense — Stefan’s been lying to Aaron since they met — but now that Stefan is, officially, on the side of the sponsors, now that he’s been upgraded from prisoner to prison guard, it’s different. How could it not be?

Welcome to the team, he remembers with a shudder.

Aaron blinks at him, looks almost comically innocent, and Stefan wonders how the punishment can possibly be proportional to his crime. It seems catastrophically unjust.

Except it’s not supposed to be punishment, is it? No, it’s rehabilitation, or Beatrice’s twisted idea of it, one she’s recruited generations of women into helping her carry out — simultaneously beneficiaries, employees and justification for her ideology; convenient — and in Stefan’s mind it’s transformed over the weeks from barely believable to straightforwardly horrifying.

He can’t stop looking at Aaron. They’re going to *change* him. They’ve already started.

“So, um,” Aaron says, uncomfortable under his gaze, “did Pippa or Maria happen to tell you what ‘washing out’ actually

involves?”

Stefan swallows some of the tension out of his throat. “No,” he says, and he’s relieved it comes out sounding almost normal. “I asked. But no.”

“Because I have a theory.”

“Oh?”

“I think they hunt us for sport, dude.”

“Aaron—”

The boy snorts. “That wasn’t serious. Okay, actually, maybe it was a little serious? Because we’re never leaving here. You know that, right?” He drums his fingers on his thighs. Allocates all his attention to the task. “I’ve been thinking about this. They’re never going to let us go. They can’t, or we’ll go to the police. I don’t care how many books on feminism Maria makes me read, none of them have a bit that’s made me any less likely to call 999 the second I get out of here and start ugly crying about kidnapping rings until the operator sends someone with a box of tissues and a SWAT team. And that means ‘washing out’, or whatever bullshit excuse they eventually use to get rid of us, means either being shipped off somewhere else — somewhere worse — or they’re doing a *Dexter* and dropping us into the sea in bin bags.”

“I’m not sure—”

“I don’t want to *die*, Stef!” Aaron says, and Stefan notices for the first time that his eyes, normally always a little puffy from poor sleep, are red: he’s been crying. “I don’t want to die, and I don’t want to sit around in this fucking dungeon watching people get carted off, one by one. I’m ready to tear this place up! Run at someone and just get tased over and over again! Because what’s the point in being a good boy, staying out of trouble, keeping my pecker in my pocket, reading all Maria’s books and eating every spoonful of shit they shovel at me, if my grand reward is that I’m the last one to leave? Do I get to sit in the common room and watch while they drag *you*

away? Because I had a preview of that today, Stefan, and I didn't like it one fucking bit."

"Hey," Stefan says, leaning forward, not touching him but closing the gap between them. Sincerity by proximity; show him he's not scared. "I've been talking to them. No-one's dragging me away. *Or* you. Declan's a fucking monster. You're not and neither am I."

"Not even for—?"

"No."

"Then how do we *leave*?" Aaron shouts. "Because I can't come up with a way that doesn't involve body bags and meat cleavers." He's stopped drumming on his thighs and instead wrapped his arms around his waist, shrinking himself. Stefan's had enough experience to spot someone trying to hold down rampant panic, and he's torn between concern for Aaron and anger at Maria and Beatrice and all the others for allowing this to happen.

But that's the point, right? That's the benefit of someone washing out: the threats are suddenly real. The boys start fearing for their lives, not just their freedom. They can't pretend it's just a psychological experiment any more, or Woke Jail, or anything else. Will called washing out 'the bogeyman'. Not any more. Stefan finds himself wondering at the convenience of the timing; just when it's starting to sink in that they're going to be down here a long, long time...

It *can't* be true that Dorley takes in one extra boy per year with the express intention of washing them out, can it? Beatrice said she doesn't like to waste people, and if she's to be believed — and Stefan has to trust her credibility, else the promises she made about his own future start to look suspect, and this place becomes even more of a horror show — then such an action would be abhorrent to her.

He can believe she'll seize on any useful side-effect, though. A shame one of the boys had to go, but what a splendid motivator for those who remain! Everything's a lever.

He wonders, suddenly, if they ever lose boys from the fear they stoke in them. If that counts as a failure or another kind of success; another bad man off the streets forever. Would Aaron, convinced that the same fate awaits all of them, do something drastic?

“Can I tell you a secret?” Stefan says quickly, stomach lurching, needing to do or say *something* to make it better, and rapidly deciding what exactly that is.

Aaron, looking down at his knees again, nods.

“And you’ll keep it to yourself, just for now?” he says.

Aaron nods again.

“Because I was explicitly instructed not to tell anyone about this, and it could hurt me *badly* if it gets out that I did.”

Aaron nods again. “I won’t hurt you, Stef,” he whispers.

“Remember, after the thing with the nurse, when I asked to speak to someone in charge about the way we were treated, and I met a woman called Abby?”

“Yeah.”

“She said she was down here, once,” Stefan says. “Down here like we are. Kept here, just like us, until she reformed. She said it was *years* ago, and that there have been a lot of people down here between her and us. Enough people that, if all of them really *had* disappeared forever, it’d be a national scandal.” Granted, all of them actually have disappeared, with Stefan and his supposed backpacking holiday as the sole exception; they’ve got to be bribing someone, surely? *Lots* of someones. “She survived.”

“She got out?”

“Her and dozens of others, over the years. They stay down here, they reform, they move on.”

Aaron’s breathing slows a little. “You didn’t happen to meet any more of these ‘others’, did you?”

“No. But she didn’t seem like she was lying. And I think she was telling me more than she was supposed to, you know?”

Aaron nods. “So, what, do they have girl intakes and boy intakes? Or are they normally mixed and we were just really unlucky and got a no-girl one? Or is there a whole other basement?”

“I don’t know. She didn’t say. I think she was more interested in reassuring me. Maybe she knows *everyone* gets scared about this, at some point.”

“So, if she got out, why’s she still around?”

“She said it’s cheaper than renting. And she has friends here.”

“Don’t suppose she said what she did to end up down here?” Aaron says.

Stefan pretends to remember, sorting through ways to repackage the things Abby’s told him about her life before graduation. “She said she had behavioural problems. Bad ones. She said she hurt someone. And that she fought against this place to begin with, but eventually came to realise that being made to change was the only way she was ever *going* to change.”

“Is that really it?” Aaron says. “We change, we leave?”

“It’s a pretty big change they want, I think. Like you said, they don’t want us running off and dobbing them in the second we get out. We need to believe we’re better off than we were before. Better people.”

“This is sounding kind of like a cult, Stefan. Are we going to end up worshipping a moon goddess or something? Is there going to be a spaceship you can only get aboard via mass suicide?”

“I’m sure she would have mentioned if there was a suicide spaceship.”

“We just... change,” Aaron says.

“Yes.”

“Become better men.”

“Yes,” Stefan says, looking away.

Aaron unwinds a little more, stretches his legs out in front of him, lays his hands in his lap. “Maybe, then... maybe you had the right idea, going on at me about my shit. Maybe I shouldn’t have given you grief about it.”

“I don’t think it’s so granular. I think it’s a whole process and they’re only just getting started. Although, I suppose deciding never to do it again couldn’t hurt.”

“Way ahead of you.”

“Good.”

“Fuck,” Aaron says, after a moment spent playing with his lower lip with his teeth. “Down here a while, then?”

“Probably, yeah.”

“This Abby, is she hot?”

“She’s beautiful,” Stefan says. “Like, model-pretty.”

“Nice. You think maybe guys don’t call the police because they get to live in a big house full of hot women, after?” The grin Aaron turns on Stefan is half-smug, half-cheeky, the way he usually is, and Stefan is so relieved by the apparent return of the boy’s equilibrium that he laughs out loud, lets the pressure out of his chest with an undignified snort that turns into a hysteria that takes a good few seconds to recover from. When he does, Aaron’s crossed his hands behind his head, looking up at him, still smiling, and it takes everything Stefan has not to hug him.

“What’s so funny?” Aaron says, play-acting offended.

“I,” Stefan says, between breaths, “have no idea.”

Aaron shrugs. “At least you got a laugh out of it. It’s a nice change of pace; I’ve spent the evening feeling like the

mousetrap is about to snap shut around my neck. Just this impending and inescapable sense of doom.”

“You’re not doomed.”

“Let’s hope,” Aaron says, half-joking.

“You’re *not* doomed,” Stefan insists, losing his levity as fast as it came. He knows exactly what it’ll take for Aaron to get out of here.

“Aww. You *do* care.”

“I do, actually,” Stefan says, looking at Aaron in profile and wondering, as the guilt ties itself around his spine, how Aaron will look as a girl, whether he’ll survive long enough for them both to find out, and what exactly would happen if Stefan just told the truth right now, if he admitted everything. Would Aaron tell the others? Try to escape?

Would he hurt himself?

“You mind if I just hang out for a bit?” Aaron says. “Kinda don’t want to go back to my room right now.”

“Yeah,” Stefan says, the confession freezing on his lips and his fingernails biting his palms as he realises that the truth *has* to be kept from Aaron, lest he try something drastic enough, one way or another, to end his own life or wash out. So Stefan will keep the secret. Lie to him. Spin stories. Cooperate with Maria. Be complicit. And comfort him when, one day soon enough, Aaron wakes up mutilated. “Sure.”

2019 NOVEMBER 10 — SUNDAY

“I feel weird about this.”

“It’s fine, Aaron, really.”

“No, it’s not fine, not at all. They got really strange about us showering unsupervised, remember? They made us always go together, at the same time every morning? It was a whole thing? I know you remember this, Stef; have you gone wrong?”

“Please stop tapping on my head.”

“I’m just trying to find the bit of you that’s gone crazy.”

“It’s fine, Aaron. Really! Those rules were because of Declan, right? Well, he’s gone now. *Gone gone.*”

“Don’t remind me.”

“I think I should, because you seem to have forgotten. We’re safe. Whatever happens to him isn’t *ever* going to happen to us, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“So?”

“Yeah. Fine. We’re safe. There’s always Maria, though. Showering at the appropriate time, that’s *her* rule. And she likes rules. Loves them. Probably sleeps with a big book of them. Probably strokes its sexy hardback spine and—”

“Remember the microphones, Aaron.”

“Good point. Still, Maria, though.”

“I’ll protect you from Maria.”

“My hero!”

“Get off me!”

“My knight in shining armour!”

“I’m your neighbour in a bloody dressing gown, now get off me.”

“My knight in a... greenish-black robe!”

“I *said*, get off me— *ow!*”

“What? What’s up? What did I do?”

“Oh, uh, nothing.”

“That wasn’t nothing, Stefan.”

“It’s just... my chest is a little sore, that’s all.”

“Huh. You too?”

They'd talked for a bit. Watched a movie together, Stefan keeping a careful eye on Aaron until the anxiety seemed genuinely to leave him. He threw in a lot of reassurances about how nice and normal Abby seemed, how probably there are others at Saints who've been through the same thing, and that the reason they never heard anything about it before they ended up here is because the people who leave are grateful, not dead. Partway through the movie, Aaron switched position, moved closer to him, and while it was a little uncomfortable, in the way personal contact with Aaron can be — Stefan's long since rejected the idea that Aaron might be flirting, having decided instead that he's just drawn to the novel sensation of being close to someone who's nice to him — mostly it made Stefan aware of how much the day's effort and anxiety caused him to sweat. So, somewhere after two in the morning, he persuaded Aaron to come along for an illicit late-night shower, because sitting in your own stink is bad enough in an ordinary bedroom and downright appalling in the poorly ventilated basement rooms.

"Yeah," Stefan says, turning his back on Aaron and hanging up his dressing gown on one of the pegs in the shower annexe, "I've been sore for a couple of days. Probably just a side-effect of the Goserelin." He makes a show of massaging his chest; is it his imagination, or is there a little development there? The flesh seems more firm, even if there's nothing visible just yet.

"Hah!" Aaron says, triumphant, disrobing and, following Stefan's example, turning away. It's been a while since Stefan was last intentionally subjected to the sight of Aaron's penis; the thought of it is almost nostalgic. "I knew it! You said it can't make you grow breasts!"

"It can't." Stefan ducks under the water and wets his hair, and then ducks back out to add, "But maybe it can make your nipples hurt." He shrugs. "I'm not a doctor."

"No, Stef," Aaron says, picking the tap next to Stefan's and starting the water, "you are not. *Jesus*, this feels good."

Stefan ducks his head under. “It really does.”

“No, you don’t understand. This feels *really* good.” Aaron turns to him and holds out his arms, as if to demonstrate, and then sheepishly turns away again, cheeks red, when Stefan’s eyes unavoidably flicker downward for a moment. “I’ve never had a shower like this. It’s like the water’s kissing my skin!”

Stefan laughs. “Maybe you’re just in a good mood.”

“Yeah,” Aaron says, rubbing in the shampoo and half-turning his head to grin at Stefan without danger of further exposure. “That must be it. I’ve got the basement euphoria. Common medical condition that comes from being entombed in concrete for weeks. You’d know about that, being a doctor and all. Or,” he adds, rinsing it out, “it’s just from knowing I’m not going to die down here. Kind of a relief, really. You okay to do my conditioner?”

“Sure,” Stefan says, shrugging. Earlier, while they were watching the movie, Aaron confided that he really does have difficulty raising his left arm over his head for more than a few seconds. He can stretch okay, he said, and wave and all that, but he can’t apply pressure and he can’t lift things. He hasn’t said why; Stefan assumes it’s an injury from boarding school, from when the other boys used to delight in hurting him. Whatever the reason, Stefan’s happy enough helping him with rubbing in his conditioner. “Come here and stay still.”

“I’m going to ask Maria if we can start taking our phones into the common room,” Aaron says, squirming as Stefan massages the conditioner through his hair; it’s getting longer, starting to look more like Stefan’s unkempt thatch, and the shorter hairs on the back and sides are getting shaggy. Aaron normally keeps it slicked back, but when it’s wet it falls in his eyes, and when he shakes his head to clear them it’s almost cute.

“Okay. Why?”

“For the cameras, Stef! Imagine if I’d been able to get you on video, smacking Declan around! You should have seen

yourself; fucking glorious. Just *whap!* and he's on the floor like a fucking, I don't know, a black-and-white-cartoon banana-peel-assisted ass-plant, and you're standing over him, all, 'Come on then.' You *deserve* to see that. Spank bank material for life."

Stefan slaps him lightly on the side of the head, both as reprimand and to let him know he's done with the conditioner. "I wouldn't mind forgetting it, actually. My thumb still hurts."

Aaron laughs. "You hit him with your thumb inside your fist?"

"Why does everyone keep on at me about that? It's not like I've been in a lot of fights."

"Hey," Aaron says, holding up a pair of soapy hands, balled up with the thumbs inside, "no judging. I would have done the same."

"I thought you got in fights at your awful school?"

"Oh, sure, I got in fights. I just didn't get much opportunity to fight back."

"Jesus," Stefan says, turning around to wash himself in the place he doesn't like to think about. "I'm sorry, Aaron."

"Yeah, well, the joke's on them." Aaron starts rinsing the conditioner. "Now *they're* all licking taint to climb the political and corporate ladders and *I'm* having an illicit shower in a kidnapper basement with my best bud."

"They'd be so jealous," Stefan says, giggling into the water.

"And I bet their nipples don't tingle at night, either," Aaron adds, shutting off the tap and shaking the hair out of his eyes. "They really are missing out."

* * *

“That was weirdly fun,” Stefan says, hanging up his wet towel and pulling on a t-shirt. Aaron hadn’t wanted to return to his room, not even to pick up spare clothes, but he did agree to get changed with his back turned and is already stretched out on the end of the bed, clad in Stefan’s too-big-for-him jogging bottoms and hoodie, scrolling through Stefan’s phone, looking for another movie.

“Yeah, actually, it was,” Aaron admits.

“It was like sneaking out from a school trip. Clandestine in a really basic kind of way, you know?”

“Aww,” Aaron says, “you’re always so wholesome. I can picture it now.” He raises a hand to the ceiling and continues in a narrator’s voice: “A trip to Chessington, a cruel and heartless Geography teacher who makes the boys and girls take separate buses, and you, a brave thirteen-year-old, sneaking out of the boys’ floor to find out where the girls are sleeping.”

“How did you know my Geography teacher was cruel and heartless?”

Aaron shrugs. “Aren’t they all?”

“You’re wrong about Chessington. Our school could never’ve afforded it. Wrong side of London. We did once go to that place where all the wattle-and-daub houses used to be.”

“Isn’t that mostly just a big field?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Your big school trip was to a field.”

“It was a different field to the ones around where I grew up.” Stefan says. “Novelty value. Anyway, I never sneaked out on any trip, except to call a friend of mine back home. Never even sneaked out of school. I was very well-behaved,” he adds primly.

“Man, what *did* you do to end up here?”

“Corporate espionage,” Stefan says.

“Liar.”

“Art forgery.”

“I’ve seen your doodles; you can’t draw.”

“I colluded with the French, to—”

“Will you stop? I’m trying to find a movie that isn’t quite saccharine enough to make me vom and you’re being *very* distracting.”

“Sorry.”

Aaron drops the phone on the bed, giving up. He rests his head on his crossed hands. “*You* might have been sweetness and light at school,” he says, “but I wasn’t. I mean, I guess you know about the recent stuff—” he coughs delicately, and looks uncomfortable, “—but I mean, before. When I was a teenager. When I got transferred to hell.” Stefan doesn’t ask what he means by that; it seems clear. “Hey,” Aaron adds, “did your parents have, like, a life plan for you?”

“A life plan?”

“Yeah, like, what did they want you to be?”

Stefan shrugs. “I don’t know. I never asked. It’s not the sort of thing I’ve ever wanted to know.”

“Huh,” Aaron says, contemplating Stefan’s response as if it’s by far the least relatable thing he’s ever said, which it might well be. “After Dad’s business got sold and we were suddenly rolling in it, they developed plans for me. *Big* plans.” He waves a hand around. “I was going to be in business. I was going to be in politics. Jesus,” he adds with a derisive sniff, “they wanted me to be prime minister. Didn’t matter what I wanted, obviously, or that they’d moved me away from my friends and made me hyper-fucking-miserable. That was a bonus, actually: no ‘distractions’. So off I go to a brand new school, a fucking sardine tin of dickheads that twists open and

rains them down on me as soon as I get there, and oh yes, I have to live my entire life there, too. Can't be prime minister if you don't network. Stupid, obviously."

"How come?"

"None of the posh boys gave a fuck who I was. And Dad, well, he *sold*, didn't he? Wasn't in business any more. He had more money than sense even when he didn't have any money, and now he was rolling in it he didn't understand that family connections *matter* to those people, and he didn't have any, ergo, I didn't have any. And I sounded wrong. I even looked wrong. You know that look aristos have, like someone not too far up the family tree fucked a trout and had a lovely clutch of fish babies, and the glassy eyes and floppy jaw become dominant genetic traits? Yeah. You know the one. Didn't have that, either. Nothing about me fit."

"That sounds awful, Aaron," Stef says, extracting two bottles of water from the stash under his bed and waggling one at Aaron, who takes it.

"Thanks," Aaron says, cracking it open and taking a drink. "And, yeah, it was pretty fucking awful. If the other boys weren't locking me in the coal shed, they were aiming a kick at me in the hall or randomly taking my stuff or— or doing *other* shit. And I guess I could have told my dad, you know, said it wasn't working out, but as far as I was concerned he stopped giving a shit as soon as he slammed the car door and drove away. Probably not actually true — looking back, I think he would have moved me on if I made enough of a fuss, like if I *really* made a problem for him — but when you're a stupid kid, you're a stupid kid."

"Right."

"So I start exploring, looking for places to be left alone. And, yeah, I found lots of little nooks and crannies, loads of secret spaces... all of which had already been comprehensively mapped by generations of posh twats. You know, like, 'Son, this is the room where I first played soggy

biscuit and made Dumpy Doggins eat it,' that kind of thing, and Dumpy Doggins is in parliament now."

"What's soggy biscuit?"

"Don't ask. Anyway, my only choice is to get the hell out of hell, so that's what I do. I start sacking off classes and just go wandering. I skip breakfast, I skip dinner, I sneak back to the dorm late at night. I show up to just enough lessons not to get kicked out, and that turns out to be not very many, because posh school? Not exactly academically rigorous."

"Really?"

"Yeah! I expected to be behind when I started there but it turns out those boarding schools are just big kindergartens for the well-bred. They don't need to *know* things; they just need to learn how to hide their sociopathy in a suit. Takes years to teach, too. That kind of cruelty takes a lot of sanding down. Hey," he adds thoughtfully, "why aren't there any of *them* in here?"

"There might have been, in other years. Probably not, though. Harder to kidnap someone if they're related to the queen. God," Stefan adds, giggling, "imagine waking up to another ordinary day in the basement, and Prince William is there. Maria standing in front of him, like, 'Imperialism is just another facet of toxic masculinity.'"

"*Anyway,*" Aaron says, and Stefan makes apologetic gestures for the tangent, "I started exploring away from the school, and there was a small town a mile or so down the road. I ended up going there *a lot*, because there was nowhere else even close. Middle of nowhere, literally. And there was nothing to do in town, so I started hanging around at this corner shop. I'd go there in my shitty little uniform and buy a Mars Bar instead of actually having dinner, and after a while they started noticing me. And when I asked if I could use their kettle so I could make a Pot Noodle, they started talking to me, asking how I am, making sure I get something a bit more substantial to eat. Well—" and he blushes, looks away from

Stefan at the ceiling, starts turning his hands around each other again, “—Elizabeth did.”

“Elizabeth?” Stefan asks, into the sudden silence.

“Yeah. She was the eldest daughter of the family who ran the place. And she was... kind to me. And interested, you know? Like, she actually cared. We’d talk, and she’d listen and offer advice, and she was so fucking pretty, Stef, you don’t understand, like, I’d gone from being a child at a normal school where the girls were kids just like me, to this shitpit full of posh boys, none of whom I’d have wanted to touch even if they didn’t ritually kick the crap out of me all the time, and then there she was: a *woman*. And she was kind, confident, intelligent... All the things you’d want someone to be. Just hanging out with her was a life-changing experience.”

“Did you, uh—”

“Did we do it?” Aaron finishes, looking vaguely scandalised. “No. Christ, no. She was in her twenties. Much older than me. I just, you know, fancied her a bit, I mean, obviously I did, she was gorgeous, but she was also a nice, smart, interesting woman who made a bit of time for me. Maybe the first and last person to be kind to me. Until, uh, well...” He coughs. “But the family lost the shop and had to move. Rent went up or some shit. And we meant to stay in touch, but the posh boys stamped on my phone and that was it, you know? When I eventually got out of hell I tried to look her up on Facebook and realised I never even knew her fucking surname.”

“How long ago was this?”

“Years ago. I had a lot of school still to get through and nowhere to escape to, after she left.”

“I’m sorry, Aaron.”

“You know,” he says, rolling back over and making himself busy with the phone again, “that’s the good thing about this place: people can’t leave me. They literally can’t. Locked in.”

“I wouldn’t leave you, anyway.”

Aaron stops scrolling. “Really?”

“Really. Remember? I said we were friends, and Will called us gay?”

“Yeah. Huh. Cool. So, uh, wanna watch something called *Desperately Seeking Susan*?”

* * *

Since yesterday, Christine’s been holding Paige’s hand a *lot*. She needs the reassurance: she came close to wrecking their relationship, close to wrecking Paige herself — Christine’s had to get over her innate disbelief that anyone, let alone *Paige Adams*, could like her that much, because clearly she does, and sooner or later you have to let go of your own self-loathing before it hurts someone who matters — and now that they’ve reaffirmed their bond she doesn’t want ever to be out of contact with her. Paige’s slender fingers anchor her, keep her safe, and she’d worry she was being too clingy if Paige didn’t need the connection just as much. Maria poked gentle fun when they came down for breakfast and didn’t unlink to pour cereal; given that they are both right-handed, this required some ingenuity.

But, because Paige takes her classes very seriously — she’s already impressed one of her History with Human Rights professors enough that she’s practically been guaranteed a spot on one of the summer placements, which makes Christine ache with both pride and pre-emptive loneliness at the thought of losing her for three whole months — they’ve been forced to detach from each other, so Paige can concentrate on her work. She’s still within sight: perched at one of the smaller tables around the edge of the dining room, laptop and binders

scattered in front of her, frowning, typing, occasionally singing under her breath. Christine can't think of anything she'd rather look at, and suppresses her irritation when two more of her Sisters, sounding distressingly chirpy, enter the dining room and make a beeline for her table.

Indira kisses her on the top of her head and sits on her left; Abby deposits three coffee cups on the table in front of her and folds into the seat on Christine's right. Christine almost doesn't want to look at the mugs, because she knows Abby will deliberately have picked out the ones with the worst, most awful jokes on and, sure enough, when she picks hers up to take a sip it says on the side, *You Have a Special Way of Making People Smile*. With depressing inevitability the word *Smile* has been crossed out and replaced with *Girls*, apparently at the printing stage. Cute, for certain (very localised) values of 'cute'.

"You're very sweet together," Abby says, nodding at Paige, "you and her. I *do* love to see it. She was miserable, you know, last year, after you broke things off."

"I know," Christine says. "I don't really want to talk about it, if that's okay? I've spent enough time recently cataloguing my mistakes. The list is *long*."

"She's testy," Indira stage-whispers over Christine's head. "No sleep." Indira's response to discovering Christine had been hiding a whole trans girl from everyone except Abby had been, mercifully, confined to Christine's bedroom and thus was moderated by Paige's presence, but it had still been rough, even if it ended in hugs.

"Oh?" Abby said, raising her eyebrows and smirking, but Indira cuts her off, shaking her head.

"Bad dreams," she explains, and squeezes Christine's shoulder.

It's true. Nightmares jerked her out of bed several times overnight. If it hadn't been for Paige, gently rubbing her back, stroking her hair, kissing her, promising her that everything's

okay, Christine wouldn't have got more than a single hour. It was one of the factors that moderated Indira's reaction: when she walked in, Christine was curled up in Paige's lap, clinging to her like she was the last woman on Earth.

"I'm worried about Stef," Christine says.

"You shouldn't be," Indira says. "Maria's on her side, and Pippa was *already* on her side; she's safe."

"Physically, maybe. But haven't we officially recruited her? What's *that* going to do to her brain?"

"We'll watch her. Don't worry."

"I'm surprised you didn't go see her in person," Abby says, "just for the reassurance."

Christine smiles. "I thought about it. But I checked the feed and Aaron was with her all night. I wouldn't have been able to see her without prompting some awkward questions."

"All night?" Indira says. "They slept together? That's... early."

"No," Christine says, and pulls out her phone, bringing up the appropriate footage. "See?" She scrubs through it, covering hours in seconds. "They watched a movie, washed up, watched *another* movie, and eventually fell asleep. That's Stef in the bed; Aaron's curled up on a pile of hoodies on the floor."

Indira giggles. "Like a puppy."

"Stop," Christine says, dropping her phone on the table. "That's not an image I ever want in my head."

"It's right there," Abby says, ever helpful. "Look."

Christine drinks her coffee, eyes to the ceiling. "You can't make me."

Indira, aware more than anyone else of the shortness of Christine's temper when she's tired, engages Abby with local gossip, and Christine shoots her a grateful smile before letting herself zone out. She rests her chin on her free hand, sips her

coffee and returns to watching Paige, a pastime she'll never tire of: Paige is sweetly deliberate in everything she does, and as Christine watches she swipes on her laptop's touchpad, peers at something in her written notes and starts typing, all with the same careful, controlled gestures so typical of her. That little dent between her brows when she frowns: Christine wants desperately to kiss it.

She's still singing to herself, too.

God, how did she let herself almost ruin this? How did she nearly miss it in the first place? All those times she thought Paige was just being pushy, she was actually supporting her, fighting for her, caring for her, the way she's always done, since before she was Paige.

A woman she'll never deserve. Best start trying harder, then.

The sound of fresh coffee being poured wakes her up, and when Abby sits back down, putting the cafetiere aside for one of the second years to pick up later, she gently strokes the back of Christine's neck, where her hair becomes wispy and fine, and kisses her on the cheek.

"Sleepy little thing," Abby says.

"Who are you calling little?" Christine mumbles. "I'm taller than you."

"I think you should know, I refilled Paige's mug just now and she didn't spot me coming, so I got to hear what she's been singing to herself half the morning."

"Oh?"

"It's *You Belong With Me*, but she's changing the lyrics. I'm pretty sure she made them about you."

Christine looks back at Paige, and it doesn't take long for her to start up again. Now that she has context, she can guess the words:

I wear short skirts, she wears t-shirts

I'm cheer captain and she's on the bleachers

Dreaming about the day when she wakes up and finds

That what she's looking for has been here the whole time

“Chrissy,” Abby says sternly, “if you break her heart again, I will be so very cross.”

“Same,” Indira says. “This is your second chance with her, and take it from me: second chances are precious.”

“She’s made herself very vulnerable,” Abby says, “opening up to you again. Don’t forget.”

Christine drinks her coffee, deliberately slurping it, to be rude. “It’s possible to have too many older sisters,” she says.

“Nope,” Indira says.

“I haven’t heard that,” Abby says.

“Me neither.”

“Sounds like a myth.”

The table is a much nicer place to rest her head than on her hand, and if she closes her eyes she can pretend that two of her dearest friends and closest family aren’t ganging up on her. Someone — Indira, probably, judging by the angle — starts rubbing her back, and she wriggles into the movements, accepting the comfort. Wonders, the way she sometimes does, what her old self might be doing at this moment; doubts he would have been surrounded by people who love him as much as Abby and Indira love her, even if they are capable of being, from time to time, mildly irritating.

Her old self; she’s starting to struggle to remember his name. Good.

Over her head, the conversation’s moved on from Christine’s love life and her litany of errors and onto just where the hell Abby has been the last few weeks.

“I’ve been around,” she says.

“Not much,” Indira says. “We’ve missed you.”

“I’ve been working!”

“And not sleeping in your room?”

“Well, no. I have an actual budget for this article, and it’s taking me all over the place. I’m getting to know the Travelodge network much better than I ever wanted to.”

“Huh,” Christine says. “I assumed you’d been staying with Melissa.”

Abby looks away. “No,” she says. “She’s, um, seeing someone. And she doesn’t want to see me again. For now.”

“Oh. Shit. Abs—”

“It’s fine, Christine.”

“But still—”

“Can we change the subject?”

Indira jumps in again, discussing her new responsibilities and noting that Nell, Faye’s sponsor, has been effectively suspended with pay, reduced to filling in on the basement rota; Dira is co-sponsoring Faye with Bella, Rebecca’s sponsor, which doesn’t take up much of anyone’s time as Faye and Rebecca are inseparable, and practically sponsor themselves.

“As bad as these two?” Abby asks, twitching her finger back and forth to indicate Christine and Paige.

“Worse,” Indira says. “Sometimes they have... guests.”

“Gosh,” Abby says, sitting back. “Your year wasn’t like that, was it?”

“Not really. Yours?”

“Definitely not.”

“They’re very sweet, though,” Indira says. She nudges Christine. “They talk about you a lot.”

“In what context?” Christine asks warily, remembering Faye’s aborted attempt to kiss her.

“They were asking if they could come up to the second floor to see both of you again.”

Ah. Good. That sounds innocent. “Any time,” she says. “But I’ll see them soon, won’t I? Aren’t the second years cooking today?”

“Yes,” Abby says, in her primary school teacher voice, “and that means they’ll be busy. Cooking is hard work, Christine.”

“No, it’s easy,” Christine says. “You take the leftovers, you put them in the microwave, you eat the leftovers.” She sticks her tongue out and earns a light smack to the shoulder.

In fact, Faye and Rebecca can do little more than wave at Christine as a line of sponsors escort them and the other second years into the dining hall a couple of hours later, bearing Sunday lunch (and vegetarian option) and a few bottles of wine, which prompts Paige, sitting down next to Abby and frowning politely at her until she agrees to swap seats with Christine, to complain once again that this batch of second years are getting way more opportunities to exercise their alcohol privileges than she and Christine ever did.

“Confirmation bias,” Indira says, leaning around Abby and gesticulating with the nut cutlet on her fork. “You remember every time we pulled you, kicking and screaming, out of the liquor cabinet, and you extrapolate from there.”

“One time,” Paige says, presenting the appropriate number of fingers. “One time. I just wanted a whiskey.”

“And she wasn’t kicking and screaming,” Christine says, loyal to the end but resisting the urge to kiss her, lest she cover her in gravy.

Aunt Bea pokes her head around the door from the kitchen just as Christine’s finishing her chicken, and exchanges a few meaningful nods with Maria before retreating. Something about her demeanour and dress — stiff movements, sunglasses, very long coat — suggests a hangover, and she whispers as much to Paige.

“Or a booty call,” Paige whispers back. She giggles, and adds even more quietly, “A Bea-ty call!”

“Cover your mouth when you say things like that!” Christine hisses, grinning.

After dessert — a strange sort of pudding-thing, soaked in alcohol, which Christine decided was intended to knock them all out — Maria taps a spoon on the side of her glass, for silence, and a roomful of sleepy women give her what passes for their full attention.

“Where’s Pippa?” Paige asks Christine quietly, as Maria gives the room the run-down on Stef’s arrival at Dorley.

“No idea. Maybe she didn’t want the attention.” Christine smiles at the surprised faces that turn her way when Maria summarises exactly how Stef remained hidden for so long. “I know the feeling,” she adds through gritted teeth. Paige hooks fingers with her, under the table.

Mercifully, Maria moves on, efficiently covering the last month, editing out most of Stef’s difficulties — the nurse included — and Christine relaxes her shoulders again.

“Excuse me,” someone on the other side of the room says. It’s Rebecca, raising a hand.

“Yes?” Maria says.

“How will her treatment differ from ours?” Rebecca asks. Christine could swear she and Faye are holding hands under the table, like she is with Paige.

Maria shrugs. “It’s what you’d expect, really. She’s excused the resocialising stuff, unless she’s with the other residents. And she’ll know in advance when... certain procedures are scheduled.”

Christine’s about to whisper something sarcastic to Paige about how Maria is still euphemising the orchiectomy to a room of women who’ve all had one, when she notices how quiet most of the second years have gotten. Rebecca in particular has lost a little colour, and Faye’s whispering in her

ear, rubbing her upper arm. So much fresher for them than it is for her, Christine remembers. Being reborn fucking hurts.

Maria gives them some time.

Indira suddenly snorts and covers her mouth with her hand. She makes conciliatory gestures towards Maria, who rolls her eyes and, looking to the second years to see if they're ready to continue, starts covering the rules around interaction with Stef: don't seek her out, unless you're a sponsor or she's visiting upstairs, which, yes, she *will* be allowed to do. At the second-year table, mild indignation replaces upset.

It's not until Christine, Paige, Indira and Abby are decompressing in Indira's room on the third floor, arranged in comfortable piles on the double-size couch, that Indira explains what caused her almost to inhale her alcoholic sponge pudding: they should all have known Stef was a white woman, she explains, the second she asked to see the manager.

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Declan's departure — confirmed by Pippa to have finally occurred overnight; there was a delay of several days before he could be 'picked up', a term which seemed deeply to disturb her — hasn't reduced tension as much as Stefan hoped it might. Will's been talking about Declan as if he's dead, holding forth to the whole common room, and Stefan's reassurances that none of the rest of them are likely to share his fate seem only to piss him off. Perhaps because Stefan only half-believes them himself. He can't stop thinking about the false choice Beatrice offered him, the night she found him out, and how it's the same choice facing the boys, though they don't yet know it: to accept her and her methods, or to wash out.

In the face of that, what can Stefan do? Beatrice asked that he help the boys acclimate to the alterations, that he make himself complicit in every aspect of their changing bodies, and

he's realised that even without her he would have a moral obligation to do just that, else she might wash them out.

The most disturbing thing, the thing that's been keeping him up at night since long before he accidentally came out to the whole building, is that there are dozens of girls up there in the Hall, and none of them have ever attempted to rush Beatrice, remove her means of control — whatever it is — by force, and take over. None of them feel strongly enough about what goes on down here, it seems. And it's obvious why they don't: they all survived it, and they think themselves better people because of it. Why would they deprive anyone the opportunity to change and grow, as they did?

True believers.

Ollie and Raph remain the most spooked. Since Declan left they've spent most of their time in their separate rooms, and in the common areas they huddle together as if afraid someone might attack them, a thought Stefan initially dismissed as ludicrous before remembering that the most recent punch had been thrown by him. His thumb still aches a little.

Will and Adam have paired off again. Will's been volubly irritated by Aaron's dismissal of his concerns and Stefan's equivocation, and where Will goes, Adam goes; along with one of the TV-side sofas, dragged a few metres away and set up with its own small pile of bean bag chairs as a makeshift table.

So Stefan and Aaron are a twosome once more, sitting together at lunch and in the common room, and spending most evenings in Stefan's bedroom. Aaron generally returns to his own room to sleep, but not always. (Stefan's visited Aaron's room just once; Aaron suggested he might not want to sit down anywhere unless he had access to a blacklight and a mop.) It's meant that Stefan's time with Pippa has been reduced largely to quick check-ins, which Stefan would consider more of a shame if she didn't insist on gendering him female when they're alone together, which causes his dysphoria to flare up; he's been meaning to ask her to stop, but

she's seemed delicate of late, and he hasn't had the heart. If she's still fighting with Christine — or ignoring her, at least — then he might be all she's got.

This afternoon he's lounging on the sofa with Aaron, laughing at the awkward reality show on the TV — Pippa called the two of them 'a pair of giggling schoolgirls', and Stefan, after consideration, chose to take it as a compliment — when Monica, free of her responsibility for Declan and thus, according to Pippa, now first in line for all the most irritating sponsor jobs, blanks the screen with her phone and tells Stefan and the boys to shut up and pay attention.

A handful of other sponsors take up positions by the doors, as if anticipating an escape attempt. The last one into the room, escorting Martin, sits him down at one of the tables.

"What's this?" Aaron whispers.

"No clue," Stefan replies, shrugging and pulling himself up from his slouch.

Monica taps her phone again and, with the unmistakable ripple of a PowerPoint transition effect, the words *What Is Feminism?* appear on the television. Off to the side, in his castle of bean bag chairs, Will groans.

"Okay!" Monica calls, in a clear, room-filling voice that makes Stefan think of school assemblies. "Before we begin, I would like to address a few concerns about Declan. Yes: he has washed out. No: this does *not* mean he's dead, or turned into burger meat, or sold into sexual slavery; *yes, William, we heard your lurid little fantasies and this is the only time we will dignify them with a response.* All this means, as far as *you* are concerned, is that he is no longer around, and that he has gone to a place that is considerably less pleasant than the basement of Dorley Hall. If you do not wish to share his fate, if you wish to continue your rehabilitation in comfort, I advise you to avoid assaulting us or your peers."

"What about Stefan?" Raph shouts. "He *hit* him!"

“Stefan—” and Monica flashes her eyes momentarily to Stefan’s, as if to apologise for using the unambiguously gendered version of his name, “—has been instructed that *any* further outbursts will be punished to the full extent of our abilities.”

“That’s it? He floors Declan and gets off with a bitching out?”

“*If* you will recall,” Monica says, raising her voice again, “Declan attacked Stefan and Aaron first. We’re viewing Stefan’s actions as... pre-emptive self-defence. Keep your hands to yourself and you will have no problems with him, I am sure.”

“She means Declan started it, idiot,” Will says, in a surprising display of solidarity. Stefan tries to shoot him a smile but he’s too busy glaring at Raph.

Is Declan alive? Stefan has no idea whether to believe Monica or not. She’s not as senior as Maria, as far as he knows, but she’s older than many of the other sponsors, and necessarily more in the loop than mere graduates; she may well know things Pippa and Abby don’t. He also doesn’t know her at all well. Would she lie? Well, yes, she would; isn’t she lying right now, to everyone here, pretending that they have a route out of here that isn’t abhorrent to them?

Isn’t Stefan?

Shut up. Unhelpful thoughts.

“And with that over with...” Monica says, tapping her phone again: the words *What Is Feminism?* are now underlined. “What is feminism?” She gestures at the screen with each word.

Aaron puts his hand up. “Oh!” he says, full of enthusiasm. “I know this! Maria made me read all about it.”

“Go on,” Monica says warily.

“Feminism is the radical notion that women are purple.”

“Very funny.”

“Thank you!”

“I’ll tase you if you’re that funny again, okay?”

“Uh,” Aaron says, “yes, ma’am.” He turns and adds to Stefan in stage-whisper, “I like her.”

Monica ignores him and returns to addressing the room. “Now,” she says, “we find that men like you—” her eyes flicker to Stefan again; he shakes his head minutely, trying to indicate his indifference, “—come to us with a, shall we say, somewhat inaccurate impression of feminism. It doesn’t matter whether you’ve been misinformed by your peers or online or by some other source, the fact remains: you are wrong about feminism and you are wrong about feminists. What you will need to learn, in order to leave this place as better people, is not just *why* you are wrong, but *how* you came to be wrong. In this course — and, yes, this *is* a course, and from next week we will be assigning note sheets and homework — we will begin with your misconceptions, move on to the mechanisms that misinformed you and how to recognise common radicalisation techniques, and finally cover the histories of the movements that make up various feminisms and related social movements worldwide, up to the present day. Any questions?” Without looking, Stefan reaches out and pulls Aaron’s arm down from its raised position. “No? Good.” Monica taps her phone again and the TV moves on to a photograph of a woman with bright red hair and glasses — Stefan recognises her from any number of insulting memes — with the caption, *You Have Been Lied To*.

* * *

Aaron, citing feminism fatigue, retires to his room, presumably to wank away any lasting impression Monica’s extensive first session might otherwise make on him, so Stefan

finds himself alone in the early evening for the first time since Declan washed out. Not a situation he enjoys: Aaron's surprisingly sweet when he's not performing for an audience, and without him Stefan's responsibilities weigh heavy. He's started imagining the boys — Aaron especially, but Will and Adam and even the others, occasionally — in three states: as the women Dorley wants to make of them, as free men after some hypothetical and almost definitely impossible escape, and as black-bruised corpses. He feels an undue influence over them, as if poised perpetually at the cusp of each of their futures, able to grasp their lives and twist them one way or the other at a whim.

He tells himself, as severely as he can, that his perception of power is an illusion, that the outcomes for these boys are practically predetermined, and the best or worst his presence can achieve is to help or hinder their acclimation.

He also pinches himself on his inner thigh. Pain helps, and marks there are easiest to hide, even from Aaron.

Stefan puts on some music. He's discovered that movies are a terrible distraction, but music, with the headphones up as high as they'll go — probably terrible for his hearing, but if he survives to be an old woman at least she'll be alive to appreciate the tinnitus — chases away almost all thought. Helps him to concentrate on one thing at a time, to dissect himself without interruption.

Hours later, after letting the mix wander through the tastes he shares with whoever put the Dorley playlists together and those he doesn't, he stops the music, drops the headphones onto the floor, and stretches, feeling the acid in his limbs boil away, feeling clear, feeling renewed. Because it's all quite simple, in the end.

It's one thing to *know* you have no choice but to help the people you're trapped with adjust to their own mutilation, but another to accept it, and Stefan, who has spent years as a closeted and barely-out-to-himself trans woman, knows there

is both grace and strength in survival, should you wish to claim it.

There's only one real choice, offered to him as it is to them all: to live with it, or die because of it. He's going to help everyone choose properly.

He yawns, cracks his jaw, and sits up, collecting himself. His phone screen is a forest of notifications: Christine and Pippa have both tried to get in touch. Pippa just checking in, Christine asking if she can visit. He shoots off quick replies to both, suggesting that Christine can come see him any time, as long as he's alone and as long as she promises to try talking to Pippa again, because she really is lonely and he doesn't have as much time for her as he wishes. Christine's response is laden with considerably less sarcasm than usual; she acquiesces, and warns him to expect her and Paige in a few minutes.

Stefan's heart skips up as he contemplates how little time he has to get ready, but he can't bring himself to turn her down; there's no escaping the fact that he's grown accustomed to having Aaron around in the evenings, and without him the place feels almost comically large.

How much his horizons have shrunk, that such a small room could be so vast!

Quickly he checks himself over, and immediately abandons the idea of brushing his hair: it's not yet long enough to put into even the world's smallest ponytail, so it'll just have to hang loose and unstyled. The rest of him looks about as presentable as he gets, lately — he's very much enjoying the clearer and softer skin — so he takes the rest of the time to quickly buzz his jaw again with the electric razor. Every little helps.

Christine lets herself in — obviously — but she has the good grace to knock a couple of times first, so he can yell out that he's presentable.

He almost doesn't recognise her. She always shows up in his memory in the clothes she wore for their longest talk, back when he came out to her: nightgown, leggings, flannel. Tonight, she's wearing a tennis skirt with a black and white repeating design around the hem, a black, long-sleeved top cut quite low and exposing collarbone and cleavage, and a pair of ankle boots. Her face is made up and her hair, a little longer than the way he remembers it, is artfully arranged.

"Wow," he says, almost involuntarily, "you look great!"

Christine grimaces under the praise. "Thanks," she says, "but this isn't my idea."

Another girl follows Christine through the door, embracing her as she comes and saying, "Don't act like you don't love it." She's tall, and her dark blonde hair is brushed carelessly out of her face in a way that would, on Stefan, look like he'd gotten caught in an updraught. She's wearing a loose jacket, a simple white top, a denim skirt and tennis shoes, and her beauty absolutely short-circuits him. How was someone like her *ever* like him?

"Jesus Christ," he says.

Christine snorts. "No," she says, "Jesus was a boy."

The other girl — Paige, presumably — grins, resting her canines on her lip, and kicks the door shut. "Hi, Stef," she says. "I'm Paige. I'm with her."

"Hi," he says, still reeling.

It takes them a minute or so to get organised, given the limited seating in Stefan's room. With Aaron or Pippa he'd share the bed, but despite talking to Christine at least once a week since the day he arrived he doesn't feel close enough to her for that to be appropriate. He resolves the debate by bouncing out of bed and claiming the computer chair, positioning it so that with the wheels locked he can put his feet up on the bedside table without spinning out across the floor, and he makes *get on with it* gestures at Christine and Paige until they reluctantly take the bed.

“I feel bad about this,” Christine says, leaning against the wall with her legs sticking out. “We’re kicking you off your own bed.”

“It’s fine. I promise.”

“But—”

“Christine,” Paige says, “it was her decision.” She pokes Christine on the shoulder as she takes up position next to her, sitting close enough to take one of Christine’s hands in hers and entwine their fingers. “Respect it.”

“Fine,” Christine says, rolling her eyes and smiling. “You see what I have to put up with?” she adds to Stefan.

“You poor thing,” he says. Paige turns amber eyes on him, interested and kind, and he finds himself shrinking away from her.

“What’s up?” she says, instantly concerned.

Why didn’t he wear a hoodie? At least then he could hide more of himself. “Oh, uh, it’s nothing.” She continues to look at him. Fine. “It’s just... it’s weird, being, um, *seen* by more of you. When it was just Christine, when I first got here, that was one thing, but then it was all the boys, and Pippa and Maria and all the other sponsors, and then Abby, then Beatrice, and now *you*... I feel foolish. And stupid, claiming womanhood in front of all of you when I look and sound like this and you look and sound like *you*. And I worry, now that you know me like this, you won’t be able to see me as a woman later.”

“Is that what your pronoun thing is about?” Paige asks.

“Maybe? A bit?”

“Stef,” Christine says, “I don’t want to be mean, but you’re being silly. Look at who you’re talking to.”

“I am. That’s the problem.”

“So, remember where we came from! Do you think we, of all people, will *ever* have trouble thinking of someone as a woman, just because of how she started out?”

He wants to protest, to tell her off, to insist that she doesn't know how it feels. But maybe she does? At some point Christine will have had to realign her perception not just of several of her friends' genders, her girlfriend's included, but her own, too. She'll have had to reckon with the world in a whole new way, and feel her way to a new understanding of herself.

He thinks of his coining for Pippa and Christine and all the Dorley girls — 'coercively reassigned female' — a term that, mouthful though it is, still doesn't adequately encompass even the little he knows about the process of going from someone like Aaron to someone like Paige. They've been here, possibly in this very bedroom, and now they're women, out in the world. In broad strokes, there can be little about him they haven't seen in each other before.

"No," he admits, "probably not."

"Does that mean we *can* call you a girl?" Paige asks. "I know I pronounced you earlier — habit, sorry — but I really won't do it if you don't want me to."

"I mean, I felt weird when Pippa was doing it, but I think that might have been kind of silly. Running on autopilot, you know?" He exhales, counts a heartbeat, and breathes again, drums into himself with the new breath the idea that the women in front of him, casually beautiful though they are, have more in common with him than almost anyone else he's ever met, and they're *not* interested in judging him.

He groans. 'Hate me,' Christine had said, when he was still in the cell, before she even knew about him. He looks at her again and recognises in her unsteady gaze the same concerns she had a month ago, when she first revealed herself to him: her insistence that he ought to find her repulsive, because of her past, because of who she is; a notion as ridiculous now as it was then.

Either they're both judging each other, or neither of them are.

“I’m an idiot,” he says.

“Oh?”

He blows out his cheeks. “*Long* story. The short version is, like I said, that I’m an idiot. You don’t need the details. Call me... call me whatever’s most comfortable for you.”

“Then... she/her?” Christine says, and when he nods she smiles broadly at him. The relief is similar to when he resolved Aaron’s concerns about washing out, except that this time the panicking idiot with the incorrect assumptions is him, and has been him for a whole month. It’s a delight to let them go.

“Thanks for coming down to see me,” he says, finding some warmth for his voice. “Really. I appreciate it.”

“You’re okay?” Paige says.

He laughs. “About this? Yeah. I think I actually am.”

It still takes another few minutes of slightly stilted conversation for them to hug, though. Christine jumps in first, kicking off her boots so they’re very nearly the same height, and whispers to him as they embrace, “Welcome to Dorley, Stef. And I don’t mean that the way Bea means it, all loaded with obligation and shit. I just mean, you’re our Sister now—” the capital letter seems to slip in via a slight emphasis, “—and that means we’re your family, and you’re ours. We’ll help you with anything you need. No matter how small.”

He’s only just managed to thank her when Paige joins them. She’s unable to mitigate her height, instead angling herself so she doesn’t shove Stefan’s face into her chest, and says, “Nice to finally meet you,” to him as they part.

“God,” Christine says, putting her feet up on Paige, who pouts and rearranges them for greater comfort, “it’s weird being back in these rooms. I did *not* have a good time in here.”

“She didn’t,” Paige says to Stefan, shaking her head. “She said the rudest things to poor Indira.”

“It’s still strange,” Stefan says, “thinking of you two, down here, with everything still to come. And then thinking about how it’s all still to come for them, too.” He waves a hand at the door.

“How are you feeling about that?” Christine says.

Stefan shrugs. “I hate it. I *really* hate it. But, short of an upstairs coup that takes Beatrice out of action — no sign of that, I take it?” Two heads shake in unison. “Damn. So, yeah, I know it’s going to happen. And I know *what’s* going to happen. So, do I help them deal with it or not? Morally, I don’t think I have a choice.”

“And it’s what Aunt Bea wants from you,” Paige says.

“She doesn’t have to do what Bea says,” Christine says. “You don’t,” she adds, looking back at Stefan. “Everyone knows about you now. I think if she tried to wash out an actual trans girl she really would get deposed. Besides, she likes you. I think she doesn’t know exactly what to do with you, and when she came down to see you that night she was still kind of flailing, but she likes you.”

“Really?” he says.

“In addition to your general novelty, you know who you are, Stef, and what you want, and you’re in a position to help the people in your intake. That’s a huge leg-up! That’s, like, a good thirty percent of what she tries to drum into us once we get into the second year and we’re finally mostly over the whole, ‘argh, my precious balls!’ thing.” She covers her groin with a protective hand.

“Actually, that’s something I want to know: how do I help *them* with that? I can’t see Aaron reacting well to the orchi.”

“He won’t,” Paige says. “None of us wanted it at the time, except for Vicky.”

“The best thing you can do,” Christine says, “is reassure him — all of them — that there’s still a future. You don’t need nuts to have a nice life.”

“Put *that* on a mug,” Paige says.

“They can all even still have kids. As for the immediate aftermath,” Christine adds, frowning, “everyone’s different. Some people shut down. Others become violent.”

“What did you do?” Stefan says. “If it’s okay to ask.”

“It’s fine. I shut down for a while. Paige and Vicky helped me through it. In a way, it was the start of *me*. A thing you need to understand, Stef, about boys, about *cis* boys—”

“*Nominally* cis boys,” Paige interjects.

“—is that losing their testicles is a violation so profound it can prompt some serious soul-searching. It’s a shock to the system like no other. For me, it made it easier to discard the person I used to be.”

“I’d already done that,” Paige says. Like Christine, she’s wearing a slight frown, expressed in the tiniest pinch between her eyebrows. “It didn’t mean I wanted the orchi, but I was prepared for it, when it came.”

“When she worked out what was going to be done to us,” Christine says, “long before the big snip, she went very quiet, and stayed that way for a while. And, yes, she was quiet before, unless we were alone together — me, her, and Vick — but she sort of retreated into her own brain. When she came back out, it was like she’d cleared the deck, got herself ready for anything.”

Unexpectedly, Paige plants a quick kiss on Christine’s temple, pulling away before a giggling Christine can respond, and holding her at bay as she says to Stefan, “I worked it all out, once we started developing our new secondary sex characteristics. The logical next steps. The likelihood of escape. Weighed next to how much I’d liked my life up to that point — not that much — it made sense to acquiesce. Quite a relief, actually. To stop lashing out because people didn’t understand me. To discard my armour, and forge the new tools I needed to live the new life I was being encouraged to accept.”

“Strength in survival,” Stefan says, nodding.

“Precisely,” Paige says. “And, besides, I’d finally found someone who understood me. I’d do anything to stay by her side.” She lets go of Christine, who overbalances for a second and then vengefully kisses Paige on the lips before returning to something like an ordinary sitting position. “It took coming down here for me to feel seen for the first time.” Christine loops an arm around her waist, and Paige continues, “I never used to think of other people as properly real. Perhaps because none of them treated *me* like *I* was real. Christine did. From our first week together.”

Stefan’s eyes flick to Christine. “I’m glad you have each other, then,” he says, squashing his jealousy, over their beauty as well as their connection, as firmly as he can.

“Me, too,” Christine says.

They talk for a while longer, mostly covering the practical side of transition. Stefan’s never taken the opportunity to talk, face-to-face, about what he can expect from transition with other trans women before — or whatever; close enough — and he can’t conceal his fascination when they reveal they’ve both had bottom surgery.

“Of *course* it feels like a part of me,” Christine says, as he leans in, rapt. “Because it is. There’s nothing there I didn’t already have, it’s just... rearranged.” She smiles wistfully. “When it was first healing up, when I was still getting used to it, I remember finding a patch of darker skin on my... uh, on *me*, and experiencing this sudden swelling of *joy*, of *completeness*, because I remembered exactly where that patch of skin *used* to be, and it was like, oh, yeah, it’s *there* now. A comforting bit of continuity. And, yes, for a while I got these sensations, like itching or whatever, and it seemed like they were coming from something I, um, didn’t have any more, but that didn’t take long to stop. Those feelings relocate quite quickly. Now it just feels like a part of me, like I’ve had it all along.”

“It’s warm and fuzzy,” Paige says, and grins her toothy grin.

Later, as Christine is scrolling through the unlocked movies and TV shows on the network, looking for something they can watch together that’s not on the approved list for the basement’s girls-to-be, and Paige is on her phone, asking one of the duty girls to send some popcorn down in the dumbwaiter, Aaron starts banging on Stefan’s door. He knows it’s Aaron without asking; it’s not that he has a special knock, but he’s the only one who doesn’t stop knocking until Stefan consents to open the door. He doesn’t open up this time, though, just waves the girls into silence and says, through the door, “Yes?”

“Uh,” Aaron says, muffled, “can I come in?”

“It’s late, Aaron,” Stefan says. “Can we talk about whatever it is in the morning?”

Behind him, Paige whispers, “Did you forget to put the other rooms in lockdown?”

Christine says, “I didn’t forget; it just seemed like overkill.”

“Oh, right,” Aaron says, “is ‘it’s late’ code for ‘I’m finally masturbating’? Good for you, Stef.”

Stefan’s glad he’s facing away from Christine and Paige, so they can’t see him blush.

“No!” Stefan says, louder than he intends. Christine laughs; Paige shushes her.

“Look, uh,” Aaron says, “I wanted to talk to you about that, actually.”

“What a surprise.”

“No, I mean, really. I’m serious. Are you, uh, can you, um ___”

“Out with it, Aaron.”

“Can you get it up? Dick-wise, I mean.”

“I really haven’t tried.”

“Okay. Could you maybe try for me?”

“*For* you?”

“Yes. Because I can’t, is the thing. For a good few days, now. It’s not happening. Doesn’t matter what or, uh, who I think about. Doesn’t matter if I stroke it or rub it or fucking sing to it. It doesn’t do anything any more. I try all my best moves, and all my worst ones, too, and no matter what, the snake won’t come out of the basket.”

“In your metaphor, you’re a basket?”

“What? Maybe? Does it matter?”

“I’m just trying to fully understand the picture you’re painting, Aaron.”

“Fine. I get it. You’re tired. You’re being a bitch. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Sleep well, Stef.”

“You too.”

It’s just about possible to hear Aaron’s door opening again, and when it closes Stefan leans gratefully against the wall. On the bed, Christine is only barely holding in a serious attack of the giggles.

“You see what I have to put up with?” he says.

2019 NOVEMBER 22 — FRIDAY

It’s been a week since Aaron formally informed Stefan of his inability to maintain an erection, a momentous enough event that Aaron’s started dividing time into BF and AF (Before Floppy and After Floppy), but nothing much else has changed. Aaron’s been dwelling overmuch on his erectile difficulties — “I told Maria and she laughed and said it was just the surroundings getting to me, and yeah, okay, that’s definitely true, but I feel like my balls are like one of those baseball pitching machines, and it’s broken, and it just keeps racking up and racking up and it’s starting to shake with how overloaded

it is and one of these days it's going to explode and shower a small American town with baseballs." — so to distract him they've been watching progressively sappier movies; they've seen *The Princess Switch* three times now, and have started to develop some esoteric theories about the genetics of it.

Will's continued to agitate, and he's started talking to Raph and Ollie, which Stefan would be more concerned about if he hadn't also relented and started talking to him and Aaron again, too. It'd be nice to imagine them all getting along, or at least never attacking one another again, and Adam's been happy to run interference on Will's worst days.

From Saturday to Wednesday, almost everyone had a cold, which dampened Will's revolutionary fervour somewhat and reduced the common room to a chorus of dull sniffles and slurps as they drank hot lemon and watched TV from under the blankets Maria eventually agreed to let them drag in from their bedrooms.

Aaron's still spending most evenings in Stefan's room until very late, but tonight he's decided, the way he sometimes does, to get an early night. Stefan's under no illusions about what he does — or tries to do — alone in his room, and prefers not to think about it if he can avoid it. He settles down instead for an evening of internet, catching up on what's been happening in the outside world since he started living mostly underneath it, and he's just started to wonder whether or not he should ask Pippa, Paige, Christine or Abby down — maybe see if he can finally meet the famous Indira — when Aaron's repetitive knocking starts shaking his door.

Aaron's got Stefan's hoodie, the one he borrowed and never returned, wrapped tight around his body, and he's twisting his hands around each other again. Stefan stands aside and the boy immediately enters and starts talking as soon as the door closes, pacing back and forth on the carpet.

"So, please stop me if this is too much information, because I've been made aware that generally I just, you know, *say stuff*, and that sometimes that stuff is a lot for people to

really take in, and Maria especially has told me she experiences conversations with me the same way someone standing in a river experiences water, but, anyway, the thing is, I was undressing, getting ready for bed and, you know, maybe thinking about having another go at a cheeky wank, see if I can really blow the doors off, but before I could even try I took off my t-shirt and, so, the thing is, and I don't care what you said about this before because my chest has *definitely* been feeling a little puffy lately, and, anyway, long story short, I touched my nipple and I came in my pants." He stops pacing and faces Stefan, flushed and wide-eyed. "Thoughts?"

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TWO

AFTERGLOW

2019 NOVEMBER 22 — FRIDAY

“You just—”

“I touched my nipple and I came in my pants,” Aaron repeats. “Simple concept, Stef! Oh yeah, and it’s messed up! It’s wrong and very, very strange. Men’s nipples aren’t supposed to *do* that! I’ve thought back through the handful of girl-on-guy videos I’ve seen and every TV show where the attractive Americans rub together and *also* my extensive history of touching myself in every possible place a human male can touch himself and I can’t come up with any counterexamples. My nipples are supposed to be decorative. Non-functional! They’re like a pair of ornate vases on either side of my own personal mantelpiece, too small to keep anything in, too attractive to ignore, just, sort of, you know, present. And, after I finished having a fun little panic attack, I came up with a very short list of possible causes. You ready?” He starts pointing in the air at an imaginary chalkboard. “One: It’s the Goserelin implant. I know, I know, you’ve pooh-poohed this idea a thousand times already but I’m really *squishy* under here, Stef.” With the hand that isn’t pointing he fondles his chest and then withdraws it like he’s just suffered an electric shock. “In a way I never was before! And it’s not just regular body fat, either, because I did comparison squeezes on my arse and on my chest and after I nearly passed

out I came to the conclusion that they are *not* the same. And the only things about my life that've changed are getting dragged down here and getting the implant, so unless men spontaneously grow little tiny titties to get through the harsh sunless Scandinavian winters, like a camel, kinda, then it's got to be that in the absence of testosterone my body's decided, oh, whoops, we need hormones to live, let's make some, and flipped a coin and picked the wrong one."

"I'm pretty sure that doesn't happen."

"Really? You're *pretty sure*? Because it's only the integrity of my chest on the line, here, Stef. Okay, let's go to option two." Aaron moves his pointing hand. "Ball cancer. That's got to be it, right? I've got fucking ball cancer. It makes you grow full-on tits — and I know you have a low opinion of *Fight Club* but it's basically a documentary where this is concerned, and since I don't have any other ideas I'm going to believe it with both sides of my sore and puffy chest — so if it's not the implant, it's ball cancer! Oh, God, Stef, I've got ball cancer. Cancer of the *balls*, Stef! Are they going to have to cut them off?"

"Aaron!"

"Yes?"

"You do *not* have ball cancer."

"Then what *is* this, Stef?"

"To be clear: you brushed against your chest and just immediately came?"

"Yes!"

"Really? Immediately?"

"Well..."

"Aaron."

He closes his eyes and leans against the desk, waking the computer when he sits on the keyboard. On the screen, the text

editor starts filling up with consonants. “Don’t make me say it,” he says. “It’s embarrassing even for me.”

Stefan, aware that Aaron is compelled to fill silences with information about his erogenous zones even when it isn’t pertinent to the topic at hand, sits down on the end of the bed, cross-legged, hands in his lap, looks up, and waits. After a moment, to force the issue, he raises an eyebrow.

“Fine,” Aaron says. “Fine!” He bounces back up off the desk and into a pace that takes him in wobbly circles through the small portion of space between the desk, the bed, the vanity and the door. “Yes, my hand brushed against them and, yes, it felt good, but that’s been a thing for a while. It didn’t immediately Jackson Pollock my boxers. What’s changed is that this time, it felt better than good. It felt... really, really good. It felt... Listen, Stef, because this is important, and I think it qualifies as mitigating circumstances, okay? Like when you miss an essay deadline and you fill out the little form and you provide the evidence and you have a little cry and they look at you all sympathetic and tell you, ‘It’s not your fault’? Well, that’s now, because I’m telling you, it felt *so* good. ‘Good’ is actually underselling it. ‘Great’ is underselling it. How can I put this...?” He stops pacing and leans against the desk again. “You know how, when you wank, and when you do it right, when you don’t just go at your prick like a jackhammer because you have nought point eight seconds to have an orgasm before one of the other boys comes into the dorm and starts hinting about how you can finish him, too, when you really spend the time, when you make *love* to your dick, and the tip just keeps getting more and more sensitive, especially if you keep stepping back from the, you know, the critical moment, until eventually it’s like you’ve got your big toe on a garden hose and you can feel the pressure building up and all it would take is for a pretty girl to blow gently on it and you’d have no choice but to let go and ruin the neighbours’ barbecue?” Stefan, who only touches himself to keep clean and, occasionally, to provide sperm samples for kidnappers, nods. Aaron returns to pacing. “Well, if we call that heretofore

unbeatable sensation a ten and the starting position a zero, then just touching my nips when I'm in the right kind of mood has slowly been climbing from a two to a six. And that's a straight up six, no prep work, no porn, just some thoughts I'm maybe a little uncomfortable about, and, you know, if your body starts handing you sixes for doing basically nothing then you *owe* it to yourself to see where things are going, right? Especially if the traditional body part for handling hot sweaty nice feelings has been taking a vacation in the land of one-point-five. I'm absolutely not questioning where that six is coming from, not in the moment, anyway, because I'm too busy taking that six out to dinner, showing her a good time and a bottle of wine, seeing if I can't get her up to a seven or an eight, so *obviously* I go in for another stroke, you know? It would be a crime not to! Am I drawing a clear enough picture for you?"

"Yeah. Vivid."

"So I immediately drop my trousers," Aaron continues, miming but not reproducing the action, "because I'm starting to feel a little nasty downstairs, for the first time in a while, but when I go to drop my boxers as well, I realise that what's going on down there is *fine* but it's got nothing on what's happening at balcony-level so I think, fuck it, although being honest I'm not really thinking anything coherent at that point because the finger I've got walking around upstairs is giving me sevens and eights while my dick is stuck on failing grades so I just go for it, and before I know it I'm lying on my back with both hands on my chest playing Spirograph with my nipples and that's basically the point where I'm wondering if my chest has always been quite this soft and bouncy but I don't care because I'm eighting, nining and I'm starting to ten and, God, Stef, I'm feeling warm *all over*, and that's *completely new* and kind of exciting, and eventually when it finally happens, when I let go and, you know, flood my sunken cavern, I'm at a fucking eleven and it's like nothing I've ever felt before."

"What do you mean?"

“What do I mean?” There’s a hint of hysteria to Aaron’s laugh. “I mean I normally come like an electric guitar riff, you know? It’s loud and it’s sort of complex and it’s really high-pitched but it’s also *quick*. Like, it’s over, and the echoes are nice, but that’s it. Sometimes I wonder afterwards why I even bother. Sometimes they even feel like discharging a chore my body’s handed to me because I happened to see a bread roll that looks like a sexy bottom and it turned me on. But this? This was like, man, I don’t know. Like I’m surfing a huge wave with full orchestral backup and one of those heat patches strapped to my back, and the ocean keeps throwing me around and the strings are getting louder and the heat is spreading out all through me and it just *keeps going* and until eventually I’m riding a wave a hundred metres high and when I finally hit the beach I destroy every little striped hut and hot dog stand and give all the sunbathers a nasty surprise. It was a life-changing orgasm, Stef. A fucking religious experience. And the afterglow, oh, *God*, the afterglow. I bask in it and I bask in it and I *bask* in it, until I finally start coming down, and then, suddenly, I remember exactly how I got there.” He pauses for a second before returning to his anxious circling. “I’m scared. I’m fucking *scared*, because something’s happening to me and either *they’re* doing it to me and won’t say why or my body’s doing it to itself, and I don’t know if it’s going to stop. And it’s all I can think about! This is not *normal*, Stef!”

Well.

Fuck.

He knows how this is supposed to go: he’s to act to support the sponsors, and for most intakes the sponsors just pretend nothing’s happening until it becomes impossible to deny it any longer. Christine said that in her year they worked it out early, thanks to that girl Vicky, who caught on and immediately started evangelising girlhood to the rest of them; a potential option, if Stefan wants to play Vicky’s role, but he’d have to clear it with someone first. He’s also got the impression that Christine’s intake lacked a Declan or a Will, that it was practically wall-to-wall introverts who’d been swept up by

Dorley for violence Christine called social rather than physical. Stefan imagines trying to sell Will on the positives of growing breasts; it doesn't end well.

Time to deny everything, then.

“Aaron,” he says, hoping the slight wobble in his voice isn't audible. “You need to take a breath.”

“Oh, I took a breath,” Aaron says. “I took *several*.” He demonstrates, closing his eyes, breathing heavily and moaning softly for a few moments. “It was quite sexy, actually, Stef, you should have seen—” and then he cuts himself off, like his own mouth has run away from him, like he forgot for a moment that he should be panicking.

“Sit.” Stefan pats the mattress.

“Sit?” Aaron asks, tilting his head.

“You're catastrophising,” Stefan says. “You need to calm down.” He frowns, wonders why that ordinary phrase sounds so strange, and it takes a second for it to hit him: Pippa's bloody playlists. And Christine's, too. This whole house has a Taylor Swift problem. Aaron's still looking at him, quivering with the energy walking in circles has thus far failed to release, so he adds, “You're not going to solve anything pacing around, talking without thinking.”

“But that's my whole thing,” Aaron says with a weak grin.

Stefan ignores the joke. He grabs Aaron by the wrist and yanks him down onto the bed. The boy bounces, collides with Stefan's shoulder and rights himself by grabbing, with various hands, the bedframe and Stefan.

“Sit,” Stefan says.

“Jesus,” Aaron remarks, twitching his hand away from Stefan's thigh and cradling it in the crook of his arm like a wounded animal. “I thought that was a suggestion, not a fucking command.”

“You were making me dizzy, going round and round.”

“Yeah, sorry, but question, Stef: why am I the only one who’s panicking?”

“You’re not,” Stefan says with an exaggerated shrug. “Will is. You’ve seen him on his doomer soapbox.”

“Yeah, and the only reason I haven’t joined him is you, and your insistence that there’s a way out of here that isn’t, you know, horizontal.”

“Look.” Stefan rearranges himself, hopping backwards on the bed so he can twist to face Aaron, and gauge his reaction in real time. “This stage, the running around like headless chickens stage? It’s *clearly* part of it. They want you to panic.” This is, perhaps, pulling back the curtain a little too much, but if he dresses it up as speculation, that’s probably fine. “We’re repenting of our sins, remember? Got to spend a little time in hell for it to really stick.”

“You think?”

“I mean, they *could* just be planning to take us all out back and shoot us one by one, but this is a very spendy setup just for that. They want something from us; this is part of how they get it.”

“Okay,” Aaron says, breathing out slowly and matching the action with his hands, the way Stefan’s come to learn he does when he’s trying to calm himself. “Okay,” he continues, after a few more shallow breaths, “but the *chest* thing, Stef. My chest; yours. You said your chest was sensitive the other day. Have you, uh, tried to, you know, touch them? Your nipples?”

“No.”

“You want me to try?”

“No.”

“So. What *about* our mutual chests? What are you going to say when *you* start having surprise orgasms? When you start feeling uncomfortably fleshy? Hell—” he laughs briefly, “—what am *I* going to say when you come panicking about it to

me?” Aaron switches to a deeper voice. ““Son, you’re finally becoming a man. This is just what that’s like. The men in our family are very chesty.’ Or—” he switches to falsetto, “—‘Darling, you’re a woman now, and your body is changing. Don’t worry about that blood in your knickers.’” He coughs, suddenly embarrassed. “What is there that makes this better?”

Stefan blinks, remembering something he stumbled upon while exploring the limits of his new access to the internet (he can go almost anywhere online, but he can’t post, which is fine by him because he never did). An excuse good enough to buy a little more time. Another deception, but whatever; you can get used to any cruelty with repetition. “Gynecomastia,” he says.

“What. The fuck. Is gynecomastia?”

“It’s the not-actually-that-rare phenomenon where adolescent boys grow—”

“I’m twenty-one! This is a pretty fucking late adolescence!”

“I don’t mean that’s what *we* have,” Stefan says, rolling his eyes, over-acting his exasperation. “I mean, it’s common. Boys growing small, uh...” He mimes a pair of invisible breasts on his own chest, and eats the anxiety spike: it’s dangerously close to telling the truth about himself, but if he’s doing this to Aaron he deserves to feel bad about it.

“So?”

“So, it’s manageable! It goes away as they grow up. As puberty takes hold.” Stefan pauses for effect. “It goes away with *testosterone*.” He doesn’t actually know this for sure — he didn’t exactly read the page in detail — but how the hell is Aaron going to check his facts? It might as well be true. “And you know what’s going to happen when we leave? When the last Goserelin implant just dissolves or washes out with our pee or whatever?”

It takes Aaron a second to get it, but he does. “You really think it’ll just... go away when we get out of here?” Is Stefan

imagining a look of slight disappointment on him? Yeah, he definitely is. Wishful thinking, Stef; it'd be so convenient to think of one of the boys down here as being a little bit like him. Nicer still if it were Aaron. But no: he's the only girl in a prison that will eventually be full of unwilling women, and it's going to get worse before it gets better.

It surprised Stefan to realise, late one night, face buried in his pillow and body covered up with sheets so no-one could possibly see or hear him, that if it was only *his* future on the line he'd give it up in a heartbeat if it meant Aaron, at least, wouldn't have to be mutilated. But it's clear that nothing he can do can save any of them. He could tell the truth and get washed out himself, or he can keep participating in the lies; neither choice gets Aaron out of here intact.

Eye on the prize, Stefan, and the prize is survival. For everyone.

“Yeah, it'll go away,” he says, upbeat and hopeful.

Faking it, anyway.

2019 NOVEMBER 25 — MONDAY

They haven't spent much time alone together since their conversation about Aaron's inopportune orgasm, so the knocking at Stefan's door is a surprise. They haven't even showered together, and when he opens the door to him, it shows: Aaron's hair looks lifeless, like he rubbed in the conditioner with one hand and couldn't massage it properly. But he's needed space to reflect, and Stefan's opted to give it to him, staying out of his way, keeping to light conversation at meals and in the common room and going back to his room alone, confident that if Aaron really needs him, he'll show up again, panicking and grasping some part of his body, like usual.

Aaron's not panicking tonight, though. He looks calm, his face set in its usual resting smirk.

Stefan steps aside to let him in, and Aaron sidles in. Rather than pace or sit on the bed or lean on the desk, he arranges himself on the floor, looking up. He seems calm, and almost still, for Aaron. He's dressed the way he usually does the last few days: in the larger t-shirts he's borrowed from Stefan, which don't chafe quite so much.

"Hey," he says, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I wanted to apologise."

Stefan shoves the chair aside and sits on the floor facing him. If he's going to apologise — if this is going to be one of *those* conversations — he wants them to be level, neither of them looking up or down. "What for?"

Aaron's concentrating on a spot on the rug. "I haven't been around. And we haven't really talked. I just kind of unloaded on you and then went quiet."

"It's fine, really. I thought you might need some time to think. This place can get to you."

"Never seems to get to— Oh, yeah." Aaron's clearly remembered the time, weeks ago, that Stefan had a serious try at slaking his skin off in the showers. The boy shudders, and Stefan has a traitorous thought: considered cynically, hurting himself in so relatively public a fashion was a smart move, given that it's cemented him among the boys as someone who's already *had* his breakdown. "Sorry. We don't really talk about that, either. The shower thing. How have you been doing, since then?"

"Good." A lie, and a particularly unpleasant one. "I guess I've realised that, well, I'm stuck down here. The worst has already happened."

"I guess. No more evil nurses yet, anyway."

"Fingers crossed. How have *you* been, Aaron? If we're talking about the deep stuff again."

The boy shrugs. "Well, Stefan, I'm growing tits."

Stefan makes a show of squinting. “Not really big enough to call tits, surely?”

“Hey!” Aaron protests, holding his hands up to his chest. “My body, my rules!”

“And how do you feel about your—” Stefan leans forward, pretending to inspect him, “—magnificent jugs?”

He’s trying to keep the tone light, and either Aaron’s willing to be persuaded by it or he really is more sanguine than Stefan expected. “I thought about it,” Aaron says. “A lot. About what you said, about teenagers with gynecomastia, and how it goes away during puberty. And then I thought, what if it doesn’t? What if we’re past puberty so it doesn’t work like that, even when the testosterone comes back?”

“Aaron—”

“No, wait.” Aaron holds up a finger. “And *then* I thought, what about trans men? What do *they* do?”

“Pretty sure they bind, and eventually get them removed.”

Aaron claps his hands. “There it is! That’s what I thought! So that’s my, I guess, worst-case scenario here. Yours, too. Get them removed.”

“Like a trans man?”

“Sure. Why not? If it works for them, it’ll work for me. And that’s *only* if it gets bad enough. If it’s like you said, that they’ll go away on their own... that’s fine, too. Hah!” Aaron looks up at the ceiling, having either guessed or been told there are cameras in the rooms, and grins. “You wanted me to panic?” he says, to the ceiling. “Guess what? Not panicking any more.” He looks back down at Stefan, energised. “We’ve got this place all figured out. And, you know—” he looks away again, trying to hide his grin, “—in the meantime, since I’m stuck with, you know, whatever’s going on under my t-shirt, I might as well take advantage.”

It takes Stefan a moment. “You’ve been touching them again, haven’t you?”

“Non-stop,” Aaron says.

“Oh my God.”

“When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. In your pants.”

Stefan hits him. “You dick! All this time you’ve been hiding away in your room, I thought you were fucking depressed or something!”

“I was! I was really, genuinely depressed! Just, you know, *in between* visits to the lemonade factory.”

Stefan leans back on his hands, finding it difficult, between Aaron’s dirty grin and the mental image of his last few nights, to keep his composure. “I can’t believe you, Aaron,” he says, stifling a giggle.

“Dude, I’m growing tits! What do you want from me?”

2019 NOVEMBER 27 — WEDNESDAY

“This is it,” Maria says. “If the shit’s going to hit the fan any day, it’s going to hit it today. And you all know what that means: Edy, Monica, Jane, Harmony, Ella, Tabby, you’ve all gone at least one round with this. And Pippa, well, I’m sure you remember what it was like. Christine: you’re in reserve.”

Pippa, sitting serious on one of the briefing room stools with her clipboard and phone out on the table in front of her, nods and worries at her lip. Christine, frowning, worries at her coffee instead. She’s chosen not to comment on the mug she’s been given, which is decorated in a faded pink with an illustration of a woman in silhouette floating from an umbrella above the words, in embossed and nearly rubbed-off cursive, *Super Femmy, Fabby Lipstick, Castrate the Atrocious!* The thing’s got to be over a decade old, and thus dates Dorley’s appalling sense of humour to at the very least some time before Christine’s first puberty.

Maria’s called the sponsors down to the briefing room on the first-floor basement, and ignored much grumbling and

slurping from novelty mugs before she dropped the bombshell: something's probably going to happen today. And even Christine, who's never been involved in any official capacity before and whose intake was, to hear the other sponsors bitch at Indira about it, unusually relaxed — not that it had felt that way at the time — can guess what that means: one of the boys has worked it out. Some of it, anyway.

Christine's here because, even though she still hasn't properly accepted Bea's job offer — to fill a new role that's a cross between Head of Network Security and Helper Monkey — she's been getting roped into more and more sponsor-aligned work. Her fault, really. She's been spending evening after evening down in the security room with laptops hooked up, patching the holes she used to exploit, which has meant a lot of time staring into space or scrolling on her phone or chatting with friends while she waits for code to compile or archive searches to complete. Maria was always going to notice. Roles around here tend to expand to fill the space available, and the devil always finds work for idle hands.

She's glad to be sitting with Pippa, though. There's still tension between them, but better her than the other sponsors, whose cynicism Christine finds wearing after a while. The youngest one is Indira's age but lacks Dira's charming tendency to give Christine enough rope to hang herself with and then catch her before she falls, and the rest are, well, everything Christine expects from sponsors. She likes them as people, mostly, but at work they expect both confidence and detachment, and while they don't actually criticise her for her occasional squeamishness, they always seem dishearteningly surprised by it. Pippa, for all that she has yet to forgive her, shares with her the oil-and-water beliefs that, yes, Dorley's work can and will help these boys, and that, yes, it's still really, really awful.

It'd be nicer still if Paige were here, but Paige has classes today and, occasional visits to Stef aside, refuses point-blank to get involved. She said so, loudly, in the middle of the dining

hall, and seemed quite irritated when Harmony and a couple of the other sponsors made light fun of her principled objection.

“How many of them have developed?” Monica asks, looking up from her clipboard. Without Declan and in addition to her duties as the basement’s lecturer on Feminism 101, she’s moved into something approximating Indira’s current role, maintaining a watch on all sponsors and subjects. Christine doesn’t know her that well yet, but Pippa checks in with her a couple of times a week and says she’s guarded but nice enough. Groups of sponsors that work well together tend to keep working together, and cliques like that can be hard to break into.

“Aaron, Adam and Stef,” Maria says. “Yes, I know,” she adds, to a murmured chorus of mild surprise, “that’s a lot at such an early stage. Adam’s the most recent. We’re talking only tiny bumps, here; barely Tanner 2. Stef’s been wearing hoodies to hide her own development and protect herself from accidents and knocks, and she’s talked Aaron out of panicking about it — I swear, at this point that boy would jump off a cliff if she asked him to — and managed to persuade him to keep it between the two of them. Well, mostly between the two of them.” She sighs. “Aaron asked me for a bra yesterday.”

“Um, breakthrough?” Jane says.

“No,” Maria replies, sounding tired. “No. He’s just being a little shit.”

“Poor Maria,” Edy says, patting her on the back.

“So, what’s so special about today?” Monica says. “None of those three are rabble-rousers.”

Maria nods at Christine, who hits the play button on her phone. The main screen in the briefing room comes on, showing Will’s room.

“Last night,” Maria says, gesturing at the screen, “Adam went to see William. Now that, in itself, is not unusual; they’ve been talking to each other about their sensitive chests and the other little changes most of the boys have noticed.

Quietly, in private, the way it normally goes with bonded pairs. They've come to similar conclusions to the ones Stef encouraged in Aaron: it's just the Goserelin. William's history's helped us here. He's always been very firm that the Goserelin was going to have some kind of an effect on them, drawing on both his experiences with his father and his, uh, didactic nature when it comes to what I believe his fellow Redditors would term, 'Science, bitch'." Her finger-quotes are almost as arch as her tone. "It doesn't mean that he's been enjoying the experience, but so far it hasn't energised him enough to become a topic for his little speeches."

"Except for the time Aaron needed him about his reduced muscle mass," Monica points out.

Will's been soapboxing to the whole common room, on themes of injustice, disproportionate punishment, the need for a robust corrections system that nevertheless does not include unexpected kidnapping rings operating out of innocent-looking dormitories, and so on. The unpleasant fate of Declan, which initially worried Will into a blessed near-silence, eventually had him standing by the TV, shouting over the reality shows until one of the sponsors either told him to shut up — which tended only to encourage him — or consented to hit the mute button. Tabby dragged him back to his room a couple of times to give everyone some relief but general agreement's been that dumping him in a cell just for being loud would set an unfortunate precedent. Mostly they've been letting him get it out of his system.

"Adam asked Will to feel his chest," Edy says, "and Will very nearly put two and two together on the spot."

"Now he's had a chance to sleep on it," Tabby says, "he'll almost definitely have come up with something close enough to the truth."

"As his sponsor," Maria asks, "what's your guess on his reaction?"

Tabby shrugs. "His response to the Goserelin's mostly been to yell a lot, but he's a very... masculine individual. To a

point of overcompensation, in my opinion. Certainly he's already sensitive about his muscle loss, although he's attributed it fifty/fifty to the Goserelin and to the lack of exercise equipment. Confirmation that Adam's growing breasts? The expectation that he will, too? He might hurt himself; he might even try to hurt someone else. It could be bad."

"Fantastic," Harmony says. "Another time-bomb boy."

"Yeah," Ella says, poking her. "He could be worse than *you* were."

"Ladies," Maria says, "try to remember, we wouldn't have taken him in if we didn't believe he was worth helping. So let's keep an eye out and try and save him from himself, okay? Any questions?"

As the others talk, Pippa wakes her phone and taps the shortcut to the cameras in Stef's room. She keeps them out of active monitoring, normally, just spooling straight to disk — one of the privileges of being an acknowledged and actualised woman is a slightly higher degree of privacy — but with activation in easy reach, in case of emergency. Christine can see the screen and shares Pippa's relief to see Stef alone and still in bed and thus, for now, safe. Pippa taps out a message to her, summarising the briefing, and they both get a giggle out of Stef's disgruntled reaction to her PC waking up and playing the alert sound over and over.

Stef stops flipping the bird at the camera when she starts reading Pippa's message. When she's done she looks up at the ceiling, smiles — at the wrong camera; Pippa taps the screen a couple more times to clip that so she can tease her about it later — and starts collecting up her things for her morning shower, pausing to check under her bed for her pocket taser, test its charge, and slip it into the lining of the hoodie hung up on the wardrobe door.

Last resort, Pippa said when she handed it over. Christine hopes Stef remembers that.

* * *

Pippa meets Stefan's eyes as he passes her in the corridor on the way to the dining room. She's asking if he's okay; in response, he shrugs. It's a complicated question, and not one he feels up to answering.

Aaron's not at the table yet, but the others are. Adam's on his own at the end of the table he usually shares with Will, and a quick glance shows why: Will's eating with Raph and Ollie, hunched in a conspiratorial circle, one or other of them occasionally glancing around to make sure they're not overheard. Stefan doesn't know what they could possibly be discussing that would have any hope of achieving anything, but checks the weight of his hoodie against his hip anyway, feeling for the little taser. He's practised, and he can pull it from its slightly awkward inside pocket and have it ready in about two seconds. He hasn't actually used it yet, but he's fairly confident he knows which end is which.

He sits next to Adam, because the boy looks lost without Will, and they share what he hopes is a companionable silence. He still feels inhibited from talking to Adam a lot of the time; especially today. Maybe it's the tension in the air. Maybe it's the boy's tendency to insert religious metaphors into longer conversations. Maybe it's because every word out of Stefan's mouth lately makes him feel like a liar.

Appropriate: he *is* a liar.

Aaron slumps into the chair next to Stefan and starts pouring porridge, managing a decent ratio of oats in the bowl to oats on the table considering how tired he looks. When he's done he sits back and raises an arm; Edy, Adam's sponsor, steps over from the little cart parked by the door and pours out hot milk from a thermos. It's the compromise they struck after

everyone got sick of the Weetabix: they can choose porridge some days, but only if a sponsor keeps control of the hot milk and Aaron promises never to summon them with an imperious snap of his fingers or ever again refer to them as his ‘mummy milkers’.

They eat in near silence, interrupted only by the occasional exclamation from Will’s sibilant huddle and Martin slouching in to conduct his daily Weetabix penance.

“Hey, Stef,” Aaron whispers.

“Yeah?”

“Does it feel weird today, or is it just me?”

Stefan makes a show of looking around, taking in the nervous sponsors, a downcast Adam, and the three irritated faces on the other side of the room.

“It’s not just you,” he says.

“Any idea what’s going on?”

“Nope.”

“You think Will’s got...” Aaron trails off, but gestures with his elbow towards Stefan’s chest.

There doesn’t seem much point in denying the possibility. “Maybe,” Stefan says.

“You, too?” Adam hisses, grabbing on to Stefan’s sleeve and pulling it; the first physical contact they’ve ever had that Stefan himself didn’t initiate.

Stefan shrugs. “I’ve been a little swollen,” he whispers, just loud enough to be heard from the other side of the room. “I think it’s something like gynecomastia, from the Goserelin.” Time to see if the lie works twice.

“What’s that?” Adam asks.

“Breast-like swelling,” Aaron says, pointing at Adam’s chest with his spoon. “Happens to up to seventy percent of adolescent boys at some point or another in their development.

Goes away on its own during puberty in seventy-five percent of cases. Occasionally caused by other factors. There are options for removal, if necessary.” He picks up on Stefan’s raised eyebrow. “What? I can’t do the reading? I asked Maria to get me a screen grab of the Wikipedia page.”

“It goes away?”

“Yes.”

“None of you know *shit*,” Will says, raising his voice and glaring at the three of them. He keeps eye contact with Aaron for a moment before returning to his huddle, shaking his head and muttering, “Gynecomastia...”

Well. It almost worked. Edy, still guarding the hot milk, gives Stefan a half-smile when none of the others are looking.

* * *

Will clearly planned it carefully.

The sponsors’ shift changes have never been particularly timely, a consequence, Pippa says, of Dorley’s staffing shortage, and the fact that almost every sponsor has responsibilities elsewhere: their studies, for the younger girls and some of the postgrads, and actual honest-to-goodness part-time jobs, for Maria and some of the other older ones. Sometimes sponsors are late and sometimes they are distracted, especially if it’s been hours since a briefing that warned of potential problems that, despite a little tension at breakfast, have yet to emerge. The most professional people in Dorley’s employ, according to Abby, are the contracted PMC guys, and they spend ninety-nine-plus-percent of their time goofing off in the basement one break room, isolated from the actuality of Dorley’s work by air gapping and a PlayStation 4. To them, Dorley’s just one of a number of secretive

assignments with eccentric security requirements, but as contracts go it's quite sought after as it offers the most amount of free time on the job to, for example, play video games.

After breakfast they trooped into the common room, subdued and in two groups: Will, Raph and Ollie taking up station on the metal tables, and Stefan, Aaron and Martin coalescing around the bewildered Adam, who kept looking across the room as if Will might at any moment renounce his dubious association with Raph and Ollie and return to whatever relationship he's been cultivating with Adam over the past two months.

One of the sponsors flicked on the television and Stefan's group tried to concentrate on the brace of reality shows, bringing Adam in for as many conversations as they could on the subjects of whose cake should win versus whose actually did, which dress she should say yes to, and which date was the least cringe-worthy. It worked to distract him for a little while. They even got him to express a slightly baffling opinion about one of the men on the dating show: "Unworthy of God's grace."

During the early hours after midday — it's difficult to keep accurate track of time in the common room, with phones still officially discouraged — a handful of sponsors responded to reminders and left, eventually paring the supervisory staff down to three: Maria, Edy and Pippa. They took up position at the back of the room, a sensibly wary distance from Will's group, but made the mistake of turning in on each other to talk without being overheard.

Stefan didn't see or hear the signal Will gave, and so didn't understand what was about to happen until all three men were out of their chairs and running across the room. He didn't have enough time to find his taser, or put himself in their way; all he could do was shout, "Look out!" and then it was too late.

He's sitting cross-legged now, with a hand under Maria's head to keep it off the concrete as Edy checks her airways and Pippa directs the hired soldiers while keeping her taser pointed

at Aaron, Adam and Martin, who for the moment all seem too stunned to react. Stefan hopes none of them wonder why no-one's pointing a taser at him.

There's blood on his hand and he's trying desperately not to look at it.

The military contractors drag first Will and then Raph off to the cells, and by the time they return for Ollie, Aaron's recovered enough to yell out, "They're keeping us locked up! Help us!"

The soldier holding Ollie's legs directs a withering look at Aaron, says, "Yeah, well, it looks like you fucking deserve it, don't you?" and lets the door shut on Aaron's outraged expression.

In the quiet, Stefan strokes Maria's hair while they wait for help to arrive.

* * *

The whirlwind of activity drags Christine with it as it passes through the kitchen, with sponsors summoned from elsewhere on campus rushing in through the front doors and the two PMC guys — not anyone Christine's met, and not anyone she's likely to meet again; they've seen rather too much and will find themselves moved on before long, bound by NDAs and, rather more pertinently, threats — laying Maria down gently on the kitchen floor. Paige, back for lunch between classes, gets roped into swelling the ranks of sponsors downstairs while Christine helps keep Maria comfortable on cushions brought up from the break room.

"Move over a little, please," Edy says.

Christine shuffles out of the way and Edy, frowning in concentration, stamps as hard as she can on the tile, cracking it. She retrieves a knife from a drawer and swipes it quickly across her forearm, then squats down and squeezes the wound, carefully dripping blood onto the crack in the floor, which she then smears with a finger.

“Edith!” someone yells from the front door, diverting her attention and giving Christine a chance to respond to blood the way she usually does, with deep, controlled breaths and averted eyes. When she looks back, Edy’s wrapped a sheaf of paper towels around her arm and is directing the soldiers back down to the first basement, there to stay until relieved.

“Christine,” Edy says, crouching back down, returning to Christine’s eye level. “Take a taxi to the hospital, please.”

“Of course,” Christine replies. No thought necessary; Edy may sound and look calm but her girlfriend’s lying on the kitchen floor, conscious but incoherent. Anything she needs, she gets.

“I’ll join you when I can.” Edy waits for Christine’s nod and then shouts to the whole ground floor, “Will someone please call Indira, Monica and Beatrice and get one of them back here to relieve me?” Edy’s the most senior sponsor on-site, bar Maria, and a stickler for the rules; others might disregard everything in this situation to go with the ambulance, but Edy will make sure her responsibilities are covered before anything. Christine would admire that if it wasn’t stupid as hell.

Jodie, leaning on the doorjamb and observing the situation with obvious distress, agrees to call anyone and everyone, and takes her phone outside to get away from the hubbub.

“Christine,” Edy says, turning to face her again, “there’s one of ours at the hospital: Rabia. She just started there recently, and she’s our new house nurse. She’ll be embedded in the hospital systems by now, so can you check in with her and make sure nothing untoward is recorded? We need everyone to think Maria—” her voice cracks, but she recovers,

“—fell, and fell *here*.” She points to the cracked tile. “There was no Will, no attack, and if she says anything about him while she’s incoherent, someone needs to be there to cover for her. That’ll be you, for today.”

“On it,” Christine says.

“You know the nurse?”

Christine pulls up the relevant record on her phone, already updated with her new position. She shows Edy the screen. “I have her name, picture, job title; everything. I’ll find her.”

“Good. Thank you. I’ll have someone tell her to expect you.” Edy raises her voice again. “How long did they say for the ambulance?”

“Should be only another couple of minutes,” someone says, and Edy nods, locks eyes with Christine again for a second, and then returns her attention to Maria, who is mumbling under her breath and looking at nothing.

“Stay with me, baby,” Edy says, crouching down and taking one of Maria’s hands. “Look at me. Listen to my voice. Stay with me. Please, Maria. Stay with me.”

* * *

The image of Maria’s head hitting concrete is impossible to shake. There’s still blood there, on the floor, between his knees; he wonders if it will stain. If it will be the last mark Maria leaves on this place. If Will and the others will wash out, if the sponsors will become more cruel, if this is the beginning of the end. She seemed to wake before the soldiers carried her out, but even though her eyes looked at him he doesn’t think she saw him at all.

Still a little blood on his hand, too. He wipes it on his trouser leg. It doesn't entirely come off.

What a place this would be to die.

He's aware of movement, of people filing in, but it's a hand on his shoulder that forces him to focus on anything but the floor in front of him. He looks up, startled by the contact; Paige has taken him by the arm and is tugging gently, encouraging him to stand, holding out her other arm to support him.

Paige?

The absurdity of it is enough to completely clear his head. If there's one thing she's been clear about, it's her refusal to even consider ever participating in the sponsor process.

He checks to make sure the boys are still on the couches, behind him, and whispers, "What are you doing down here?"

"Filling in. I'm not happy about it."

"Is Maria okay?"

"No news yet. She's being taken to the hospital. But she was unconscious for less than thirty seconds. There's reason to be hopeful."

"Good," Stefan says. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop it."

Paige makes a show of letting him stand on his own, of checking him over for harm, and when she's done she turns him around so she can face him. "I don't think there's anything you could have done, Stef, and I'm glad you didn't try, or we might have been sending *two* women to the hospital today, and you're considerably less explicable." She smiles weakly. "You're supposed to be out of the country, remember?" He nods; she's not wrong. If he gets hurt he'll have to be treated on the premises, because leaving Dorley would create problems big enough that Beatrice might just write him off. "Go join the others," she says. "Edy will be down again soon."

Oh, God. Edy! Isn't she dating Maria? Pippa's kept him up-to-date on Dorley gossip — she likes to talk, especially when she's sleepy — and according to her, Edy and Maria's long-standing friendship became something more after Beatrice's birthday dinner, when Edy put a happily drunk Maria to bed and never left. After that, it escalated: spotted holding hands in the dining hall; seen walking together on campus; caught leaving Maria's room again and giving up on keeping the secret.

How's she going to react? She's always been, next to Pippa, the most calm and kind sponsor; she brushes Adam's hair, for goodness' sake! What will this do to her?

At some point, while Stefan was sitting on the floor, Adam and Martin dragged the second sofa back to its usual place by the TV, and with Aaron they're sat in an anxious circle, ignoring the muted television and the women who keep coming in, in ones and twos, whispering to each other.

“This is fucked,” Aaron's saying, as Stefan sits down next to him. “This is so fucking fucked. And you, Stef!” He whirls on Stefan. “Why would you warn them?”

It comes out too loud. “Because I didn't want anyone to get *hurt*, Aaron!” Stefan says, and winces against his voice. Too fucking deep. He bites the inside of his cheek. To go to pieces over voice dysphoria at a time like this would be stupid as well as selfish. Keep it in, let it out later, when it can't hurt anyone else. A mantra, lately.

“But what if it had worked?”

Irritation overrides self-disgust. “You mean, what if Will outright killed her? Or held her hostage? You saw those army guys, right? And you see how many people are down here now, right?” He throws an angry arm in the direction of the almost two dozen women at the other end of the room, and takes a moment to wonder if Dorley needs to reconsider its work/life balance if it can field this many women only *after* the worst has happened. “You think he could fight his way through all that? Even with the idiot twins on his side? Even

with help from you and you and you?” He points at the boys in turn; Adam recoils from his finger. Into the silence he starts counting, tapping his hand on his forearm with each point. “There are guards. They have batons. And tasers. And there are *armed men*. At least two; maybe more. And they have fucking *guns*, Aaron. Real guns that shoot real bullets! There are doors and locks and stairs and— and— Jesus Christ, Aaron, do I really need to say all this *again*? If you don’t get that this was nothing more than a demonstration of how fucking *stupid* Will is capable of being, how pointlessly violent, then what’s even going on in that head of yours?”

He pushes against Aaron’s temple. The boy offers no resistance, instead holding up his hands. Conceding. “Stef, I get it, that was a dumb thing to say, but, please, calm down—”

Stefan recoils at the sheer idiocy of it. “Is that going to help? Being calm? Will that make it so Will didn’t just slam a woman’s head into *a concrete floor*? Aaron—!”

He’s interrupted by Aaron grabbing urgently at him, taking his hand and squeezing it until he shuts up. It’s so unlike Aaron that Stefan bites back his anger and focuses on the subject of Aaron’s gaze, which turns out to be Adam, curled up in the corner of the other couch, making himself small the way he does when someone has triggered a memory from a past none of them have yet been able to understand, beyond guesswork.

“Shit,” Stefan says. He smiles at Aaron — a thanks; an apology — and swaps seats, sits down next to Adam and, slowly, holds out a hand, making clear that it’s an offer, not an obligation. “I’m sorry, Adam. I won’t raise my voice again.” He’s aware of a couple of the sponsors looking on, but that’s not important at the moment.

“No, it’s okay,” Adam says, quietly, finding the few words an effort. “I’m sorry for my reaction.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologise for,” Stefan insists, injecting as much sincerity and kindness into his words as he knows how, leveraging the breathing and pitch exercises he’s

been doing in his room to raise his voice to a near-whispered alto. Anything to seem less threatening, less male: Adam doesn't respond the same way when sponsors raise their voices, and Stefan's come to the obvious conclusion about the gender of Adam's tormentor, whoever he was, in the life he left behind. There's a part of Stefan that wants to rub his own nose in that, to crow about how he, a supposed woman, is so easily able to emulate the man who hurt the boy, but he ignores it as much as he can. Self-hatred can be so self-indulgent, and Stefan has more important things to do. It works, anyway: after a few more quiet reassurances, Adam finally takes his hand. "The fault is entirely mine," Stefan continues, "and I'm genuinely sorry. I was angry and I was scared, and because of that I raised my voice, but I didn't mean to hurt you, and I'll try to do better."

"This is all my fault," Adam says. "If I hadn't gone to see Will last night, Maria wouldn't be hurt. If I hadn't told him about my—"

"His actions are *not* your responsibility," Stefan says quickly. Adam's chest is not a subject he wants to deal with right now. "And neither is Maria."

"Edy likes her," Adam whispers.

"I know."

"I'm so scared for her."

"Did you see the girl who helped me up?" Stefan nods at Paige, hovering nearby and, for all that she has a taser, absolutely failing to look menacing. She's not paying much apparent attention to them, seeming mostly focused on her phone, but it's clear she's listening. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Aaron staring at her, and wraps up his irritation with that along with all the other things he doesn't want to think about right now. Aaron can look at pretty girls if he wants to. "She told me Maria's probably going to be okay. She wasn't out for long."

"But the blood!"

“There wasn’t much,” Stefan says, showing him his other hand, the one he’s been keeping in the front pocket of his hoodie, so he doesn’t have to look at the drying blood, so he can feel the weight of his taser. There’s very little left on it now; more must have rubbed off inside the pocket. “See? I had my hand under her head, covering the wound. It was just a trickle, really.”

“You really think she’ll be okay?”

Stefan flicks his eyes back to Paige, who nods. “I do,” he says.

Adam smiles. Relaxes his grip on Stefan’s hand a little. Absorbs the knowledge for a moment. “What’s going to happen to Will?” he asks.

“That depends on them.” Stefan tilts his head towards the door, where Edy’s just entered and is talking animatedly with some of the girls. Relieved smiles on several faces; a good sign. “He did a really, really bad thing, but it could have been a lot worse. And he thought he was protecting you, I think.” Protecting Adam or protecting himself?

Adam gasps, holding in tears, and Stefan knows the drill: he pulls on his contact with Adam, drags him into an awkward hug, and lets him cry on his shoulder. There’s a lot of tension to let out, and after a little while the shuddering gulps become ordinary breaths, still saturated with moisture but indicative of someone who has passed through the worst of it. Aaron surprises Stefan by coming to sit on Adam’s other side, placing a tentative hand on his back, and stroking his spine. He makes searching eye contact with Stefan, asking if he’s doing it right. Stefan nods, mouths, *Thank you*, and Aaron smiles.

What a sight they must be. A far cry from the day Stefan met them all.

They remain that way for some time. On the other end of the sofa, Martin stays silent, his legs hitched up under his chin, his thoughts a mystery as usual. Stefan can’t find his usual resentment for him; they’ve all had a scare. Maybe he’ll try to

pick him apart some time, find the man beneath the misery. Preferably before Dorley removes the man entirely, Stefan adds to himself, and disguises his laughter as a cough.

The gallows humour here gets everyone eventually.

When Adam's mostly dried out and sitting back and Aaron's returned to the other sofa where there's more room, Edy sits down in front of them on one of the bean bags. She looks like hell: makeup smeared and rubbed off, eyes red, and there's a dressing on her forearm which confuses Stefan as he's sure she didn't get hurt in the altercation. She also looks vulnerable, unarmed and sat in front of them, which feels foolish on a day like this, but Stefan quickly checks and there are several sponsors behind them with tasers aimed, just in case the basement's least-likely rebels decide they want to have a go.

"Are you okay, Edy?" Adam asks.

She smiles at him, brittle but genuine. "I've had better days," she says, "but I'll be okay." They link hands for a second, before Edy drops hers back into her lap with the abrupt motion of someone who's been running on adrenaline for a long time and is starting to reach the end of her reserves. "Now," she continues, addressing all of them, "since it's just you four, I won't give you the big speech. Nor will I give you the one I'm planning to give to the others, which is an even bigger speech. The short version is, none of you are in trouble. Not even you, Aaron, for questioning why Stef would try to warn us."

"I panicked," Aaron mumbles, into his chest. "It was a shitty thing to say."

"It's understandable; we're your captors. You don't have to like us. But, and I believe I am summing up general sentiment here, if *anyone* tries anything like that ever again, we won't bother formally washing them out, we'll just bury them in the woods and walk away happy." Adam hiccups, and Edy adds, "Sorry. But you need to understand the... depth of feeling

here. You all might want to be on your best behaviour for a bit.”

“You don’t have to worry about us,” Stefan says. “Right?”

Adam nods, Martin remains quiet, and Aaron crosses himself.

“Good,” Edy says. “Now, Maria’s been taken to hospital, but we don’t, for now, believe her life to be in danger. William, Raphael and Oliver are in the cells and will remain there until we can evaluate them. No-one’s washing out just yet, but their future depends entirely on how they respond to this. When you speak to them — and you’ll all have the opportunity to visit, with our supervision, if you want, and I encourage you to do so — it would be helpful if you could impress that upon them. Do it for their sake—” she shoots a withering glance at Aaron, who closes his mouth and makes a conciliatory gesture, “—not ours.”

“He’ll be okay?” Adam asks.

“That’s up to him. I’m sure you know by now that his past is not a pretty one and that, as he is now—” Edy allows a snarl to creep momentarily into her voice, “—the world would not miss him. Certainly his brother wouldn’t, nor the students he assaulted.” She closes her eyes and takes a breath before continuing. “But he, like Oliver and Raphael, is not done yet, and we are dedicated to releasing the potential hidden inside such troubled boys. I promise you, we don’t throw *anyone* away on a whim, no matter how... angry we might be, in the moment.”

“Troubled boys?” Aaron says. “Are we ‘troubled boys’ too?”

“If you’d like to dispute the label,” Edy says, “be my guest.”

“No, well, it’s just that it’s very Dickensian.”

“Well,” Edy says, standing up and stretching, “we *are* an old-fashioned operation.”

* * *

Christine needs a fucking cigarette.

Rabia, the nurse, met her out of the taxi, and they greeted each other with the usual Dorley-solidarity hug, the one that says, *I know some really weird shit about you and you know the same stuff about me and we'll never, ever tell*. Fully briefed and prepared, Rabia gave her the latest on Maria's condition: awake, not exactly lucid but aware of where she is, and being kept overnight at minimum. Christine introduced herself as the new Head of Network Security — reasoning that if she's going to keep getting drawn into things like this she might as well take a salary for it — and Rabia quickly went over her integration with the hospital systems as they took the lift. There's no need for Christine to check the work unless she wants to, as it was set up by Elle's people. Christine nodded and pretended to know who Elle was. Another graduate? Since when did any of them have 'people'?

In Maria's private room they positioned Christine, truthfully, as a dorm-mate of Maria's, here to keep her company until family arrives, and Christine greeted the doctor, settled into one of the bedside chairs, and held Maria's hand. She spent the next few hours talking quietly to her when she seemed receptive, reassuring her that everything's taken care of back home, and trying to ignore how much the whole setup, private room and all, reminded her of visiting her mother in hospital, years before Dorley, after another fabricated fall.

Rabia offered to cover for her for a while at the end of her shift and that was all the excuse Christine needed to leave the building at a near-jog, find a quiet spot in the parking lot with a railing to lean on, and glare out at the late-night traffic.

She really, really needs a fucking cigarette.

The addiction's long gone, wasn't even sparked up again by the smoke she bummed off of Naila on Dorley's roof, over a month ago, but the emotional need will never leave her. A final gift from the boy they burned out of her: his need, always, to be occupied.

Her fingers twitch.

Smoking was a way to hide from his regular bullies, or from his dad's temper, or from his mum and the marks on her arm and face. He'd smoke behind the pool maintenance shed at school or on the back balcony at home or on the roof of the phone repair shop in town. One cigarette after another. And there was a difference: at school it was a prop, an excuse to get away, a reason to occupy his hands, and he could make one last forever, or until the bell went, taking little drags and watching the cars go by, wondering what would happen if he just walked out onto the road; on the balcony he'd smoke as quickly as possible, to satisfy the need before his dad found him; on the roof, a place no-one knew about except the guys in the shop, who owed him a few favours and asked no questions, he'd smoke five, ten in a row, substituting cigarettes for self-control.

It was to the roof he escaped after he caught his dad's hand, practically broke his own wrist in one last desperate attempt to give a fuck, to keep his father's hands off his mother's body. He'd had to fight his way out of the man's grip as the bastard apologised: didn't mean to hurt his son; didn't mean to hurt another man.

Look at me now, Dad! Want to take another swing?

She remembers the last time he saw him and her fingers twitch.

Dad got sick after she disappeared, Indira told her, during her first year at Dorley, and she always wondered if she was the cause. There are times when she hopes she was, when she thinks she might have poisoned the old fuck with her absence.

Indira also told her how her mother stayed by him. Always devoted, despite everything; always an idiot. But it eats at her: if she hadn't disappeared, if her mother hadn't lost her son, might they have left together, when he/she was old enough and able to support her? Could she/he have saved her instead of giving up, turning all his bullshit out on other people, becoming the kind of person Dorley scoops up for reform? Would her mother even have come? It kills her that she could find out; she could go see her mum and drag her away from her father's bedside, leave him to fucking rot, and all it would take is breaking Dorley's strictest rule and exposing herself to more humiliation than she thinks she could stand.

She imagines meeting her mother again, coming out to her, packing her suitcases and taking her away from that huge, empty house, and her fingers twitch.

She thinks of the info packets piled up on her desk, the updates on her family, unopened. Maybe one of them says he finally died. Maybe her mother's free, and better off without the both of them.

"Hey," says a warm, familiar voice, accompanied by a hand closing over her fingers. "I thought I'd find you out here."

Shit. Should have stayed with Maria. Lived with the memories. Another bad decision made in haste.

An arm encloses her, turns her around, makes her look down into soft brown eyes. "How are you doing?" Abby says.

"The usual," Christine says. "Having a minor breakdown over shit I can't control. Jonesing for a smoke. Hating my dad. Did you see Maria yet?"

"Yes. She seems to be doing okay. The nurse, Rabia, she sent me looking for you. She said you seemed upset."

"She's perceptive."

"It's nice to have one of ours here."

Christine nods absently. “She seems to know her stuff, too. Speaking of, who’s Elle?”

The quizzical look Abby adopts is one of her less convincing deceptions. “I don’t know,” she says.

Christine rolls her eyes. “I’m on staff now, Abs, against my better judgement. I’m allowed to know shit.”

“Perhaps, but I’m not allowed to tell.”

“Fine. Be mysterious. I’ll just look it up, anyway.”

“Come on inside,” Abby says.

“No. Wanna be cold and miserable.”

“There’s hot chocolate...”

“No.”

“And baked goods...”

“Fine!” Christine says. “Foul temptress. Evil hussy.” She succumbs, as she was always going to, to Abby’s mischievous grin, and consents to be dragged inside, but because she still has her pride she keeps up a string of insults until Abby presses a hot drink and a warm pastry into her hands.

* * *

They’ve got the lights low in Maria’s room. It’s late, but the room is warm and the murmur of the television hanging from the ceiling keeps them company when none of them have the energy to talk. Maria, lucid again, sips water from a bottle Christine got her from the vending machine. Abby, having stuffed herself full of sweet things, sleeps on Christine’s shoulder.

A couple of hours ago she snapped a picture of Maria, sitting up and smiling, head wrapped and fingers v-signing, and sent it to the group chat. Almost immediately she had to turn off notifications, because her phone wouldn't stop vibrating with messages from Dorley graduates across the country, asking her to pass on their good wishes and their relief, and she's glad she didn't say how exhausted Maria looked from the effort of smiling for a few seconds. Let her remain, to everyone else, as invincible as she always has been; it'll be their little secret.

It seemed to make her happy when Christine told her she was officially accepting the job, too.

God, what a long day. Christine checks her phone: ten to midnight. She's been going since five in the morning! She had to get up extra-early to make herself look beautiful before the briefing, and while she's a lot better at it than she used to be, it still takes time and effort and a setting on her alarm she deeply resents. Worse, the other girls, Paige aside, have stopped complimenting her on her efforts, but she knows that if she stops, if she starts slobbing around in shorts again, someone will notice. Officially.

At least the skirts and things are comfortable, and she likes how she looks in them, and you can layer them in the cold weather.

Maria whispers something and drops her capped water bottle onto the bed, apparently unable to stay awake any longer. Christine's briefly alarmed, but she's read Rabia's briefing through three times: only if there's a sudden and unexpected change in Maria's condition should she call a doctor; normal sleep is downright encouraged, and this looks normal enough. Careful not to dislodge Abby, she reaches forward, retrieves the bottle and sets it down on the table, settling back in her chair without waking her sister.

She checks her phone again: midnight.

It's not so bad here, really. With a belly full of hot chocolate and pastries. With the lights down and Maria and

Abby quietly snoring next to her. With the knowledge that Maria really will be okay.

It's not even very much like her mother's room in the private hospital any more. Too many people. Too much love.

Maybe she'll run some searches on her mum when she gets home. Maybe she'll finally open those info packets. Maybe she'll look into the past she's been trying so hard to forget, and make peace with it.

Maybe, just for a minute, she'll close her eyes.

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THREE

**WE DON'T TAKE BOYS FOR
FUN**

2019 NOVEMBER 28 — THURSDAY

The crack of Christine's spine as she stretches is astonishingly sharp in the near-empty hospital foyer, and she curses under her breath: she shouldn't have spent the night in that horrible chair! Her arse feels almost bruised where the padding was worn thin, and when she pulls up her sleeves she has marks on her elbows from the bare wooden arms, and — Christ! — her back is *killing* her. She should have moved, should have decamped to the couch in the corner of the room, but by the time she thought about it, Abby was fast asleep on her shoulder. And now her whole body feels like a knuckle she can't get to pop, and her top is damp from where Abby dribbled on it.

She rolls her spine again, moans loudly at the pain and ignores the irritated glances from the handful of people dotted around the room, and suddenly she has to stifle a giggle because she's realised that a bunch of strangers just *looked at her* and she didn't care about it in the slightest.

They looked at her and she brushed it off! She used to run, she used to hide, and when she was trying to become a better woman she'd do her best simply to ignore it, suffering through lectures and workshops and visits to the Student Union Bar

while hyper-aware of everyone around her. They could all see through her, she thought, to the boy inside, and all it would take would be for her to say the wrong thing or move the wrong way or laugh at the wrong joke and suddenly everyone's suspicions would be confirmed.

But today: nothing. Now she comes to think about it, she spent the whole *night* here, and much of the previous day, interacting with doctors and nurses and orderlies and random people in the queue for the vending machines, and *not once* has she feared discovery. Not once has the possibility even occurred to her!

She'll have to tell Paige; she'll be delighted. Ever since that day at the mall with Pippa, the day they got back together, Paige has been working on her. She's dragged her to clubs, bars, shops and cafés, she's walked her around the art gallery and the university grounds, she's provided all the evidence Christine could ask for that she is, as far as anyone else is concerned, simply another ordinary girl. And the fear that someone might somehow intuit her maleness has, in the face of Paige's patient and loving efforts, simply faded away.

Hell, they kissed on the escalator in the middle of Almsworth Mall and the most anyone did was hiss at their six-year-old — those girls are *kissing!* — to stop staring.

Just an ordinary girl. Well, *damn*. Finally, she has the invisibility she once craved. A small, perverse part of her chafes at the idea of being assumed to be just like everyone else, but it's easily ignored. She can be a weirdo back home, where it's safe, with all the other weirdos.

Another thing she owes Paige.

The bad sleep starts to catch up with her again and robs her of her balance, punishing her for the moment of introspection, so she leans against the wall, outsourcing the job of keeping herself upright to a hundred thousand tonnes of brick, concrete, and tacky glass frontage. If she makes it to tonight without dropping face-first into a bed, a couch, or a comfy enough brace of cushions, it'll be a miracle. She pictures the

edifice of Dorley Hall rising up in front of her as she staggers the last few metres home and has to stop herself laughing at how completely the place has taken her over.

Dorley Hall: her home. It would have been an incomprehensible thought just two years ago.

“Coffee,” Abby says, announcing her presence and her purchases.

“Coffee,” Christine agrees, jerking away from the wall for long enough to accept a paper cup and then slumping back. She points an accusatory finger. “You dribbled on me.” It’s okay to say it, now that they both have coffee and thus have upgraded themselves from non-functional to pre-functional and able to absorb mild critique.

“It’s not my fault you’re so comfortable.” Abby sits in one of the chairs bolted to the foyer floor in rows. “You don’t *have* to stand, you know.”

“I do.” Christine winces, and rubs at her back like an octogenarian. “I feel like I have burning insects crawling around in my spine. Why’d they have to kick us out, anyway?”

At oh-six-hundred on the dot they were woken by a nurse who shooed them out of Maria’s room and insisted they go get some air and come back at eight and, stumbling, half-awake, they’d obeyed. They barely spoke in the elevator down, each of them still blowing the cobwebs out of their brains, and on the ground floor Abby immediately left in search of someone or something that would sell her some coffee and Christine just sort of stopped for a few minutes, reactivating every little while like a toy on low batteries to stretch her back and to be grateful that nothing was currently drooling on her.

Abby raises an eyebrow. “They were always going to kick us out. This is a *hospital*, Chrissy.” Christine would be offended by the patronising tone if she didn’t think, in her current state, that it was probably warranted. “Just be grateful this isn’t the NHS or we would’ve been out on our ears last

night, and Maria wouldn't have had anyone to talk to when she woke up at three."

"Wait, Maria woke up at three?"

"She thought she was being attacked again."

"Fuck."

Grimacing, Abby says, "I'm getting the feeling this might have unearthed some bad stuff she's been keeping buried. She looked kinda wild. But I talked her down. You helped, actually."

"I did?"

"It was really sudden: she sat up, *far* too fast for my comfort, and she looked like she was going to yell out, but then she clapped a hand over her mouth and held her breath. She was all wide-eyed and, honestly, I thought she was terrified, but then you started talking in your sleep."

"Um. What?"

Abby grins. "I think the disturbance sort of half-woke you. You were talking to Paige, I think, in your dream. And listening to you calmed Maria down enough for me to get through to her. She said to tell you, you're *very* cute when you're asleep."

"Good," Christine says, and takes a sarcastic slurp. "Great. Thank you. Message conveyed. I'm cute."

"Come on," Abby says, nudging her, "you know Paige loves it."

"*Paige* isn't mean to me," Christine says, and takes the plastic lid off so she can blow on her coffee, more to punctuate the retort than anything else. "Would they really have kicked us out if this was an NHS hospital?"

"Yes?" Abby says. "Visiting hours are a thing. You've never been in an NHS hospital?" When Christine shakes her head, Abby pokes her. "Rich girls!"

“Hey! I was a rich *boy*, thank you *very* much. As a girl, I’ve had to take a job down in the boy-torturing mines to make ends meet, just like everyone else.”

“Uh, keep your voice down?”

“What?” Christine says. “Why?” It takes her a moment. “Oh, shit. Sorry. I think I’m too tired to filter.”

“No-one noticed, I think,” Abby says quietly. “Maybe restrict yourself to nods until your brain starts working?”

Christine nods. It’s fortunate for her and Dorley both that their secrets are so ridiculous; the odd slip-up just flies over people’s heads.

* * *

They’re finally allowed back in around half past eight, and by then Christine’s spine is even more sore, but it’s worth it to see Maria sitting up in bed, eating Weetabix and smiling at them.

“When I come home,” Maria says, as Christine and Abby sit down, “I want us to diversify the boys’ breakfasts. Away from Weetabix. And not just to porridge three times a week.” She regards her spoonful, frowns at it, and lays it carefully back in the bowl, contents uneaten. “We should get them something nice. Something that distracts them a bit from what we’re doing to them.”

Abby leans forward. “I don’t think *cereal* would—”

“Did you ever have those variety packs? They were a treat. Like, when you’d go on holiday with your family and wake up and look out at this whole beautiful new place, and then downstairs the bed and breakfast would have a little buffet out, but you wouldn’t care about toast or eggs or anything because in the middle of every table there’d be a multipack of portion-

sized cereal boxes, all cellophaned together.” She smiles, and her eyes wander the room, wincing when they come into contact with the thin shaft of light the closed curtains admit in the centre. “Abby,” she says, “can we get more curtains in here? Is that something we can do? It’s so bright, Abby. It’s so bloody *bright*. Can we call Elle and tell her they’re not giving me enough curtains? Can we—?”

Abby leans over and pulls the privacy shade around the bed, all the way along to Maria’s feet, blocking out more of the light. Maria sighs and visibly relaxes, lets her torso sink back into the mattress. Christine hadn’t even realised she was so tense; Abby had, clearly. Christine’s reminded once again that while she doesn’t know Maria all that well — except as something of an antagonist during her second year at Dorley, when Maria became more actively involved with Christine’s intake — Abby’s been a part of things for a lot longer and knows a lot more. Including who this *Elle* person is, probably.

“Thank you, Abigail,” Maria says, smiling wide and appearing to get momentarily distracted by the sensation of her front teeth resting on her lower lip.

“Bea will be here soon,” Abby says, sitting down again. Out of sight of Maria, she reaches out for one of Christine’s hands and squeezes. The gesture is nice and Christine knows the reason behind it, but the more time she’s spent here the less she’s reminded of her mother. For one thing, Maria isn’t dazedly begging for her abuser to come back to her; she’s dazedly reminiscing about cereal.

“When?” Maria asks urgently.

“Soon,” Abby repeats, and Maria nods and settles into the pillow.

“I remember it so clearly; sitting at the table in the bed and breakfast. Red and white squares on the tablecloth, like something off the TV.” Maria giggles. “It was so stupidly perfect. Like when you’d watch a show and wish you could be in it and suddenly I was. I can see myself, breaking open the wrapping, picking out a box of Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes and

pouring out the blue-top milk, which I was allowed, because we were on holiday. Mum smiling at me as I eat. Dad assembling a breakfast plate which fit the maximum amount of food without spilling over the edges.” She meets Christine’s eye. “Sorry. I think my mind’s wandering a bit.”

Christine smiles at her. “Yours and mine both,” she says. “At least you have an excuse. I’m just sleepy.”

“I miss my mum,” Maria says. Christine’s never heard her talk about her family — her old family — before. Judging by the look on Abby’s face, neither has she. “I miss her so much. She had the sweetest laugh. I could tell her the stupidest joke, the most page-one-of-the-joke-book crap, and she’d laugh just because it was me telling it. And Dad. He could *cook*. He’d make soy sauce chicken once a week because I always asked for it, and he’d start a whole thing with me about how he was so tired, he’d worked so hard, and wouldn’t I prefer something quicker, and then he’d laugh and tell me I could have it if and only if I agreed to do all my homework. And I would promise, and get all my books out on the kitchen table, and he’d prepare it in front of me. And we’d eat it together, the three of us.” She sniffs, and winces against the pain. “Always together. Sitting in the front room, eating chicken, watching telly, the sunset streaming through the blinds... How is it possible to miss something so simple so much?”

Abby reaches into her bag and hands tissues to Maria, who doesn’t seem to know what to do with them, so Abby takes them back and dabs gently at Maria’s eyes until she comes back to the present, smiles weakly at Abby, and takes over the task herself. When she’s done she shuffles around in bed, sits up a little higher, rearranges the covers for comfort.

“You okay, Maria?” Abby says.

“Yeah,” she replies, after consideration. “I’m going to close my eyes for a little bit, if that’s okay?”

She does so, and Christine, who doesn’t feel up to checking the Dorley group chat, the private Consensus channels or her personal messages just yet, leans her head on

Abby's shoulder, and catches up on a little sleep of her own. Hopefully she'll drool.

It's a little after nine that Aunt Bea arrives, bursting through the door and looking considerably less put together than she usually does, having come straight from some car or train or plane delivering her from wherever she spends her days away from Dorley. She rushes to Maria's bedside, taking the chair Abby vacates for her. Christine groggily manoeuvres her own chair out of reach, uncomfortable with being too involved in what's undoubtedly about to happen.

"My Maria," Bea says, running a finger down Maria's bare arm.

Maria cracks her eyes open. "Hey, Auntie," she says.

"How are you feeling?"

Maria opens her hand and lets Bea lock fingers with her. "Oh, I'm thriving. Turns out having a dickhead slam your skull into the floor is incredible for productivity."

Christine can't see Bea's face, but can imagine her reaction to Maria's flippant description of her assault in the way she flinches. Christine finds the sarcasm reassuring: so much of growing up (again) in Dorley is about looking to the older women who surround you and drawing confidence from their comfort, and to see Maria, the most constant adult presence in Christine's recent life aside from Indira and Beatrice herself, so vulnerable has been unnerving.

"He'll be punished," Aunt Bea says.

"Okay," Maria says, "but, Auntie? Don't wash him out. Or his pals. The whole thing was mostly my fault."

"Don't say that!" Aunt Bea says.

"Don't be ridiculous," Abby says, at the same time.

"We *push* them," Maria insists, leaning up out of the pillow, "and we change them, all the while denying it. And we *expect* them to push back." She locks eyes with Bea. "It's part of it. It's how it works. How it *has* to work, for some of them.

I just got careless.” She drops back again, energy spent, and continues, sounding out of breath, “I gave a big speech in the morning about how it was going to be the day the shit hit the fan, and then when nothing happened in the first few hours, I let my guard down. I let people go before their replacements arrived. Yes, they all had good reasons — getting to work, getting to class, blah blah blah — but it’s not procedure. And then—” she closes her eyes for a moment, summoning more energy, “—and then I turned my back. My fault.”

“I don’t accept that,” Bea says.

“We had two cushy years in a row,” Maria says, smiling again, “where the biggest troublemakers were girls like Faye and Jodie and Paige and, well, *you*.” Christine realises she’s being referred to, and smiles sheepishly back. “You made a fuss, of course you did — how could you not, with what we were doing to you? — but you didn’t attack us.”

“Of course not,” Christine mumbles, looking away, playing with her wrist.

“We got complacent. I—” Maria tabs at her chest with a thumb, “—got complacent. We picked up some guys with histories of violence and then treated them like we did *you*. After all, the kid gloves mostly worked on Faye, and she was... okay, nothing like Will or the others, but she was a step above you, Christine.” She shakes her head and winces, hand to her temple. “I was stupid.”

“Not at all,” Bea insists.

Maria shrugs. “We can talk about it another time. But no washing out, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Keep them in the cells, though. But do the enrichment programme and—”

“We’re already on it,” Bea says smoothly.

“I was thinking we could run split population for a while. Will and Ollie and Raph on one schedule and Stef and the free

range boys on another. It's more work, but—"

"We're already on it," Bea repeats. "And Edith can handle it."

Maria blinks, apparently caught short by someone having anticipated her ideas. But then she grins. "Actually, she can't," she says. "Put Indira on herding duty; the second years are all just one big cuddle pile at this point. I want Edy here. With me. And taking me home when it's time. So I gave her the week off."

"The hell you did."

"The hell I did," Maria confirms. "Remember when you gave me—" she switches to a sing-song tone, picks up her phone and waves it in time with her voice; it's open on the timetabling app, "—op-er-a-tion-al con-trol?" Before anyone can reply, she winces, drops the phone, and holds a hand to her forehead, closing her eyes again.

"Maria!" Bea says, leaning in closer.

"I'm okay. It comes and goes."

Aunt Bea strokes Maria's cheek. "My poor little angel," she says. "I'm so glad you're okay."

"I am too, Auntie..."

Their voices drop to whispers. Abby pulls on Christine's hand, dragging her up from her chair and out of the room. She closes the door quietly behind them, leans on the wall opposite and exhales deeply.

"I think we don't want to intrude on that," Abby says.

"Yeah," Christine says. "They're... close."

"Like mother and daughter."

Christine laughs, without humour. "I feel like everyone misses their mum except me."

"You really don't miss her at all?"

“I miss *something*. But my whole life before the Hall was so fucked up... I’m not the same person I was when she knew me. Even if I wanted to, I feel like—” Christine’s fingers twitch, and she wishes once again for a cigarette, or anything to do with her hands beyond knot her fingers together; she makes a fist and presses it against the wall, “—like I don’t get to miss her. Like I don’t deserve to miss her. The boy who had that right, he’s gone, and they stopped looking for him a long time ago.”

“Christine?” Abby says, and when Christine looks up she’s close, really close, with a gentle hand on her shoulder she hadn’t even noticed. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Christine says. “I am, actually.” She points at her forehead. “Some good shit’s been happening in here. Just, you know, some less good shit, too. I’ve been thinking about stuff.”

“Like you were last night?”

“Yeah. Feeling kinda shitty about going to pieces in a crisis.” She shrugs against the weight of Abby’s hand. “Mum stuff. Like I said. Which comes with Dad stuff.”

“Hey,” Abby says, squeezing Christine’s shoulder and letting her go, the better to gesticulate, “Edy wouldn’t have sent you here if she didn’t trust you. And you did everything you needed to do. In fact, you’re so together I can see why the sponsors keep forgetting you still haven’t, technically, graduated. You seem more like them than the other girls in your year.”

“You take that back!” Christine says, but she smiles, in case her tone didn’t make the joke clear. *Only kind of a joke, though*, she adds silently.

“I’m serious. Vicky graduated, sure, nice and early, like the girly girl she almost definitely would have become at some point without our help, but then she *immediately* left Dorley, and only comes back for meals or to steal our food and our estradiol — and yes, Christine, I think *everyone* knows about

that by now; she's not as sneaky as you. Jodie is on a pretty standard trajectory, goth version, and Julia and Yasmin are the deal-by-not-dealing sort. They'll graduate and leave and I expect we'll only hear from them when they want to renegotiate their stipends. That leaves you and Paige, and Paige is, for all her gifts, less... temperamentally suited to this stuff."

"And she'd never do it in a million years."

"As is her right," Abby says.

Christine nods, and wonders if Abby, too, feels like a morally compromised monster whenever Paige voices her objections; objections Christine shares, in theory, but which never actually seem to matter when it comes to her day-to-day interactions with the programme.

"You two still doing okay?" Abby asks, and then, observing the inevitable blush that floods Christine's cheeks and the shy smile she can't keep down, says, "I'll take that as a yes." She pokes Christine, who squeals and wriggles away, batting at Abby's fingers.

Bloody Abby. Always able to make things better.

Through the narrow glass window in the door, Christine spots Bea sat right up against Maria's bed, leaning on the mattress and stroking Maria's forehead with her thumb. They really *are* close.

"Would it be so bad to let Maria reconnect with her real parents?" Christine says, voicing the thought as soon as it crosses her mind.

"We can't!" Abby says, suddenly serious, grabbing Christine by the shoulder and firmly dragging her away from the door, out of Maria's line of sight. "And be *careful* when you say stuff like that!"

"But surely she, of all people—"

"No, she can't," Abby says, and steps closer before she continues. "Because they're dead. We're all she has. Beatrice,

Edy and the rest of us. All she has.”

Maria in the bed, fingers linked with Aunt Bea. Like mother and daughter.

Shit. No wonder it seems like she’ll never leave. Maria’s one of the last graduates from Grandmother’s time, and while Christine still doesn’t know much about that period, she knows Grandmother didn’t exactly prioritise making sure the girls were socially functional. The survivors have been gradually peeling away from Dorley Hall over the last decade and a half as they acclimate to the world away from Grandmother, establishing lives for themselves elsewhere, but Maria’s never shown the slightest indication she might follow her Sisters, and Christine’s never known exactly why. Her close bond with Aunt Bea has always been her best guess, followed by the assumption that Maria is essentially institutionalised, which is starting to look a little unfair of her.

“What happened to them?” she asks.

“You probably shouldn’t know this,” Abby whispers, “and I *know* I shouldn’t, but the hierarchy around here keeps shrinking and it seems *really* keen on gobbling you up, so in the interests of avoiding you putting your foot in your mouth: Maria’s parents were killed by Grandmother.”

“*Grandmother—!*” Christine claps her hand over her mouth.

“Yes. Or her people. Same difference.”

“Did she kill *everyone’s* family?” Christine asks, as the bloody history of Grandmother’s regime expands in her mind to include roomfuls of children, parents, grandparents, all dead for one woman’s satisfaction.

“No. It was a punishment reserved for the most unruly. And a stupid one, too, because once you’ve done it, you can’t do it again, and the girl now knows you’ve nothing left to hurt her with. But they did it anyway, because Grandmother’s lot were cruel. Cruel for the sake of it. Cruel for fun. Cruel just to

see what would happen. Maria fought them, and they killed her parents and showed her the proof.”

“How the *fuck* did Grandmother get away with shit like that?” Christine hisses.

“She had money and connections,” Abby says, “just like we do. But she also made sure she picked up boys with criminal convictions. Usually something minor. Shoplifting, purse-snatching. Enough to get them in the system. Police won’t look too hard for some missing working class twenty-year-old at the best of times, but if he also has a record? Barely worth them getting out of their seats for. And if the devastated family, years after he vanishes, vanish themselves, or ‘commit suicide’? Well, that’s all very explicable, isn’t it?” She spits it, unable to keep her snarl contained. “Especially if those boys, those families, just happen to be poor and from... backgrounds the authorities feel the country could do without. Practically natural causes.”

“Jesus.”

“In my darker moments,” Abby says, “I’ve told myself that we’re no different to Grandmother, just with a shiny coat of girlboss paint and stupider crockery. But we don’t take boys for fun; we take them because we think they can be saved, and to protect the people around them. And we make sure their families have access to therapists, get money to them if they need it, et cetera.” She sighs. “I have so *many* justifications.”

“Do they help?” Christine asks.

“Sometimes. At least we have Indira’s pilot programme now, for reconnecting with families.”

“That’s a thing we’re doing? I thought it was just that Dira made a huge pain in the arse of herself until Bea finally gave in?”

“Well, yeah,” Abby says, smiling. “That’s how it started. But we’re watching the situation. If, in five years, it all seems okay, we can start to think about reuniting more people.”

“But never Maria.”

“No.”

“Five years,” Christine says. “That’s a long time.”

“Yeah,” Abby says, after a pause, and leans her head against the wall. “It really is.”

“What about—?”

“Oh, shit; shush!”

Christine, still operating on poor sleep and feeling very slow on the uptake, is about to ask why, when the door to Maria’s room opens and Aunt Bea steps out, damp-cheeked and tired. She looks away while she wipes her face with a wet-wipe; Christine and Abby do her the courtesy of concentrating very hard on the floor.

“Thank you both for staying with her,” Aunt Bea says.

“Any time,” Abby says.

Bea gives her a quick nod and turns to Christine. “Victoria has agreed to pick you up on her way into campus. She’ll find you in the car park in, oh, about ten minutes.”

“Fine,” Christine says. “Um, thank you for arranging that.” She hadn’t given much thought to how she was going to get home.

“Abigail, I’d like you to stay with me a little longer, if you please. Until Edith finishes up.”

Christine pops her head back into the room, but Maria’s asleep again, so she hugs Abby, gives Aunt Bea an embarrassed smile, and finds the ground floor again on her first try. Feeling increasingly fatigued, she wobbles out to the railing in the parking lot to wait for Vicky and her distinctive car. It doesn’t take long for the hatchback with the one blue door to pull up, and for Vicky to leap out of the driver’s side and envelop her in a hug, and when Vicky lets her go, Christine has to fend off Lorna, too.

Lorna’s face is slightly rougher against her cheek than Vicky’s. Maybe they can get her some money for laser or

electrolysis or something? Christine can't get the families out of her mind — years of wreckage left in Dorley's wake — and it would be nice to do something unambiguously good for a change.

Deposited in the back seat, Christine fills them in on Maria's condition, and as they pull out of the car park she finally checks to see how the group chat and the Dorley Consensus server are doing.

1,047 new messages.

Okay, then. Maybe she'll deal with her personal stuff first.

63 new messages.

Fuck it. Christine ignores them all, messages everyone on her internal contact list with a quick update on Maria's situation and a stern warning that anyone who happens to find her asleep later today — no matter how unusual the position or location — and decides to wake her up will be subscribed on all their accounts to every recipe newsletter, grey-market video game key-selling service and off-brand bulk sex toy website she can find, and switches to the Consensus app.

She scrolls past pages and pages of messages from anxious Dorley women, who are both worried about Maria and indulging in some rather lurid revenge fantasies with Will, Raph and Ollie in starring roles. She stops to read Edy's pinned post rebuking them, adds a reaction emoji, and continues scrolling. The photo of Maria smiling and showing the V sign is everywhere, and by 3am, after Abby hopped into the channel and posted an update to confirm that Maria is still okay, the few people up late or awake early started to meme on it, pasting Maria into other images and designing the odd mug. Relief makes people giddy; it also makes them bad at Photoshop. Christine saves a few of the better ones and jumps straight to the bottom so she can make a post for anyone not on her contact list.

One of the last messages is from Monica, enquiring about Maria's hormones, and Christine watches Edy's reply pop up:

she'll be taking them over when she starts her week's leave — good for her! — in a few hours.

“Shit,” Christine says, swiping the app closed and dropping the phone back into her bag, “I didn't bring my pills last night. Vick, I don't suppose you have any on you?” It takes her a while to process the silence in the car and she looks up to Vicky, in the rear-view, giving her the most intense stare she's ever— *Shit!* Lorna's not supposed to know about that! “I feel terrible if I don't take my vitamins,” she adds quickly.

Vicky affects exasperation. It probably doesn't take much effort. “Why would I have vitamin pills in my car, Tina?”

“Uh, I don't know.” Christine waves a mollifying hand. “Sorry,” she adds. “My brain is completely fried. I slept in a chair last night, and Abby slept on me. I was babbling away in the lobby, too. Just ignore me.”

“Let's get you home, then,” Vicky says, “and you can eat all the vitamin pills you can find.”

Christine hopes the strange look Lorna's giving her is harmless and innocent and not, for example, a sign that she's made a huge mistake, and rather than say anything else and make the situation worse she directs her attention firmly and uninterruptibly out of the window for the rest of the drive, watching the outskirts of town become the long tail of the Royal College of Saint Almsworth campus and, eventually, the parking lot nearest Dorley Hall.

Home.

* * *

It's Pippa who wakes him, tapping him on the forehead with — he squints, in lieu of focusing his eyes properly, which is a

feat that is clearly beyond him this morning — yes, her taser.

“Wake up, sleepyheads,” she says.

“Do you have to wield that thing at me?”

“What thing?” Pippa says, and then finally notices what she’s holding. “Oh. Sorry. We got a lecture about keeping them on hand, after— uh, you know.”

“It’s too early for tasers.”

“It’s way past nine.”

“Still too early for tasers.”

She backs off and gives Stefan room to wriggle around in his sleeping bag, freeing limbs that got trapped in the folds overnight. To his left and right, disgruntled noises suggest the boys are waking up, too, stretching, yawning, and bumping into furniture they pushed out of the way to make room for their impromptu sleepover.

Last night, things became rather less structured than Stefan or the boys have become used to. With the common room full of sponsors — and people like Paige, who are definitely not sponsors but didn’t, she told Stefan in a quiet moment, run away fast enough when Edy was rounding people up — Adam started getting antsy, and it fell to Stefan and Aaron to try to keep him calm and distracted. Stefan tried not to let his heart sink as he imagined how much of his near future was going to involve managing Adam; Aaron’s been enough work on his own!

When it became clear to the assembled Dorley Sisters that none of the four who remained were likely to try anything funny, the room mostly cleared out; a relief, given how many of them had tried to talk to Stefan, or looked at him in ways he found uncomfortable. He suspected that at the first opportunity he was going to quietly go to pieces over how just how fucking *seen* he’d been, so when Pippa suggested to Edy that the ‘boys’ sleep together in the common area rather than face the night alone, he enthusiastically backed her.

It had been Edy who supplied the spare pillows, roll-out mattresses and so on, with Jane's help. Jane, Raph's sponsor, took the opportunity provided by laying everything out to complain to the room about always getting the difficult ones, about having to get up early the next morning to feed 'a fucking pillock', which Stefan suspected was only half about letting off steam and half about making a point to the remaining boys: behave.

Edy, meanwhile, took Adam aside and spoke to him quietly. At the end of their conversation, they hugged, and Edy stroked Adam's hair, clearing it out of his eyes and smoothing it down at the sides. Stefan's been meaning to ask someone what the hell's going on with those two.

"Come on," Pippa says, gesturing with a finger, her taser now reassuringly hooked into her wide belt, "up up up! Breakfast in ten."

"That's not the enticement you think it is," Aaron mutters.

There's a smell Stefan associates with groups of boys who've gone too long without a shower — the one time he agreed to sleep over at the house of one of Russ' other friends, in the rec room with five boys, the room reeked in the morning — but the common area has none of the musky odour he expects. Is that something that changes with estrogen? Or the lack of testosterone? Or is it something else entirely, something to do with their diet, and he's just looking for reasons to believe it's the HRT taking effect because it comforts him?

Self-consciously he turns away and presses softly around his nipples: still sensitive; still fleshy; still nothing you could really yet call a *boob*. Patience, in this place, where he barely has time to adjust to the status quo before it changes under his feet, and where he seems to keep accumulating new responsibilities, feels like an imposition.

It takes them a few minutes to clear up the sleeping bags, and then Pippa's ushering them into the dining room, ignoring Aaron's complaints that it would better preserve the sleepover

atmosphere if they got to eat in front of the TV and maybe put some cartoons on.

Edy's sat there, at the head of the table, with Pippa on her left and Indira — Stefan recognises her from the staff files — on her right. Indira catches him looking at her and smirks, raising an eyebrow. Christine's sponsor, he knows; she's had only good things to say about her.

“And then there were four...” Indira says, putting on an ominous voice. Edy nudges her and shakes her head, which only broadens Indira's smile.

“Good morning,” Edy says. “We have some announcements to make; you might want to start on your breakfast.”

“Do we have to?” Aaron gripes, as Stefan drops a couple of Weetabix into a bowl and pushes it and the oat milk in front of the boy, ignoring Indira's undisguised amusement. Aaron grudgingly pours milk and Stefan fills a bowl for himself.

“Yes,” Martin says. Surprising; he rarely interjects. Rarely says anything much. He's smiling when Stefan glances over, which is beyond unexpected and firmly in creepy territory. He's also helping Adam with his bowl, which is the point Stefan decides that the events of yesterday have so upset the balance in the basement that his ability to predict events has dropped to near zero.

“How's Maria doing?” Stefan asks, before Edy can say anything else. He can guess that she hasn't taken a downturn, judging by the fact that Indira seems to be having a whale of a time just watching him make sure Aaron eats breakfast, but it's better to know for certain.

“She's awake and she's talking,” Edy says, “and she's asked that, whatever the vengeful instincts of... certain people, William, Raphael and Oliver are not to be washed out.” She directs that to Adam, who closes his eyes in relief. “She is also going to be taking a leave of absence to recover, and since I will be helping to take care of her in the short term, Indira will

be in charge down here. She'll also be taking over sponsorship of you, Aaron."

Aaron, clearly painfully aware of the broad, innocent smile on Indira's face, nearly chokes on his Weetabix. "Hi," he says, when he recovers.

"Hello, Aaron," Indira says. "I'm looking forward to getting to know you!"

"Last night's indulgence will not be repeated," Edy continues, borrowing Beatrice's tones, "so expect to sleep in your own beds tonight. Nonetheless, we do recognise that none of the four of you have yet to engage in violence against another resident or any of the sponsors, with the exception of Stef."

Aaron grabs Stefan by a shoulder and shakes him. "Yeah, killer!" Stefan pushes him off.

"Continued good behaviour comes with privileges. More media on your computers, more varied food, that kind of thing. Obviously, the opposite is true. You won't be seeing the others for a while. That doesn't mean we're doing anything sinister with them," she adds quickly. "I know you saw Declan. We're not doing *that*. Not yet, anyway. But their presence is disruptive, and they need individual attention." She sighs. "It's more work, of course."

"I'm super sorry you kidnapped us and then we gave you a really hard time about it," Aaron says.

"Thank you!" Indira says. "You're much more thoughtful than Maria said."

Aaron blinks, and Stefan wonders if he should be taking notes.

Edy stands and walks around towards Adam, trailing her fingers idly on the table. When she reaches him she places a hand on his shoulder. "Adam," she says, "I'm going to be away for about a week. Indira will be here to help, and if you need to reach me you can ask her or any of the other sponsors, okay? The rest of the time, Stef will take care of you, right?"

She glances at Stefan, eyes wide. He nods. “Yeah, Adam,” he says. “I’m, uh... Anything I can do. Just ask.” Edy thanks him with a smile.

“I don’t want to be a burden,” Adam says quietly.

“You’re not,” Stefan says.

“Stick with her— him,” Edy says, correcting herself and going momentarily still, controlling her reaction to the error. “Sorry, Stef,” she adds. “Long day, long night.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Teacher’s pet,” Aaron whispers, grinning, as Edy leaves the room and the other two sponsors start talking between themselves.

“Better a teacher’s pet,” Stefan replies, “than stuck in the cells with Will.”

It’s the wrong thing to say, and he realises it a second later, when Adam almost chokes on his Weetabix.

* * *

Before there was the Anthill and the redevelopment by the lake, there was the central quad, the sixties project which transformed a collection of disparate teaching buildings and other facilities — only one of which had properly been part of the Royal College of Saint Almsworth — into a real university. Its crowning feature: a brutalist spike driven into a square of green space and surrounded on all sides by administrative and office spaces and what had once been the main library, now repurposed as a student hangout and study area. The central tower, no longer the jewel of the Royal College and slightly shabby with age, now houses a laundromat, a small supermarket, one of two bookshops, and

on top retains its only original feature: Café One, a restaurant which never caught on as the trendy social hub the architects intended, and which now mainly sells sausage sandwiches, baked potatoes, and other cheap, portable food to hungover students for prices which render it only slightly more cost-effective than taking a bus into town and going to a real café.

“If you keep pouring coffee into me I’ll never get any sleep,” Christine says, glaring at her cup and at her abandoned, half-finished sandwich.

“That’s literally the idea,” Lorna says.

“You can go, you know,” Christine says, leaning on her hand, unable to keep her mounting exhaustion under control. “See your friends and stuff. I can just slouch here until they kick me out. Someone’ll eventually take pity on me and drag me to the front steps of the dorm.”

Lorna snorts. “Nope! Vicky’s meeting us here and she’d be kind of annoyed with me if I wandered off, don’t you think? Besides, you *are* my friend!”

“That’s very kind of you to say.”

“It’s true!” Lorna taps Christine on the wrist, almost destabilising her. “You’re even worse than Vicky, Tina. Does *everyone* at your dorm have massive self-esteem issues, or is it just you two? And Pippa?”

Vicky? Self-esteem issues? Christine wants to ask her if she’s talking about the same bubbly, outgoing girl Christine knows. Instead she says, “Just us. Why do you think we all know each other?”

“I’m guessing, support group for the terminally shy?”

“We meet once a month,” Christine says, and sips her coffee. How many cups so far today? She’s losing count. “With paper bags on our heads. And with the—” still holding her cup, she twirls her little finger in a circle near her eye and almost overbalances, “—*shit!* Sorry. And with the holes cut out, so we can see.”

Lorna gives Christine the same look she gave in the car, the same one Christine's sure she could interpret better if she wasn't so fucking tired. And she needs to do better in front of Lorna: it's one thing to be confident and undetectable in front of cis people who, by and large, haven't got a bloody clue about anything, and quite another to be friends with a trans woman. Christine feels a little like she did back at the mall, when Paige and Pippa dragged her out to buy dresses, except that Lorna isn't likely to be cruel if she clocks her, just confused. Confused in a way that would end in major problems for Vicky and Dorley.

Why'd you have to fall in love with a trans girl, Vick? And why'd she have to be so nice? I can't even resent her for making me nervous!

Lorna chews on her own sandwich for a while in silence, still giving Christine the look. "Is Vicky... okay?" she asks eventually, and bites her lip.

"Yes?" Christine says. "I think so?" Uncomfortable under Lorna's scrutiny, she starts fiddling with her remaining sandwich, tearing off hunks of bread and turning them over in her fingers. She considers eating a bit more; if she really does fall asleep as soon as she gets home, this might be the only thing she eats all day. Hopefully Indira's put the standard email through to her lecturers, or she'll wake up to the same bullshit in her inbox she remembers from when she was a bad student the first time around.

"Are you lying to me, Christine?" Lorna says, her voice suddenly hard, and Christine's glad she didn't yet get around to stuffing any more food in her face because she would have choked, for sure.

"I mean, she hasn't said anything to me," Christine says carefully.

"It's just... All right, so, in the car? You asked her for pills. 'Vitamin pills'." Christine watches her air-quote like a rat watches a cat. "The ones you forgot, and thought she had."

Quality fuckup, Christine. “Uh, yeah?”

“You weren’t asking about vitamin pills, were you?”

The caffeine hasn’t done anything for Christine’s mental acuity, because in her anxious need to fix things she says the first thing that comes to mind, which is, “Why wouldn’t I have been?” which is exactly the kind of thing she’d say if she were trying to be evasive. She puts down her coffee and holds up her hand, asking for a moment. “Yes,” she says, thinking as fast as she can under the circumstances, “you’re right. Not vitamins.”

“Has *Vicky* been lying to me?” Lorna asks. Quiet and steady. She’d be meeting Christine’s gaze if Christine was at all prepared to meet hers.

Yes. Ever since you met her. “No. Not as far as I know.”

“But she’s taking something.”

“Yes.” Two things, actually: progesterone and estradiol. Christine never gave much thought as to how *Vicky* hides her HRT from Lorna. When does she find the time to dissolve the estradiol under her tongue? Christ, what does she say about the scars on her labia?

“And you know what it is because you take the same thing,” Lorna says, with a sigh in her voice, already almost as tired of this as Christine.

“Yes, but—”

“I *know* you don’t want to let her down, Christine, or break a promise, or whatever, but... I can’t deal with lies.” Lorna leans forward, so she can speak quietly. “I had a girlfriend, before I transitioned. And she lied to me. She pretended she was fine with what— with *who* I am, with the changes I was just starting to go through, but she was lying her *arse* off. She was already seeing another— a guy, but she was too chicken to tell me. Scared of how I might react. And when I eventually found out, she was all—” she holds her arms up in front of her face, protectively, “—like I might attack her for it. Like I might beat her. She *cried* about how scared she was of my

reaction. Like I was some abusive boyfriend, not a trans girl ten times as scared of what she might do than the other way round.”

Shit. “I’m sorry,” Christine says. “I didn’t know.”

Lorna sniffs. “Yeah, well. Now you do. I’m done being lied to, Christine. And I know you and Vick have a bond, some shared experience or something, I see it with you and her and Paige and even Pippa when you’re all together, and I’ve *never* asked because I *know* she has shit in her past just like I have in mine. I *know* what she’s like when she gets scared.” She must notice Christine’s flinch because she reaches forward, takes Christine’s hand, and modifies her tone. Softer; less accusing. “And I’m *not* asking about that, about whatever happened to all of you. But I need to know about this pill thing. I need the truth.”

There are procedures for this. There’s evidence, ready-made and available in the lockers back home. Scripts to recite. Christine never put much effort into memorising any of it, because she never expected to end up with someone who didn’t know her, past and present, which was obviously a mistake equal in stupidity to all the other mistakes she’s made recently.

Fuck it; improvise.

She covers Lorna’s hand with hers, squeezes, and sits back in her chair, implying discomfort, which gets Lorna to let go. She nods, pretending grudgingly to accept that *now is finally the time to tell the truth* while she rearranges herself such that she can drop a hand into her bag and hit the button on the side of her phone. Christine made sure she got the brand of phone with the superfluous extra button, which as standard summons a proprietary voice assistant that approximately one percent of this phone’s owners actually use, but which on hers has been set to launch a voice recorder app. A double press, later, will end the recording, zip it up and encrypt it, and bounce it to the security room at Dorley, where someone will pick it up and act on it, if it seems necessary.

Improvise *with backup*.

“I was really out of it in the car,” she says, looking down at the table, ignoring the guilt constricting her throat, “as you saw. Partly because I was really tired. And partly because I missed my pill last night.” She meets Lorna’s eyes, hopes she can keep her gaze steady. “Venlafaxine. Those are the pills I take. The ones I asked her about. It’s an SNRI. I’ve been taking it for years, and so is Vicky. At least, I thought she was. I don’t actually know if she still does. We took it together, a long time ago. But never talked about it much. My choice. I’m, uh...” Christine rubs the back of her neck. “I’m kind of ashamed of it? Needing the help? And I *know* I shouldn’t be, I know lots of people take this stuff, I know it’s *normal*, but I’ve never been able to get over it. And in the car, I was so knackered, I wasn’t thinking straight, and just blurted it out. Vicky wasn’t lying to you, Lorna, when she went along with my story about it being vitamins. Not really. She was just protecting me.”

“Protecting you... from me.”

Christine shrugs. “From myself. Not you. She knows I’m neurotic.” Finally, a spot of truth.

Lorna sits back heavily. “Why wouldn’t she tell me about them? I’m not some ableist piece of shit who’s going to care that her girlfriend takes something that helps her. I’d be a pretty big hypocrite if I did, if you think about it.”

“Yeah,” Christine says, “I guess. And she might not take them any more, anyway. Like I said, we don’t really talk about it.”

Like a switch being flipped, Lorna’s face breaks out into a smile. She reaches across the table and touches Christine’s hand again. “Thank you, Christine. And I’m sorry for pushing. It’s just... you know how it is. The shit in your past never quite lets you go.”

Christine nods. Matches Lorna’s smile. Squeezes Lorna’s fingers. Displays sincerity. And with her other hand she hits

the button on her phone twice, sending the audio file back to Dorley where someone will listen to it and shoot Vicky a message through the Dorley build of Consensus, which will manifest on her phone as a notification about a system update and open the messaging app in a floating window that will disappear as soon as she acknowledges receipt. Before she meets back up with them at Café One she'll have her story straight and ready to tell.

“I get it,” Christine says. “When you’ve been lied to before, it’s hard to trust again.”

* * *

“Hey, baby. Did you miss me?”

“Edy?”

“Hi, Maria.”

“Edy!”

“Hey, don’t sit up so fast! Let me come to you.”

“Where did Bea go? And Abby?”

“Aunt Bea’s taking Abby home so they can get a bit of distance and a bit of rest, respectively. Which means that for the next little while I’ve got you *all* to myself.”

“Good! That’s... that’s really good. Sorry about that, by the way. I wake up hard at the moment. Takes me a second to get orientated.”

“How do you feel?”

“Honestly? Like complete shit. Even with the curtains shut it’s too bright in here. And these headaches keep coming and going. Not to mention — *ouch!* — the small matter of the dent in my skull.”

“Don’t touch it!”

“Yeah. Sorry. I haven’t been seriously hurt like this since — fuck, since Grandmother’s time. I’ve lost all my helpful wound care habits.”

“Poor baby.”

“Can you— uh, Edy, can you do me a favour?”

“Anything, Maria.”

“Sit with me? Up here? Maybe hug me a little? Auntie’s been wonderful, obviously, but she’s been treating me like I’m made of glass. I just want—”

“I’ve got you. Come on. Move over.”

“You, uh, might have to help me with that, too.”

“Okay. You just— no, lift your— no. Okay. I’ve got it. Just lie still, Maria. I’m going to pull the sheet, and you with it.”

“That’ll get the sheets all messed up.”

“So?”

“So, someone will have to fix it.”

“Let them! They can bill it.”

“Elle’s money isn’t infinite.”

“It might as well be! Besides, how much can it cost? Item: fitting new sheets after scandalous hospital bed lovemaking episode, ten dollars.”

“Lovemaking, Edy?”

“If you play your cards right. Now, stiffen up; I’m going to pull.”

“Edith, you’ve already pulled. Get it—? *Aahh!*”

“You had to make the joke, didn’t you, baby? Couldn’t stiffen up like I asked. Had to exercise your smart mouth.”

“It’s the only thing on my smart face that still works.”

“Okay. Lie still. I’m going to join you on— *Woah!*”

“Edy! Are you okay?”

“Yes. Just spectacularly uncoordinated. Give me a moment?”

“Shall I call someone?”

“No. It’s fine. I’m fine. See?”

“Impressive. Standing on your own two legs.”

“Don’t make fun, Maria.”

“You’re right. And you’re doing better at that than I am, right now. I suppose concussed women in glass hospitals shouldn’t throw, uh, plastic jelly containers?”

“Rules for life. Okay. I’m taking my heels off this time. I *learn* from my mistakes.”

“You’re so wise.”

“And you’re so mean.”

“It’s how they made me. Seriously. It was a design goal. It required quite a lot of beating.”

“Hey! Maria. Don’t joke about that.”

“Sorry, but I’m going to, always. My dark past, my rules.”

“What if I kiss you? Will that make you stop?”

“Maybe. Let’s try it.”

“Mmmm.”

“Yeah. Yeah, Edy, I think that worked.”

“Shall I keep going?”

“Yeah, just— just gently.”

“Very gently. Very, very gently.”

“Ouch!”

“Sorry!”

“No. It’s okay. I’m okay. But let’s maybe just lie here for a while? Together?”

“Let’s. I have get well cards?”

“Hmm. Who from?”

“Uh, let’s see. One from all the second years — look! Faye drew you something!”

“Okay, that’s actually really sweet.”

“Right? And there’s one from the sponsors, and, uh—”

“What’s that one?”

“It’s from Aaron.”

“How did he get a card in the first place?”

“Indira.”

“Of course. I feel like it’s a good thing I can’t focus well enough to read his scribble. What does it say?”

“Life down here just isn’t the same without you judging everything I do. Sorry about your head. Hope you don’t get any weird scars.”

“Huh. Surprisingly polite.”

“Yeah. Oh, and there’s one from—”

“Edy? Maybe no more cards for a little while?”

“Sure.”

“We could, uh— did you bring your phone?”

“Of course. Why?”

“This is probably the best time for you to sell me on one of those bands you’re always going on about.”

“Really? You’d let me? You wouldn’t run screaming?”

“Can’t.”

“Right. Of course. Yeah, just let me find the right track. Here we go.”

“Oh! Oh. Yeah, this is okay, Edy.”

“You really thought my taste was that bad?”

“Yeah? Kinda. You tried to make me listen to Lit, once.”

“That was the automatic playlist thingy!”

“Lies. Who’s this, then?”

“Placebo. I was *so* into them when I was, like, thirteen. The singer? He’s so hot. Or he was, back in the nineties. He might not be, any more; I haven’t looked. I *really* wanted posters of him. Wasn’t allowed.”

“‘Him’? Aren’t you *incredibly* gay?”

“He’s my exception.”

“Do I have competition?”

“Absolutely not. You’re hotter.”

“You’re so sweet. What’s this song called?”

“*Every You Every Me.*”

“I like it.”

“Good.”

“Edy?”

“Yeah?”

“You think the boys will be okay? I mean, this feels like it’s going to be a difficult year, and—”

“The boys will be fine, Maria. I promise. We’ll take care of them.”

“All except Declan, right?”

“He was... beyond us.”

“I hope so. I don’t like that we have to do that.”

“Me neither, baby. But we help the ones we can help.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, Maria?”

“Yes?”

“I was so scared.”

“I was, too.”

“We’ll be more careful from now on.”

“We will. I love you, Edy.”

“Love you too, Maria.”

* * *

Victoria Robinson

SNRIs, huh?

Christine

I’m sorry!

I know it’s a huge fuckup

I tried to put it all on me

How did it go after you dropped me off back here?

Victoria Robinson

It was hard. I had to promise her I have no other secrets.

Christine

Shit

I’m really sorry

Victoria Robinson

Yeah, well. It’s done now.

You need to know the new story, and so does everyone else, so tell Paige and everyone, okay? I tried vrenlafaxine for six months when I saw it worked for you, but the side-effects were too much, so I tapered off. I wasn't taking them at all when I started seeing Lorna. And we never talk about it because YOU have mental health hangups.

Christine

I mean, accurate

It's venlafaxine, by the way

No R

Victoria Robinson

God damn it, Christine. I don't have time to learn the names of any new things. Unlike some people, I actually go to my lectures.

Christine

I'm sorry

Again

I hate that I created this problem for you

Victoria Robinson

Stop.

Christine

Vick, I'm REALLY sorry

If there's anything I can do to help, please tell me

Victoria Robinson

You can't help. But it's okay. No-one can.

And I want you to stop worrying about it, okay? This is already a fucked-up couple of days and you've had enough to deal with without my disaster zone of a personal life complicating things even more. You've been dropped right in the thick of it by a bunch of nihilistic old bitches who don't have the basic empathy to let you graduate before they rope you in to Dorley's never-ending cycle of absolute shit.

My problems are NOT your problems.

Christine

Are you okay?

Victoria Robinson

I'm fucking not.

But I'm sorry to go on about it. I don't really have anyone to vent at about this stuff and it kind of builds up.

I'm locked in a cubicle in the toilets in the fucking Anthill and as soon as I sat down I realised some bitch left the seat wet. So that's not helped my mood.

And I'm actually glad you're where you are right now. You've got most of that sponsor shit off your back, and you're in a position to do a lot of good. You can really help those girls. Future girls. Fuck, I never know how to assign genders at this point. But you can be there for them. And that's amazing because, God help me, I still believe in Dorley. Even if sometimes I'm not sure why.

I'm just sick of lying to Lorna.

I feel like I'm on a rollercoaster ride with her. When I'm with her I'm SO happy. Happier than I ever thought I could be. Happier than I even thought possible. Definitely happier than I

would have been without Bea and Maria and their intervention.

But when I'm on my own, all I can think about are the lies.

Because I'm a liar, Tina. That's what I AM. And this, with the vrenlafaxine, is just another lie. Just another little fucking lie. For the pile.

I want to marry her, Tina! I want to spend forever with her! She's the most amazing person I've ever met! She's funny and brave and kind and she sings like an angel and sometimes she looks right at me and tells me the worst fucking pun you've ever heard in your life and just KILLS me right there on the spot because I just can't believe this fucking dork loves me back!

And I'm stuck with this stupid New Personal History that says I'm a cis woman so I can't even empathise with her trans shit too hard in case I know too much or anticipate her needs too often or accidentally prove myself to be in possession of a legible fucking gender!

I'm SICK of playing the clumsy cis girl learning trans shit on the internet and deliberately getting things wrong sometimes. I'm sick of this role I cast myself in before I even understood what my future was going to be like.

I want her to KNOW me, Tina! Through and through. Everything. My sins included. What I did. Who I am. How I got here.

But I'm a liar.

Christine

Have you thought about just telling her?

Victoria Robinson

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Christine

Just part of it, I mean

Victoria Robinson

HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

Which part? I can't claim to be trans without fatally undermining our whole relationship, admitting I've been lying to her since the moment we met.

So if I tell her, I might as well tell her EVERYTHING. She'll probably figure all of it out once she has even one of the puzzle pieces, anyway.

And then she burns Dorley to the ground.

And me along with it.

Christine

I'm sorry I made things worse

Victoria Robinson

Tina, you dropped a pebble onto a mountain. It's fine.

I apologise. I shouldn't have dumped all this shit on you.

Christine

We're friends, right?

You can dump WAY more on me than you do

I thought you were just effortlessly cruising your way through all this real life shit

It's a bit of a relief to discover you're just as screwed up as I am

Victoria Robinson

Tina. You have no idea.

Christine

Oh, you spelled venlafaxine with an R again

Victoria Robinson

Who gives a crap? I was only fake on it for six months, maybe it makes total sense that I can't fucking spell it!

* * *

“I never thought I'd miss the simmering air of barely controlled rage, but I do. It gave every afternoon a certain structure, like we couldn't just fall asleep on the couch, digesting our veggie lasagne and trying very hard to ignore the telly, because at any moment Will might jump up and start lecturing us on the evils of incarceration or how ACAB applies even to hot lady kidnappers or how it's okay actually to beat the shit out of your brother if you're super homophobic and/or a really big closet case. He may scare the bejesus out of me half the time but at least he has passion. What am I passionate about, Stef? I barely have any strong feelings that aren't about sex or how much I hate Weetabix, and down here there's only so much sex I can't have and so much Weetabix I can throw at Martin and I'm *bored!* Look at me, Stef! It's only half past dick in the afternoon and already I'm sitting on the couch like you do.”

“Get down from there.”

“Make me.”

“You’ll hurt yourself if the sofa tips over, which it *will*, because your centre of gravity’s all wrong.”

“How come it’s okay for you to sit like that, then?”

“I’m taller. Longer legs.”

“Some people have all the luck.”

“Agreed.”

“Stef! I’m so bored!”

“I know.”

“I can’t even be mad about the chest thing any more! I’ve gone through all that and now it’s just, welp, I have erogenous nipples now. I’m kinda used to it. The absolute banality of life down here has utterly overcome my ability to stay angry. Like, I’m still pissed off, don’t get me wrong, but it comes in waves. Just like me.”

“What—? Oh, fuck you.”

“Hah! You laughed!”

“Fuck you.”

“Got you.”

“Yeah, you got me, Aaron. I thought, for a brief second, that you might be expressing an emotion.”

“Idiot.”

“Yeah, yeah. You want to go to my room and watch movies?”

“Sure, but I thought you were supposed to be keeping an eye out for Adam? And thus, by extension, so am I?”

“Yeah, but who knows how long he’s going to be talking to Will? Indira can just knock on my door if she wants me to watch him again.”

“Indira, huh? You know her name already? Suckup.”

“Shut up.”

“Kiss-ass.”

“Shut up.”

“*Mwah! Mwah! Mwah!* That’s you, kissing sponsor butts.”

“Yeah? Then why did you ask if you could send Maria a get well card?”

“That’s just basic human decency, Stef. And I’m a model citizen.”

“Uh huh.”

“I am! Ask any of the boys who used to beat the shit out of me. They called me a ‘girly little goody-two-shoes’ and I’m pretty sure that qualifies me to go straight into the priesthood without all the hassle of seminary.”

“Aaron, if I ever meet any of the boys who used to beat the shit out of you I won’t be asking them polite questions. I’ll, uh, I don’t know, probably yell a lot?”

“My hero!”

“Get off me!”

“Okay, God, fine.”

“You *know* I’m sensitive there.”

“And yet still you refuse to try them out.”

“Hah! Shows what *you* know.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Come on, let’s go pick a movie.”

“No, Stef, tell me, what do you mean by that?”

“Nothing, now come on!”

“Tell meeeeeee!”

“Nope!”

“Stef, I’m serious: have you, in fact, wanked yourself to completion using only your nipples? Stef? Stef! Come back! I need to know! It’s for science!”

* * *

> **WELCOME TO TRANS YOUTH UK! (Not affiliated with the Egg Society of Great Britain.)**

> All the usual Consensus rules apply. Click >**here**< for server rules. Obey them or begone!

> There are no stupid questions. Only stupid answers! Please refrain from giving stupid answers.

> Message **Take The Ralph With The Smooth** for moderation. Message **GAYBOT XIV: A REALM REBORN** for automated server functions.

cicada

hi all

Girl Alex

Hi, Lorna!

RaymondNoodle

Heya.

distilled

hi bitch

Far and Away

Welcome back.

cicada

so, before I start I just want to say, I have some shit to talk about and maybe ask about that's TMI as hell but also really sensitive so if anyone here has a problem with that let me know and I'll take it to a thread

distilled

I think we're pretty much all fine with that

I mean

look at us

Girl Alex

I don't think any of us really HAS a concept of TMI any more. You should see the stuff Penny's been posting in the nsfw channels.

cicada

ok good

distilled

you should go look at what I've been posting

it's so unpleasant

cicada

enticing

ok so the other part of this is I need to talk about Vicky and me and our relationship and everything and I NEED all of you to promise to keep it quiet because I'm not ready to talk about this with her yet

and I tried googling but I can't come up with any combination of search terms that gets me an answer that doesn't scare me to death, and also looking at the search results for too long gives me MAD dysphoria, so I have to come here and ask people with more experience

Far and Away

We can message Ralph after this and he can erase all the messages, if you like. And no-one here is going to talk.

Lorna, serious question: are you okay?

cicada

god, Gemma, I don't know, this is all sort of scary, and it's all wrapped up with my shit which is scarier still

so you know how long I've been with Vicky, right? we've been living together and sleeping together and basically been all up in each other's lives, yeah? and I've always known she has some capital-T Trauma in her past because she's told me as much and frankly I can see it in her eyes sometimes, like sometimes she just gets really frightened, like someone's coming for her, and I talk quietly to her and remind her where she is, tell her she's safe

and she hates being alone in the dark

there's a lot she hasn't told me, but then there's a lot I haven't asked about

and I know, healthy relationships blah blah built on trust blah blah but even though she's cis I get the feeling her Shit is at

least the size of my Shit and I've never wanted to press on that, if that makes sense?

distilled

yeah perfect sense

cicada

so I'm not really

uh

I don't know how to say this

I don't really GO for sex, yeah? I want it, I need it, but with what I have down there, and finding anal stuff uncomfortable, I haven't been able to do what I want

and it's frustrating as FUCK because I want to but I'm waiting on bottom surgery and that's years away and sometimes I think I was stupid to go for FFS first but I need that confidence, yeah? and Vicky's happy to wait for me

but I'm still frustrated

RaymondNoodle

Understandable. You're a sexual being, unable to satisfy her own needs or have them properly satisfied by the one you love. I think a lot of us here get that.

cicada

yeah so this is the other thing

we do finger stuff, yeah? not mouth stuff because I'd be super happy to go down on her but she doesn't want me to until she can reciprocate, and I believe her, but I also see her face sometimes when we talk about it and I think that's where some of her Shit is, she seems almost scared

so I've been thinking about that for a while, always wondering
if I should ask her and always deciding it's a bad time

but a couple of days ago we were showering together, to save
time and because it's just super nice, and she dropped the
shampoo, and I picked it up, and

please don't laugh

I saw her vagina really clearly

distilled

you don't normally?

cicada

not like that! when we're in the bedroom we've got the lights
low and we're both kind of busy!

but in the shower with her pubes all flat with the water and the
sun shining right on her, it's different, ok?

and she's got these scars I've never seen before

one on either side, where the vagina lips meet the rest of her
body

they're really faint but they're THERE

distilled

vagina lips

Far and Away

She has scars on her labia majora?

cicada

yeah, that sounds right, I don't have one yet, I don't know these things

one scar on each side

very thin

basically identical

and really really obviously surgical

and I've been wondering like was she assaulted and had to have surgery to recover? did she have some other kind of operation???

Far and Away

Is she intersex? Did she perhaps have some 'work' done when she was young? If so, she might not be aware she even has those scars, if they're that faint.

You should tread carefully around this topic, I think.

cicada

that's not all, this morning, I picked a friend of ours up, and they talked about some 'pills' our friend needs and she thought Vicky might have them, and it took me a while to get out of her that she was talking about SNRIs

and I talked to Vicky and she says she was on them for a while and they didn't help so she went off them before we even started dating, but I can't stop thinking about all the things I don't KNOW about her

Far and Away

Okay, Lorna, the first thing I want you to do is take a deep breath. Breathe it in, let it fill your lungs, and breathe it out, slowly. Can you do that for me?

cicada

yeah

Far and Away

Good. Now, I need you to read very carefully what I write here.

And, please, wait for me to finish, everyone.

You're catastrophising. You've found a couple of things you didn't know about, and you've put them together with the fact that there are things about your lives that you have yet to discuss with each other, and it's put you into a spiral. An understandable one, considering your history.

Looking at what you've written, it seems that Vicky simply didn't think the SNRIs were important, since she doesn't take them any more. That's fairly normal; certainly if I'd been on some kind of medication, years ago, I wouldn't necessarily discuss it with a new lover unless it came up in conversation. So, that seems fairly open and shut to me: you didn't know something about her, and now you do. Unless it makes her less attractive to you, or less worthy of your love — I'd be very surprised, either way — then you can probably put that whole thing to bed right now.

And either she doesn't know about her scars — none of us can lean down and look at ourselves down there, from the sort of angle you were at, after all — or she does, and they are part of her Shit, as you call it.

This seems like something you should talk to her about when you both have a good block of time, say, a whole evening, to cover what might be a traumatic subject for both of you.

cicada

maybe, yeah

Far and Away

Do you have any reason to believe that Vicky is lying to you?

cicada

no

no, I don't think so

she's always been so kind and open and loving and

fuck, I feel really stupid

Far and Away

Talk to her.

And talk to us, too, preferably before you next build up something so much in your head.

You're not stupid, though, Lorna. You're at a stressful time in your life, you're in your first relationship since transition AND your first relationship after a very painful breakup with someone who hurt you very badly.

It makes perfect sense that you'd be on edge.

cicada

you're right

why are you always so fucking right, Gemma?

Far and Away

I'm very old.

Girl Alex

Aren't you, like, a year or two older than I am?

Far and Away

Positively ancient.

Girl Alex

lmao

Far and Away

I feel the call of the grave...

distilled

ok so Lorna are you feeling better now?

cicada

yeah

yeah I am

I'm still kind of running on total panic, yeah?

but it'll pass

I think I'm good

better, anyway

distilled

great because I have been waiting what feels like HOURS to
make fun of ray

RaymondNoodle

What, what?

What did I do?

distilled

“a sexual being”????

are you a hundred and five? like Gemma?

RaymondNoodle

What’s wrong with that wording? Just because it isn’t pointlessly juvenile like what you might have said.

What would you have said, anyway, Penny?

distilled

:3

> **RaymondNoodle** has changed his name to **Raymond “a sexual being” Noodle**.

Raymond “a sexual being” Noodle

I didn’t do that.

Who did that?

distilled

probably some sort of awful computer nerd

Raymond “a sexual being” Noodle

I have my suspicions.

distilled

you can't prove anything

cicada

so, I'm going to go

I need to go home via the takeaway so I can feed Vicky some really good food to make up for the horribly painful stuff we're going to have to talk about

Gemma, can you message Ralph for me, get him to clear the logs?

Far and Away

Already done.

Take care, Lorna.

And you can contact me if you need to talk more.

Girl Alex

Love you Lorna!

distilled

bye

> **cicada** has signed off.

Raymond "a sexual being" Noodle

Good luck!

Damn. Missed her.

God, I can't take myself seriously with this name.

And I can't change it back! Penny, what did you do?

distilled

:3

Raymond “a sexual being” Noodle

I'm reporting you to the police.

distilled

they won't take you seriously with that name

* * *

“Hey, kids!”

“Um, hey, Indira.”

“I'd love to just drop in for a chat but I actually need your help, Steffie. With Adam. He won't talk to me, and Edy's at the hospital with Maria. So it has to be you.”

“What happened?”

“He asked to see Will.”

“Yeah, we saw.”

“I was a fool to let him. I know, I know, I *said* we would and we have to honour our promises, but it was a bloody idiot move on my part to let them see each other again so soon. Adam was already pretty freaked out, and Will was all steamed up, and Raph and Ollie were there in the other cells

contributing the occasional nugget of wisdom, like a pair of bears shitting in the river, so all that happened was they upset each other. So much yelling. I'm almost surprised you didn't hear it."

"We were watching *Clueless*. And there's quite a lot of concrete between us and them."

"I said 'almost surprised'. Look, Steffie, I hate to be a pain, especially as we barely know each other, but I really do need you to talk to him. Urgently."

"He's that bad?"

"He's not talking."

"Ah. You'll let me into his room?"

"Of course! Come on. Oh, and Aaron, I'm afraid you'll need to go back to your room, or the common area. You can't stay in someone else's room on your own! Rules."

"It's okay, he'll probably just go jerk off."

"Hey! I mean, accurate, but, hey!"

* * *

There's nine. Two on her desk, seven in the drawer. One per month, so nine months. That's how long it's been since Christine last opened a report on her old family, her old life. And now here they all are in their black folders, spread out on the bed in front of her like massive, ugly tarot cards. She snorts at the mental image, imagines shuffling them and dealing out a hand, analysing her deliberately abandoned past via the mystical arts.

The last one she opened, ten months ago, was the one that confirmed they'd dropped any pretence of searching for her.

Abandoned one last time, first by a father who didn't give a shit, then by a mother who stood by her abusive husband, and finally by them both, forgetting her/him, consigning their son to a memory.

Abby's parents, the last Christine heard, are still looking. Still got a private investigator on the case. Christine's both jealous of the relationship Abby had with her parents, and impressed with Dorley's obfuscation of her past: after so many years, you'd think they would have had *some* success. Stef found them, and she's just an amateur!

Except Stef got lucky, didn't she? Her surrogate older sister (brother) was taken, and they happened to run into each other. The whole thing is ultimately Abby's fault, if one were inclined to assign blame, both for taking on Melissa and for letting her off campus: sponsors are supposed to be more wary about locals, both when it comes to picking them up to begin with, and in allowing them out.

Stef got lucky, and if there's one thing most Dorley girls can be said to lack, it's luck.

Abby. The poor girl. At least Christine's curiosity is driven mostly by guilt and nostalgia; Abby wants nothing more than to have her family back.

Fuck it. No more pontificating. She slides a finger through the seal on the most recent folder, delivered only days ago, and drops back onto the bed, open on its first page.

The picture is hard to look at.

Christine's clearest memory of her father is from the day she took a blow meant for her mother. She's dreamed dozens of times of the way his face twisted, transitioning from anger through disbelief and into, of all things, shame, as he cradled his son's injured wrist in his hands. These last couple of years the dreams have all ended the same way, diverging from reality: her father's apologies die in his spittle-soaked mouth as he realises what his son has become and raises his arm once more.

There's a carer in the photo, tending to him, captured in the act of feeding him. In Christine's long absence, the downstairs study's been converted into a bedroom, and he's lying in a narrow bed, surrounded by medical equipment. Christine, fresh out of Maria's hospital room, can almost hear the quiet, insistent beeping. Her mother's nowhere to be seen.

Turn the page.

There she is: Christine's mother is weeding, in dungarees and the ugly sun visor she got in Portugal, squinting into the bright morning, fuzzily out of focus but still obviously less than half her former size. Her clothes look comically large on her.

Wasting away, both of them.

Get out! She wants to yell it at the photograph. Leave him! Let him rot! Let him die in the tomb he built around himself, the enormous house that greed and stress and three fucking heart attacks bought.

Her mother's not even forty-five yet. Twenty-odd years younger than him. She could still have a *life*. But she won't, because where would she even go? She'll potter around the old house doing the same old chores until, one day, the worthless piece of shit she married finally dies and, alone, probably she'll follow him.

Christine doesn't realise she's crying until Abby peeks in through the half-open door and lunges for her, practically collides with her, throws aside all the papers and photographs and unopened folders, and scoops Christine into her arms. Suddenly aware of Abby's presence and of how desperately she needs her, Christine clings to her sister, buries herself, wants to scream into Abby's shoulder but keeps it quiet and continuous.

"She's so fucking *stupid*, Abs. She always was. She could have left at any time. Could have taken me with her. Could have got us both out. She had money before they met. Not loads, not like him, but enough, definitely enough. I know. I

looked. I even, fuck, I even took some for myself, once, when I hated her, when I had to be around her all the time and hear her bullshit excuses. I saw her with bruises still loving that fucker and I *hated* her, so I took from her. Abs— Abby. How could I *do* that to her? I gave it back. All of it. I did. But that was *all* I did. I didn't help. I didn't get her out. Just like she didn't get me out. But I *should* have! The last time I saw her, not long before— before Dorley, before me, before *this*, she looked so fucking brittle, like the slightest touch would break her, and I remember thinking that as soon as Dad got home he'd do just that, and I didn't want to see it, *couldn't* see it, so I ran out without even saying goodbye. And now *there she is*, not even living. Just a fucking automaton, traipsing around that fucking house, doing the same stupid shit she always did, waiting for him to die, and there's nothing I can even do. I even know *what* I would do if I could! God, Abs, look at her. *Look* at her! There's nothing left of her. Just... just look."

Abby holds her, strokes her back, whispers nothing words to her, lets her get it all out, and as the tears fade from Christine's vision she can see something else: one of the photos Abby scattered ended up near the head of the bed, right in front of Christine as she leans on Abby's shoulder, and its glossy paper catches the light, lending the depiction of Christine's childhood home an ethereal quality, like a place that belongs to the afterlife.

Later, much later, when they've tidied up the pictures and put the folders away, when they've watched some stupid cartoons out of Edy's network folder, when Paige has texted to say she'll be late because she's gone to the library and to ask if Christine would like her to pick something up for dinner, Christine and Abby sit, shoulders against each other, on the floor of Christine's room, leaning their heads on the couch behind them, spent but calm.

"You could go see her, you know," Abby says.

Christine shakes her head. "No. Rules."

"As if they matter to you."

“What would I say? She’s not exactly the kind of person who embraces queer people. And I *definitely* can’t say I was turned into a girl against my will.”

“She thinks her only child is dead. That changes people.”

“Enough?”

“Sometimes.”

“No,” Christine says again.

“Think about it.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Christine says, “Abs, I really don’t want to think about *anything* right now.”

“Sure,” Abby says. “I won’t push.”

“Thanks, Abs. Love you.”

“Love you.”

Later, after Paige texts to say she’ll be up in ten minutes with curry, Abby pauses the music and repositions, facing Christine and looking very serious.

“Christine,” she says, and takes a deep breath, lets it out, and looks like she doesn’t know how to continue.

“Yes?”

“So. I haven’t been around much. You know that. And I want to tell you why, but I need to do it my way. Okay?”

“Sure.”

“You free Saturday?”

“I can be.”

Abby reaches into her bag and pulls out a page from her notebook with an address written on it: a restaurant in Almsworth, according to her neatly penned note. Not one Christine knows. “I’ll be there one o’clock. Meet me?”

“Um. Okay. What’s this all about, Abby?”

“Pay for the taxi with cash. Don’t use your card. And don’t tell anyone where you’re going.”

“You want me to spoof the tracker on my phone?”

“You can do that? I’ve just been turning mine off.”

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“Good. Yes. Please. Do that.”

“Abby,” Christine says, smiling, “this is beginning to sound dangerously criminal.”

Abby snorts. “Little bit, yeah.”

* * *

It feels wrong to shut Aaron out again, but Stefan needs everything to stop for a while. No more questions, no more worried eyes, entreating him for answers he can’t give. It was bad enough when it was just Aaron; Adam, lost without Will, upset by his friend’s rejection of his concerns, fearing for Will’s life, begged Stefan for reassurance. And Stefan gave the only reassurance he had: bullshit.

Endless, endless bullshit.

He puts on some white noise, closes his eyes, and drifts.

The first time he knew there was something wrong with Mark was shortly after their shared birthdays, on Stefan’s thirteenth year and Mark’s seventeenth. Their birthdays fell on a weekend that year, which was serendipitous: weekday birthdays suck, even for the lucky ones whose birthdays don’t fall inside the school year. On Stefan’s birthday, the first of the two, Mark had been his usual quiet but considerate self, and he’d even brought a friend, a girl called Shahida, who he’d talked about on and off for years. It was lovely finally to meet

her, and Stefan put on his best behaviour, wanting to impress this woman who might or might not have been Mark's girlfriend, while Russell made fun of his exaggerated politeness. She was kind, and laughed with him, not Russell, and took Mark away on some errand.

She looked forward to seeing him again.

But on Sunday she wasn't there. Mark's birthday came and went without her, and when Stefan asked after her, Mark just said that sometimes things change, sometimes relationships don't work out, and maybe it's for the best. They weren't right for each other, he said. They were both going to move on, he said. He hadn't said it like he believed it; he said it like he thought it might be the last thing he ever said.

That was the start of it, as far as Stefan saw. Probably it really started years before, but childish eyes see only the obvious. Whatever eventually brought Mark to Dorley Hall, it was a long time in the making.

There's pictures of Melissa on the network, and Stefan pages through them on his phone. She seems happy in most of them, even the earlier ones, the ones where she looks more like Stefan remembers her, a blur of her past and future selves, the girl-still-learning he met in the supermarket that day.

God, he hopes she's happy.

She doesn't know he's here. Abby always said it'd be a bad idea to tell her, and she's Melissa's only link to Dorley, more or less. When she left, she *left*. Stefan can't decide if it's good or bad that she doesn't know, but after half the population of the building got a close look at him yesterday he's happy that at least *someone* doesn't get to see what years of fear and denial made of him.

She'll see him when he's worth fucking seeing.

He rolls over onto his back, glares at the ceiling, tries to imagine the white noise becoming a physical presence, overlaid on the concrete like static on an old-style television.

There's something about Adam that reminds him of how Mark was in that last year. Maybe it's just the obvious loneliness. Loneliness as habit. Loneliness as defence. Loneliness that, briefly, Will kept at bay.

People pair off down here, that's what Pippa said. Him and Aaron, unlikely as that would have seemed a few weeks ago. Christine and Paige. Abby and Melissa. Adam and Will. But Will shouted at Adam. Called him a collaborator. A broken man. A weakling. And several words out of the vocabulary that Will had, up to that moment, seemed to have abandoned. A cornered animal reaching for all its weapons, no matter how grotesque. Adam left in tears.

There wasn't much of a conversation to be had. Yes, Will's a piece of shit. Yes, he'll be okay if he learns how to cooperate. No, Stefan doesn't know if he'll ever actually do so.

No, Stefan doesn't know what's happening down here. No, he doesn't think they're all going to die eventually. Yes, he really does think they'll all be released when their sponsors think they're ready.

No, Stefan isn't going to leave him. No, Stefan isn't stupid enough to assault a sponsor. Yes, we can say your prayer together.

Stefan was surprised by the wording: *Your grace is your most precious gift. Please, Lord, make me worthy of it.* Not one he encountered back at the church he avoided attending.

Yes, we can watch movies. Adam likes these cheesy TV-movie rom-coms, painfully straight and filled with Christmases and horrible sweaters, and Dorley has a whole folder full of them.

As they watched, Adam told Stefan where he came from. It came out in fragments, whenever something or someone in the movie reminded him of something. Stefan put the fragments together like a puzzle, and quite lost the thread of the movie.

Adam's the first son of a founding family, and thus the church — and where Adam says *church* Stefan hears *cult* — laid expectations on him from birth. Colossal ones. And in his younger days he bucked them, but not out of arrogance or confidence; Adam's kind, and there's only so many times you can force a kind boy to tell strangers they're going to hell before you break him.

Stefan's parents got religion back when he was in primary school. It was the quiet, local kind, and Stefan never found it particularly restrictive until he caught a sermon, on one of the Sundays he lost the stay-home-and-watch-cartoons argument, about the sins of homosexuality. It was difficult after that, as his self-realisation grew, not to feel like the enemy lived in his own home. Whatever he was, whoever he eventually became, he realised, he would no longer be welcome.

He turns the phone over and over in his hands, watches as the pictures of Melissa he's not even really looking at any more play catch-up with the screen, bouncing from portrait to landscape and back.

Stefan is exhausted. Hard even to be upset any more. Like Aaron said, you can't stay angry forever. Even if he turned it into a joke, he was right.

Can't stay angry forever. Can't stay guilty forever. Can't even be dysphoric forever; after a while, the hands holding his phone, the knuckles he hates the shape of, the bony wrists, become almost geometric. Abstract. Repetition dulls the sharpest edge.

His phone buzzes. He almost drops it.

Pippa Green: You okay, Stef?

Stef: not really

Pippa Green: I came by and knocked but you couldn't hear me with those headphones on.

Stef: kinda the point

Pippa Green: I know. I thought I'd give you your privacy.

Pippa Green: But I wanted to update you, all the same.

Pippa Green: Indira's with Adam. He's talking to her now.
Thanks to you.

Stef: I'm glad

Stef: why is he even here?

Stef: yeah I get that he's probably said a bunch of phobic stuff
because his church slash cult is evil as shit and filled his mind
with garbage

Stef: but you just get someone like that away from their
abusers and help them adjust

Stef: you don't turn them into a girl

Pippa Green: I actually don't know why he's here.

Pippa Green: Edy brought him in. And she'll have had
Maria's approval. And Aunt Bea's.

Stef: I can't help feeling you lot are getting too casual with the
whole forced feminisation thing

Pippa Green: Maybe. This is my first time on the supply side
of feminisation and I'm not exactly happy about it.

Stef: pippa

Stef: I want to stop lying

Stef: I hate it

Stef: I feel like it's killing me

Stef: it's worse than the dysphoria, at least that's just hurting
me and no one else

Stef: now adam's starting to trust me and I'm lying to his face

Stef: I even prayed with him!

Stef: and I know exactly what's going to happen to him and I
pretended I don't

Pippa Green: I'm sorry.

Stef: don't be sorry just fix it

Pippa Green: Okay.

Pippa Green: I have an idea.

Pippa Green: Give me a bit. I have to go see Aunt Bea.

Pippa Green: And then can I come tell you about it in person? I hate talking by text. It makes my thumb hurt.

Stef: okay

He puts on a show, something random off Netflix, and doesn't watch it. When she knocks — and of course she does, even though he gave her permission to come in, because she was serious when she said she didn't want to be like a sponsor any more, even before the truth came out, and that means never taking her presence in his space lightly — she does so with her customary identifier: three knocks, a pause, two knocks, a pause, two knocks. Her sweet insistence on using a special knock so he knows it's her makes him laugh despite his mood.

“Come in, Pippa!” he shouts, sitting up in bed and belatedly pushing the covers back.

She enters, smiling broadly, and sits in the free space at the end of the mattress, drawing her feet up under her so she can face him. “She said yes!” she says.

“Yes to what?”

“Oh. Whoops. I thought I told you. Bea says we can do disclosure soon. Tomorrow or the day after, maybe, but in the next few days for sure.”

“Is that what I think it sounds like?”

“Yeah,” Pippa says. “We come clean.”

“Just like that?”

Pippa holds out her hands, like the assistant on a cheesy game show. “Just like that!”

“Wow.”

“We were planning on doing it in the next month or so, anyway,” she says. “Now that things are, uh, starting to develop, that starts a clock, you know? We’ve ended up bringing everything forward a little.”

“So, how does it go? You line us all up and say, ‘Sorry, lads, you’re going to be girls’?”

Pippa laughs. “Yeah. That’s basically how it was with my year. More words, same gist.”

“How did you take it?”

Now she looks away, some of her enthusiasm sapped. “We rioted.”

“Oh.”

“But that’s not going to happen,” she says, looking back at Stefan, trying to regain her former good mood, “because we’re running split pop now, and all the guys who are likely to cause serious trouble are already in the cells.”

Stefan leans back, thinking. “Adam and Aaron might not cause trouble,” he says slowly, “but will they be okay? Isn’t, uh, suicide a risk at this point?”

She nods. “We watch very carefully. Two in the security room at all times watching the cameras. Except yours, obviously.”

“Oh. Yeah. Thanks.”

She watches him for a moment, and then shuffles closer. “You okay, Stef?”

“Yeah,” he says quickly, surprised. “I’m actually— shit, Pip, I’m actually really relieved. I think I’m just tired.”

“Aren’t we all?”

“Yeah. How’s Maria?”

“See for yourself,” Pippa says, and hands him his phone. Within the confines of his room, he can get at the same

network resources as he can on the computer; a location-sensitive upgrade Christine put quite a lot of time into, apparently. He must remember to thank her. “Just hop on Consensus. There’s a new picture pinned.”

He does so, and brings up a photo of Maria and Edy, lying next to each other on Maria’s hospital bed, holding hands and grinning at the camera. It’s not clear who took the picture until he swipes onto the next one and finds a selfie of Abby, sticking her tongue out and holding a multipack of Jaffa Cakes just out of Maria’s reach. There’s another, of the three of them — Abby in a chair, Maria and Edy still on the bed together — and Beatrice on the other side, watching what looks like *The Lord of the Rings* on a laptop. It’s taken from Abby’s perspective again, and Beatrice is very reluctantly v-signing with the rest of them.

“Cute,” he says.

“Right? Oh, I have something for you.” Pippa reaches into her bag and pulls out a wad of tissue paper, which she drops into his lap.

“Thanks?”

“Unwrap it, doofus.”

“Oh. Right.”

The tissue paper eventually gives way to something that makes his heart leap when finally, in the dim light of the bedroom, he recognises it: a little rubber elephant, in faded blue, with tiny heart imprints under its feet and a keyring and chain embedded in its mouth like a giant piercing. There’s another lump of tissue, separately wrapped, and while he knows what it’s going to be, he’s still delighted when the green frog with the keyring through its belly drops out.

His frog and elephant. The first gifts his sister ever got him, when she was old enough to have pocket money, but not old enough to have *much* pocket money. A year before Stefan left for Saints they went to Colchester Zoo together, one of the few family trips outside Almsworth that wasn’t paid for by the

school, and Petra persuaded their mum and dad to let him escort her. She came alive, the way she always did when away from parental supervision, and skipped through the zoo, identifying animals by sight without having to look at the plaques or the videos. She was a Wikipedia animal section veteran, explaining to him as they went what each animal was, the foods they liked, their lifespans, and whether or not they took kindly to humans.

She tarried longest around the elephants.

He learned later — three months later, on his birthday — that she managed to get away from him at some point, sneaked into the gift shop, and bought with almost all her money a pair of keychains, the elephant to represent her and the frog to represent him. When he opened the gifts on his birthday morning he planted his sloppiest big-brother kiss on the top of her head and asked, “Why the frog, though?”

“You seem like someone who likes frogs,” she said.

Carefully Stefan rolls the little rubber animals around on his palm, remembering. He doesn’t have many genuinely good memories, but that one’s near the top. And the keychains have always been an anchor, a reminder that, despite everything, there were bright spots.

“Thank you,” he says.

“I told you I’d keep them,” Pippa says.

Stefan laughs. “Yeah. You said, ‘For now...’ like a *real* sponsor.”

“Don’t remind me,” Pippa giggles. “I remember typing that and feeling just *so* pompous.”

“I’m glad you sucked at being a sponsor.”

“Yeah. Me too. I’d hate to be good at something like that.”

“I don’t know,” Stefan says. “Indira seems nice.”

“True. So—” and Pippa drops her bag on the floor by the bed and pushes up to the wall, closer again to Stefan, “—what

are you watching?”

Stefan frowns. “I, uh, don’t remember.”

“You want to find something else to watch?”

“I think I’m bored of Netflix.”

“You want to listen to some music instead?”

“Sure.”

“Any thoughts on what?”

“Anything but Taylor Swift.”

“You’d be surprised how many of my playlists you just dismissed.”

“I really wouldn’t.”

“Okay, then. I have something. Edy’s been all over the group chat, going on about finally getting Maria to listen to her music, and I meant to give it a try. You game?”

“Yeah,” Stefan says, “why not?”

Pippa fiddles with her phone for a second, trying to hook it remotely to the speakers, but gives up and just starts it on her phone speakers instead, turning them up until they distort and then backing off one notch. It’s not too loud. It’s fine.

Synths, a guitar, and a reedy voice fill the room. Stefan reaches around her and pulls the covers over them both, and Pippa leans on his shoulder, dropping the phone between them.

“I kinda like this,” Pippa says.

Stefan just nods, smiling, and rests his head on Pippa’s. For the first time in a very long time, he’s almost content.

No more lies.

FOUR

**YOU'RE JUST SOMEONE I WAS
FORCED TO KNOW**

2019 NOVEMBER 29 — FRIDAY

It's the chorded message chime from two phones that wakes him, but it's the arm around his belly that causes him to jerk upright and hit his head on the wall, which doesn't do wonders for the headache he discovers when he opens his eyes. Even the dim red light from the strip in the ceiling feels bright. He pulls at the sheets, intending to cover his head, finds them trapped by something, remembers the arm around his waist and almost falls out of bed.

The arm around him, which belongs to someone considerably stronger than him, saves him. Its owner responds to his thrashing with quiet, insistent moans and a firming of its grip.

He resorts to clearing his throat.

"Hm?" Pippa says, sounding like she prefers her arm exactly where it is. "Oh. Yeah. Sorry, Stef. Do you need to pee?" She releases him and the mattress clinks as, suddenly unsupported, he almost falls out again.

"No," Stefan says carefully, and rolls over to face her. It's tricky; the bed isn't exactly wide, and it's a squeeze to fit two people lengthways. He settles for a strange hopping

manoeuvre on his hip, which Pippa watches him perform, bemused. The mattress coils don't poke him quite as hard as he expected.

Pippa grins at him. "Hi."

"Um, what did we do last night?"

"What did—? Oh!" She snorts, and then grimaces and massages her forehead. "Ow. You don't remember? Look on the table."

She helps him turn over again — "I'll keep my hands decent," she whispers with far too much delight as she steadies his shoulder and back — and when he's in position he sees two wine glasses and two empty bottles on the bedside table, next to his little elephant and frog, and both their phones.

Memory returns. "Oh," he says. There's a third bottle, discarded on its side under the computer desk, where it must have rolled. The effort's made his head throb again, and he closes his eyes to say, "Pip, that was probably an outstandingly bad idea."

"It was *fine*," she says, and Stefan can hear the smirk in her voice as he sits up and, still with his eyes closed, swings his legs off the bed.

"I hope you can support that thesis," he mutters.

"You're a fun drunk."

Hmm. No trousers. "I'm amazed I was a conscious drunk." He opens his eyes again, halfway, to give them time to adjust. The only light in the room is still from the lighting strip, which Pippa's changed to a candlelight yellow with an app on her phone. "I wasn't exactly a drinker before, and I've had a bit of an enforced dry spell. I don't know if I told you about my dry spell?" He checks, and in addition to a t-shirt he is, in fact, wearing underwear. Thank God.

"Oh yeah," Pippa says, "I heard. Some chick found you in a flowerbed and thought you could use a few months' time-out in an exclusive underground spa."

They listened to Edy's playlist last night, which was mostly 90s and early 2000s stuff. When they both got the message that disclosure was set for the coming Saturday, so Maria and Edy could be back in the building for it, Pippa called upstairs for a bottle and some glasses to be sent down in the dumbwaiter. "No lectures tomorrow," she said, clinking her glass to his, "and Maria's going to be fine. I'm letting my hair down."

"What hair?" Stefan had said, and made to ruffle her pixie cut, only backing off when she threatened to pour white wine on his head.

After the first bottle they switched to one of Pippa's playlists. Stefan let her keep just the one Taylor Swift track: 22; "It's my song," she insisted, "because *I'm* twenty-two." He didn't argue with the logic.

"At least you got some drinking practice in," Pippa says, stretching and climbing over him, out of the bed. She's dressed almost identically to him, having borrowed one of his t-shirts last night, and she pulls it off and over her head without turning around, and giggles when, freed, she sees he's turned away. "Don't be silly," she scolds, and kicks up last night's dress from the floor, catching it and dropping it over her head.

"What if I don't *want* to practise drinking?"

"You'll need it. Now you're officially one of us, they're going to start roping you into our social functions. They tend to get boozy."

"Yes, Christine warned me about those. I was planning on making excuses. You know, dentist appointment, family emergency, essay due; kidnapped."

"Ah," Pippa says, stepping into her shoes, "the classics."

She'd dumped her dress and shoes halfway through the second bottle and climbed into bed next to him to watch a show a friend had recommended, a recent one; definitely not on the approved list, full of attractive people making terrible decisions. She nudged him with her elbow when a trans girl

character — “Played by an *actual* trans woman!” she hissed — came cycling onto the screen. It’d made him pay a little more attention, despite the alcohol complicating matters.

Right now he can’t even remember what she looked like.

His head throbs again.

“Hangover?” Pippa says. “Same. Just chill here a few minutes and I’ll get someone to send some painkillers down. We need to get you a lockbox or something to go under the bed to keep stuff like that in,” she adds, half to herself.

He’s perfectly happy to go along with her instruction to stay put; even getting up from the bed would be an insurmountable challenge. “How are you so chipper,” he says, “if you’re hungover, too?”

“I *might* still be a little drunk. I finished the last bottle while you were snoring away.”

Stefan nods, slowly and carefully, so as not to dislodge any more headache. “Is it not going to be weird if one of the boys sees you leaving my room?”

She steps over, taps him lightly on the forehead. “Nope. How many times have I come down here in the morning? Just because none of *them* saw me walk in, doesn’t mean I *didn’t*.”

He flops back onto the bed, twisting so he lands lengthways and doesn’t brain himself on the wall again. “You’ve thought of everything.”

Pippa smiles. “That’s why I’m the... incredibly experienced, not at all winging-it Dorley graduate. I got a *good* grade in girl.”

Her impish grin and the little bounce she does to accentuate her joke make him laugh. “Clearly.”

“Anything else you need before I go?”

“Um, yeah, actually.” He raises himself up on his elbows, tries to borrow a percentage of her energy as he voices a

thought that's been worrying at him for the last few minutes. "It's not weird for us to spend the night together, is it?"

She frowns at him, sits back down on the bed and hauls on his hand until he sits up next to her. She doesn't let go of his fingers, and starts rubbing her thumb along their length. "Sponsors stay overnight all the time. Sure, it normally takes a *lot* longer for that kind of closeness to build, and, yeah, I'm not actually your sponsor any more — if I ever was — but, absolutely, it's normal. Doesn't happen for everyone, but Indira and Christine, for example, used to have sleepovers all the time, towards the end of the first year. Ask Christine to braid your hair when it gets longer; she's good."

"You said 'closeness'," he continues urgently. "Does it ever get... sexual? This isn't me asking for anything with you, it's just—"

"I know, Stef," she says with a languid smile. "And, no. It's rare, and highly discouraged. There's a *little* bit of a power imbalance." She pinches off a tiny volume with thumb and forefinger. "Rather unethical. And ethics, as you know—" she interrupts herself with a giggle, "—are *so* important here."

"It's just, I had the impression that Abby and Melissa are, uh, you know..."

"Yes, I do know. And they're... complicated. And *very* close. Until Melissa left, anyway. Now she's elsewhere, and Abby's restless. Even more so these last few months."

He nods again, and lets Pippa drag him all the way out of bed and into a hug.

"You going to be okay?" she whispers.

"Yeah. I'm not super excited about another day pretending ignorance, but I'll manage."

She squeezes him. "Spend the day in your room, then. Say you've got a headache; not much of a lie, there. Or ask to come upstairs. Like I said, you're one of us now. You're a Sister. You have, within this house, as much freedom as you ask for. My advice is to start asking."

“I don’t feel much like a sister.”

Pippa kisses him lightly on the cheek. “You will.”

* * *

When Stefan finally consents to open his door after what feels like five full minutes of irregular but increasingly frantic knocking, he’s not surprised to find Aaron, in a hoodie zipped all the way up and the hood over his head — he’s been complaining about the cold, lately; most of them have — rocking back and forth on his heels and glaring up at him.

“Yes?” Stefan says, leaning into his sleepiness. He’d gone back to sleep less than half an hour after taking Pippa’s painkillers, sent down with caffeine-free tea in one of the kitchen’s less hilarious mugs.

“Where have you been?”

“Asleep.” On cue, the need to yawn and stretch takes him. Indira, leaning against the opposite wall and currently out of Aaron’s eyeline, winks at him.

“I’ve been up since seven,” Aaron says, yanking a thumb in Indira’s direction; she smirks. “How come *you* get to sleep in?”

Indira pushes off from the wall and walks quietly up behind Aaron. “Extreme favouritism,” she says, making him jump. “We do it on a random rota. Keeps you all on your toes.”

“Really?”

“No.” With a hand on each shoulder she manoeuvres Aaron to the side and nudges him back towards his room.

“You smell like a sock. Go get your washing stuff. It’s shower time.”

“Jesus. Fine.”

“How’s your head?” Indira whispers to Stefan when Aaron retreats into his room and slams his door as best he can.

“Better now,” Stefan says. “How’s Pippa?”

“Tabby said she was riding pretty high until about an hour ago, and then she fell asleep in the security room. Almost faceplanted into her bagel. She put a blanket on her. She’s fine.”

“Good.”

“Sorry we’re not doing, you know, *the thing* today.”

“It makes sense to wait,” Stefan says. “And it’s only one more day. I’ll live.” He winces as his headache lances him again; the painkillers are wearing off. “If the hangover doesn’t kill me, that is.”

Indira smirks at him. “You’ll fit right in here if you keep drinking like that.” She mimes knocking back too many glasses of wine.

“So Pippa tells me.”

“Hey, you should come to the next—”

Whatever event she was about to invite him to goes unnamed; Aaron is back, as is circumspection. He raises his eyebrows and his wash kit at Stefan, who takes the hint and ducks back into his room to collect his shower things. He rubs quickly at his face as soon as he thinks he’s out of sight, and decides he can probably get away without shaving. He hasn’t gone a day without since Pippa moved him out of the cell, but he has to admit that there are days when it’s mostly ceremonial.

“Have fun!” Indira shouts at them as they close the bathroom door behind them; Aaron flinches again.

“So?” Stefan says, while they undress. “How do you like your new sponsor?”

“God,” Aaron says, dropping his underwear on the pile of clothes. True to recent form, he mostly faces away, now that he’s naked. “Don’t.”

“That good?”

“Stef, she’s driving me up the fucking wall.”

“Oh?”

“She’s so... so...”

“So...?”

“I don’t know!”

Aaron ducks under his shower and Stefan, after taking a moment to check he’s set the temperature properly, turns away to hide his smile. Christine’s talked about Indira’s methods, about how in the early days especially she had ways of ‘weaponising niceness’, which disarmed all the terrible things Christine wanted to say to her. It didn’t stop her saying them, obviously; it just compounded the guilt she felt afterwards.

They wash in silence.

It’s becoming difficult to predict Aaron’s moods. For all his insistence that the drudgery of life down here has flattened his responses to the changes his body’s been forced through, it’s hard to believe he’s not bothered by them. Sometimes the boy is his familiar self, the chatterbox, the wind-up toy whose stream of consciousness and endless innuendo can be interrupted only by food, sleep, or a good movie; sometimes, like now, he’s quiet, keeping even his eyes to himself. Stefan imagines him in his time alone, examining himself, repeating to himself the mantra that it’s just gynecomastia or something like it, that the swelling on his chest can only go so far, that it’ll go away on its own, or be easily removed. Comforting lies; Stefan’s poisoned gift.

Stefan lets him have his quiet. It’s the last day of this. Tomorrow the sponsors kick over the board, reveal the game

the boys have *really* been playing this whole time, and everything changes.

“What’s with the name, anyway?” Aaron asks, breaking the silence and handing his conditioner bottle to Stefan.

He squeezes some out into his hands and starts massaging it through Aaron’s hair. “What do you mean?”

“Stef. Everyone calls you that now.”

Where’s he going with this? “‘Stefan’ is kind of a mouthful, don’t you think? I’ve never liked it. Makes me feel like I’m back at school, like when the teacher calls you up in front of the class.”

“Yeah,” Aaron says, squirming under Stefan’s fingers, “but isn’t ‘Stef’ kind of... girly?”

Stefan tells the honest truth. “No-one’s ever mistaken me for a girl.”

Aaron snorts and mutters something under his breath.

“What?” Stefan says, nudging him.

“Oh, uh, nothing. I’m just wondering how it started. You being Stef, I mean.”

“My friend, the one who went away.” Stefan briefly stops rubbing conditioner into the tips of Aaron’s lengthening hair. Even with everything he knows, and even though it won’t be forever, her absence eats at him. “She called me that.” Because, the very first time they met, she saw Stefan wince at his full name and somehow intuited that he might prefer something else. “It spread from her.”

“Melissa, right?”

“Right.”

“Your first cru-ush!” Aaron sings.

Stefan pokes him in the back of the neck, to reprimand him and to suggest that Aaron can go back to his own shower now. “Gross! She was like my sister. My *much older* sister.”

Aaron starts washing his undercarriage, leaning his head away from the water stream. It's taken weeks of patient nagging to get him to understand that conditioner doesn't really do anything if you immediately rinse it out. And from what Stefan's observed of the Dorley girls, most of them keep their hair long — those still in the programme are probably under instructions to do so, come to think of it — so this way Aaron will at least not have to deal with tangles alongside his forcibly applied new gender.

“What was she like?”

The smile comes automatically. “Kind,” Stefan says. “And smart. *Really* smart. I'd have done terribly in all my science subjects without her help.” Because the memory of the supermarket invades him yet again, he continues without meaning to. “And pretty. *So* fucking pretty, Aaron.”

“Sounds like you *did* have a crush.”

“No.” *I wanted to be like her from the moment I saw her again.* “She was just...”

“So fucking pretty?”

“Hard not to notice.”

“You miss her?”

He turns away. Washes himself below the waist. Directs his flattening mood at the task. “Like a part of me rotted away, yeah.”

“How long did you know her?”

“Since I was ten.” Rinse away the soap. Wash the feet. Be methodical. Be a machine. Be not present. “She left when I was fourteen.”

“You never said why she left.”

“I never knew.”

Aaron leaves him alone after that, and Stefan finishes up. But when they're towelled and robed and about to leave, he shyly grabs Stefan's forearm, stopping him by the sinks. His

hand, damp against Stefan's wrist, trembles a little; this must be hard for him.

"I'm sorry," he says. "About Melissa. I've told you about Elizabeth, yeah? I knew her for, like, no time compared to you and Melissa, but I still miss her every day."

"People say it gets easier," Stefan says. "I'm still waiting."

"Look," Aaron says, "I'm fucking terrible at this, but I'm trying to express sympathy and empathy and all that shit, so I, um..."

Fuck it. Stefan interrupts him by pulling on his hand and dragging him into a hug. Aaron squeaks in surprise and stiffens, like a lost creature, freezing to protect itself from unknown predators, but when Stefan whispers, "Thank you," he relaxes, and loops his arms around Stefan's back.

"I never found her again," Aaron says. "I lost her number, never knew her last name. I've been worrying, lately, that maybe she looked for me, maybe she found me, maybe she heard about what I did. Decided she wants nothing to do with me."

Stefan wants to say that she won't find him in here, that he can look for her when he leaves, that they could see each other again, but that's a lie too far. He hugs the boy more tightly instead.

Later, at their delayed breakfast, they discover their usual Weetabix has been augmented by a cellophane-wrapped variety pack of cereal, sitting in the middle of the dining table on a wooden tray, along with porcelain bowls, metal spoons, and blue-top milk. Over his Coco Pops, Aaron talks about much, but does not mention Melissa, Elizabeth, or the hug.

2019 NOVEMBER 30 — SATURDAY

Getting up before the sun sucks, but today's the big day: disclosure. All hands on deck. And with Maria delivered back to her room yesterday evening, even Edy — nominally still on

leave — is making herself available. As the new Head of Network Security, and as Stef's friend, Christine can't sit this one out.

And she's got a slide presentation to prepare for Monica.

She slips out of bed, lifting Paige's hand off her hip and kissing her silently on the tip of her nose, showers quickly and dresses quietly. She picks clothes she can move easily in: a loose blue dress with a few handy pockets, leggings, trainers and a wide belt; she wants to be unrestricted in case things kick off. It's not *likely*, not unless Adam, Aaron or Martin have an undiscovered propensity for (non-vehicular) violence, but it's not impossible, and they're doing things by the book now. She slips the taser she was issued into the largest pocket, grateful that Paige is still asleep; she hates that Christine has to have it. Hates having it in the room. A reminder of their past; other people's present.

Simple makeup. Her skin looks okay today so she skips foundation and just deepens her naturally pale lips and adds a little eyeliner. She pulls out the scrunchie she wore in the shower, takes one look at her hair and puts it back in, pulling out a few strands around her face and leaving the rest up. It doesn't look spectacular, but it's fine enough. They're supposed to look at least somewhat aspirational — sorry boys, you're going to be girls, but maybe you can be *pretty* girls, like us — but, fuck it, perhaps Christine can be the role model for girls who probably should have washed their hair this morning.

“Why did I take this job?” she asks herself, and Paige answers in her sleep with such sweet and gentle grumbling that Christine has to force herself to grab her laptop and leave the room immediately before she succumbs to the urge to just climb back in with her, forget about disclosure, forget about Stef, and tell Aunt Bea to take her salary and shove it.

Twenty thousand, though! Net! And no rent or bills! A safety net for the two of them, over and above the stipends they can expect.

She closes the door and creeps down the corridor to the kitchen, aiming to fill herself with coffee before she has to face another human. She dumps her computer on the table and starts checking over the intake files, assembling photos and records and dates into slides, irritated at herself for not doing this yesterday (but Paige had brought some new dresses around to show her, and one thing inevitably led to another). At least the task is brainless.

She's on her second cup and finishing off a bowl of cereal when her phone chimes: Vicky.

Victoria Robinson: Hey Tina. Won't be around much for a bit. Lorna and I are taking some time to be together. Straight home from lectures. Staying in at the weekends.

Victoria Robinson: There have been some BIG talks.

Christine Hale: Oh shit babe

Christine Hale: Anything you need, shout

Christine Hale: I'm here for you

Christine Hale: We all are

Victoria Robinson: Thanks.

Victoria Robinson: I'm so fucking scared. This is WAY beyond the vrenaflaxine thing. She says she's been noticing things for a while, and I'm having to pretend to be baffled and gaslight the shit out of her while inwardly crapping myself, looking back on everything I've ever said and done around her, trying to work out if any of it betrays the Big Fucking Secret.

Victoria Robinson: She even brought up the donation. The very large and completely anonymous donation that put her FFS fund over the finish line.

Victoria Robinson: She must have been thinking about that for ages.

Victoria Robinson: Tell me there's nothing to find there, please.

Christine Hale: It's watertight, Vick

Christine Hale: Processed through our most anonymised payment lines

Christine Hale: You'd have to be a state-level actor to trace it back to us and even then I wouldn't give high odds

Christine Hale: If you have friends in high places you can get really fucky with finance

Christine Hale: Does she have any ideas about who sent it?

Victoria Robinson: I don't think so, not any more. She asked if I knew, and I said no, and that was a WHOLE conversation.

Victoria Robinson: We got onto my family, my school, everything. All the stuff about me that's fake as shit. It's like she's going through my whole life, looking for the cracks.

Victoria Robinson: Tina.

Victoria Robinson: I'm ALL cracks.

Christine Hale: Did you stick to your NPH?

Victoria Robinson: She asked about my SCARS, Tina! My GRS scars on my fucking labia! I didn't think they were even visible enough! I can barely see them myself in the mirror with the torch on my phone and I know what to look for!

Christine Hale: Shit

Victoria Robinson: Damn right, shit.

Victoria Robinson: And yeah I fell back on my NPH. I could practically see those laminated fucking NPH sheets I spent all that time memorising.

Christine Hale: Good

Christine Hale: Those are unimpeachable

Victoria Robinson: I know, Tina.

Christine Hale: Right

Christine Hale: Sorry

Victoria Robinson: It's fine, I'm just so scared.

Victoria Robinson: She tells me she still loves me. And that word 'still' in there, it's like it won't stop echoing in my head. It means she knows there's things she has to forgive. It means

Victoria Robinson: Shit.

Victoria Robinson: It means she doesn't see me as the same person she used to.

Victoria Robinson: I'll always be someone who lied to her now.

Victoria Robinson: She keeps telling me she still loves me. And it's not like she's trying to convince herself. She really does love me.

Victoria Robinson: But it's clear she doesn't trust me any more.

Victoria Robinson: Maybe it's just too many lies, all at once. Maybe I sound different when I'm talking about the last year or so, to when I'm listing off all the fake bullshit I'm supposed to pretend is my life.

Victoria Robinson: Maybe I sound like a liar every time I open my fucking mouth because I am one.

Victoria Robinson: She's everything to me. The most special girl in the world. And I'm scared I'm just going to lose her. I'm scared she's going to decide I'm too broken, too untrustworthy, and just leave. All I want is to tell her everything and I JUST CAN'T

Victoria Robinson: I hate this I hate this I hate this

Christine Hale: Do you want me to tell one of the senior sponsors about this? Maria's back, she might have an idea

Victoria Robinson: NO

Victoria Robinson: Keep those people out of it. Especially Maria.

Victoria Robinson: If I have to I'll ask them for help but not yet

Victoria Robinson: Please say you won't Tina please say you'll keep this between us

Christine Hale: I won't say a word

Christine Hale: I promise

Victoria Robinson: Thank you.

Victoria Robinson: Okay she's out of the shower, no more texts, I have to delete everything

Christine drops the phone on the table and turns her attention back to her coffee, trying to put her worries about her friend out of her mind; she won't do anything without permission, especially not since it was *her* slip that kicked all this off. Even if it was, apparently, something that's been festering in Lorna for quite a while.

Does Lorna suspect her? They've been nothing but friendly with each other, but Christine's hardly an expert on her. For all that Vicky is one of her best friends, her girlfriend — her future wife, if they can weather this and if Vicky gets her wish — is still mostly a stranger.

“Hey,” someone says from the doorway. “Mind if we come in?”

It's Julia, which means Yasmin's probably either around the corner or still getting dressed in one of their rooms. Christine hasn't seen either of them for weeks; they keep away from their Sisters as a matter of course. She's pretty sure one of them must have gotten hold of the lecture schedules and worked out times to duck in through the front door and up the stairs to the second floor without being spotted.

“It's not *my* kitchen,” Christine says, and immediately realises how she sounds. “Sorry. Bad morning.” She picks up and waggles her phone by way of explanation.

Julia sets about preparing some kind of egg dish on the corner hob, with onions and red peppers. It doesn't take long for the aroma to make Christine regret her choice of Weetabix.

“That's an early breakfast,” Christine says after a while. Julia nods. “You, uh, going out today?”

“No, I’m here all day,” Julia replies, in the hesitant manner she uses when she’s concentrating on something and which ignites in Christine a brief spark of nostalgia; the last time she heard it, they all lived underground together and Julia was training her voice in the echoey acoustics of the dining room. “But Yas is on call, so...” She wiggles her fingers; a *you work it out* gesture.

“Hey,” Yasmin says, appearing on cue around the corner, kissing Julia on the back of the neck and slumping into a chair opposite Christine. “Long time.”

“Yeah,” Christine says. Awkward. Sure, the few times Christine’s seen Yasmin and Julia recently they’ve exchanged smiles and hellos — a vast improvement! — but that’s been more or less it for the last year; not really a foundation on which to rebuild a rapport, or even just to have a conversation that doesn’t make Christine cringe with inadequacy. The two of them have been in a stable relationship since the first year, and in work since their major restrictions were lifted; Christine feels adolescent around them.

Julia, her back turned to both of them, continues to cook. Yasmin props herself up on her hands and stares at Christine, chewing on her lip. Thinking. Christine doesn’t squirm under the examination, but she wants to. She pays attention to her coffee instead.

“So,” Yasmin says eventually, “I have to ask your advice.”

Christine blinks away her surprise. “Oh! Sure.”

“Me and Jools,” she says, “we should have graduated by now, right? I mean, you think so, don’t you?”

Both Yasmin and Julia are, as far as she’s ever been able to tell, model examples of the women Dorley aims to let loose on the world, and she’s been at a loss as to understand why they’ve been kept here. Sure, in most previous intakes the third-year girls have stayed on until the end of the third year, but the loosening of guidelines across the board has taken effect here, too: Vicky, graduating in two years; Paige and now

Christine, effectively sponsor-less; Jodie, socialising extensively with people from outside the programme. It's sobering to realise, as Christine suddenly does, that she's on course, out of everyone in her intake, to become the least likely ever to leave this place.

No. She's *going* to leave. Her and Paige. Growing old together. Somewhere away from here.

"Yeah," she says. "Definitely."

"Well," Yasmin says, still watching Christine's face carefully, "we finally found out why we're still stuck here. Identities and accounts held hostage."

"Be careful, Yas," Julia says.

"We were supposed to work it out for ourselves," Yasmin continues, "but, of course, we didn't, because it's stupid, just like all their... extra-curricular crap. We're supposed to 'socialise'."

"Oh," Christine says. "But you *do* socialise, right? You have whole lives away from Dorley. You just... don't hang out with anyone here. Which is valid."

"Thank you for your approval," Julia says.

"We have lives," Yasmin says, "but we don't have friends. We have coworkers. And we have... whatever you lot are to us."

Christine, through her shrug, attempts to communicate that *her lot* can be taken or left, as one pleases.

"They told us we have to spend time with you," Julia says. "Sally and Lisa, ganging up on us as usual. We're 'insufficiently socialised'."

"And we said, like you, that it's bullshit. And it's not like — Okay, so, no offence, Christine, but I don't especially want to hang out with you, or Paige, or Vicky, or anyone in your circle."

"Um. None taken."

“You didn’t exactly make it easy for us down there,” Julia says. “It’s a bit difficult not to remember that, just, like, looking at you.”

Christine frowns. “We mostly left you alone, I thought.”

“Exactly,” Yasmin says. “It was always you three and Jodie, and even when she broke off to spend more time with Donna, it was still *always* you three. And us, at the periphery. And Craig, I suppose, before they killed him.”

“He washed out,” Christine corrects. “We don’t know—”

“They might as well have killed him. Not that I miss the guy, but that’s not the point. We shouldn’t have to spend time with a bunch of— of sponsors, or the girls who ignored us while we were getting tortured and reshaped, just to go free! We’re ready *now!*”

“Yasmin,” Julia warns again.

“How much socialising did they say?” Christine asks.

Julia waves a dismissive hand. “Not much.”

“They’re not requiring you come out clubbing with us, or anything?”

“No.”

“So just switch to using the downstairs kitchen for a bit, then. Eat lunch in the dining hall at the weekends. Paige and I are usually around, and Jodie, too, so there’ll be people you know. Even if you don’t like us very much.”

“It’s not that we don’t *like* you,” Yasmin says. “We just, you know...”

“You were there at the worst part of our lives,” Julia says, dropping a plate in front of Yasmin and sitting down next to her, “and you didn’t help.”

“Sorry,” Christine says. “I was a mess back then. We all were. But I should have—”

“The past is the past,” Yasmin says. She chews on her breakfast for a bit — it smells *amazing* — and adds, “Perhaps we can come down for lunch today. See how it goes.”

“I thought you were on call?”

“It rarely amounts to anything, and if it does, I can usually handle it remotely.”

“Oh, shit, actually,” Christine says, “today might be a bad time to start coming down for lunch. They’re doing disclosure today, and—”

Yasmin drops her fork and sits back in her chair. “Fuck sake!” she says, “This is *exactly* why I didn’t want to do this! You can’t spend five minutes around a ‘Sister’ without getting sucked into all this *bullshit* again! *That’s* what this requirement’s actually about: it’s to gaslight us.”

That word again. “What do you mean?” Christine asks.

“We’re loners. We have each other, and that’s all we’ve ever needed. But you know what that means? We have no ties here. No reason to think fondly of this place. And that’s unacceptable, so they want us to spend time with you — okay, fine, not actually *you*, but you know what I mean — and start seeing this place through the eyes of the programme. See the first and second years as they come up. Understand the sponsor point of view. Stop viewing our lives, our experiences, our memories of what was done to us through our own framing, and start adopting Beatrice’s.” She picks up the fork again and stabs at the air with it. “Stop thinking of the rest of you as just people we were tortured next to and start thinking of you as our *Sisters*.” She spits it with a sneer. “The family that spays together, stays together!”

Christine winces. She’s seen that mug.

“Yas—” Julia says.

“They’re such manipulative bitches! They want us thinking of our *torture and mutilation* in purely administrative terms, with nice innocent words like ‘disclosure’ bandied around to mask what’s actually being done: revealing to a

group of vulnerable boys, ripped out of their lives and taken captive, that they're going to be held against their will for at least the next two years, that their bodies are going to be taken from them and ripped apart, and that their minds are next on the chopping block. It's fucking—”

“Yas, *please!*”

“Jools!” Yasmin says sharply. “She’s not going to tell on me! Are you, Christine?”

Christine emphatically shakes her head.

“No, Yas,” Julia says, “the *cameras...*”

Yasmin throws down her fork again. “Shit,” she says. “Sally’s going to be annoyed with me again.”

“Just a moment,” Christine says, picking up her phone and loading up her app. She almost loads her old custom app — legitimacy is a difficult habit to instil — but she chooses the correct one and waits impatiently for the feeds to load in.

“What are you doing?” Julia asks.

Being manipulative, Christine thinks. Out loud, she says, “Wanna see?” She pulls out her chair and swings it around to the end of the table, sitting down again at right angles to Yasmin and Julia, close enough that if she angles her phone they can both see well enough. As they watch, she calls up the last five minutes of footage, scrubs around in it to show Julia and then Yasmin entering the kitchen, then defines start and end points and tags it *corrupted footage*. A tap sends it straight to the archive; another puts all the second-floor cameras into a full reboot cycle.

“Christine—” Yasmin says.

Christine wags a finger. “Not done,” she says. *Now* she loads her custom app, finds the archived footage and scrambles it. “There.” She looks up, grinning, to a pair of confused faces. See? *Someone* on the inside is your friend...

“How come you can do that?” Yasmin asks, half-accusing, half-astonished.

“I took a job here. Head of Network Security. Bea and Maria have been really unsubtle about how badly they want me to be a sponsor; this way, I get them off my back, I make some money, and I don’t end up in the basement next year telling some poor lad I’m going to cut his balls off.” Her smile widens. “But I’ve also had control of pretty much the entire network for a while now, since way before I took the job. I have a whole suite of tools for fucking with the surveillance here. The door locks, too.”

“Wait,” Yasmin says, gesticulating with her fork again, “you’re doing tech support for Dorley? You’re *in charge* of it?”

“Yep.”

“Do you *know* how much you could make in the private sector, with those kinds of skills?”

“Is it better than twenty thousand, after tax, with no rent and bills, for a brand new hire with no relevant qualifications?”

“I mean, no, okay, wow. After tax?”

“Hey! I saw this job first!”

“Sure, no worries. Wouldn’t want it anyway.” Yasmin smiles at Julia. “We’re out of here as soon as they let us.”

“I have to ask,” Christine says, cupping her mug in both hands to still her fingers; what she’s about to say feels uncomfortably *true believer*, “and I mean, my job *requires* me to ask: you’re not security risks, are you?”

“Hey!” Julia says. “You said you wouldn’t report us!”

“I did and I won’t. And you’re *obviously* ready to leave. Have been for ages. You deserve your lives. So, if you’ll let me, I’ll argue for that, officially; I’m on payroll now, after all. You should talk to Indira as well. She’ll listen, and we can both bring your case to Bea. All I ask is that, when you leave, you move on. Forget about this place, if you need to. But all the people I love are tied to it, one way or another, and as

much as I want to take *all* of them with me when I go, I'm fairly sure that's not going to happen. Losing any of them to someone else's grudge—"

"Don't worry," Yasmin says. "All we want is to move out."

"Anyone who tells on this place would become the most newsworthy person in the world, anyway," Julia says. "And that's unpleasant enough for regular people, let alone people like us, people with... our histories."

"You're really planning to leave?" Yasmin asks. "I assumed you'd stay forever, actually."

"Nope," Christine says vehemently. "I'll probably stay here while I finish my degree, since Aunt Bea seems to want to throw money at me and Paige and I can get a double room up on the fifth floor and still pay no rent, but when I graduate Saints, I'm leaving. For where, for what, I don't know." She smiles. "My future's with Paige, and the family I made here; it's not with Dorley itself."

"Good for you."

"We have another reason to keep the secret, anyway," Julia says. "We heard about the trans girl. No matter how mad we might be at the rest of you, we wouldn't want to hurt her."

Christine laughs. "Yeah. Dorley's first innocent."

"How's she doing?" Yasmin asks. "I've been sort of worried about her. Is she okay?"

* * *

The basement's still bifurcated — 'split population' is the official Dorley term — with Will, Raph and Ollie living out of the cells for now. The plan is to keep them confined for the

time being, with minimal entertainment but no other punishment, until they've gotten over themselves, and while the cells aren't quite as austere as they were when Stefan first woke up in one, having been reconfigured for a longer stay — Pippa described a nicer mattress, voice control over the lights, and a tablet — they're still not exactly pleasant places to spend weeks or months at a time. When it's time to rejoin the rest of them, Stefan imagines Will, Raph and Ollie will be less likely to try anything, lest they find themselves sent right back to the cells.

Difficult to care about them right now, though; it's disclosure day! At last!

The four of them — him, Aaron, Adam and Martin — are spaced out in the common room, one at each of the metal tables, feet tucked under the seat, separated and more or less immobilised. Their sponsors stand at their sides, tasers cupped in ready hands, with Edy back for Adam but Indira still standing in for Maria. At the edges of the room, also with weapons ready, stand almost as many sponsors and other Dorley girls as had appeared after Will attacked Maria; no Paige, but Christine sits on the sofa by the door, laptop balanced on her crossed legs, frowning at the screen. She shoots Stefan a grin when none of the other boys are looking, and wiggles her fingers in greeting.

They've been positioned so they're facing the doors into the dining room, and that's where Monica comes in from, all smiles, carrying with her a stool that Stefan recognises from his brief glance into the rooms on the first floor basement. She drops it, sits down with heels resting on the bottom rung, and places her hands carefully in her lap.

A sitting position from which she can easily and quickly stand and step away. Wise, after Maria.

“Good morning!” Monica says, looking around at Stefan and the boys like a substitute teacher greeting the class the other teachers warned her about. “It's time for the big speech. But first, a reminder: violence will not be tolerated. If you

attack your sponsor or any other employee, there will be consequences. If you attack *each other*, there will be consequences. I believe, Edy, you summed our institutional attitude up as, ‘we’ll bury you in the woods’?” Edy nods, embarrassed, and pats the back of Adam’s head. “Absent that, you must understand that we are not offering you a choice. And—” she laughs cynically, “—we are *not* accepting comments or criticism at this time. There are two ways to leave this place: complete the programme or wash out, whether through resistance or violence. Any questions, before I begin?”

“Define ‘resistance’,” Aaron says. “Do we get to, like, ever actually complain about shit, or are you going to delimb me and bury me in five bin bags the moment I raise my voice?”

“You can yell and scream and complain as much as you like, *later*. Just keep your hands to yourself. Anyone else? No? Okay!” Monica leans forward on her stool, hands clasped in front of her. “By now, you’ll have noticed certain changes in your bodies. Perhaps you feel the cold a little more than you did; maybe you’ve found you’re more sensitive in some areas and less in others. These changes are deliberate, and there will be more to come. You remember your Goserelin implants? Those have been suppressing your testosterone since you arrived. It’s a procedure we’ve used in other years, with other male intakes, to reduce aggression, but our success with them has been... mixed. In fact, in all the years Dorley has been operating as a rehabilitation facility—” Aaron snorts, and Indira reaches out without looking and slaps him lightly on the shoulder, “—we have had considerably poorer treatment outcomes with our male intakes than with our female intakes. Put bluntly, the endemic violence of toxic masculinity is extremely difficult to cure, and we have been forced to wash out the majority of our subjects. So, this year, in the interests of being humane, we’re trying something new.”

Monica pauses, to let the boys’ minds race. So far, this is everything Stefan expected: Pippa explained that they prefer every intake believe they’re the first ones in Dorley’s history

to be feminised, lest the boys in question draw (correct) conclusions about their sponsors. It's crucial, Stefan read in the guidelines, for the boys to feel like their only allies, the only ones who can understand their plight, are each other; to bond under the attractive boot heel of the sponsors. Only later, when the subject is at their lowest, will the sponsor reveal that it was all just another ruse, that she, too, was once the same. She will present herself as proof that future, family and friends all await, if only they can push through.

But at least Stefan won't have to pretend about *most* of it any more.

"In addition to your testosterone suppression," Monica continues, "for the past month, we have been administering estrogen in appropriate doses. We intend to continue this regimen indefinitely."

Another pause, punctuated almost immediately by Aaron attempting to stand and hitting his knee on the underside of the metal table. "You fucking *what?*" he yells, and starts trying to untangle his legs; for what purpose, Stefan can't imagine.

Indira puts a hand on his shoulder. "Sit."

"No!" He tries to shake her off. "You're not going to fucking—"

"*Sit!*" Indira repeats. "I will *not* tell you a third time, Aaron Holt, and if you don't return to your seat *right this instant* I will *make* you sit down."

He doesn't immediately comply, but he does stop struggling against her grip. "All right!" he says to Indira, and puts flat palms on the table to steady himself and lean forward to address Monica. "You're not serious; estrogen?"

"I am completely serious," Monica says. Stefan wonders if any of the boys have noticed the edges of a smirk playing about her mouth. "As I said, you'll have noticed some of the physical changes already; they are *not* caused by testosterone suppression alone, as I know some of you have speculated. These changes will continue. We have informational

pamphlets should you wish to educate yourself fully.” She gestures to a small pile on the cabinet nearest the TV. Stefan, twisting to look, turns his laugh into a cough: the pamphlets have NHS branding.

Indira uses Aaron’s moment of paralysed outrage to push him back down into his seat. He lands with a surprised squeak and glares at her. Held down by her, he can do nothing but complain. “Stef! Why aren’t you *helping*?”

“What would I even do?” Stefan says, remembering at the last moment to push a scowl onto his face, as if he’s equally angry. He points around the room. “Taser, taser, taser, taser... and a roomful of big guys with actual guns, somewhere.”

“I don’t mean *fight*,” Aaron says. “I mean— fuck, I don’t know. Why not get Pippa to help? You have this whole psychosexual thing going on with her—”

“It’s called having a friend, Aaron.”

He hits the table. “Then why isn’t she, as your ‘friend’, stopping this? They’re making us into fucking *girls*, Stefan! That’s what estrogen *does*.”

“How do you know that?”

Aaron looks like he’s going to hit the table again, and Stefan has to admit that he’s probably pushing the pretence of ignorance a little far.

“Have you *ever* been online? Estrogen’s what trans women take. It’s what makes them women.”

“Actually—” Indira starts.

“Yes,” Aaron interrupts, “Jesus *fucking* Christ, I know, they were women already, is that really the point?”

“You should always endeavour to be accurate.”

“Oh my fucking— You see, Stef! You see what she’s like? I’m being menaced by a pedantic primary school teacher!”

Monica claps her hands to force all eyes to return to her. “Are you done?” she says.

“Not even remotely,” Aaron says.

“We can escort you out. Put you in the cuffs in your room, and leave it to Indira to give you the rest of the information, if you’d like.”

“Fuck. No. Fine. I’ll be quiet. Tell us your plans for us, Mo-ni-ca.”

She frowns at him, irritated but not unsettled by Aaron’s reference to her former charge. “Before I continue, you should know that we did not come to this decision lightly; nor were you chosen at random. Some of you are here because you’ve hurt people — very badly — and others because your lives were on harmful trajectories. Aaron, since you have chosen to be so vocal, I believe we will use your case as the example. Christine?”

“One second,” Christine says. Stefan glances over: she’s tapping at the screen of her laptop, biting her lip in concentration. “There.”

When Christine hits a key on her computer the TV clicks on, showing a picture of Aaron, taken some time before Dorley snatched him. He’s at a bar — not one of the ones on campus; perhaps this was taken in his home town? — and he’s drinking from a half-empty bottle of light beer. His hair’s shorter and he’s wearing a suit jacket over a loose shirt. Stefan wants absurdly to protect the boy in the photo, to warn him what’s coming, to make him change his ways. Pippa steps closer and squeezes his upper arm. With the boys all staring at the TV screen, he feels safe to reach up and take her hand, just for a second.

“Aaron Holt,” Monica says. “Twenty-one years old as of July. Geology student. *Prolific* harasser of women.”

“Do we really have to do this?” Aaron asks. He’s not looking at the screen.

“You have, I believe, extensively covered the topic of your dick pics with your peers, so I won’t go into much detail except to note that your expulsion from Saints was

countermanded by your parents, as was any hint of *actual* disciplinary action. A large donation, forming the last leg of funding required for what is probably now going to be called the Aaron Holt Memorial Tennis Court. Be proud, Aaron; your name will live on. Christine: next, please?”

Another tap on her computer and Aaron’s photo shrinks into the top-left corner, replaced in the centre by an unfolding list of dates, events, and pictures of women.

Monica points at the screen. “These women were spared the indignity of your penis, but did not escape your other avenues of harassment. Most of it surprisingly chaste, but all of it rather misogynist. We don’t even know what some of these women did to piss you off, Aaron, but there are rather a lot of them, aren’t there?”

“Stop it,” Aaron mumbles, resting his head in his arms.

Stefan knows he has something to say here, a knife to twist. “Aaron,” he says, “there are so *many*...”

“Shut up,” he says. “I know.”

Indira pats him on the shoulder and leans down. “It’ll be over soon,” she whispers.

“Next,” Monica says. More dates, events and pictures scroll onto the screen. “Next.” The list updates again.

“Stop it,” Aaron says again.

“Next. Here’s the list of websites we pulled off your laptop, your phone, and your mobile provider. Notice a theme?” Monica waves her hand at the screen, and Stefan does indeed notice the theme. When Abby and Christine called Aaron an incel he hadn’t realised they were actually describing him so accurately. “Next.”

“Stop it!” Aaron yells, pushing Indira off his shoulder and glaring red-eyed at Monica. “I get it! Next! Next! Next!” He bangs his fist on the table in time with his chant. “You have every bad thing I’ve ever fucking done up there!”

“Not just that,” Monica says. “We also have this.” Her voice is a little softer, and when the screen flickers again it shows a list of incidents from his boarding school. Aaron’s name is in the *victim* column this time, opposite the kinds of names that are destined to accumulate inherited honorifics as their owners age. Bullying, intimidation, theft, and seven assaults. Three of them—

Stefan looks away from the screen.

“We have more,” Monica says. “Incidents dating back to primary school, where you switch back and forth between aggressor and victim.”

“Fuck you, Monica,” Aaron says. “If you’re trying to say I’m the way I am because I got bullied in school, fuck you.”

“No, Aaron. You are the way that you are because your worst traits have been encouraged at every step of your life. Neglectful parents. Poor role models. People who hurt you, and people who encouraged you to hurt others. And the one true friend you had, well, she left you.”

Aaron, looking at the table again, sticks a middle finger up in Monica’s rough direction.

“You don’t have to be this way,” she continues. “You never did. You are bright, quick-witted, and even capable of empathy. But you were failed, repeatedly. Taught to be impulsive rather than wise. Resentful rather than thoughtful. Never offered better options, or a better way to behave; shown only loneliness, violence, and an extremely unhealthy view of women.” She nods at Christine, who returns the screen to its starting configuration. “And we know what happens to boys like you, left alone: you implode or you explode. You go quietly or you go very, very noisily. I know you hate looking at that screen, Aaron, and seeing everything you’ve done in one place. Well, you’re only twenty-one. Imagine how much longer those lists will be in a year; two; five. Imagine yourself at thirty; do you even recognise him? How many people has he hurt? How badly has he hurt himself?” She lowers her voice. “Is he even still around?”

“Fuck you,” he says again, dropping his head back into folded arms.

“We’ve been taking groups of troubled and troublesome people into our care for a long time now,” Monica says. “Our aim is always to reform, to provide resources, to map out alternate ways to live life. To find people who are on the edge of atrocity, and bring them back. But we have been, as I said, *considerably* more successful with women than with men. From the very start, in fact. And we’ve tried *many* different methods with the men, trying to replicate our results with the women; nothing works. As a society, we are simply too ready to forgive men — white cisgender men, it has to be said — for any harm they might commit, especially if they are of means. And you, Aaron — and I do genuinely apologise for singling you out again — are a textbook case for failure. A white cisgender man with money, looks, charm, and absolutely *appalling* habits. You’ll keep getting away with it until, eventually, either you can’t live with yourself or someone else doesn’t survive you.”

“I can change,” he whispers.

“Can you, now? What would you be doing, right now, if we hadn’t taken you in? Be honest.”

“I can *change*. I want to change!”

“But you won’t. This country won’t let you. Have you, by any chance, heard of Charlotte Church?”

And Monica launches into a spiel almost word-for-word identical to the one Beatrice subjected Stefan to, which leaves him free to tune her out and concentrate on Aaron, quivering in the nest of his forearms, stripped and laid bare by Monica’s evidence against him, by her confidence in the inevitability of his recidivism, by her mournful enumeration of his failings.

At around the halfway point, Indira waves to get Christine’s attention and beckons her over. Christine puts down her laptop, pulls a taser out of her pocket with visible distaste, and stands where Indira stood. Indira sits on the chair

next to Aaron, joins him in his space, encircles his shoulders with one arm and his hands with the other. Christine looks at Stefan and mouths, *Are you okay?* He nods. He's not sure if he actually is; it's hard to watch Aaron go through this, but harder still to see Aaron's victims.

There really were a lot of them.

"This year," Monica says, finishing up, "we have decided, finally, to act in accordance with the data we've been collecting for almost two decades. To attempt to rehabilitate you as males would be to abandon you. So we're trying something new."

At his table, Martin, heretofore silent, snorts and shares a look with his sponsor, Pamela. She rolls her eyes at him, displaying only an echo of the disdain Stefan remembers from the last time he saw them interacting. But that was weeks ago. Things change, including, apparently, Ella's disgust for her charge.

Things change, including all the boys.

"Excuse me," Adam says. He's raising an arm, and supporting it with his other hand as if he thinks he might have trouble holding it aloft without help. Behind him, Edy rubs his shoulders. "By something new, you mean, with the estrogen, and the— the—"

"Goserelin," Aaron supplies, muffled by his arms.

"Yes," Monica says, before Adam can continue. "Rather than resign ourselves to another pointless year of failed male redemption, we are going to rehabilitate you as women."

"How far will that go, please?" Adam says.

"All the way."

"A— all the way?"

"*All* the way."

Adam stiffens for a moment, and then turns to Edy and says, so quietly Stefan almost can't hear, "I'd like to return to

my room, please.” Edy nods, steps back to let him stand, and follows him out of the common room, her taser still clipped to her hip.

“All the way’,” Aaron says. He raises his head again. “This is fucking ludicrous, right? You see that, yeah? Your solution to toxic masculinity or chronic dick wagging syndrome or— or whatever the fuck is wrong with me, is to make me into a girl?”

Monica shrugs. “Yes.”

“Stefan?” Aaron turns to face him. “Do you have anything to say about this? At all?”

“I’m, uh, still processing it,” Stefan says, caught out.

“Of course you are,” Aaron says. “Indira, I take it from Adam’s exit that going to my room and staying there, sans handcuffs, is an option?” She nods. “Let’s go, then.”

Stefan does his best to avoid Aaron’s glare as the boy leaves, walked out of the room at taser-point. That last part could have gone better.

With just him and Martin remaining, the sponsors visibly relax. Edy returns from delivering Adam to his room; Monica hops down off her stool and walks over to talk to her. Christine’s eyes flicker down to meet Stefan’s again, and he does his best to answer the question he sees there silently, with a quick quirk of his eyebrows, because Martin’s looking at him, and he still has a role to play.

Why *is* Martin looking at him?

He excuses himself from Pippa, who half-heartedly waggles her taser at him, and joins Martin at his table. Ella nods to the both of them and joins Christine and Pippa, leaving them alone.

“I saw you laughing,” Stefan says, after Martin doesn’t say anything. “Kind of laughing, anyway. What was so funny?”

Martin smiles. It’s a bitter smile, and quite shallow, but it’s not as disturbing as it might have been had Stefan not

observed the dour man's mood unaccountably improving over the last few days. "I was right," he says.

"About what?"

Martin rests his chin on his hand. "About *this*, Stefan. About their plan for us."

"And you didn't *tell* anyone?"

"Neither did you," Martin says.

Stefan, perpetually wrong-footed this morning, can only answer, "What?"

"I know you saw this coming, too."

"You're just going to let it happen, then?" Stefan says, ignoring the accusation. "I saw more pushback from bloody *Adam* than from you."

Martin gestures towards the assembled sponsors. "It's like you always say: they have the tasers *and* the keys. Besides, I don't think they're wrong, necessarily."

That is emphatically not in Stefan's script. "About rehab through womanhood?" he says.

"I wasn't just a drinker who had a bad accident one day," Martin says, meeting Stefan's eyes with as steady a gaze as he's ever seen on the man. "She could have put me up on the screen and, sure, my list wouldn't have been as long as Aaron's, but the fact remains that I've always gotten away with things. Because of who I am. Who my parents know. I'm... borderline aristocratic. And I hate it. I'm just not strong enough to push back against it. Except in the most terminal way, if you get my meaning. As weird as it is to say, coming here might have saved my life, for all that there's anything there to save."

"But," Stefan says, unable to let the thought go, "you don't *want* to be a woman, right?"

Martin's eyes harden and his hands, placed harmlessly on the table, tighten into fists. But he relaxes again before Stefan

can respond, returns to his former equanimity. “Stefan,” he says, “I don’t want to be anything.”

* * *

Two days ago, Abby gave Christine the address of a restaurant in Almsworth. Today, it turns out to be a pub: The Fallen General, hooked into a back street deep in the winding alleys that spread out from the river like cobbled veins. According to the menu, the pub is named after a poorly anchored statue, erected in the centre of what is now a small roundabout, which blew over and washed away in a flash storm sometime in the late nineteenth century, taking the memory of whichever luminary it commemorated with it. The head, neck and one shoulder of the statue, recovered decades later, are on display under a reinforced glass dome, positioned amidst the spirits behind the bar, looking out on the patrons with faded, weatherworn eyes.

The Fallen General, with its exposed wooden beams, generous outside seating, cutesy signage and desecrated conversation piece, is as much a tourist pub as it is a drinking pit for locals, and as such contains on a bright Saturday afternoon about as many people with backpacks as without. It’s probably why Abby picked it: good camouflage. Or, perhaps, good for witnesses.

But for *what*?

“How did disclosure go?” Abby asks, as Christine swings down onto the bench next to her. She’s staked out a table by the front window, the better nervously to stare out of it, and spotted Christine before Christine spotted her, waved at her with fake enthusiasm. Abby’s nervous and trying to hide it.

“Could’ve been worse. Monica victimised Aaron. Not unfairly, considering his rap sheet; he was probably the best case study to make the point she wanted to make.” It’d still been hard to watch the boy crumple up in his seat. “There was a bit of shouting, and then one by one the boys all got escorted back to their rooms while everyone else stayed behind to chat with Stef. I made my excuses.”

“No riots, then?”

“No. I doubt it’ll go as well this afternoon when they tell the guys in the cells.”

Abby smirks. “If *they* riot, the worst they can do is brain themselves on those nasty little metal toilets. You want something to eat?”

Christine shakes her head. “I want to know what I’m doing here, Abs. And, no, I’m still riding breakfast. I could murder a Coke, though.”

“Me too, actually. No, I’ll get it; you sit. And, yes, I promise I’ll tell you what this is all about when I get back.”

She squashes back as far as she can to let Abby out, and people-watches while Abby arranges drinks for the both of them. She quite likes the atmosphere here; the place is reminiscent of the kinds of pubs her mum liked and would drag her to when she was a child: safe, rural-themed, and able to supply large baskets of chunky chips slathered in salt and vinegar. She smiles, picturing her mother digging in, the fat, greasy chips contrasting with the delicate white wines she preferred, and kicks the table to dispel the memory. That was before everything: before it all went to shit; before her father started hitting her mother; before Christine disappeared and consented eventually to be remade. Back when she’d had a family.

Best forget it all, really. Fuck sentimentality, fuck memories and fuck her mother, too; she’s here for her Sister and nothing and no-one else.

When Abby returns, depositing Cokes on the table and sliding back down onto the bench, it's impossible not to notice her hands shaking.

"You okay, Abs?"

"I'm fine!" Abby says, too loud. "So. Okay. We're meeting a couple of people for lunch. Just lunch. Nothing else. You're here for moral support."

"Mine or theirs?"

"Mine!"

"Define 'a couple of people'."

Abby stalls, takes a swig from her Coke. Christine elbows her. "Remember how I said my parents hired a private investigator?" Abby says, and preemptively winces. "Well, I, uh, kinda sorta contacted him."

"Abby."

"Yes, Christine?"

"These people, they're your parents, right?"

Abby nods. "Yeah," she says, "yeah, they are."

"They don't know about you, right?"

"Nope."

"Do they even know *anything* about who they're meeting?"

"Nope."

"What are you going to tell them, and is it better than the truth?"

Abby blinks, confused for a second, and then the words all come out in a rush. "I'd never tell them *the truth*, Chrissy! You think I'm stupid? I have a story, and it's a good one, and you're in it, so *please* stay and don't run off! I need someone here and you're the only one I can trust, so—"

“Relax!” Christine interrupts. “I’m not running off. And you couldn’t trust Dira?”

“Not the way I trust you. I *know* you won’t tell Bea. I’m merely *very certain* she wouldn’t.”

“She wouldn’t.”

“She’s a sponsor,” Abby says. “She has obligations.”

“I’m an employee, too.”

“Yeah, but, like, you’re not exactly... scrupulously loyal, are you?”

Christine weighs her answer. “Let’s just say, I’m loyal to the spirit, not the letter.”

“Exactly,” Abby says triumphantly, and then wilts under Christine’s glare. “Fine! If this goes well, I’ll think about bringing Indira in.”

“Good,” Christine says. “So, if you’re telling a story, what’s my role in it?”

“You’re— shit! They’re here!”

Of course they are. Everything in Christine’s life operates on impeccably awkward timing. “I’ll wing it,” she says. “Is that them?” She points at an older man and woman, both Black and conservatively dressed, climbing out of a hatchback parked just down the road. “Abs?” she prompts, when Abby doesn’t say anything. “Is that them?”

“What?” Abby says, quietly and as if unsure, suddenly, of everything. Christine pokes her again. “Yes. Sorry. Yes. It’s them. And... someone else?”

Someone’s climbing out of the back seat, into the shadow cast by the buildings on the other side of the road: a man (almost definitely), in his early twenties (probably), and of about the same height and skin tone as Abby and her parents (as far as Christine can tell). With a practised shake of his wrist he extends a cane and puts his weight on it with every

other step as he rounds the car and joins Abby's parents. They cross the road together.

"You have a brother?" Christine says.

"No."

Christine's out of time for guesses, because they cross the street quickly and head straight for Abby's table as soon as they enter the pub. She must have told them which table to look for; how long has she been sitting here? She smiles at them as they sit down, Abby's father opposite Christine, Abby's mother opposite Abby. The mystery man pulls up a chair and sits opposite the window, effectively blocking either of them from leaving.

No-one says anything. Abby's parents are waiting for her to open, and Abby herself has frozen.

Fine. "Hi!" Christine says, leaning into her voice training for a nice, clear, bright voice, forward in the mouth and high-pitched; feminine and friendly. "My name's Christine Hale. I'm—" Shit! Did Abby even give them a name? "—I'm with her."

"Understood," Abby's father says. He points at himself. "I'm Robert and this is Diane." He's decided that Christine is the one in charge; understandable, given Abby's complete silence. She's staring at the younger man, frowning slightly. Robert continues, "Carl, our investigator, said you have information about our son. Please, we just want to know if he's okay. Carl says he's alive, but—"

"Oh my God," Abby says, quietly but with such force that it shuts her father up. "Are you... Derek?"

"Yes," the man at the end of the table says. He matches her frown.

"You would have been, what, fourteen when I left? Goodness, *look* at you!"

"Please," Robert says, "if one of you knows something, you have to tell us. Or if you've been leading Carl on a wild

goose chase... we have to know.”

Abby shakes herself, head to hands, which she then places on the table in front of her, clasped. Her knuckles tighten. Under the table, Christine places what she hopes is a calming hand on Abby’s thigh.

“Yes,” Abby says, looking from her father to her mother, “okay. Sorry. This is... oh, fuck, this is so hard.” Christine squeezes, and Abby glances quickly her way, smiling in thanks. She takes a deep breath. “Mum,” she says. “Dad.” And then, absurdly, she suppresses a giggle. “Cousin Derek. I asked you here today because I wanted to see you again. Because I wanted to see *my family* again.” She closes her eyes. “It’s me.”

Abby’s mother, Diane, leans forward, staring intently at her daughter. “What do you mean?”

“I’m—”

“Gareth?”

She says it quietly, incredibly so, but for Abby it’s a shout; she jumps like she just bit a live wire and her breathing audibly quickens, but before anyone can react she waves her hand to say she’s okay. Diane’s got a hand on the table and Abby reaches out to take it, draws her mother’s hand into the middle and holds it with both of hers.

“Yes,” Abby whispers. “It’s me.”

“We thought you were *dead*.”

“I’m not. I’m just... different.”

“Let me look at you,” Diane says, and Abby holds still. She’s wearing her hair out of her face for this, in her habitual bun, gathered in tight curls just above the nape of her neck, and it leaves her whole face visible. She smiles nervously, tightly, with her lips almost pursed, expending a great deal of effort to keep herself under control. Christine doesn’t know whether, if Abby had room to move, she’d leap forward and embrace her family or run out of the pub and never look back.

“That’s you, Garry?” her father says. At the end of the table, Derek leans on his elbow and just stares.

“Yes,” Abby says.

“I see him,” Diane says. “In her. I see him in her.” She shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I’m being rude; you must have a new name?”

Abby nods, but doesn’t say anything. Christine’s still wondering if she should interject, perhaps even take over the conversation, when Abby suddenly comes alive again, retreats from her mother’s hand, sits back and exhales deeply. “My name’s Abigail,” she says, smiling brightly, smiling the way Christine’s used to, smiling like her sister always should. “Abby,” she adds. “I took the surname Meyer.”

“Grant not good enough for you?” her mother says, but there’s a tease to her tone, one Christine recognises from Abby herself. She looks from Abby to her mother; they look so much alike.

Abby laughs. “No,” she says, “no, it’s good. But I had to disappear. I—”

“*Garry?*” Derek says, grabbing Abby’s hand. “Seriously? Garry?”

“Hi, Rick,” Abby says. “But, uh, call me Abby, if you’re going to shout, please?”

“Oh.” Derek lets go of her hand and smiles sheepishly. “Right. Yeah. I know the drill.”

“What do you mean, you know the drill?” Abby’s father asks.

“One of the guys at work is trans,” Derek says. “Mick. He’s a good guy. You met him, at the—”

“Tell us about him later, dear,” Diane says.

There’s a moment of embarrassed silence, broken when Robert Grant slaps the table. “Right,” he says. “Now that we’re all over the big surprise, why don’t we get some lunch

in, and some drinks, and we can talk about the last decade *without*—” he points at Abby, “—leaving out why you pretended to be *dead*. So, what do you fancy, Gar— Abby? Roast beef sandwich, like always, or do you eat dainty little salads now, like your mother?”

“Roast beef sandwich sounds great, Dad,” she says, and covers the side of her mouth to whisper to her mother, “I skipped breakfast.”

Robert collects lunch orders for all of them — Christine agrees to try Abby’s order of a roast beef and cranberry sauce sandwich, and has her offer to pay waved away — and bustles off to the bar to find someone to serve him. Christine recognises in his attitude the sudden and necessary busyness of an older man who has something difficult to deal with and needs to occupy his hands so his mind can work away in silence.

“So,” Diane says, “Christine, was it?” Christine nods. “How do you know our— our daughter? Are you two, um...?”

“Oh, no!” Christine says quickly. “We’re just friends. Really good friends. Sisters, almost. I mean, not even almost. I think of her as my big sister, really.”

“Then you must be a remarkable young woman.”

“I try.”

“How did you and Abigail meet?”

Christine’s impressed. Barely a hint of a pause before her daughter’s name that time. Then she parses the question. “Uh, Abs? You want to take that one?”

Abby nods. “It’s sort of part of the whole story,” she says. “Why don’t we wait for Dad to get back first?”

He returns a few moments later but doesn’t want to talk about any of the ‘big stuff’ until their food arrives, so they fill the time with small talk about Derek’s job — he’s in Quality Assurance at a software company — and Christine’s degree,

until four sandwiches and a salad arrive, plus a large basket of enormous chips, which makes Christine smile despite herself.

Abby's story is simple, and like all the best lies is constructed partly of truths: she was an unhappy child, a restive teen and a disruptive university student, and she came to a true understanding of herself after hitting rock bottom, early in her degree. The fictions are that she left Saints for a long time so she could transition up in Manchester, which is where she met a young, pre-transition Christine.

“Oh,” Abby's mother says, “you're like her, then?”

Christine shrugs. “On my best days, I'd like to think I get close. She's the kindest person I've ever met, Mrs Grant.”

“Oh, do call me Diane.”

Christine didn't miss the half-second's surprise on Diane's face: that her former son could be seen as aspirationally kind is perhaps almost as big a leap for her as the gender thing. Which is ludicrous to Christine — she's seen Abby's file, and read in there mostly deep depression and the occasional self-destructive impulse — but the worst years of Abby's past are Abby's alone to share, and she's always preferred to forget her former self.

Abby explains her extended silence by leaning into Aunt Bea's justification for keeping Dorley's resources to herself: she was helped to transition by a small collective of other trans people, who have to guard their privacy very carefully, especially in this age of increased stigmatisation — “We've seen some very unpleasant things said in the papers,” Diane says, nodding seriously; “Nothing but nonsense in there,” Robert confirms, with a disgusted shake of his head — so she kept the secret to keep them safe, at least until she could complete her transition and leave.

“Does that mean you've had your, um...?” her father asks.

Everyone at the table knows what he means. “Yes,” Abby says. “I have.”

“Understood,” Robert says, swallowing.

“But when I was nearly done,” Abby says, continuing her story, “I met Christine. She’d left her abusive family and was looking for help, so we helped her. I stayed behind to look after her for a while, and then I came back down here to finish my degree at Saints, under my new name. She joined me a few years later.”

Christine nods. “She made this place sound so great. And, well, she really does feel like a sister to me. I go where she goes.”

“I should have told you about myself back then,” Abby says, frowning, regretful, “but secrecy was a habit, and also... I was ashamed, mum. I treated you badly and then I disappeared without a word. It took me a long time to get over that. To realise how stupid I was being. I’m sorry.”

“We’re going to talk about that,” Robert says, “but not today. Today, I’m just happy to have my son back. Even if he’s... different.”

“I always wanted a little girl,” Diane says. She’s been holding Abby’s hand across the table for the last ten minutes, ever since the plates were cleared away, and it’s only the alarm on Abby’s phone that forces her to let go, so Abby can extract it from her bag and silence it.

They have a few more minutes, Abby tells them, but she’s meeting a source for work and she can’t be late. Which dovetails neatly, as Abby no doubt planned, into a discussion about what she does for a living. She shows them her newspaper bylines on her phone and extracts much parental pride from the remaining time.

They all swap numbers — Derek asking shyly enough for Christine’s that she has to make a point of noticing a text she has from her girlfriend, which the man takes in good spirits — and part with smiles and a promise between Abby and her parents to meet up again in a few days, somewhere they can really talk, where they can spend more than just a few hours together. Abby deflects the question of where she lives as a topic for another time, and hugs are shared all round.

While Abby's checking the bus timetable, her mother takes Christine aside and asks her quietly, "Is she happy?"

"Yes," Christine says. "She's happy. Not just that, but she's kind, thoughtful and funny. She's helped me so much, and she's helped a lot of other people, too. She's a treasure. She's my *sister*, Mrs Grant, and I love her."

"*Diane*," she corrects with a grin. "And, I have to say, I wouldn't know. With her, I can see my son — although I have to look *pretty* hard! — but with you... I wouldn't know."

Christine's starting to expect this from cis people now. A compelling argument for copying Paige and Vicky and becoming a cis girl permanently. "Thank you!" she says warmly.

"Do you think she'll find someone? Someone who loves her for who she is?"

"That's not in doubt. She's wonderful, Diane."

With promises that, yes, she'll take good care of herself *and* Abby, Christine extracts herself from Diane Grant and joins Abby at the bus stop, waving back at Abby's family, who are standing around their car and fidgeting, seemingly about to come and wait with them. But then the bus arrives and the Grants and cousin Derek watch them alight with unmistakable tears in three pairs of eyes, and Abby's family is gone from view.

"So, I'm trans to Indira's family," Christine says quietly, settling into a seat and making a show of counting on her fingers, "and now to your family, too, and I'm cis to Lorna... Am I forgetting anyone?"

"You could go see *your* mother," Abby says, "and be trans to her, too."

"I'm thinking about it! I said I'd think about it, and I'm thinking about it." Not entirely accurate.

"Good."

"How are you feeling?"

“Honestly?” Abby says. “Like I just ran five marathons. It’s going to take all evening for my heart to slow back down.”

“You did well.”

“Thank you.”

“So did they, I thought.”

Abby smiles. “I knew they’d be okay with me. I hate the lies, but I’ve been thinking about what to say for a long time, and I know what they’re like: now that they have me back, they won’t push. If there’s holes in my story, they’ll give me privacy about it. They always did.”

“This is going to be a regular thing, then? Seeing them?”

“Yes. I’ve got my family back, Chrissy, and I’m never letting go. Oh, and did I see Derek getting a little cute with you?”

“You did. I mentioned my girlfriend. He didn’t whine.”

“He’s a good boy. Good man, now, I should say. Oh, and about that name they called me...”

“I did not hear it,” Christine says. “I’ve already forgotten it.”

“Bless you, Christine.”

* * *

Stefan eats a late lunch in the common area, with Pippa, Martin and Martin’s sponsor, Pamela. Pippa evidently shares Stefan’s fascination with Martin’s apparent ambivalence towards his upcoming and inevitable feminisation, and asks a couple of questions, none of which fill in the picture to Stefan’s satisfaction; the man genuinely does not seem to care. He leaves for a shower and a nap after lunch, and Stefan

follows a little while later, agreeing, for the sake of appearances, to spend at least some time in his room, in case one of the boys — Aaron — decides to call on him. But no-one does and, bored, he heads back out to the common room to find Monica, Tabby and Jane lounging on the couches, playing poker. They offer to teach him, and deal him in.

He's terrible.

He asks, during yet another hand in which he folds early, if Martin's attitude is unusual. Not particularly, Jane tells him; it's not every year they bring in someone so traumatised or guilt-ridden that they submit willingly, but it's hardly unknown. They don't tend to stick around after, preferring to live away from the Hall and make new lives for themselves elsewhere in the country, but all of them are, last anyone looked, as happy as people in their position can reasonably be expected to be.

"Still doesn't make sense to me," he says, dropping another hand of cards on the table, scarcely any better at poker than he was when they dealt him in. "I just can't wrap my head around it."

"You know what I think it is?" Tabby says. She's sitting cross-legged on the other couch, guarding both her cards and her pile of improvised betting chips — buttons — on the cushion in front of her. "I think it's *because* you're trans."

"Oh?" Stefan says.

"Explain, Tabitha," Monica says. She's lying on her back on the floor, with her head on a bean bag chair and her knees elevated. Stress, she explained. Tabby suggested they put whale noises on over the common room speakers, to really help relax her, and Monica threw a button at her. Tabby accused her of trying to bribe the clearly superior poker player.

"Thank you, Monica," Tabby says, imitating Monica's lecture voice with a smirk, "I will explain! Stef, as a trans woman, your gender is pretty strongly defined, wouldn't you say? Something you've always been aware of, even if you

didn't always know what exactly it was. I mean, dysphoria, depression, depersonalisation, dissociation; it all comes from a pretty extreme body/gender mismatch."

Stefan shrugs. "Yeah, I suppose."

"I think — and, you have to understand, I'm speaking from personal experience, here — the opposite of that state isn't being cis, necessarily," Tabby says. "It's being indifferent."

"What?"

"Some people just don't care."

"Very technical, Tab," Jane says.

"It's true, though," Tabby says.

"Well, yeah, probably."

Tabby leans forward more, throws her cards down on the table, the game temporarily abandoned for the discussion. "There are people who are guys *solely because they are guys*. And girls who are girls because they are girls. They've never thought about it. They don't have a particular attachment to the shape they currently are, the social role they currently occupy, it's just... theirs. It's like their car, or their house. They may like it fine enough, but if someone like us comes along and says, hey, sorry, it's time to move house, they'd just ask about the new address and for a week to box up their stuff."

"It's a tautological gender," Monica says, from the floor.

"That doesn't help."

Stefan's trying to imagine it. The idea of being simply indifferent. "That's so alien to me."

Tabby smiles at him. "That's just it. Gender, and the fuckery of it, has defined your whole life. And there's a lot of cis people who feel the same, except without the dysphoria and the need to transition; they really, *really* feel like a girl or

whatever, and they get really into *being* a girl. I'm sure you can think of people like that."

Stefan shrugs. He hasn't known all that many people.

"We don't get a lot of people like that," Monica says. "It's practically an instant washout. It'd be pointlessly cruel to try and get them to change."

"We go for the middle ground," Jane says. "Boys who *can* change, even if they don't want to. Whose identity, under all the cultural conditioning, is flexible enough. But, yeah, sometimes we get Martins, who just don't care, whether because they're like that naturally or they've been made that way by guilt, trauma, blah blah blah."

"You think even Declan was like that?" Stefan says.

"He was a pretty big fucking question mark, to be honest," Monica says. "But he was a piece of shit. Getting him off the streets seemed like a pretty potent priority, and we didn't even know about the rapes. Just the violence."

"Jesus."

"No-one else is going to wash out, though," Jane says.

"That's hardly a foregone conclusion, Janey," Tabby says.

"It is!"

"Ignore her," Monica says. "She's just saying that because she got Declan and only Declan in the pool."

Jane nods. "I'm going to win two hundred quid."

"So," Stefan says, "the ones who aren't like Martin, they'll adapt?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"You just... do," Tabby says. "You accept it. You move on. It's better this way, anyway." She makes a show of extending her arms and flaring out the loose material of her sleeves, which are a bright cream-white and contrast beautifully with

her dark skin, even under the unflattering basement lights.
“Nicer clothes, softer skin. And the company’s better.”

“You learn to live with it,” Jane says, “when you have no other choice. And it’s not like any of us were living nice lives before we came here. Remember, we don’t just snatch guys randomly off the street. We put in the hours, do the research. We go for guys who’ll benefit, and who’ll survive.”

“What would Will have to go back to?” Tabby says. “I hate the fucker right now, but it couldn’t be more clear he’s *drowning* in guilt and doesn’t know how to deal with it except to hurt more people, which then makes him feel even *more* guilty. When we’re done with her, she won’t be that guy any more.”

“Yeah. You don’t hurt people like he does if you’re happy.”

“Masculinity is a prison,” Monica says. “We have the key.”

Stefan frowns. “Do you ever wash out guys who, maybe, could change who they are, but not the way *you* do it?”

“Not often,” Tabby says quietly. “But it’s happened.”

“We’re better at avoiding that than we used to be,” Monica says.

It still seems like a high price to pay. Stefan doesn’t say it, but Tabby sees it in him, anyway. “It hasn’t happened for years,” she says, reaching across the couches and taking his hand. “We’re very careful.”

He nods. There doesn’t seem to be any other appropriate reaction.

“Well, girls,” Monica says, sitting up and stretching, “game’s over, I think.”

“Aw,” Tabby says.

“Really?” Jane says.

Monica slips a band off her wrist and ties her hair into a ponytail. “Really. We can’t put this off any longer.”

Jane groans like a teenager whose curfew has been brought forward, but hops up off the couch, anyway, offering a hand to Tabby and pulling her up. “You ready to give another speech, Mon?” Jane says, aiming a swipe at Monica and missing.

“Stop,” Monica says. “No. I miss Maria.”

“Well,” Tabby says, “you can take it out on the guy that hurt her. Come on.” She smiles at Stefan, gives him a tired little wave. “It was nice to finally get a chance to talk to you properly, Stef.”

“Hey!” Edy shouts, poking her head through the door that leads to the bathroom, as the three sponsors head out to the corridor. “Are you—?”

“Yes,” Jane yells, “we’re doing the thing.”

“Make sure you tell—”

“*We know!*” Tabby and Monica say in unison.

“They’re supposed to tell the security guys where they’re going to be,” Edy says to Stefan, “and I *know* they forgot.”

“How’s Adam?” Stefan asks, turning around properly on the sofa so he can rest his hands on the back cushions.

Edy shakes her head. “Not good. I’m giving him some privacy to pee, but...” She sighs, and rolls her shoulders, pushing tension out of her body. “I really thought he’d do better with this.”

“With what? Being made into a girl?” When Edy nods he adds, “I’m sure he’ll get used to it in time.” Silently he scolds himself for being too damn nice about all this. It’s too easy to get sucked in, to be on the sponsors’ side, when they’re offering him everything he wants, when he’s just seen a list of sins longer than a supermarket receipt scroll by on the TV.

Edy beams at him. “You’re sweet, Stef. Oops, gotta go!” She ducks back into the bathroom, leaving Stefan alone in the common room.

Adam's having trouble and Martin doesn't care; what about Aaron? He was distressed during disclosure, understandably, and hasn't left his room since, not even to urinate.

Worrying. He should look in on him.

He should check with Indira first, though, before he goes banging on Aaron's door. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and sends her a message, and while he waits for a reply, he tidies the common room. Bean bag chairs in the corner, couches straightened up, deck of cards back in the cabinet. Dirty plastic mugs go in the dining room, for one of the girls to pick up later. He's wondering if there's a vacuum cleaner somewhere around — they must clean the place during the night, or early in the morning, because he's never seen them do so — when he laughs at how ridiculous he's being: he's cleaning the torture basement. Voluntarily.

Feeling rebellious, he drops back onto the couch and reads a book on his phone, studiously ignoring the dust bunnies in the corner.

It takes a while for Indira to get back to him, and she does it in person. She gives him the bad news: Aaron's not eating or drinking, he's not watching a movie or listening to music or reading; he's not doing anything. Just sitting on his bed, staring at nothing. And ignoring all of Indira's attempts to get his attention.

"I tapped him on the head. I stood in front of him and said his name. I waved in front of his eyes! I even put water bottles and cookies on the bed next to him, in case he gets hungry or thirsty. I stopped short of actual physical violence, but I'm willing to try anything."

"You can't just leave him alone? This is a pretty big bomb that got dropped on him today. Maybe he just needs time."

"Time is fine," Indira says, leaning against the wall, "as long as he takes even the slightest bit of care of himself. But all he's had today is a bowl of cereal and nothing even to drink

since then, and if this becomes a whole twenty-four hours without food and water, then we have to start looking at drastic options, and those are...”

“Drastic?”

“Strapping someone down and *making* them eat and drink doesn’t help. It keeps them alive, but it’s just more trauma. They don’t recover. You get into a vicious circle. The *threat* of it is useful,” she adds, frowning, “but if you actually have to follow through, you’ve lost.”

The answer’s obvious. “Why don’t I talk to him?” he says.

* * *

Aaron’s sitting cross-legged on his bed, surrounded by the detritus of Indira’s attempts to get him to engage: water bottles, paper plates with cookies on, a couple of wrapped cereal bars, and some scattered cushions.

Indira insisted repeatedly to Stefan that he doesn’t have to do this, that this goes beyond Beatrice’s instructions for him, that this is *sponsor stuff* and not something he should be taking on. But what other options are there? Despite everything, Aaron is his friend, and he’s currently facing something no-one should have to face alone.

“Hi.”

Aaron says nothing.

“Indira let me in. I said I was worried about you after Monica really went in on you in the common room. That was pretty fucking intense, right?”

Aaron says nothing.

“They’re telling Will and the others now. Same speech, probably. I bet Monica uses Ollie as her example. Probably got a big chart of all the times he made his wife’s life a living hell. Or is it a girlfriend he had? I bet both. I bet he had a wife *and* a girlfriend, and was fucking horrible to both of them. He seems like the type.”

Aaron says nothing.

“I kind of want to be a fly on the wall for that? And I kind of don’t. After Declan *and* Will I think I’ve had my fill of sudden, unpredictable acts of violence.”

Aaron says nothing.

“I bugged Pip for details, but she just gave me one of those pamphlets and, like, I get the mechanics of it, I think? I just want to know why they think this’ll possibly help.”

Aaron says nothing.

“Did you know those pamphlets are from the NHS? Isn’t that ridiculous? As if this is a legit operation or something. Government-funded. Like what they’re doing to us is on the approved treatment list put out by the World Health Organisation.”

Aaron says nothing.

“Did you eat? I ate. I wasn’t really in the mood, but I was hungry and I decided I could still be scared shitless on a full stomach. There was meat in the lasagne actually. I think they decided to give us a treat to make up for all that stuff they said, but it might not have been a good idea because after weeks and weeks of vegetarian food I think my gut bacteria’s forgotten how to deal with beef. I feel a bit uncomfortable.”

Aaron says nothing.

“Aaron,” Stefan says, taking another step closer, “talk to me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m worried about you!”

“Oh, yeah? You want your little mate back, is that it?”

“I’m just worried.”

“Yeah, well, you fucking saw it, didn’t you?” Aaron leans back on the bed. He’s still cross-legged and his hands are buried in his lap. “Up on the screen. All the shit at school. What they liked to do to me. Want to know a funny secret? That’s just what I reported. I stopped telling on them after a while. No point. No evidence, unless you counted me having bruises or needing to shower in my uniform to get the blood out. They were all little lord fuckfaces and archduke dickheads, anyway. No-one was ever going to punish them. And, no, if you’re thinking, ‘Ah, that’s his origin story, that’s why he’s a bastard!’ No. I threw that in Monica’s face because I could. I don’t actually believe it. It was all just shit on top of shit. I wasn’t a good guy even before I went to that school, and getting victimised there... I kind of thought it was karma for a while, you know?”

“Aaron—”

“You know what I’m thinking about? I’m thinking about how they used to just casually hit me in the corridors. How they chased me down sometimes when they were bored. How they— how they did other stuff. And I’m thinking, what if I’d been a girl back then? What if I’d been a girl, like Monica and Indira and Maria all want to make me, surrounded by those boys? What would they have done? How much further would they have gone? I know what estrogen does, Stef. And I know what happens when you drain a body of testosterone. It’s why trans women don’t win Olympic medals. They’re making us *weak*, Stef. Weak, and then they want to send us out there, changed so we have *no* chance of fighting off people like that.”

“Women don’t have to be weak, Aaron—”

“For fuck’s *sake*, Stefan! You’re giving me that, too? You’re asking me to be fair and even-handed and glug the fucking respect women juice in the middle of all this? Are you actually Indira in a shitload of makeup and a ginger wig?”

“Sorry.”

“Look at me: I was smaller than most of the women here when they kidnapped me, and I’m only going to get weaker. It’s all part of the punishment, that’s what it is. One big power play. It’s the long game, and it ends with us dead, or worse, whatever we do.”

“You don’t think they’re sincere?”

“You *do*? Stef, that’s the stupidest question you’ve ever asked. And, yes, fine, it doesn’t fucking matter if they’re lying or not because tasers, guns, locks, et fucking cetera, *I know*. But there’s other ways to fight. Other ways to hurt them. They want me to take those hormone shots? They’ll have to put me to sleep first. They want me to get another Goserelin implant? They’ll have to tase me. They want me to eat? They’ll have to put a tube in me.”

“That’s your strategy? To make yourself miserable?”

“It’s not a ‘strategy’. It’s a ‘fuck you’. If they’re going to be like those boys at school, if they’re going to hurt me for their own reasons, then they’re going to have to do what those boys did and *hold me down* while they do it. I’m not going to consent. I’m not going to salve their consciences. They’re going to see me screaming when they close their eyes at night; I’m going to make *all* of them into monsters. Just fucking watch me, dude. They can do whatever they want to me. They can grow tits on me, they can cut off my dick; whatever. They’ll just have to live with it.”

“They didn’t say they were going to cut off—”

“*Jesus*, Stefan! Read the fucking room! Monica said, ‘All the way.’ Twice! What do you *think* that means? They’re going to teach us how to paint our faces and wear frilly knickers? No. They’re going to pump us full of hormones until we look like the sisters we never had and then they’re going to cut off our fucking dicks. It’s not just about a chest I can wank with and a bit of swelling any more. It’s real. It’s irreversible. And *don’t* think I haven’t noticed how well you’re taking this.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know why Martin doesn’t care: he’s practically anaesthetised by his own self-loathing. Adam’s probably putting all his energy into praying he wakes up somewhere less fucking psychotic. But you; I don’t get you.” He half-smiles. “Okay, sometimes I do. Sometimes you seem just like me. But other times, like now, it’s like you’re from another planet. Like you’re a Stepford wife. Like you’re standing in front of me as a distraction because you’re in league with the insect queen, and she’s behind me, ready to implant her eggs. Why don’t you *care*, Stef?”

“I care. But what would I do?”

“Don’t give me the whole routine again. I don’t mean that you don’t try to escape. You’re *friends* with these girls, dude! You and Pippa are practically brother and sister, and I’ve seen you smiling and talking with the others. It’s like you *like* it down here, or something.”

He’s right. Stefan’s act has been absolutely terrible. Beatrice echoes in his mind; can’t be the Judas goat if he’s not believable. And if he can’t do that for them, if he can’t *survive Dorley* alongside them, then how will they get through it? Aaron’s already making plans to resist; they really could wash him out.

“You’re so *calm* about everything,” Aaron insists.

But how can he explain himself? How can he position himself as Aaron’s peer once again? How can he sell this?

“They’re going to do everything to you they’re going to do to me, so why don’t you *care*?” Aaron says.

An idea occurs. It starts itching in his mind as soon as he thinks about it; a diseased thought that needs to be expelled. It’s probably the worst thing he could do to Aaron right now. It’s manipulative and it’s cruel.

But it’ll sell it.

“Can I sit down?” he says.

“Sure. Whatever.”

He clears aside the cookies and the water bottles and sits on the bed next to Aaron. Closer than Aaron expected. Close enough for their thighs to touch. Aaron shifts uncomfortably, but doesn't move.

“I'm *not* okay with this, Aaron,” Stefan says, breathing out heavily and slumping his shoulders. “I don't exactly understand everything about what they're going to do, but I know enough to know I don't want it. And, yeah, actually, you say I've been talking to the sponsors? This is a big fucking betrayal. They've been talking to me, acting like my friends, all while knowing this was what was coming... It's *sick*.” It's not hard to spit the word. “Maybe they think we can all be gal pals after, or something. I don't know. But what I do know is, I can keep going. I always keep going. I'm *good* at keeping going, Aaron. I've been doing it all my life. All I need is a reason.” He leans back on the bed, shoulders against the wall, hands cupped in his lap. He wants to seem open and honest. Nothing to hide. “When I was a kid and I was getting bullied, spending time at home was my reason. When Melissa disappeared, being strong for Russ was my reason. And when my friendship with *him* fell apart, studying was my reason, to get to Saints. And when I was lonely at Saints, graduating and getting a good job was my reason. I've always had a reason to keep going, and I always make sure I do. Because if I don't have a reason, if I don't *find* a reason, I don't know what I'll do.”

“So,” Aaron says, leaning back, matching Stefan's pose, “what's your reason now? What's a good enough incentive to keep going when those girlboss psychos are getting ready to castrate you?”

Aaron's looking at him, so Stefan looks back. Holds it. Two, three, four seconds. Five. Aaron opens his mouth, and Stefan pre-emptively interrupts, looking away as he does so.

“You,” Stefan says. “You're my reason.”

* * *

It would have been nice if it'd gone another way. If Aaron had accepted Stefan's affection. If they'd hugged it out. If they'd even, Stefan has to admit to himself in the most guarded corner of his mind, kissed. If Aaron hadn't recoiled from him, hadn't pushed him off the bed. Hadn't thrown cookies and water bottles and pillows at him until he left.

Hadn't screamed ugly words down the corridor until Stefan burst into the common area and slammed the doors shut, quieting him.

But he bought it.

Stefan's okay with being forcibly transitioned because he's fallen for one of the boys suffering alongside him? An incredibly believable lie, it turns out.

Indira and Edy come through from the dining room and pull him back up off the sofa. One hand in each of theirs, they lead him out of the common room, up the stairs, past the security room. Through that cavernous dining hall. Into the kitchen, where he spoke with Beatrice, long ago. Pippa, Christine and Abby are there, Pippa kicking her chair back and almost running for him as soon as he comes into view. Indira and Edy hand him off to her, and he falls into her arms.

She holds him until the tears stop.

Gentle hands help him into a chair and he sits, leans both arms on the kitchen table, and wipes ineffectually at his eyes until someone — Abby, he thinks — passes him a box of tissues.

"I'm so sorry, Stef," Pippa whispers, sitting down next to him and rubbing the back of his neck.

Indira puts a phone on the table, the view from one of Aaron's room cameras on the screen. "He's eating," she says. "Cereal bars. You broke his resolve. He's eating. You helped him."

"You did amazingly, Stef," Christine says, taking a hand and massaging his knuckles.

"Here," Paige says, passing a mug around, through Abby's hands and Christine's and onto the table in front of Stefan. Hot chocolate. Marshmallow. He threads his free fingers through the handle and drinks.

"He'll be okay," Indira says, sitting down opposite and smiling.

"And so will you," Abby says.

He blows on his hot chocolate. The reflected heat is nice, and eases the soreness around his eyes and the salt-dry skin on his cheeks. He imagines he's red all over, his fair and lightly freckled complexion burning.

"I hope so," he says.

"You *will*," Pippa says.

"We're all here for you," Christine says.

"Forget what Aunt Bea asked of you," Paige says. She's still standing by the microwave, where she heated the milk, and looking down at him with crossed arms. "Don't burn yourself out trying to help people who don't want to be helped."

"That's our job," Indira says.

"I *want* to help him, though," Stefan says,

"And you did. He's eating. He'll get through this. And," Indira adds, glancing at Edy, "just because we don't *want* to strap him down, doesn't mean we won't, if we have to. He's only hurting himself."

"And he won't do that forever," Christine says. "He reminds me of me, a little. After the orchid. He'll work it out."

Even if it gets worse for him before it gets better, it'll *get* better."

It's still a little alarming to remember that they're *all* in on it.

One of the other sponsors — someone attached to the second or third year, someone he's seen around in ancillary roles downstairs but doesn't know by name — passes through the kitchen on her way out, and smiles at him as she goes. Another product of Dorley. Another woman who might once have been strapped down, been made to drink water, been made to eat, been made to accept injections. Been mutilated. Another one who is, like the rest, in on it.

Another one who's *happy* now.

Aaron, throwing things, sending him away, rejecting him. Rejecting his help and, yes, his affection. Screw him. There's too much evidence casually walking the halls of Dorley that says he'll be okay, eventually. That he'll live, in some form or other. And that's all that matters. Stefan can't spend every waking minute worrying about him.

He wipes his eyes again, and drinks his hot chocolate.

* * *

The girls slowly scatter, Christine and Paige up to Christine's room — "You should drop by some time," Christine said on her way out, "and I'll show you the view from the second floor." — Abby out on some errand, and Indira back down to the security room, to keep an eye on Aaron and Adam and to link up with Monica and the others.

Edy sits down next to him, when it's just the two of them left in the kitchen. "We were going to take you down, too," she

says, “to meet with Monica and watch the footage of the second disclosure, get your thoughts on it, but I think that can wait, don’t you?”

He nods. it’s about all he has the energy for; he’s emptied out, exhausted from stress, from crying, from Aaron. Edy gets him some coffee and toasts him a bagel, and eats with him. Various other women pass through the kitchen as he eats. Two of them, a pair of girls named Faye and Rebecca, tell him how exciting it is to have him around, and ask him if Christine’s a good dancer; he has to admit that at the party where they met they mainly drank, smoked, and wandered around a half-complete building site together.

“That’s cool, too,” Faye says.

“Say hi to Christine from us when you see her next,” Rebecca says, as their sponsor collects them and escorts them out of the kitchen and into the main hall. Edy explains that, as second years, they don’t yet have the run of the place.

“But they seem so... normal,” he says.

“You should have seen them a month ago,” Edy says. “This place is nominally a dorm for adult students, but sometimes it’s like a hostel for horny adolescents.”

He finishes his bagel and coffee, and cleans his face with the moist wipe Edy offers.

“Aaron,” she says. “You love him, don’t you?”

He screws up the wipe and drops it onto the empty plate. “I don’t know,” he says. “Maybe. Maybe not. I feel... protective of him. Despite what I saw on the screen today. Despite everything.”

“Don’t over-analyse it. Lots of us formed attachments down there. And, with only a few exceptions, none of us were exactly great people, either. It’s okay to love a bastard, Stef. Here, bastards *reform*.”

“Why do I like *him*, though?” Of all people, of everyone he’s ever met, why Aaron? He’s been chewing on that along

with his bagel, and come up with nothing.

“Why Maria, for me?” Edy leans on her wrist, smiling wistfully. “I’ve been here a long time, Stef. On and off. Known Maria longer than I’ve been a woman. And, my goodness, we *weren’t* friends to begin with. Emphatically not. I was one of Aunt Bea’s first, you know. Things were still a bit rough, back then. I spent eighteen months in the basement, under Maria and Bea’s authority. Had rather a hard time. So, even after I graduated, I avoided her. Through my first sponsorship I mostly interacted with her by text message. And when I got restless and left, back in 2013, I didn’t even say goodbye. I just left. Did my resignation by phone. But in the end, I came back. I missed this place. And why wouldn’t I?” She makes a show of looking around the kitchen, taking in microwave, food processor, AGA. “We have *all* the fancy equipment.” She sighs. “When I got back, things were different. More relaxed. *Nicer*. And it had been so long since she was the face of my rehabilitation that I couldn’t see her that way any more. That’s when I finally started talking to her properly.” Edy’s staring into the distance, now; into memory. “She apologised. I told her it wasn’t necessary. I told her I did things out there, out in the world, as Edith, that I never could have done before. Had experiences I never could have had. I thanked her, and that was the first time we so much as hugged. But it still took us until this year to get together. It was just, finally, the right time for it. We were both ready. And sometimes that’s all it is: it’s the right time, it’s the right place, and it’s the right person — no matter how unlikely any of those seem — and you fall in love.”

“Maybe,” he says again.

“Do you think your affection for him will survive the changes he’s going to go through?”

“I’m more worried *he* won’t survive.”

“He will,” Edy says. “He’ll live, and he’ll be a woman. Are you okay with that?”

“For his sake? No. Never in a million years will I be okay with that.”

“And if he comes to accept it? To embrace it? Like I did?”

Stef sighs. Imagines, once again, Aaron in a year’s time. It’s difficult; he can’t get around the idea that he won’t make it, that he’ll wash out, that he’ll be one of Dorley’s check marks in the failure column.

“I still don’t understand how you lot work,” he says, “even though you all keep taking a run at explaining it to me. But, yeah, I get what you’re asking. And I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Come on,” Edy says, standing, pushing her chair back, and holding out her hand for Stefan. “Maria wants to see you.”

“Because of today?” he says.

“She just wants to touch base.” Edy rolls her eyes. “*And* she’s a compulsive meddler who is probably watching us right now.” She looks up and blows a kiss at the almost-perfectly disguised camera set into the cornice. “But it’s not because of today, no. You just haven’t had a chance to really talk yet. C’mon.”

Stefan consents to be dragged out of his chair, and as Edy lets go of his hand she spins around and scrutinises him, screwing up one eye and grinning. “Your changes are well underway, Stef,” she says. “And not just on your chest. Have a look at your face, later.” She takes a step back. “Have a look at your whole body.”

“That’s something I prefer not to do.”

“Not for long!” Edy replies, and grabs his hand again, suddenly energetic. She pulls him along, not through the double doors into the hallway like he expected, but back through the dining hall and into a corridor on the other side. There’s a staircase at the back of the building, and as they ascend he catches glimpses of the woods through circular windows. He laughs: on one side of Dorley Hall there’s the university, more built up every year, full of activity even at night, and on the other side, only silent trees. He thinks of

home, of the suburbs that end at the street he used to live on with his family and Melissa and Russ. The little places they would escape to, to study, to talk. A little piece of safety, before Melissa came here and Russ stopped talking to him and his parents moved away.

Careful, Stef. You don't want this place to start feeling like home.

Edy leads him off the stairs and into an L-shaped corridor with frosted glass doors at either end; an isolated space, a small section cut away from the rest of the third floor. Christine said that ordinary students, who have nothing to do with the programme and no idea what happens in their dorm's basement, live up here; on the other side of those locked doors, no doubt.

“My room,” Edy says, pointing. “Monica's, Tabby's. Aunt Bea's down on first and the rest of the sponsors are scattered all over the place, but we're the oldest so we get the nicest rooms. And here—” with ceremony she opens the door in front of them, “—is Maria's flat. And my home away from home,” she adds in a whisper.

“I can hear you gossiping, Edith,” Maria says.

“I'm not gossiping! I'm being informative.”

Maria's flat is larger than Stefan expected. The main room is laid out as a bedsit, with a large bed on the left — which contains Maria — and a living and study area on the right. An open arch on the nearest wall leads to a kitchen and against the far wall, on the other side of the bed, doors open into what looks like a utility room — she has her own washing machine! decadence! — and a bathroom.

“Hi, Stef,” Maria says. As Stefan approaches the bed and sits in the office chair Edy directs him to, he notices her eyes are sharp and her smile steady. Good. Maybe this view will replace the one of her head hitting the floor in his dreams.

“Hi,” he says, returning her smile. “Um. Nice place.” There's a framed picture up in the utility room, above the

toilet, and he can almost make it out, but the light from Maria's bedside lamp reflects off the glass and obliterates the image. Edy, when she sits down on the other side of the bed, reaches behind her and quietly closes the door.

Right. It's probably not polite to stare at a woman's toilet. Especially if she has, second only to Beatrice herself, the power of life and death over you. Double especially if she's convalescing.

"I wanted to touch base," Maria says, "and— hey!" She makes a grab for the laptop which Edy, taking advantage of her distraction, has snatched off her lap.

"No work!" Edy says, holding the computer out of reach.

"I was just checking, Ede."

"You were meddling. Everything's fine."

"What's this about Aaron hiding in his room? What's Indira doing about it? Monica?"

"Ignore her, Stef. She's just being smug that it took three of us to take over her duties. Which I have, since I got back—" Edy wags a finger at Maria, "—been *trying* to imply means she's been overworked this whole time!"

"I was thinking of getting him up on the intercom—"

"No."

"I just want to check in with him."

"No!"

"Fine." Maria dismisses Edy, turning away from her with only the barest hint of a smirk. Edy rolls her eyes, places the laptop sufficiently far out of reach, and heads over to the kitchen area. "How are you, Stef?" Maria says.

"Um," he says. How *is* he? "A bit shaken. I didn't think Aaron would take it so hard. After all, he adapted to the, uh, the chest thing pretty quickly."

“It’s always different after disclosure,” Edy says, from the kitchen. She pours water from a filter jug into a kettle.

“The fact that it’s permanent is a shock to the system,” Maria says. “An intentional one, I should say. And the first of many.”

“Seems a little cruel,” Stefan says, “to drop it on them and just let them deal.”

Maria shrugs. “Don’t forget, we’re not just changing them physically. We’re changing them mentally, too. Helping them become better people.”

“At the point of a taser.” Stefan can’t help saying it.

“The process isn’t pleasant,” Maria says. “But it works.”

“So everyone keeps saying. And I know I don’t have to like it. I just have to be the Judas goat.”

“About that...” Maria leans forward and fluffs up some of the pillows behind her, to better support her head as she sits up. “Auntie didn’t make the greatest of impressions on you, I know. We’ve asked her to back off. Leave you alone. For a while.”

“‘We’?”

“Pippa and me. With reinforcements from Christine, Abby, Indira... You’ve got quite the fan club up here. Bea... She tries, she really does. But she’s had a rough life, and her instincts aren’t always the most helpful. She believes in protection above all else. It can make her lose sight of her ideals, make her forget who we *should* be protecting, because it’s not just ourselves.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m *not* saying, ‘don’t be the Judas goat.’ If you’re going to be down there, you’re going to be transitioning alongside the others, and you’re going to be around them all the time; it’s not practical to pretend to be horrified by everything all the time, and I hope you won’t be offended if I say your acting skills are in need of development.”

“No argument there.”

“What I’m saying—” she glances at Edy, who is pouring tea from a pot into three mugs, “—is that you should have the chance to get out of there. Permanently.”

“Do you have permission for that, babe?” Edy says.

“Nope!” Maria says, smacking her lips with satisfaction on the plosive. “My plan is to move fast and break things.”

“Please don’t move fast, Maria, not in your condition. Stef? Milk and sugar?”

“Um, just milk, please,” Stefan says, and turns back to Maria. “What do you mean, ‘get out of there’?”

“I mean,” Maria says, accepting a mug from Edy and wrapping her fingers around it, “that we can pretend to wash you out. It wouldn’t be hard to make it nice and believable for the boys. We get you a room somewhere in the building — on the first or second floors, which are secure — and you can have a normal, boring transition, away from all the chaos downstairs.”

“You think Aunt Bea would go for that?” Edy says. She passes Stefan a mug — it’s just about cool enough to hold; she added a lot of milk — and takes her own around to her chair on the other side of the bed.

Maria juts out her lower lip like a pouting child, and says, “Yes, of course! Because I have a head injury! I bet I could ask her for my own helicopter and she’d be texting Elle for the funds before the evening’s out. I could probably get two if I started dripping blood again.”

Edy reaches out and gently rubs Maria’s head, over the bandana-style bandage. “What did I tell you about dark jokes?”

Maria grabs Edy’s wrist and strokes her hand with her thumb. “That I should try to cut down?”

“Um,” Stefan says, unwilling to interrupt them but needing rather urgently to make his point. “It’s nice to be invited up

here, but... what about Aaron? What are we going to do about him?"

Edy frowns. "Didn't he reject you pretty roundly, earlier?"

"Doesn't mean I'm not still fond of him. Doesn't mean I want him to struggle with all this. And he will: he doesn't get on with any of the other boys. He thinks Will's a wanker and he thinks Adam's a weirdo and he *hates* Martin. And Raph and Ollie, unless they've become very different people over the last couple of days, are actively antagonistic towards him. Not only that, but he's got a history with being stuck in an environment he can't leave with a bunch of boys. Boarding school was basically hell for him, and I know that because I'm *literally* the only one he's opened up to." Stefan shrugs. "And, honestly? If he's wary of me for a while, after what happened —" *Don't think about it, Stef*, "—then it makes it easier for me to be objective. To help him without dying of guilt."

"You think you can do that? Stay down there, be around him; around all of them? You were having a pretty hard time, before."

He takes a sip of tea. The mug says, amid stylised clipart of dresses, *If you lived here you'd be a girl by now*. Of course it does. "I can back off. Let Indira mostly interact with him. She can do the sponsor stuff, the day-to-day stuff. Force-feed him if she needs to, even. But I'm *not* leaving him all on his own. Even if he never speaks to me again, it'll be better for him just to see me dealing with it. There needs to be someone down there, someone he doesn't h—" Stefan swallows against the lump in his throat and tries again, "—someone he doesn't hate, so he can see it's *possible* to cope with what's coming. I couldn't live with myself if I abandoned him." He shrugs, pretending a greater indifference than he feels; it would be *so* nice to turn his back on everything and transition like a normal girl, up here somewhere. "So I'm staying. Sorry."

Maria nods. "Then let us know if there's anything we can do to help," she says. "When we say you're one of us, now, we mean it, and we support our own."

“I mean,” Stefan says, looking around, “time away from the basement is nice.”

“Yes,” Maria says, “it really is.” She drinks her tea and scrutinises him. Her mug says, in large, red letters, *Gone Feminisin*, but the caricature of a fisherwoman is mostly hidden by Maria’s fingers. Which is a good thing; Stefan doesn’t especially want to see what’s hooked on the end of the cartoon fishing rod. “Have you given any thought to your name?”

“Um. What do you mean?”

“Do you intend to keep going by Stef — which would, I suppose, mean picking some variant of Stephanie — or will you switch it out for something different?”

Stefan laughs. “I haven’t given it much thought. I kind of like being Stef, I think.”

“Well, nothing’s set in stone. Don’t think that just because we’ve got used to calling you one thing, we can’t switch. We’ve all done it.”

“Monica’s on her third name,” Edy says.

“To be honest,” Stefan says, “it’s a little difficult to think about. I can’t really imagine who I’ll be after all this. Feeling like a girl... It’s hard. Difficult to get a hold on, you know?”

“You’re still having problems with dysphoria?” Maria asks, bluntly. He nods stiffly, tensing up just at the mention of it, and as she goes quiet, biting her lip, clearly thinking about something, he forces himself to look around the room again, to give himself something else to concentrate on. He finds nothing new but he describes it all to himself in detail anyway, reviving an old game he used to play in class just so he can’t think too hard about his answer to Maria’s question. Yes, he still has problems with dysphoria, thank you, Maria; yes, when he tries to think of himself as the woman he’s *supposed* to be he finds himself almost unable to move, becoming so paralysed by even the tiniest sensations that any motion might prompt drastic action. He’s become used to waiting these

feelings out, or chasing them away by forcing himself to think about something else, anything else, no matter how trivial.

The kettle in the kitchen: it's bright red and has an oddly geometric design. It's not what *he* thinks of when he pictures the platonic kettle; his would be shorter, rounded off, and in an earthy, homely colour. Dark green, perhaps...

“Stef?”

Someone's trying to get his attention. Edy. She's waving at him. He blinks. Smiles for her. Concentrates on the *now*.

“Can you keep a secret?” Maria asks.

“I'm decent at it.”

“Then can I tell you a story? One I think you might find... interesting?” He nods, wondering what she wants to tell him. “I'm a woman,” she says, “unequivocally and irrevocably. And I was assigned male at birth, like you. Like Edith. But, except in the strictest, most mechanical sense, I'm not really a trans woman. I know some of our girls embrace the label; it's never fit me.” She wiggles a hand back and forth to indicate something like, *it's complicated*. “There's an implied gender trajectory there that just doesn't work. But—” she leans into Edy, who is offering her shoulder for support, “—I understand dysphoria. All too well.”

Edy frowns. “Are you going to tell her what I think you're going to tell her?”

“Yes,” Maria says, rubbing Edy's hand but not taking her eyes off Stefan. “I don't know how much you know of the history of this place, Stef, but Beatrice didn't always run it. She took over fifteen years ago. How she did so is a long story for another time; all you need to know is that, before her, Dorley was run by the self-styled Grandmother. A vicious old bitch for whom this was her sadistic little playground. It was she who transformed me, and her methods were... more brutal than ours.” She passes her mug to Edy and rolls up her sleeve. Rocks her arm left and right in the lamplight. Faint lines criss-cross her forearm all around; without the direct light, they'd

probably be invisible. “My captor, the one who brought me in, she liked to play around the vein. To threaten to make her cuts deadly but to never actually follow through. And she liked to surprise me with it; I’d wake up and she’d be there, with the blade, already cutting. Unlike most of them she didn’t seem to get a sexual thrill out of it; she just enjoyed hurting people. Hurting me, at the time. Many dozens of women and men before me. All of us toys for her pleasure.”

“Women *and* men?” Stefan says, trying and failing to wipe from his mind the image of Maria waking to some faceless torturer carving into her. Despite what she does for a living, Maria’s always seemed gentle, in a pragmatic sort of way; the idea that Will’s assault was merely the latest injustice in a life filled with violence is abhorrent.

“Yes. And *that’s* what’s important here. In the current iteration of the programme, we encourage men — grown boys, really, given their general level of emotional development — to grow into women. To break away from the toxic masculinity that empowered them to abuse others, and which abused them in turn. Yes?”

“I have... quibbles, but sure.”

“Grandmother *emphatically* did not want that. She preferred men in women’s bodies. She believed that for a man to become a woman is the ultimate humiliation — and for many men it absolutely is, which was exciting for someone as titillated by the concept as Grandmother. She *treasured* the man behind the eyes, inhabiting a body he no longer recognised. She saw his panic, his all-consuming self-disgust, and she got off on it. But she discovered — thanks to Bea, actually, and a girl she was close with — that, despite her efforts, womanhood blossomed inside some of us. And so there were the rules, always being refined and adjusted, designed to keep us from becoming the women they made us look like and, when that proved ineffective, designed simply to *force* us to hide it.” The bitterness in her voice, at bay until now, overflows, and she spits her next words through a sneer. “To make us *play along* with their fantasy. We were punished

when we named ourselves or when we treated each other as women, even in private. They even started to hurt us for walking, sitting or standing in ways they viewed as ‘too feminine’, things which once they would have celebrated as humiliations; they got me on that a lot. Rules upon rules upon rules to dictate our behaviour, to keep us male, because if we adapted, it just wasn’t *fun* any more. But we adapted anyway. It was almost fractal, and most definitely farcical: a woman, inside a man, inside a woman.”

The picture of Maria under the thumb of a single torturer, already difficult enough to deal with, is replaced by one of Maria and several other women — Stefan’s mind populates Grandmother’s Dorley Hall with Edy, Monica, Tabby and Jane — trapped in an ever-changing bestiary of cruelty, subject to indignities and violence he’s glad he has difficulty imagining. He stares at Maria, trying to override his mind’s eye with the image of *her*, today, safe and alive, but his eyes keep flicking to her bandaged head, to the ancient scars on her forearm, and he wonders what else might have been done to her and the women she once lived with.

“Stef?” Maria says. While he’s been imagining horrors, she’s been calming herself, and there’s no pain left in her voice now. “If that was too much for you—”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry, Maria.”

“It’s okay, Stef.” She sounds so much like his mum would when he skinned a knee as a kid. Reassuring; loving. Like nothing bad could happen ever again. “Memories fade, even the awful ones. Not completely, and—” she glances at Edy, who rubs her shoulder with an intimate smile, “—sometimes they come back with reinforcements, but, mostly, they’re just memories.”

“Is there anything I can do?” he asks. It sounds idiotic as soon as he says it.

With a quirk of her lip, Maria says, “You’re doing it. You’re here and you’re listening to me. It’s good to tell the

story again. It's... validating to see someone react with—" and she smiles again, "—the appropriate amount of horror."

Grandmother's Dorley. Christ. Aunt's Bea's is the *nice* version.

"How many?" he says, hoarse. "How many people did Grandmother take?"

Maria frowns and Edy clasps her upper arm, comforting her. "You don't want to know," Maria says. "We *do* have the numbers," she continues automatically, eyes unfocused. "Aunt Bea and her people did a lot of digging. We got most of their files. And there were the stubs of police reports and things. Missing persons. Parole records." Her voice grows even more distant. "She looked. She looked for her for *so* long." She shakes her head, fixes Stefan with a glare he wants desperately to escape. "You *don't* want to know. It's not worth the nightmares."

Stefan nods. Nightmares seem inevitable at this point, but he doesn't push. Maria had seemed, if only for a second, even more vulnerable than she had on the floor of the common room. He can't stop himself from asking one more question, though: "Who was she looking for?"

"Hmm?"

"You said she was looking for someone."

"Oh," Maria says, "yes. Valerie. Beatrice's... friend. Valerie didn't escape, unlike Bea. She was taken away, and Bea didn't get out until months after; it's likely she was already dead."

"That's— that's just awful, Maria."

"That's what it was like, back then," Maria says, patting Edy's arm and leaning forward, reinvigorated. "I survived in Grandmother's Dorley by understanding *exactly* what was being done to me and refusing to be broken. Refusing to be ashamed of it. The more they tried to put me back in the role they wanted for me — the scared, cowed man, emasculated and afraid of nothing more than the continued erosion of his

masculinity — the more I embraced my womanhood. I chose a name. I invented a whole new history for myself. I created a new life. I asserted, at every point, no matter how much they cut me, burned me, humiliated me, tortured me, that I am *Maria*, and that their sad, angry little attempts to exercise their rage on me, or entertain their pathetic fetishes, meant nothing.” She leans even closer. “And this is my point, this is why I wanted to tell you all this: I *know* what it is to see a stranger staring back at me when I look in the mirror, Stef. I know what it is to want so completely to escape my own skin that I scream, that I tear at myself, that I throw myself against walls until no unbruised flesh remains. I know what it is to feel like every word spoken to me is meant for the shell I’ve been forced into. I know what it is to speak and to shudder at the sound of my own voice.

“That’s dysphoria, Stef. It’s what they gave to me, it’s the tool they used to try to make me into what they wanted, but it *lies*, Stef. Dysphoria lies. And you can choose *not* to listen. To fight it. Mock it. Assert yourself. *Be* yourself. Because to give in to it, to let it control you, is assuredly as repellent a torture as any I experienced.”

“But,” Stefan says, “I still look and sound like—”

“*Fuck* that, Stef,” Maria says with such vehemence that Stefan almost jumps. “How you look will change. How you sound will change. Everything about you will change. And I *know* how much those things matter, how much they matter to you *right now*, how much the hope of a happy future is difficult to hold on to when you look at yourself and feel... mutilated. But it’s transitory. Your dysphoria wants you to believe that it’s forever, and that’s a lie it will *keep telling you*, making you believe the changes you’re waiting for aren’t happening when they *are*. And you know one of its other lies? It wants you to believe the worst of other people, it wants you to think that it knows what they see when they look at you, but ask *any* of us who we see and we’ll all tell you the same: we see *you*. We see Stef. We see a girl. The girl you were before you got here, the girl you are now; the girl you could not more

obviously be. And we don't see her out of pity, or because we know the way you're going to change; we see her because she's *there*. She's you. And if *you* can't see her... Well, sorry, but you're outnumbered. You're a fucking girl, Stef."

He doesn't know what to say to that. Doesn't know what to think about it. It feels like too much to fit in his head. A good thing he's sitting down or he'd be on the floor by now; as it is, his knees tremble weakly and his hands grasp uselessly at each other.

"Maria," Edy says, "are you force-feminising her?"

"I think we established that I have only one hammer and a surfeit of nails," she mutters, and then grimaces. "Sorry, Stef; I think I need some rest. Talked a bit too long. Got a bit het up. Just— just fucking claim yourself, will you? You're a woman among women; act like it. Tell your dysphoria the same thing I told mine: *you won't win*. Name it as your enemy and kill it." She closes her eyes. "Ede, can you make sure she gets put on the locks for the stairs, the ground floor, et cetera? And maybe set up a room for her, somewhere she can go to spend time with the other girls? I want her to have some freedom. I want her to feel like she belongs."

"Of course, baby," Edy says, rising and reaching out an arm for Stefan as she rounds the bed. "Get some rest."

"Way ahead of you," Maria whispers.

Stefan accepts Edy's hand, rises out of the chair, and thanks Maria quietly, exchanges goodbyes. Those words, at least, are available to him, the rhythm of small pleasantries something easily recalled.

"You okay, Stef?" Edy asks as she leads him out of the room. He glances behind them and sees Maria settling back in bed, closing her eyes, and then realises she asked him a question.

"Oh," he says, "um, yes. Probably."

"A lot to think about, huh?"

He nods. It's all he can think of to do.

Edy leads him downstairs, past a handful of sponsors eating a late dinner in the dining hall — Tabby jumps up out of her seat to give him a quick hug — and back into the basement. Indira, on duty in the security room, waves, and he waves back, almost overbalancing; he hadn't realised he was quite so tired. But if he still hasn't got his thoughts in order, the journey back downstairs has made them all seem somewhat less immediate and less overwhelming, and he can function well enough to perform minimal self-care.

"You want me to call Pippa?" Edy says, when they reach his room.

"No," he says, "it's okay. I'll probably crash soon. *Long day.*"

"Okay. Sleep well, Stef."

She blows him a kiss as she leaves, and he summons the last of his energy to fetch his toothbrush and toothpaste, throw a robe over his top, and stagger to the bathroom to clean his teeth. He watches himself in the mirror as he does so, a departure from habit, and thinks of Maria, trapped by Grandmother, forced back into a role that no longer fit her, play-acting for sadists. It's a less visceral image this time; it really does help to remember that she's upstairs, in her own flat, surrounded by laptops and silly mugs and her own washing machine, with Edy rushing back to her.

The role that doesn't fit *him* is clear. And Maria's right: he lives in a house full of women who know exactly who he is, who would never treat him the way they would treat a boy. So why *is* he treating himself that way?

Habit?

When he gets back to his room, his computer screen is lit up; a message from Maria. It reads:

I saw you squinting at the print I have up above my toilet. Thought you might get a kick out of it. Tell Pippa, Edy or

Indira if you need anything at all, and remember to put yourself first. Leave the boys to us; just be an example for them.

Attached is an image: an idyllic sunset beach scene, overlaid with the text, in cursive:

One night, a woman had a dream. She dreamed she was walking along the beach with her auntie. Across the sky flashed scenes from the last several months of her life, and for each scene, she noticed two sets of footprints in the sand; one belonged to her, and the other to her auntie.

When the last scene flashed before her, she looked back at the footprints in the sand, and noticed that many times along the path of her life there was only one set of footprints. In the lowest and most difficult parts of her life, it seemed, she walked alone.

“Auntie,” she said, “you said that once I came to you, you’d walk with me all the way. But when I look back at my life, I see that you left me to face my greatest hardships alone.”

“My precious child,” her auntie replied, “I love you and would never leave you. When you see but one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.”

“Thank you, auntie,” the woman said, looking back again and deriving great comfort from the view, until she saw something in the distance, just before the longest stretch of solo footprints. Puzzled, she asked, “Auntie? What are those little lumps in the sand back there?”

“Oh,” her auntie replied, “those are your balls. Sorry about that.”

He doesn't know if it's stress, exhaustion, or the relief that Maria, despite her injuries, despite her horrific history, is still able to send him something so ridiculous, but he has to cover

his mouth to muffle the laughter. He laughs until his throat burns, his chest hurts, and his cheeks ache, and lets the enervation carry him, weak-limbed, to bed.

On his phone he finds a message from Edy, letting him know a room is being set aside for him on the first floor, and that his thumbprint will take him out of the basement and up the back stairs. And one from Indira, thanking him again for helping Aaron. And one from Pippa, joking about their ‘excitingly psychosexual relationship’ and suggesting they meet up tomorrow night in his new first-floor room; he’ll like it, she says, because it’s the only one on the floor apart from Aunt Bea’s flat that has an ensuite. He can shower on his own, guaranteed. Finally, a message from Christine: five hug emoji, a reminder to bug her on Consensus any time he wants, and a sticker that says, *You go girl!*

It really is so much easier, so much more comforting, to find community with the women of Dorley than with the men down here. So what’s stopping him? His embodiment? Changing all the time. Aaron? He can help him without being such a constant presence in his life.

Dysphoria?

If Maria can beat it, so can he.

He remembers himself under the nurse’s hand. Surprises himself with the memory. Doesn’t know why it came up. But it makes sense, doesn’t it? If the nurse was from Grandmother’s time, then she was a part of what happened to Maria. Might even have participated in it. Did Maria stiffen as the nurse examined her, too? Did she, too, try to make herself into an unemotional automaton, a nonconscious machine of meat, just surviving, not experiencing?

He swings out of bed again, energised but aware that these are perhaps the last of his reserves for the day. Borrowing from tomorrow, maybe. He hooks open the wardrobe with his toe, examines himself in the full-length mirror on the inside of the door. Kicks off his trousers, pulls his shirt tight around his body.

He remembers how he looked on the day the nurse was here: pink from burning himself in the shower; hunched and dysphoric after the examination. He's different now to how he was then. He better understands his place here. Better understands the girls here. Better understands what they went through, and what will happen to Aaron and the other boys.

He pulls his t-shirt tighter, exposes his shape fully to the mirror. He was always too thin; money and misery conspired against his appetite. But almost two months of regular meals and one month of estradiol has shaped him, changed him, grown him. He's fleshier in more places than just his chest. His hips are a little rounder — is that why his legs and lower back have been aching recently? — and his belly is a little less flat, skin once taut now relaxing around the faintest suggestion of shape. And his jawline is softer, his cheeks more full. In all cases it's the tiniest hint of change, mere millimetres, but it's enough that his reflection is comfortingly unfamiliar.

They all see him as a girl, do they? Maybe it's time to try it for himself. He closes his eyes, tries to clear his memory and reset his image of himself. He thinks of Maria, the woman within the man within the woman, defiantly spitting at her captors. He thinks of Christine, Paige, Pippa, Indira and Abby, of all of them standing where he now stands, examining themselves in the same mirror. He thinks of Melissa, not as he's seen her in the pictures on the network, the ones he looks at most nights, but as he saw her that first time, nervous and new, at the supermarket where he used to work: a girl, still developing, still learning, but as kind and generous as ever she was.

The bridge of his nose tickles; oh yeah, hair's getting long, too. He blows at it, curling his lip to direct the air, but it keeps falling back into place. He runs a hand through it, smooths it away from his forehead, and suddenly he remembers, years ago, in the old house, his reflection in the dark screen of his phone. Remembers the sharp bones of his cheeks, the waxiness of his adolescent skin, the greasiness of the hair his mother made him cut. How foolish to remember that boy and

think of himself as the same person, unchanged despite the years! How different he is now!

He *is* different, isn't he?

He bites his lip. Still nervous. Afraid that when he opens his eyes, in defiance of all logic, the same boy will glare back at him, the teenager broken by secrets and self-hatred. But he can't stand here forever.

Fuck it. If the women of Dorley can do this, so can he.

He opens his eyes, looks himself up and down, and steps unconsciously back.

It's too much.

It's impossible.

It's unreal.

But there she is: the girl the others all say they can see.

A step forward again. Fingers reaching out, making contact with the glass. Making it real, making it tangible.

"Hi, Stef," she whispers, and the girl in the mirror whispers back.

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FIVE

**ALL THE LITTLE PIECES OF
ME**

2019 DECEMBER 2 — MONDAY

Stef. Stefanie. Stephanie. Stephenie?

There aren't that many variations on the name that she can find, and most of the ones that deviate do so mostly in the unique and creative abuse they can heap on the letter *e*. And she's scrolled through the name list on the network, and hopped onto the web and clicked at random through baby naming websites; nothing. Besides, *Stef* just fits. She can't imagine abandoning it. Adding to it, perhaps, but it's not just that it's a connection to Melissa, it's a connection to her whole past, to her sister, her parents, to Russ, to the memories she made in the little house on a stump of a street on the edge of a city.

It's barely five in the morning but she's up before her alarm again, walking barefoot around the basement. Her room's fine enough — and would still count as the nicest place she's had to call her own in years if not for Maria's recent gift of another bedroom, up on the first floor — but changing her scenery helps her think. The lights are low, with just one spotlight in every four on at one-third brightness, and it's quiet.

She runs an idle finger along the wall of the main corridor, and turns off into the common room. She imagines whichever poor girl pulled the night shift watching her on a screen up in the security room and laughing to herself: Stef's wandering the halls again.

Stef. Stefanie. Stephanie.

The name is hers, belongs to every version of her, so why would she change it? She never expected continuity to be something she desired, something she needed, and she winces as she remembers protesting to Christine that she wanted a clean break from 'this guy' — she'd jabbed a thumb aggressively into her chest, back there in the cell with her — before she could even consider adopting a new pronoun, and now, here she is, embracing her womanhood but still claiming the same old name.

You don't have to deserve your gender. It's just your gender.

Seven weeks to internalise such an incredibly simple lesson. No wonder Christine got stressed out with her, way back when! Idiot.

No. She shouldn't torture herself, she decides, and then breaks out into giggles, imagining a deadpan Maria informing her that torture is explicitly not in her job description, that the responsibility of torture merits a considerable pay bump, and Stef's basically an intern.

Stupid Dorley sense of humour. It's wormed its way into her brain.

She leans on the back of one of the couches by the TV, pulls her phone out of a pocket and checks the time. 05:04. Perfect; the automated daily updates will have gone out. She swaps through the sponsor apps, checking for alerts (none) and news (little). Indira's report on Aaron says he spent the night the same way he spent all Sunday: alone in his room, drifting listlessly from sleep to wakefulness and back again; putting on a series of movies and TV shows he clearly isn't watching;

eating the bare minimum; turning away from the cameras to cry.

It's hard to stay away. But Indira's asked her to and so she will, for a little while. At least he's eating, and at least his plan to resist the treatments didn't manifest on Saturday night; he accepted the week's estradiol shot without fuss, in what Indira described in yesterday's report as 'death-glare silence'.

She scrolls around on her phone, twisting the fabric cord around her finger and bumping the frog and elephant against her wrist; already habit, after just one day. Pippa got her a phone case and a braided cord to loop through it, and now Stef can take her little keepsakes wherever she takes her phone, so long as she's careful to hide the case and its companions from the boys. Technically it's a bit of a risk leaving the case on while out here, in the common room, but who else is going to go for a wander at five in the morning? Who else is going to come out of their room on their own at all, except Martin?

Still. Best not to tarry. Stef kicks off from the couch she's been leaning on and heads back to the bedrooms, pausing in the main doorway and looking down the line.

Aaron's door. One down from hers, on the other side. And she has to pass it on the way to her room, so she can't be blamed for stopping to listen for a moment.

Steady breathing, just about audible. He's sleeping, good; the confirmation silences the violent thought that's been coming to her every so often since he rejected her: that he might hurt himself badly enough and quickly enough that no-one could save him. She keeps listening to the breaths: in and out, in and out, with a grumble on the inhalation that suggests he's sleeping on his back.

She could have checked on the cameras — and she does, several times a day — but this is more real.

Her fingers trace patterns on the door. Maria and the sponsors gave her a lot of trust when they opened up her access. Her thumb opens almost every lock between Aaron

and freedom, and it probably wouldn't take *too* much to get through the kitchen doors, especially if they worked together. She could just... take him. And, at this time in the morning, there's probably only the one night-shift girl in the security room, sleepy and slow, and Stef has a taser. They could be out the front door before anyone else caught on.

A list of names and dates on a screen.

He needs to change. Forget the other consequences — Dorley exposed, Pippa and Christine and the rest of them taken away, Stef left once again at the languid mercy of the NHS — Aaron would go back to being the person he was before all this. The piece of shit she remembers from her first day here, who made jokes about the women Raph hurt and the man Martin killed.

And he rejected her. Let's not forget that.

She checks to make sure he's still breathing like he's asleep — he is — and forces herself to walk away, sparing a sheepish glance at the camera as she does so. The sponsors all seem to know how she feels, anyway.

Back in her room, she slumps onto her bed, lies on her back, scrolls around on her phone. Another day to fill. Without Aaron, she's been at a loose end. Adam's been leaving his room in Edy's company only, and does nothing but stare at the television, eat whatever's put in front of him and ignore all attempts at conversation. And Martin? She spent an hour Sunday morning going over the pamphlets with him, discussing the mechanics of transition and watching him absorb the information with the dispassionate acceptance of someone looking over a utility bill that's come to the exact amount expected. It's almost as if the man isn't *there* when she talks to him; he'll answer questions, even hold a coherent conversation, but that's about it. If somehow she managed to stab him somewhere sensitive with a plastic fork, he'd probably do nothing more than coldly examine weapon and wound, and perhaps return the fork. It's like he's decided to

make a head start on becoming a new person by dissolving the old one.

So she spent much of Sunday upstairs, in her *new* room. It's a vast improvement on the one she came back downstairs to sleep in, that's for sure: it's on the corner, which explains its funny shape and why it's large enough to have its own ensuite, and looks out both onto the woods and the edge of campus. Pippa told her the wardrobe and drawers have been stocked with clothes in roughly her size, but Stef wasn't brave enough yesterday to check, fearing for the fragility of her newly embraced womanhood.

After lunch, Christine gave Stef her first voice training lesson. "I'm the best in my year," she'd said, standing up straight and bullying Stef until she did so, too, and favouring her with a song in near-perfect soprano.

"Were you a choir boy?" Stef had asked, before the inappropriateness of the question occurred to her, but Christine wasn't offended, instead flicking him lightly in the shoulder and impishly shaking her head.

"We weren't religious, and I think if I'd set foot in a church I'd have melted like the witch from *The Wizard of Oz*. I've just had a lot of practice." She smirked at him. "Which I'm going to have a lot of fun inflicting on you. Now, chin up! Breathe in; in the *chest*, not the shoulders! And give me an *Aaaaah*."

Stef gave her an awful lot of *Aaaaahs*.

When they broke for dinner — and to make time for Christine's obvious pining for Paige — she praised Stef's progress. "You're speaking from the right place," she said, "*most* of the time. And your projection isn't bad! So practise every day, up here. It's soundproofed! All the rooms on first are, or Aunt Bea would have gone crazy by now. Just make sure you slip back into your boy voice when you go back downstairs or you'll give the guys a hell of a shock. You'll be able to use them both side by side for now, as long as you keep

up the practice, but you'll probably only see a major pitch lift when you abandon your old voice for good."

"So I won't be able to sound like a girl?"

"Of course you will! Lots of women have deeper voices, and if you don't want to lift your pitch, that's fine, too; you're really not that much lower than Pippa. I'm just saying, you won't be able to do this—" and she slipped briefly into a descant *do-re-mi*, "—until you stop pretending to be a boy altogether. Which, yes, I know, is horrible, but it was you who wanted to stay down there."

"Sometimes," she'd said, "I'm an idiot."

"Oh! You noticed!"

Stef chased her out of the room for that.

Stephanie.

She likes that one. Likes the *ph*. More different from her old name than *Stefanie*. Maybe she'll try it out for a bit, see how it fits. Like Maria said, her first choice doesn't have to be her only choice.

The quiet click of her bedroom door startles her, but only enough that she drops her phone on her chest and winces; every time she thinks her nipples have become as sensitive as they're going to get, they find more spare nerve endings lying around. She sits all the way up and greets her fake sponsor with a smile.

"Hi," Pippa whispers, shutting the door and tiptoeing into the middle of the room. "Maria wants you at the briefing this morning, but it's not for a while and I woke up early and I was kinda bored and I thought maybe we could break the seal on your new wardrobe. Get you in something other than a hoodie for a change. You don't have to, though," she adds, frowning. "It's just a suggestion. I'd never want to push you. Actually, I really *shouldn't* push you. I was reading that you need to let trans girls take things at their own—"

“Pip,” Stef says, interrupting her before she builds up too much steam, “it’s fine. It’s a good idea, and I could do with a shower, anyway.”

They don’t talk again until they’re out of the basement and ascending. Stef, out of curiosity, pokes her head into the security room as they pass but the woman in there is someone she doesn’t really know; the woman smiles and waves, anyway, looking exactly as bored and tired as Stef would expect from someone on the night shift. Nell, she thinks she’s called. Nell returns to her ebook and Stef and Pippa continue on up, taking the back stairs to the first floor and Stef’s other, nicer, more above-ground bedroom.

When she’s done showering she finds Pippa arranging a selection of outfits on the bed.

“I was thinking modest, but flattering,” Pippa explains, and starts explaining her logic for each choice. Stef, as she does so, can’t help but notice the full set of underwear draped over the back of the chair: sporty, light grey, and with some padding in the bra. That’s fine; it’s not like she has much to fill it out with, otherwise.

She’d always thought her first time wearing appropriate underwear would be revelatory somehow, but the bra and knickers slip on easily, fit comfortably, and are thoroughly unexciting. Pippa’s visibly pleased with how she looks in them, though, which prompts a blush from Stef she can’t control.

“What’s up?” Pippa says, when Stef looks away.

“Um,” Stef says, flapping a hand, unable to find the words she needs.

“If we’re going too fast, we can stop.”

“It’s not that. It’s, um...” She closes her eyes, places her hands on her belly, and runs through Christine’s breathing exercises. Pippa, bless her, gives her the time. Once calmed, Stef opens her eyes, meets Pippa’s gaze, and does her best to explain. “When you looked at me... it felt different. Not bad

different. Or weird different. I felt... warm? Like, okay, so you've obviously seen me naked, right?"

"Yeah," Pippa says darkly.

"Not your fault!" Stef says quickly. "Sponsor crap! But you've seen me without anything on. And you've seen me with all the jogging crap we have downstairs on. But this is the first time you've seen me in, well, *girls' clothes*. And I know it's just a bra and stuff and it's like the simplest thing ever but, Pippa, they're really comfortable, and when you looked at me it was like I knew you were looking at *me*, the me I want to be when I'm looked at, and—"

Pippa collides with her, hugs her tight, and when Stef hugs her back, Pippa sniffs, loud and liquid, and says, "I love this for you, Stef."

They separate, so Pippa can blow her nose, which she does enviably delicately, and then it's back to work. Between them they choose a loose blue dress — "It's perfect for you, Stef: it's right opposite your hair on the colour wheel!" — with a skirt just past the knee and a wide belt in matching colours, to give her developing waist a bit of help. Pippa suggests leggings underneath, for confidence and to keep out the cold, and brushes Stef's hair, teasing the locks between her fingers and occasionally blasting it with spray, while Stef fiddles with the belt, finding a comfortable compromise between borrowing a figure from it and having it pinch the tops of her hips.

She can't resist a little spin.

Pippa giggles and bounces over for another hug. "Stef, you look wonderful!" She turns Stef to face the mirror, the one she's been avoiding since she got up here, and Stef takes in her worst-case scenario: sharing a reflection with Pippa, one of the most beautiful women she's ever met.

Actually: not awful! Sure, there's fuzz she missed when she buzzed her face, and her hair is still a lot shorter than she'd like, and she still looks *mostly* the way she did when she first

got to Dorley, but mostly isn't entirely, and with a dress and a positive attitude she isn't the disgusting troglodyte she feared she might be.

The girl in the mirror is still there.

Shyly she turns back to Pippa. "Um," she says, intensely aware of the blush once again flowering on her cheeks, "can you call me Stephanie?"

"I'd be delighted!" Pippa says, her excitement obvious and infectious. "Stephanie."

Stef turns back to the mirror and confirms the blush has more or less taken over her face. "I just want to try it," she says quietly.

"You can try it all you want, Stephanie," Pippa says. "You have *so* much time to find yourself."

The slight frown that pricks at Pippa's eyebrows is suddenly all Stef can think about, and she breaks out of Pippa's grip and drops hard onto the end of the bed, avoiding the rejected outfits, tucking her legs under herself. Making herself small. "I'm sorry," she says.

Pippa's frown deepens. "I don't understand. What are you apologising for?"

A heavy breath controls her burgeoning shame. "It's like you said. I have all this time. *I* have it. This place, Dorley, it was always this big gift-wrapped present that I just needed to fake being a boy a little while longer to get, but now..." Another deep breath. The buds of her breasts move inside the bra; the cushioning feels good. "Shit, even this!" She tugs at the strap of her bra, pulling it out from under the neckline of her dress. "Free clothes, free underwear, and everyone's falling over themselves to be nice to me!" She risks a look at Pippa; she's still confused. "I've been here seven weeks. And I can't stop thinking about *you* at seven weeks. Or Christine, or Paige, or Indira, or Tabby... Didn't you say your sponsor basically abused you—?"

“Stef!” Pippa says sharply, and stands right in front, makes herself impossible to ignore. “Stephanie. You’re the *only* one making that comparison, I promise. I *don’t* resent you for getting what you need from this place; no-one does.”

“That’s not what I mean! They *hurt* you, Pip. And here I am, beneficiary of all the things they hurt you *with*—”

“Stephanie,” Pippa says, emphasising the final vowel. She squats down on her knees and places her hands in Stef’s lap. “You need to stop thinking of it that way. I mean,” she adds, smiling, “if you’re worried about me, just remember, I was expecting to spend the whole year with someone like Raph or Ollie. You’re the biggest and best surprise I ever had.”

“But—”

“No buts! Never forget: I was brought here because I needed help. And you *came* here because you needed help. And this place? It helped me. It’s helping you. Just because the medicine stung a little when it went down for me doesn’t mean I regret being brought here.”

“‘Stung a little’?” Stef says. “I *saw* Declan, after three strikes.”

“They never did that to me. Or Christine, or Paige, or basically anyone who’s still here. That was... drastic measures.” She reaches up for Stef’s cheek, strokes the downy hairs below her eyes. “Stephanie. You need this. I needed *this* —” she nods down at herself, “—and I’ll never stop being glad I got it. We all feel the same, and we’re *all* glad to see you getting what you need. Okay?”

Stef nods slowly. “Okay. Sorry. I just... I like you a lot, and I hate to think of you in pain. You’re like, um...” She doesn’t want to say it. It’s embarrassing.

“I’m like the older sister you never had?” Pippa guesses. Stef nods. “And that’s how it *should* be. And don’t worry about my old self, and what had to happen to make *him* into *me*. He’s still here.” She taps her heart. “At least, the parts of

him worth keeping are. And he's happy — *I'm* happy — to be here, right now, with you.”

It's foolish, always thinking about who the girls around her used to be, when they themselves would rather she see them as they are. When they've repeatedly asked her to do so! Stef nods again, and together they rise and embrace, and she concentrates on Pippa, the woman in her arms, and nothing else. There's a moment's idiot guilt, and then it's gone, and Stef luxuriates in the warmth of her sister.

“Better?” Pippa says, pulling away.

“Yeah.”

“Then how about trying some makeup?”

Without waiting for an answer, Pippa grabs her wrist and drags her over to the vanity. Stef lets herself be sat down, but fidgets. “You don't think I'll look silly?”

“Why?” Pippa asks. “Are you saying I suck at this?”

Stef snorts. Pippa's eye makeup was the first thing she ever noticed about her. “No,” she says patiently, “I think I'm very good at looking silly.”

“But you're already so pretty, Stephanie,” Pippa says, dragging a stool over and sitting down next to her. “And you're only going to get prettier.”

She avoids her face in the mirror. “I look so masculine, though. Less than I did, I guess, enough for me to see—”

“*Stephanie*,” Pippa says severely, threatening Stef with — Stef squints at the label — a tube of primer.

“Yes?”

“You're a pretty girl.” She uncaps the primer. “Deal with it.”

“I just can't see it. I can see a girl, if I try, but a pretty one? No.”

“Well then,” Pippa says, smearing clear gel onto her fingertips, “maybe we need to get you some *glasses*, pretty girl.”

* * *

She’s never wanted to see the place before. Actively avoided it, despite how large it looms in Vicky’s history. Because it’s *Vicky’s place*. She doesn’t know what happened to her while she lived here, has never wanted to push for that knowledge, and Vicky’s never offered it. All she knows is that Dorley Hall is part of Vicky’s past, part of the person she was before they met, part of how she got hurt. Part of what makes the love of Lorna’s life whimper in the dark.

It’s also part of the lies. The lies which keep unravelling, splitting off into more lies as they come apart, tearing at the seams, slowly revealing... something. Lorna doesn’t know what it is yet, but the shape of it is becoming clear. *Everything* she can actually verify about Vicky’s life is from the time after she left Dorley Hall, with the odd snippet from when she still lived there. As for her life before the Hall...

Vicky’s on file at the school in Thelingford, but the teacher Lorna spoke to, slipping her name in among a dozen others, making suggestions for a reunion, didn’t remember her. Vicky’s parents, both only children, died together in an accident. The only childhood friend who responded to Lorna’s contact on Facebook did so with a terse message about some falling-out that soured their relationship for life, and signed off with a request to have her information deleted from Lorna’s phone.

And then there’s the time Vicky spent travelling, explained as a need to get away after the death of her parents. Vicky has stories of couch-surfing around Australia, working on her tan

and taking cash jobs in bars, but not a single friend from that time has ever got in touch. And the idea of Vicky, who isn't exactly an introvert but who is practically the definition of careful, sensible and diligent, throwing everything away to bum around a country half a world away has never quite fit.

Finally, Dorley Hall. Where everything converges. The place where she met her closest friends — where she met *all* the friends she has that she didn't meet through Lorna — and yet the place she doesn't like to talk about.

It's also the place Vicky goes back to a lot, despite claiming to hate it. To see her friends, to bum free food off the kitchen, and to get Lorna's estradiol from some girl who also likes her secrecy. And that girl is Lorna's natural next target. Sure, she doesn't know her name, but she does know another girl who still lives in Dorley Hall, who is best friends with Vicky, and who recently has acquired a mysterious trans woman friend who probably would quite like some estradiol of her own...

Lorna works hard to be nice to Christine. It's not that the girl is unlikeable — quite the opposite — but it's difficult not to feel jealous. Christine's pretty, she's sweet, and she's never given Lorna the look Victoria sometimes gives her, like she feels sorry for her. Like she wants to wrap her in cotton and protect her from the world; which, yes, very kind, but Lorna doesn't want pity. Besides, Christine was there for some of the hardest parts of Vicky's life. Something to be jealous of, sure, but it also makes Christine a keeper of secrets. Secrets Lorna needs.

It's bright and clear but cold, and it's early enough that the sun is barely grazing the university grounds. Dorley Hall skulks in the half-light, a brick monstrosity barely restrained by vines that climb from basement to rooftop, as if the earth itself is trying to drag it under. Vicky said it used to be a private hospital, the sort of place you got sent if you were an aristocratic woman who happened to be inappropriately mad or inconveniently self-interested, and it shows. Lorna, approaching in its shadow, feels as if it might swallow her.

But the entryway is brightly lit, and when she pushes through the double doors into the hall, the wall immediately to her left hosts a battered corkboard covered in the usual paper paraphernalia of dorm life: party fliers, instructions for residents on how to dispose of their garbage, emergency procedures, ads for voice lessons — singing lessons, she assumes — and other such mundanities. Pleasingly ordinary. The locked kitchen doors are unusual, though, as is the fingerprint reader next to the mechanism. Perhaps, out here on the edge of campus, they've found they need to be more security-conscious than they were back in the famously always-open Windsor Tower, Lorna's home for her first year at Saints.

She peers into the windows set into the kitchen doors. At the large table that dominates the room, a Black girl is in conversation with a South Asian girl and a plate of pastries. The Black girl looks irritated and the other girl seems sympathetic. Lorna doesn't want to interrupt, but after a minute it becomes clear that the discussion is still far from a natural break, so she raps on the window and gives an embarrassed wave.

It's the Black girl who gets up. She lets Lorna in with a thumb to a reader on the other side of the door.

Biometrics inside as well as out?

“Hi,” the girl says. Lorna revises her first impression: she's older than she thought; late twenties, at least. Grad student? She looks tired and annoyed, which Lorna takes as evidence for her conclusion.

“Hi,” Lorna says, finally assembling her wits a full second after they would have been useful. “I'm Lorna. Vicky's girlfriend?”

“Hi!” the South Asian girl calls, leaping up from her chair and near-running over to her, only to stop and linger, chastened, about a metre away from Lorna's confused frown. “Sorry. We all know her, is all. We've heard a lot about you. I'm Indira; this is Tabitha.”

“Tabby.” Tabby extends a hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

Lorna takes her hand, noting a slight stress on ‘finally’. Have they all been bugging Vicky to bring her over? Vick’s never mentioned it. “Hi,” she says again, uselessly, and shakes for too long.

This is *so* awkward.

Over Tabby’s shoulder — the girl is tall but Lorna’s taller — she can see another set of double doors, propped open, that lead to a large dining hall and a closed, heavy-looking metal door inset in a concrete arch. She only just has the chance to read the sign — it says *Maintenance* and must, she decides, be a materials-cheap late addition, judging by the extreme contrast to the otherwise well-maintained and consistent aesthetic; she imagines the custodians of this place apoplectic before what looks uncomfortably like a portal to hell, smashed through the wall of their immaculate dining hall, and berating some poor contractor — before Tabby’s head obscures her view.

“Victoria’s not here,” Tabby says, smiling to make it sound less dismissive. “Do you need to leave a message with us, or —?”

“I know!” Lorna says, too quickly. She’s put her finger on the source of her nerves, and it’s not just that she’s in Dorley Hall: if Vicky’s talked to these people about her, they might *know*. And while Lorna’s not exactly stealth, here on campus — impossible to be, when she stands on chairs at rallies with a dozen phone cameras pointed at her — she also likes her perception to be at least somewhat under her control. Out and proud among her peers; play-acting a boring little cis girl when she goes to buy her oat milk. Especially when, as the paranoid voice in her head — the one she hates but nonetheless credits with helping her survive those months when just going to the shops had been a terrifying and almost superhuman exercise of will — insists, she worries she’s far more clocky than she wants to be.

FFS in less than three months. People love to tell her she's beautiful, that she doesn't need it, and she's long used to ignoring them. If you haven't had someone come up to you in the street, block your path, stare at you for twenty-plus seconds and then shout as loud as they can, because they want to see if they can make you jump and they want to hear the noise you make when you do, then you don't get to have an opinion. Appearance is safety, and right now, she doesn't feel safe.

She chews the inside of her cheek. She's being stupid. This place isn't dangerous; these girls aren't her enemies. And this is just a perfectly normal building filled with perfectly normal people. That Vicky sometimes whispers its name in her sleep is coincidence and nothing more.

"I'm actually looking for Christine," she says. "I would have texted her, but I cracked my phone and it's being repaired." Quality lie, Lorna.

"Oh!" Indira says. "She's, um, probably here. I can call her, if you'd like?" Lorna nods, and Indira bustles back over to the table and makes the call. "Hey, sis," she says into her phone. 'Sis'? "You're home, right? Well, you'll *never* guess who's here, in the kitchen, asking for you! No. No. *No!* No— Teenie, I said you'd never guess! Look, just— no, Christine, please stop being clever. Yes, you're *very* funny. It's Lorna, Teenie. She's here!" Indira's eyes meet Lorna's for a moment. "Which is exciting. I've wanted to meet her for so long. Yes, she *is* very pretty." Those eyes roll now, and she points at her phone in exasperation, turning her pointing hand into one miming a voice that will not, for the love of God, shut up. "*I was thinking,*" she says, interrupting whatever Christine's saying, "you could have her up there? In your kitchen? There's only Tabby and me down here, and we both have things to do. Yes, 'things'. What did I tell you about being funny? Yes, I'll send her up. *Yes*, unlock them. I don't know, three minutes? If you're not wearing clothes, it's time to find some, unless you want to form a polycule with her and Victoria. Hey! I'm

allowed to be funny, too, you know! Yes. Yes. Love you. And be careful, sweetheart.”

“All arranged?” Tabby says. She’s been leaning on the table, with an eye on Lorna, tapping her fingers on her folded arms, a human avatar for the tension Lorna feels in the room. As if visitors are a bad thing, as if her arrival is cause for alarm.

Don’t be stupid, Lorna tells herself. She’s had a difficult weekend, bad sleep, and she feels like she doesn’t know who her girlfriend even is any more. Any one of those could make her paranoid; all three together are making her feel fifteen again, like when her mum still lived with them, and she’s watching for danger behind every door.

“All done!” Indira says, beaming. She drops her phone into a bag on the table and rushes back over to Lorna, grasping her hand and shaking before Lorna really knows what’s happening, all her prior reticence gone. “I wish we had more time to spend with you, Lorna. You must visit again!”

“Um, I will.”

“Just go up the front stairs,” Tabby says, waving a hand at Indira, who releases Lorna and steps back, still smiling, “until you get to the second floor.”

“Christine’ll meet you there,” Indira says.

“Thanks, Indira, Tabby,” Lorna says, and looks at them for a moment longer, making sure to fix their faces in her memory alongside their names. She always makes an effort with that; it’s always seemed important. And she can ask Christine their pronouns later.

Tabby buzzes the doors open for her and smiles again, and Indira wiggles her fingers in farewell.

Once she’s backed out of the kitchen and gotten her bearings, she hears Tabby, muffled by the closing doors, say something like, “What was that?”

“What was what?” Indira says.

“You called her ‘sis’! Did you panic?”

“It’s my day off. You can’t expect me to...”

And that’s all Lorna gets, as the curve of the stairs silences what remains of their voices.

* * *

The security room’s laid out like the kitchen, which it sits directly under. Where the AGA and the food cupboards would be is a large, custom-fitted security desk, of the sort Stef’s seen in a hundred movies: four large screens, each divided into multiple camera views, a control console for the screens and the cameras, and an open space which tends to fill up with laptops and phones. And where the kitchen table would be there’s a pair of tables, like the ones in the common area, only with padded seats. There’s also another table, added after the room was professionally fitted, which looks like it came from Ikea and which pushes up against a pair of long couches. It’s the one Stef’s most often seen sponsors at, with a couple of laptops in front of them and, inevitably, a plate of snacks. No-one pulling a long shift on monitoring duty wants to sit in the chairs by the security screens when there’s a sofa on which to lounge.

She and Pippa are early.

“Oh, thank *God*,” Nell says, looking up from her ebook. Stef wonders if the dark circles under her eyes have gotten deeper since she last saw her. “Can I go now?”

“Go!” Pippa says, shooing her. “We’ll watch the screens until everyone else gets here.”

“You’re a doll, Pippa.” Nell pushes herself up, slowly and painfully, and stretches with audible cracks. “Hi, Stef. That’s

your name, right? I'm kind of behind on events."

"Hi," Stef says, "and it's Stephanie right now? I'm, um, trying it out."

"Stephanie, huh? Suits you. I'm Nell. I'm on shit duty. Anyway." She puts her e-reader in her bag and scrapes her hand along the edge of the table, dropping laptop, pens and notepad in behind it. "Toodles, kids."

"She seems nice," Stef says, as Pippa slides into the end spot on the couch.

"She's not," Pippa says, and sighs at Stef's bemused expression. "She's working on it. Shadowing the rest of us, one at a time, and taking more graveyard shifts than anyone else."

Stef sits down next to her and leans back into the soft cushion. "How come?"

"Because she *wasn't* nice. Bad sponsoring technique."

"Oh, not like your soft touch, then?"

"No, not like— Are you making fun of me?"

Stef shrugs. "A little."

Pippa reaches down beside the couch and pulls out a laptop, which has the battered and unloved look of an institutional device. It boots slowly, and she makes coffee for both of them with the pod machine in the corner while they wait.

"How are you doing?" she asks, gesturing backwards with her head at the screens behind her.

Stef, who hasn't been able to look away from the two cameras monitoring Aaron, groans. "Am I that obvious?"

"A little," Pippa says.

"God," Stef says, as Pippa drops back down onto the couch and hands her a coffee in a plain red mug, "I feel stupid."

“Why?”

“He rejected me.”

Stef’s got a hand on the table, fingers tapping on the surface, and Pippa covers it, silencing her. She squeezes. “I’ve seen him with you,” she says. “He doesn’t know *what* he feels. About you. About anything. He’s a big ugly ball of repressed *everything*, and your confession... it pulled on a string. It was like that for a lot of us.”

“You?”

“Me,” Pippa says firmly. “My trigger was different — and who I was when I came here was *very* different from him — but I recognise a lot of his behaviour. He’s facing up to the knowledge that he’s going to leave here an entirely new person, and on top of that, he’s got you: a friend, who wants more. I’d bet a hundred quid he’s never had someone express that kind of interest before. He doesn’t know how to feel about it. He doesn’t even know how to *feel*.” She coughs delicately. “Masculinity, for boys like him — boys like I used to be — is an iron maiden. It’s a shell that protects you, but it hurts you as well, and when you’re hurting that much, vulnerability — genuine emotion — is a liability. We can tear away the armour and give him room to breathe, but his wounds have to heal, first.”

“What can I do?”

“Wait for him to come back to you. Be an example for him until he does. And don’t push. Indira’s a great sponsor, and so’s Maria. They’ll know when he needs a nudge, and when he needs to be left alone. But—” Pippa raises a warning finger, “—you should know, things are going to get worse for him before they get better, and you’re going to be down there with it. It gets messy down there when the boys start *really* changing; we’re still mostly in the warm-up phase.”

“I can deal with it,” Stef says.

“Okay. Just, maybe, practise calling him *her*?”

“Not until he asks me to.”

“Maybe—” Pippa starts, and then zippers her mouth and nods at the door. Stef turns to see Edy and Maria walk in, slowly and carefully, with Edy holding Maria’s arm and Maria’s face set with an expression of amused tolerance, as if letting her girlfriend look after her is equivalent to granting the greatest of favours. Still, when she sits down next to Stef, she seems relieved to get off her feet.

“Hi,” Stef says.

Maria sits forward, folds her arms on the table and rests her head on them, half-closing her eyes until Edy darts over to the console and lowers the lights. “Hi, Stef,” she says.

“Stephanie,” Pippa says.

“I’m trying it out,” Stef says.

Maria smiles broadly. “Hi, Stephanie. How are you doing?”

“Good. And, um, thanks for the advice. It really helped.”

“Any time,” she whispers.

It’s impossible not to notice how tired she looks. “Can I get you anything?”

Maria smiles, half-visible through the crook of her arm. “You can take the second years off my hands, if you like. I agreed to take some of the admin responsibility for them while I’m spending so much time bedbound, and Mia’s begging me to let her stream.”

“Stream?” Pippa says. “Stream what?”

“I have no idea what game it is,” Maria says, grimacing. “All I know is, she bugs the other girls to play it with her on the LAN here, and wants to take her skills online. But I’ve told her a thousand times: no streaming until you stop making jokes about your huge hog.”

Edy sits down next to her, smooths down her hair and drapes a flannel over her head, for which Maria thanks her.

Stef looks away as Maria turns to Edy, not wanting to intrude on their intimacy.

The other sponsors start filing in. Jane waves at her, Indira squeezes in next to Edy and leans around her to wiggle her fingers at Stef, and Monica gives her a smile. Pamela pulls a stool out from under the table and sits down on it with the aura of a woman who will only get back up if ordered to, loudly. The last one in is Tabby, wheeling in an office chair from the storeroom across the hall and collapsing dramatically into it with an exaggerated sigh and a cup of coffee she only just doesn't spill. She nods at Indira, who nods back and waves her phone, which is open to a set of cameras elsewhere in the building. Some private problem, Stef assumes.

Tabby's almost blocking the entrance, and even Stef, who doesn't know her that well, can tell she's not having the best morning. Everyone in the room is looking at her now, with the exception of Indira, who's watching the feed on her phone, and into the expectant silence Tabby says, "No-one's going to ask why I'm pissed off?"

"I think we're all just waiting with bated breath," Maria says, from underneath her flannel.

"Didn't you come in, like, *super* late last night?" Jane says.

"She had a *da-ate*," Monica sings.

"Spill," Edy says. She's been setting up laptops in front of her and Maria, with security feeds on one and action points on the other.

"Men fucking *suck*," Tabby says.

"Ah. One of *those* kinds of dates."

"I thought it was going well with Barry," Maria says, struggling more upright and leaning on her hands. "What did he do?" Edy removes the flannel from her head before it falls off.

"It was going great," Tabby says. "And, well, he hasn't really done anything. Shit. Sorry. *She* hasn't done anything."

Monica snorts into her coffee.

“Ah,” Edy says.

“Not again, surely?” Jane says.

“Again,” Tabby says darkly.

“She told you last night?” Maria asks.

“Yeah. She invited me to dinner, she cooked, it was going to be a whole special evening and *I* thought it might be something else as well. And then she starts with the whole, ‘Tab, there’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time...’ and I just fucking knew. I had to sit through the whole thing and smile and hug her. And that used up *all* my supportive girlfriend energy, so today I’m just going to be bitter and alone.”

“You should put her in touch with your last boyfriend,” Edy says.

Tabby laughs. “They already know each other! They had a girls’ night last week! Just to see what it was like!”

“Does she know you’re—?”

“Straight? Yeah. I gave her the usual — God, how stupid is it that I have a ‘usual’ for *this*? — and we’re going to be friends.” She groans. “I’m taking her shopping next week with Belinda and Kelly. It’ll be like a reunion! All Tabby’s ex-boyfriends turned ex-girlfriends, together again!”

Jane snorts. “You’ll have fun. You know you will.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. It’s nice helping trans girls find themselves. But why do they have to keep finding themselves *inside my boyfriends*?”

Harmony, arriving late, wordlessly reaches into the paper bag she’s carrying and hands Tabby a croissant, which she attacks with irritated fervour.

“Did she tell you yet?”

“Yes,” several people say.

She lays a caring hand on Tabby's shoulder. "I do know someone," she says, "if you're looking to get back on the market."

"No," Tabby says. "Like I said, men suck."

"Tab," Jane says, "it might be time to accept that you're just gay. Join the winning team."

"To be fair," Edy says, "none of her boyfriends have *actually* been men."

"That's just it!" Tabby says, and gestures towards one of the security monitors, the one focused on Will and Raph. "Men suck, and we're all intimately acquainted with *how much* men can suck, so it makes a twisted kind of *sense* that the men I'm drawn to eventually all turn out to be women."

"Tell you what," Maria says, blinking carefully against the still-too-bright lights in the security room, "the next guy you find interesting, just bring her straight here. We'll give her the ol' Stephanie treatment. It could save you a lot of time."

Tabby scowls at her, snatches the empty paper bag from Harmony, screws it up and throws it at Maria's head. Edy intercepts it with a frown. Then Tabby blinks, and says, "Oh, hey, Stephanie! You decided to switch up your name? Good for you."

"I'm trying it out," Stef says. Various sponsors smile for her, or give her a thumbs up, or groan something unintelligible from their state of near-unconsciousness (Pamela).

"I like it," Monica says. "But," she adds, to groans from the assembled sponsors, who can spot a businesslike tone when they hear one, "I'm afraid it's time we got down to it."

"Boo," Harmony comments.

"Actually," Indira says, standing up and relieving the pressure on the couch, which was struggling to fit the five of them between the arm rests, "there is one thing, before we begin. Tabby and I met Lorna Fielding this morning. She interrupted us just when Tabby was telling me—" she throws a

grin across the room, “—about her woes. Lorna’s going out with Victoria. They’ve been dating a long time, and things were going well until recently: Lorna now suspects Vicky of keeping secrets from her. *Not* funny, Harmony.”

“I didn’t laugh!”

“You smirked. Don’t. This has the potential to hurt Lorna, to hurt Victoria, and to blow up in all of our faces if the situation isn’t contained. Lorna’s an outsider, she’s not cleared, and while obviously we have a profile on her, the contents aren’t encouraging. She’s highly politically motivated, with contacts among notable activists. She’s only a handful of degrees of separation from some fairly well-known journalists.”

“That’s the downside,” Maria says. “What’s the upside?”

Indira smiles. “She loves Victoria. It’s why we didn’t discourage the relationship; Victoria’s one of the most accomplished graduates we’ve ever had, and they fell deeply in love very quickly. Our initial assessment was that their attachment would override Lorna’s need to ‘do the right thing’.”

“Neither of you are with her right now, so I’m assuming you’ve assigned someone?”

“Yes,” Indira says, nodding. “We sent her up to talk to Christine.”

Stef thinks she feels Maria tense for a moment. “How do you see that going?” Maria asks.

“Christine will handle it.”

“You don’t think she’ll crack? Tell her everything?”

“No. She’ll calmly and rationally assess the situation, and *then* tell her everything. We’ve done it before.”

“Christine hasn’t done it before, though,” Edy says.

“If Indira thinks Christine’s got this,” Tabby says, “she’s got this.”

“They’re *friends*,” Indira says. “Christine knows her pretty well, she knows Victoria better than *any* of us, and Christine’s track record of making out-of-the-box decisions that nonetheless benefit and protect us is sitting right there at the table.”

Stef, on cue, waves.

“Christine will find a way to tell her,” Tabby says, “that *doesn’t* make her fly off the handle.”

“And what if she does?” Edy asks.

“Don’t *worry*,” Indira says. “My Teenie’s not stupid. She’ll have made sure all the doors are locked before they even start talking.”

* * *

Lorna’s visited almost every other building on campus. Some, like the old residential towers, seem held together only by the tension between the steadily increasing funding required to keep them upright year-on-year and the potential payout should they collapse with students inside. Others, like the Anthill, wear the money spent on their construction ostentatiously, in curved fascia and internal viewing windows and lecture theatres large enough to hold twice as many students as ever attend her Psychology modules.

Dorley Hall’s different, in every possible way. She’s been told it predates the establishment even of the university’s ancestor college, that it’s served a number of functions over the years, and that it’s never spent more than a handful of consecutive years vacant; from this she has inferred that the amount of money it’s absorbed could build a whole second Anthill, possibly a whole second university, with some left over.

From the outside, it's imposing. Inside, it's lavish in the manner of a well-maintained National Trust property: old-fashioned, polished, dignified. The walls of the main staircase are tiled with green ceramic, treated in some way that makes them look almost crystalline, and where the brick has been deliberately left bare, it has none of the dusty sheen she associates with exposed brickwork. The place is out of her league.

Out of Vicky's, too, but that's supposed to be the point: she's just one of many disadvantaged girls who got subsidised rooms in a dorm that's not technically part of the university and thus can write its own rules. A lot of people stay here for their whole degree, and beyond.

What *happened* to her here? That something did, and that it was awful, is easier and easier to believe as Lorna ascends; the affluence dripping from every tile, every brick, every fixture lends the building an air of impersonal malice, drills into her more and more by the second that this is one of those old-money buildings built centuries before she was born. An outpost of the ageless English aristocracy, a name bigger than anyone who temporarily inhabits it; this is Dorley Hall, and it will outlast her by generations.

She imagines the lights flicking suddenly off, plunging her into darkness, absolutely alone, and hurries her step. It takes her several more before she feels foolish.

Too many horror games, Lorna.

Christine's waiting at the exit to the second floor with a shy smile and an oversized checked shirt over a cami and pyjama bottoms. She waves, and Lorna, trapped between her anxiety and her need to be polite in all situations, waves back.

"You really weren't dressed yet, then?" Lorna says, and Christine rolls her eyes.

"You overheard Indira, huh? I should have words with that woman. Who am I, without my mystique?"

Lorna skips up the last couple of steps, allowing herself to be energised by the sight of a friendly face. They embrace on the landing. “You don’t have a mystique. I *know* you’re a nerd.”

In Lorna’s arms, Christine shrugs. “It’s true. Come on, let’s get something to drink. The kitchen’s just round the corner.”

Christine leads her down the corridor and Lorna looks around, eyeing the fingerprint locks on the doors. *So* much security! Why? The kitchen, at least, is open and airy. Less like the one on the ground floor, more like the kitchens in the best dorms on campus: utilitarian, but with fittings and fixtures of the highest quality. Christine nods at the table in the middle and flicks the kettle on, then starts rummaging in the fridge.

“Have you had breakfast?” she asks. “We have cereal, or I could attempt something with eggs. You like them kind of thrown haphazardly into a frying pan, right? Overhand or underhand? Shell?”

“Just a tea is fine, Christine,” Lorna says, and grins when Christine turns around, holding an egg. She was worried Christine would be weird around her, after their conversation in Café One, but she’s acting like her usual self.

“You sure? I kinda wanted to experiment.”

She looks so cheeky Lorna can’t stop the laugh. “I’m sure. Just tea.”

“Your loss. Tea it is.”

The tea takes a couple of minutes to make, which they pass with small talk. Lorna mostly lets Christine babble about introducing Paige to her favourite childhood books, and waking up one morning to find that Paige had stayed awake most of the night and made a serious dent in the stack of novels on the bedside table. Christine talks with her hands a lot, and has to interrupt her flow more than once to sweep her messy morning hair out of her eyes. After the third time, Lorna wordlessly pulls a hair tie out of her bag and hands it over.

“Thanks,” Christine says, ties a ponytail, and starts fishing out tea bags. She looks open and expectant, and why wouldn’t she? Only Lorna knows why she’s here. Only Lorna knows she’s about to risk her nascent friendships with all the girls who live here — not just Christine, but Paige and Pippa, too; they all seem to come together — on a hunch that Vicky is lying to her.

It’s a pretty fucking well-founded hunch, yes, but Vick’s had explanations for everything she’s been willing to answer so far and, as for the rest, absence of evidence is not blah blah fucking blah.

“So,” Christine says, dropping mugs of tea on the table and sitting down opposite, “what’s up? Everything okay? Is this about what we talked about the other day?”

Lorna sips her tea; too hot. She hadn’t thought this far ahead, hoping the right questions would simply come to her. Running for days on no sleep and a mixture of aggrieved self-righteousness and genuine fear of what she might discover hasn’t left her with significant reserves.

“You know what?” she says, putting down her mug. “Fuck it. Yeah. Things have been rough with Vicky. But you don’t know how rough, unless she told you.”

“She told me,” Christine confirms, looking at her tea and not Lorna. Yeah, she would have. They were friends before Lorna even arrived on the scene. “I’m sorry for my part in it.”

“You had no part in it. I’ve just been... ignoring things for a long time. But you *do* know things I don’t, and I know you lie for her.” Lorna chews on her cheek for a moment. “I know betraying confidences is, like, the *worst* thing you can do, but — oh!”

She’s interrupted by two other girls, entering the kitchen and stopping short at the sight of her.

It’s the white one with the deep red hair and the trouser suit who speaks. “Um,” she says. “Hi.”

“Hey,” Lorna says, hesitantly.

“Sorry, are we interrupting anything?”

Christine saves her. “Julia, this is Lorna, Vicky’s girlfriend. Lorna, this is Julia and that’s Yasmin.”

The other one, Yasmin, waves from the sideboard, where she’s assembling a basic two-person breakfast. “Hi, Lorna,” she says. “Uh, if you’re looking for Vicky—”

“I know,” Lorna says, sharper than she intends, and smiles in apology. Yasmin nods and Julia leans over and whispers something in her ear, something which makes them both giggle.

“Uh, listen,” Julia says, “we overheard some stuff as we were coming up the corridor—”

“Julia—” Christine says.

“And we know what it’s like to be looking for answers,” Yasmin says.

“We know some of what you need to know,” Julia says.

Christine covers her face with her hands. “Oh, God.”

“I’m just going to come out and say it,” Julia says. “There’s a secret basement here where they turn men into women.”

Yasmin turns around, holding a tray of cereal and coffee. “I used to be a rugby jock called Andrew.”

“She’s lying,” Christine mutters.

“Yeah,” Julia says, “that was never her name.”

“Will you two please go to work and get out of my hair? You’re not helping.”

“We’re just cutting to the chase,” Julia says. “Putting the poor girl out of her misery.”

Yasmin, standing in the doorway with her tray, beckons Julia with her head. “Come on. Leave Christine to show and tell.”

Julia waves.

“You’re only making things harder!” Christine yells, leaning around the table to direct her voice out of the door.

“Good!” Julia yells back.

“It’s payback!” That was Yasmin.

“This is shitty thanks for covering for you!”

“Oh!” Yasmin yells. “Right! Sorry!”

A door slams, leaving them both in embarrassed silence. Christine breaks it. “Sorry about them.”

Lorna winces. At least she and Christine are *both* bright red; she can’t bear the thought of being overheard, of knowing random people are aware of the problems she and Vicky are having. “Kind of a double act, aren’t they?” she says, wanting for a moment to talk about *anything* else.

Christine rolls her eyes. “Yeah. They’ve been together ever since we were all, uh... They’ve been together a while.”

Oh, for God’s sake. Christine brings it *right* back to secrets. “No,” Lorna says, pointing a finger, surprised by her own vehemence. “No, you can’t just *trail off* like that! I’ve had it from Vicky all weekend! *Constant* allusions to shit I can’t know, and I’m fucking *sick of it*, Christine! They’re involved in it, aren’t they? Or they were there. They *know* about what happened to Vick. You *all* do! Should I be suspecting those two girls in the kitchen downstairs, too?” She realises her finger is shaking, and drops it into her lap. Ignores her cooling tea. She takes a deep breath and says, with more control, “I realise I must sound crazy to you. Like I’ve gone off the deep end. But I’ve done nothing but think about Vicky’s past, her life, and this place *all weekend*.”

Christine nods. “You’re sure you’re not better off hearing this from Vicky?”

“I’ve *tried*! She just shuts down. She goes into this quiet state and I can almost see what she’s thinking. Sometimes it seems like she wants to talk, but she just... doesn’t.”

“We share a lot of secrets. Sharing hers is sharing mine, too.”

“And you see how frustrating that is? You’ve always had these *pieces* of her, *loads* of them, and I’ve never gotten to know about *any* of them. I only get to see how they hurt her. And I’ve lived with that — I’ve *made* myself live with that — because I love her. But now they’re hurting *us*, they’re breaking us apart, and if she’s bound by *your* secrets...” Lorna can’t finish. She knows what she’s asking, or she can guess. She watched Christine, that time they went clubbing, and until Paige came for her she was... twitchy. Wary. It switched on and off: she’d be carrying on a normal conversation, or she’d be dancing with Pippa, or she’d be walking back from the bar, and suddenly she’d be afraid. She hid it well, but isn’t that just another sign of someone who’s learned to live with trauma?

“Okay,” Christine says, her eyes flicking from Lorna, to the table, to the door. “Okay. I’ll tell you.”

“I’m sorry,” Lorna says. “This must seem selfish to you.”

“No,” Christine says instantly. “Absolutely not. If you take *one* thing away with you today, make it that: you are *not* being selfish.” She goes to run her hand through her hair, then remembers she tied it up. Her hand hovers uselessly above her head for a second and then she shakes it, like it’s not supposed to be there, and digs in her pyjama pocket, pulling out her phone. “I want to show you something first,” she says, and messes with it for a little while. “Okay.”

She passes it over. Lorna doesn’t take it, just leaves it where Christine puts it, because her eyes instantly lock to the screenshot Christine’s loaded up, of a text conversation between her and Vicky:

Victoria Robinson: It’s fine, I’m just so scared.

Victoria Robinson: She tells me she still loves me. And that word ‘still’ in there, it’s like it won’t stop echoing in my head. It means she knows there’s things she has to forgive. It means

Victoria Robinson: Shit.

Victoria Robinson: It means she doesn't see me as the same person she used to.

Victoria Robinson: I'll always be someone who lied to her now.

Victoria Robinson: She keeps telling me she still loves me. And it's not like she's trying to convince herself. She really does love me.

Victoria Robinson: But it's clear she doesn't trust me any more.

Victoria Robinson: Maybe it's just too many lies, all at once. Maybe I sound different when I'm talking about the last year or so, to when I'm listing off all the fake bullshit I'm supposed to pretend is my life.

Victoria Robinson: Maybe I sound like a liar every time I open my fucking mouth because I am one.

Victoria Robinson: She's everything to me. The most special girl in the world. And I'm scared I'm just going to lose her. I'm scared she's going to decide I'm too broken, too untrustworthy, and just leave. All I want is to tell her everything and I JUST CAN'T

Victoria Robinson: I hate this I hate this I hate this

Lorna reads it through three times. Reaches out for the screen, like she can touch Vicky, comfort her just by proximity to her words. Of *course* she loves her!

She reads it once more, her eyes catching on *the fake bullshit I'm supposed to pretend is my life*.

"I know showing you that might seem a bit manipulative," Christine says slowly, taking the phone back and locking it, "and, yeah, maybe it kind of is. But you need to know, before we get into this, how much this has been *killing* her. She had to make a decision, before you met, that she can't go back on, and it's been the source of a lot of this. So she's carrying guilt, she's carrying regret, but most of all, I think, she's carrying shame." Christine coughs. "All of us are."

Lorna nods. "How bad is it?" she whispers.

Christine hesitates, and Lorna reads more into that than into the single word she eventually speaks: “Bad.”

“I won’t see her differently,” Lorna says. “I won’t. I *won’t!*” she repeats, to Christine’s frown. “She’s my Vicky.” It’s hard to maintain her anger after reading Vicky’s texts, seeing something she was never supposed to see.

“I believe you’ll *want* to see her the same way. I think you might have to work at it, when you know everything, but I do believe you.” Christine shifts uncomfortably in her seat. “Look, um, there’s one other thing. Before we get into everything. Two other things really, but they sort of rely on each other. This is going to be pretty fucking heavy, so, Lorna, are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“There’s literally no going back.”

“I’m ready!”

“Okay. We’re all part of an... organisation here. And we’re backed by money. *Serious* money. Which buys serious influence. The secrets I’m about to tell you are *also* backed by that money and that influence. The sort of money and influence that can make people disappear.”

Lorna breathes in sharply without meaning to, a hiccup that turns into a cough, but she raises a hand when Christine makes to stand up and help her; she’s okay.

People disappearing? How big *is* this? It’s starting to sound like Vicky’s a fucking *spy* or something. Is that anything Lorna wants to get involved in?

Yes. For Vicky, yes. She may have kept secrets, she may have lied, but Lorna *knows* her. There’s no-one else she can imagine in her life. The line *I hate this I hate this I hate this* keeps nearly superimposing itself on her vision.

“That’s thing one,” Christine says. “And this moment, here, now, is your last chance to leave before I read you in to *everything*.”

“Christine,” Lorna says carefully, “I appreciate that you’re looking out for me here — I think you are, anyway — but I need to know. I’m all in.”

“Okay. Thing two.” Christine taps on her phone again and holds it out. The screen this time shows an official-looking document, black on white. Lorna reaches over and swipes: it goes on for several pages. “This is an NDA, or something like it. The gist is, if you breathe a word of what I’m about to tell you to anyone who isn’t already in the know, we come for you. With the biggest legal guns money can buy. Look it over, if you’d like.”

Lorna swipes back and forth. The text is *tiny*. “I trust you, Christine. Just tell me: if I sign this, am I fucked?”

Christine sighs and makes a show of looking around. “You’re here. And you know something’s up. So you’re fucked already, Lorna. But this doesn’t make it any *worse*.”

“Way to make a girl feel safe,” Lorna says, trying to keep her tone light as she navigates to the last page, taps in her name and the date, and records her thumbprint on the phone’s sensor.

“Okay!” Christine says, taking the phone back and pocketing it. “You’re officially in the loop. Which, yes, I know all this has been a bit scary, but you’re now in the same position as Vicky. And me, and the rest of us.”

“She couldn’t tell me anything because she signed an NDA?” Ludicrous.

Christine snorts. “Not exactly. We’re kept under control by... other means. We sign something similar, yes, but it’s not the paperwork that does it. The secret is too big; no amount of paperwork could keep it hidden. It’s just protocol. Legal fancy dress for the real threat.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember how I said the money can make people disappear? It’s done so twice in the last month.”

Lorna's chest tightens. What has she gotten herself into?
"You're fucking kidding me."

"No. Bad people. *Very* bad people. A rapist and a... a person possibly even worse than him. A woman who hurt someone I care about, and many more besides. But—"
Christine looks away, raps her fingernails on the table for a moment, "—we are *capable* of doing it to anyone. Remember that. Anyway!" She adopts an almost businesslike affect.
"Your NDA is different from ours. Yours is more like what the PMC guys sign."

"'PMC'?"

"Private Military Contractors. Soldiers. You know, like in *Metal G*—"

Every time it seems like it can't escalate, it does. "You have *soldiers*?"

"Two on duty at all times."

Lorna nods, and breathes carefully again, counts five in and five out, until she's— well, she's not calm, but she's riding it. If this is Vicky's world, if this is the shit that makes her cry out at night, then she needs to know it all. And if she can't tell anyone else, on pain of being 'disappeared'? Fine. She and Vicky can keep the secret together. At least they'll have each other again.

"Okay," she says eventually. "Tell me."

"Vicky's secrets are hers to tell, if she wants to," Christine says. "And she *will* want to, now that you're a part of this. But these are mine." She takes a long sip of lukewarm tea. "I can't believe I'm doing this twice in two months," she mutters.

She looks so uncomfortable that Lorna wants to tell her it's okay, that she can stop, that they can take a break, but she doesn't. She just listens.

"I was a boy," Christine says. It's like all emotion's drained from her voice. "And not in the way that you, for example, were assigned male. I was just... a boy." If her voice

is motionless, barely moving from monotone, Christine's fingers are hyperactive, tapping against and winding around each other. "Not a nice one, either. I hurt people. Not physically, but I hurt people. I was cruel, vindictive, and barely functional. And I was found and brought here. For rehabilitation."

Lorna's breath fails in her throat. She listens, increasingly faint, as Christine tells the story of her life. The boy. The childhood. The abusive family. The violence, all directed at his mother, with one exception: when he stood up for his mother, took a blow meant for her, and his mother defended his father, against him. The loneliness. The isolation. The obsession with computers and technology. She gets the pronouns mixed up a few times, but Lorna follows along without issue.

Christine can't look at her for the next part, seems barely able to speak, and jumps when Lorna reaches over and holds her hand.

She said the boy hurt people? Time to say *how*. She doesn't go into his motivations; not important, she says. Stupid adolescent bullshit, she says. The violent logic of the young man who knows no other way to process his grief, his anger, his pain, she says.

And then, capture. Indira, talking to him in the basement under Dorley Hall. Six other boys. One of them, she says upfront, doesn't make it. The others do. And what they do to the boys, in the basement under Dorley Hall...

Lorna loses the thread for a while. The warmth leaves her body, the clarity leaves her hearing, the moisture leaves her mouth.

She drinks her cold tea. It's something to do. Across the table, still holding her other hand, Christine's crying undemonstrative tears, and when she sees Lorna notice them, what remains of her façade crumbles. She rips her hand out of Lorna's and covers her face.

Lorna can't stay in her seat after that. She joins Christine on the other side of the table, embraces her, and waits for the grief and the shame to pass. She doesn't know how real any of this is — Christine's story fits the facts, but it's completely ludicrous — but at least some of it is close enough to reality to hurt Christine, and thus likely hurt Vicky, even to retell.

“Sorry,” Christine says after a while, wiping her eyes with tissues from her pocket, and Lorna has to tell her over and over that apologies aren't necessary. She senses Christine needs some time to recover, so she makes tea for them both, and when she's done, most of the Christine she knows is back.

Forget all this stuff about ‘rehabilitating bad boys’. If Christine once was a boy, once was someone she hated, if that part is true — and of all of it, it's the most believable — well, Lorna knows a little something about that, doesn't she? When you transition you take what you can of your old life with you, no matter how small the shreds you have to tear it into, and Lorna couldn't take much, just a battered and bruised relationship with her father and stepmum, still on the mend, all long silences and deadnames and embarrassed apologies in the times she goes home to visit; Christine, from what she said, took even less.

“Thank you,” Lorna says as warmly as she can.

“If it were solely up to me,” Christine says, sipping her tea, “you'd have been told all that months ago.” She smiles. “If it were up to Vicky, she would have told you a week after you met.”

“It's still all too ridiculous.”

“And yet all real.”

Lorna doesn't know if she's ready to make that leap just yet. “Jesus fucking Christ, Tina,” she says.

“If he came here,” Christine says, “he'd have to change his name, too.”

* * *

“So? How was your first briefing?”

Stef flops down onto the bed in her first-floor room, kicking off her shoes and enjoying the muted *thud-thud* as they hit the rug. “Exhausting,” she says. “And what do you mean, ‘first’?”

Pippa laughs. “You’ve a perspective the sponsor team sorely needs,” she says, kicking the door closed behind her. “Expect to get called on again.”

“Just let me have an ibuprofen first next time, okay?”

It was at the hour mark that she realised how much her impression of the sponsors had changed. She’s always assumed — from no evidence but the slightly haphazard way things looked from her side, back when she was one of the boys — that they mostly just winged it, but in the meeting they went over the boys’ psychology and recent actions in incredible detail, with each sponsor chiming in with her own opinion, often backing it up with surveillance footage. Stef hadn’t contributed much, comparatively, but her thoughts on Aaron, Adam and Martin generated much discussion.

“What did you think about Will?” Pippa asks, sitting down on the chair by the vanity and stretching. “Interesting, huh?”

Active discussion about Will’s response to disclosure had been tabled for the next meeting, with Edy asking everyone to check the archives for boys who responded similarly. Stef, who’d expected to be asked her opinion, had been grateful for the reprieve.

“Weird, more like,” she says.

Ollie and Raph had responded to disclosure the exact way Stef expected. Shouting, swearing, kicking the glass doors to

their cells, overturning what little inside the cell could be overturned — mostly just the mattress, although Raph had a good go at detaching the cot from its housing — and otherwise vindicating the sponsors’ decision to keep them separate. They’d had the contents of the NHS pamphlet read to them, and eventually succumbed to the exhaustion of rage, alternately sleeping (Ollie) and sitting on the cot, rocking back and forth (Raph).

Will had been different. The now-familiar disbelief gave way very quickly to something that quite disturbed the sponsors who hadn’t been present for it, and they watched the rest of the footage in silence. It was as if Will had been switched off; he went completely quiet and absolutely still, not even reacting when Tabby told him an orchiectomy would be scheduled for some time in the next few months. She eventually resorted to describing for him what an orchi is and how it is done, in the apparent hope of getting some kind of reaction out of him; nothing.

From the overhead camera angle, Stef had been reminded of Martin, but Tabby, narrating, switched to the head-on angle, in which Will’s face was just about visible, demonstrating nothing like Martin’s placid, dead-eyed acceptance. Will was *despairing*.

He remained silent, ignored them when they came by to check on him later, and — aside from silently climbing into the cuffs so they could open the cell door to leave food for him — barely moved for the rest of the day. Tabby loaded a video file, audio gain cranked all the way up, and played for the assembled sponsors the only thing Will said for the entire rest of the day, a whisper so quiet Tabby said she barely heard it in person: “It’s not fair.”

Even Adam had asked questions.

“Oh, hey,” Pippa says, “head voice!”

“Shit.”

The reminder is useful: twenty-one years of not really caring how she sounded — except to make sure that as few people as possible had the opportunity to hear her — is a great deal of inertia to overcome in just a couple of days. Stef *aahs* and hums and gets herself back in the zone.

“You want to make this a practice session?” Pippa says. “We’ve still got some stuff to go over with your treatment plan, and talking is better practice than anything else.”

“Sure.”

“Okay!” Pippa throws her phone down on the bed next to Stef, with the recording app already running. “Let’s talk about electrolysis.”

“Oh, God,” Stef says. She’s heard horror stories.

“First off, at Dorley it’s not quite as bad as you’ve heard. It takes a long time for most trans women because scheduling it can be difficult, and long sessions are costly and painful.” Pippa grins. “But *you* don’t have to work, and money isn’t an issue.”

“That still leaves ‘painful’, though.”

“It’s not as bad as all that. We can load you up with painkillers and apply numbing cream. But there *is* an unavoidable downside that we can’t really mitigate.”

Stef laughs. “Of course there is. Go on?”

“Growing out the hair before your session, and caring for your swollen, itchy face after it.”

“*Fabulous*,” Stef says.

They discuss the arrangements. Stef wants to start sooner rather than later, so Pippa texts the girl who does the sessions — a Dorley graduate, naturally — and she agrees to visit next week for a consultation. Like everyone else, she’s intrigued by the idea of a trans girl at Dorley and, Pippa relays, she’s looking forward to not having to have someone strapped down, right from the start. Stef, unfortunately, will have to avoid shaving for three days beforehand, and she grudgingly

makes a note on her calendar. As for the boys — Aaron — if it comes up, she'll tell the truth: electrolysis is both inevitable and uncomfortable, so why not get it out of the way as soon as possible?

“What’s it like?” Stef asks a while later, as Pippa comes back in with cups of tea. “When you start getting back out there?”

“Hmm. You want to know what it’ll be like for you, or how it was for me?”

“For you.”

Pippa sips her tea, and thinks. “Strange,” she says. “Incredibly strange. All of us here had our social development curtailed, even reset completely, depending on how you think about it. We have the whole second puberty thing to deal with — *you* know about that — but the strangest thing is learning how to be a normal person. Learning how to talk to normal people. That’s part of why we encourage our girls to go back to school here: you get to mingle with all kinds. It helps if you have a frame of reference that’s not *completely* limited to Dorley Hall, because, well, we’re all a bit weird.”

Stef laughs. “God. I can’t imagine the bravery it takes to step out of that door for the first time. Hard enough for me, and I *want* this—”

“Don’t forget,” Pippa says, “by the time we take that step, *we* want it, too.” She frowns. “Or we’ve accepted it, at least.” She sits back in her chair, looks out of the window. “Sometimes I think we have more in common than I originally thought. You and me. You and all of us. Like, most of us were pretty effing miserable as kids, for one reason or another — it’s literally on the list of things we look for — and then we come here and suddenly we have to adjust to our futures becoming something very, very different to what we expected.”

Stef shrugs. “That doesn’t sound too far off,” she says, and grins at herself; there was a time she might have found the

comparison offensive.

“You ever feel like you never got to be a teenager?” Pippa says. “Properly, I mean? Not like, a bad decisions teenager on TV, but just a kid who had friends and hung out and did stupid stuff. I never did any of that. And then I came here and lost three years of my life and now I’m a girl, I’m old, and I’m surrounded by transsexual wine mums.”

“You’re old?” Stef says, incredulous. “Aren’t you, like, a year older than I am?”

“Yeah, but...” She slumps in her chair. “I suppose I just wish this all could have happened in time for me to really be a kid. Restarting your whole life as an adult effing sucks. Sometimes I watch those shows and get upset I didn’t get to go to school as Pippa.”

Stef sits up and reaches out for her hand. “When I’m done,” she says, “when I’m ready, let’s go out and do stupid shit together. Let’s be teenagers.”

She absorbs Pippa’s broad smile, and suddenly can’t imagine being anywhere but here. It’s like she’s supposed to be here, like she has a place here: she needs their help, sure, but it’s more than that. Pippa needs a sister. Aaron needs a friend. The sponsors need her perspective. The boys need an example. And she can do all that while remaining herself; while *becoming* herself.

Like Pippa, it’s easy for Stef to feel like she never got to be a kid. Always too busy performing as the boy everyone around her expected to see. Here, though, she fits in without even trying, without having to change a thing.

Figuratively speaking.

They make plans after that. Pippa pulls a laptop out of a desk drawer and calls up maps of the university and of Almsworth, and they decide on their future excursions: to the Student Union bar; to the library and the cafés and all the places on campus from which to see the sights; to the club in Almsworth where Christine and Paige got back together; and

farther, to London. Pippa's always wanted to visit the Natural History Museum.

Stef's phone eventually interrupts them; she puts the call on speaker. It's Christine.

"Hey, Stef. Got a favour to ask. You know Vicky, right? You know *of* her, at least."

"Sure."

"Well, her girlfriend's here, and she's getting read in to the whole Dorley thing, and I think she could really benefit from your perspective."

"What do you mean, 'read in'?"

"I think the meaning of 'read in' is obvious, Stef."

"She means," an unfamiliar voice says, "that she's told me the most completely insane story I've ever heard, and I only half believe it. She thinks you, whoever you are, can sell me on the other half."

"Yeah," Christine says, "so come quickly, please. I think she's about ready to jump out the window and come back with napalm."

"To be clear," Stef says, "she didn't know about Dorley... and now she knows?"

"Yes."

"No," Pippa says. "No *way*, Christine! She's— Wait, can Lorna hear me?"

"What, am I stupid? No."

"Lorna's nice and all, but she's an outsider. I don't want to put her in front of an outsider yet."

"You're not her sponsor any more."

"No, but I *am* her advocate."

"Okay, but Lorna's *not* an outsider; she's Vicky's girlfriend."

“Who Stephanie hasn’t even met yet—”

““Stephanie’?”

“I’m just trying it out,” Stef says.

“—and she might be in a highly volatile state,” Pippa finishes.

“You’re not volatile, are you, Lorna?” Christine asks.

“Didn’t I just sign something that says I’m not allowed to be?” the other voice, Lorna, says.

“See? She’s not volatile, she’s not an outsider, *and* she’s a trans girl. She’s safe!”

Stef, looking sideways at Pippa, shrugs. She’s still not entirely clear on what’s going on, but if she can help Christine, she wants to. She owes her so much.

“Okay,” Pippa says, “but I’m coming with.”

* * *

Whatever she expected, this is worse.

Lorna still suspects Christine of lying, of covering up something terrible with something... also terrible, but ridiculous, farcical, unworkable; insulting. Like she went online, read a fiction summary from the sorts of websites Lorna visited before she came out to herself, and regurgitated it verbatim. But why would she? If it *is* a lie — and at least some of it *has* to be — then why invent such an outrageous story? Besides, Lorna likes to think that she knows Christine, at least a little, and she’s never seemed like the sort of person who would spin a transition-as-punishment yarn in the presence of an actual trans woman. And she told her story, her history, with such conviction!

It's a stupid lie, or it's the truth.

Lorna taps her mug with a nail. The surface of the tea responds to every strike, and she watches it, momentarily transfixed by the interaction of ripples, wondering again if she should have followed her other passion, gone to study Physics. But if she hadn't chosen Psychology, hadn't chosen Saints, she would never have met Vicky.

"Christine," she says. "This is ridiculous. And it's monstrous! The story you've told me, I feel like I should be calling the— fuck, no, not the police, but, I don't know, *someone*. You want me to believe you and Vicky are part of some kidnapping ring! I don't— I *can't* believe you."

Christine frowns. "You sound just like someone else I know. Actually, wait a minute! I know who can help you get a handle on this!" She holds up a finger, and with her other hand scrolls down the contact list on her phone. "Just... hold that thought. The one about all this being ridiculous and monstrous." She hits call, and before she holds the phone up to her ear, adds, "I agree, by the way." And then she's on the call: "Hey, Stef. Got a favour to ask. You know Vicky, right? You know *of* her, at least. Well, her girlfriend's here, and she's getting read in to the whole Dorley thing, and I think she could really benefit from your perspective." She rolls her eyes again, and smiles at Lorna. "I think the meaning of 'read in' is obvious, Stef." Christine covers the microphone with her thumb and whispers, "Newbies."

Lorna indulges her frustration. She leans across the table, pushes her voice to the very front of her mouth — her phone voice; her public speaking voice — and says, "She means that she's told me the most completely insane story I've ever heard, and I only half believe it. She thinks you, whoever you are, can sell me on the other half."

"Yeah," Christine says, "so come quickly, please. I think she's about ready to jump out the window and come back with napalm. Yes. What, am I stupid? No." She mouths, *Sorry*.

Lorna shrugs. “You’re not her sponsor any more. Okay, but Lorna’s *not* an outsider; she’s Vicky’s girlfriend.”

Lorna sits back in her chair, unsure as to whether or not she wants to relinquish her ‘outsider’ status. Wait; fuck. She signed that stupid NDA thing, didn’t she?

“‘Stephanie’?” Christine says, in the manner of a stockbroker asking, ‘*How* many billions am I up?’ She gives Lorna a thumbs up, obviously realises how baffling that must be, shrugs, and says, “You’re not volatile, are you, Lorna?”

“Didn’t I just sign something that says I’m not allowed to be?” Mum would kill her for being such a bitch. But she’d kill her for being *a bitch*, first, so screw her.

“See? She’s not volatile, she’s not an outsider, *and* she’s a trans girl. She’s safe! Okay. Okay! Good. See you in a minute.” She returns the phone to the table. “They’re on their way.”

“I’m ‘safe’, am I?” Lorna says acidly.

“Well, yeah, I think so. I’m fairly sure you’re not going to attack me—”

“Um, no!”

“—and you have literally no way out of here without one of us, so...” Christine shrugs theatrically.

“What do you mean, ‘no way out of here’?”

Christine tries to run her hand through her hair, fails, and irritably tugs at her ponytail, freeing her hair to be messed with again. Sheepishly she passes the hair tie back across the table. Lorna slips it over her wrist and raises an expectant eyebrow.

“It goes with the whole kidnapping thing,” Christine says. “You saw the locks on our bedroom doors, right? And on the kitchen door? We have a portion of the third floor and *all* of second down to ground locked down. With biometrically linked, networked locks. With a few taps on my phone I could open every lock on the loop and you could walk straight out.”

“But you won’t do that?”

“I *will*. As soon as I know you’re not a danger to us. To the programme, to me, to Vicky.”

“I would *never* put Vicky in danger!”

“She’s a *product* of this place, Lorna. Her safety depends on our secrecy.”

Lorna looks at her for a second, then stands, walks over to the sink and washes her face with cold water. It might mess up her makeup, but — and she almost laughs — she can probably borrow something from Christine before she goes. Right now she needs to be alert. She feels disconcertingly like she did that time she got kicked in the head.

She turns around and leans on the wall by the window, in time to see Christine putting her phone down again. “I like you a lot, Christine,” she says. “But I can’t just believe you about this.”

“Will you believe Vicky?”

“Yes.”

“Good, because she just texted asking if I’d seen you. I said you’re here. She’s worried, Lorna.”

Lorna kicks her foot back against the wall. “*I’m* worried!” she yells. “I’m fucking terrified, Christine! It just keeps getting worse and worse and— Oh, for fuck’s sake. You, too?”

Pippa, poking her head into the room, says, “Fraid so.”

“Jesus. This is looking less and less like a bad-taste joke at my expense.”

She steps into the room, leading another girl— no, a boy. No, a girl, Lorna decides, taking in the girl’s presentation. She looks in transition: a couple of months of hormone therapy at the most. Pretty. Also, definitely rather nervous.

“I know the exact feeling,” the girl says.

“Oh my God,” Lorna mutters, as Pippa and the girl find seats at the kitchen table, and the girl pulls her legs up under herself to sit cross-legged, arms folded in front of her, taking some of her weight, “you really *are* doing it, aren’t you?” If there’s someone here who reads like a trans girl early in transition, and if Christine’s been telling the whole unvarnished truth, there’s only one possible explanation. “Hey, um, you. Kidnapped person. I don’t know your name, but say the word and I’ll get you out of here. Somehow.”

“How nostalgic,” the girl comments, mostly to herself. “You’re Lorna, right?” Lorna nods. “I’m Stef. Stephanie, actually. I’m trying it out.”

“You’re *trying out* a girl’s name? They’re making you do that?”

“Christine,” Stephanie says, looking sideways, “did you tell her *anything* about me?” Christine, pursing her lips, shakes her head.

“She’s disbelieving everything else I said,” Christine says. “I thought I had her convinced, but she kept... walking it back. So I decided it’d be better coming from you. And then from Vicky, when she gets here.”

“I haven’t met her, have I?”

“Vicky? No. You’ll like her. She’s a sweetheart. Although probably somewhat preoccupied at the moment.”

They both look back up at Lorna.

“What’s going *on*?” Lorna says.

Stephanie — Lorna’s going to keep thinking of her that way until a better option presents itself, perhaps during an escape attempt — leans on her wrist and says, “Assuming Christine’s told you the whole story—”

“—I’ve told her most of it—”

“—then you know they scoop up new batches of bad boys at the beginning of every academic year, yes?” Lorna nods. Christine didn’t actually say *when* they kidnap the men, only

that they do, on a regular cadence. “I, uh, got wind of this place, and what it does. Actually,” she adds, looking down at the table and smiling, “I was mostly right about what they do, but incredibly wrong about who they do it to. I got myself kidnapped.”

“What?” Lorna says.

“She’s a volunteer,” Christine says.

“*What?*” Lorna says.

“It’s true,” Pippa says.

“I’m trans,” Stephanie says, smiling.

“You’re a trans girl?” Lorna says. This, at least, is a comforting point of familiarity in an increasingly insane world.

“Yes.”

“As in...?” She has to be clear.

“I was assigned male at birth. I hated it. More or less gave up on life after my twenty-first birthday. And—”

“You didn’t tell me that!” Pippa interrupts. “What do you mean?”

Stephanie takes Pippa’s hand and squeezes it, and Lorna frowns. If all this is true, this makes Pippa and Christine both complicit. And she’s *friends* with them?

“I mean,” Stephanie says, “that I decided transition was a pointless dream. That I was—” she laughs cynically, “—too manly for it to work out for me. I was going to try and live as Stefan. Forever. That’s why I went to that party in the first place; that’s how I met Christine. I was trying to be a normal guy, and normal guys go to parties when their housemates invite them. Yeah, sure, as plans go, it sucked, I know. I couldn’t have kept it up for more than a few weeks. And then I don’t know what I would have done. Fortunately for me, I didn’t have to find out.”

“Yeah,” Pippa says slowly. “Fortunately for you, you came here and I put you in a cell and—”

Stephanie shushes her, rubs her hand, whispers something Lorna can't make out. It ends with Pippa and Stephanie hugging each other awkwardly, and Stephanie complaining about poking herself in the tit with the corner of the kitchen table.

“Where were we?” she says, rubbing herself carefully.

“I was about to ask you how you can possibly accept this place,” Lorna says.

The girl shrugs. “The boys down there, some of them are *vile*. One guy, Declan, attacked me and Aaron, and—”

“Aaron?”

“He's, uh, a guy who's down there right now.”

“Forget Declan, then,” Lorna says, seizing on Stephanie's suddenly downcast expression, “how do you feel about *him*?”

“None of your business,” Stephanie says, quickly, sharply.

Lorna notes her blush, and says, “No, I mean, how do you feel about them... transitioning him?”

She sighs. “I'm pretty fucked up about it, to tell you the truth.” She looks away from Christine and Pippa — the *sponsors*, Christine said — and bites her lip. “It used to be that I didn't want him to change, the way everyone else wants him to. And whatever I said, people would tell me, oh, we have data, we have experience, he'll benefit in the long run. And they always point to themselves as an example, and I've never known how to argue against that.” She holds up both hands, palms flat, like plates on an old-fashioned scale. “*It's wrong* versus *it works*.” She mimes the scales tipping this way and that, and coming to rest roughly even. Christine reaches out and pulls one of her hands down, and Stephanie laughs and shoves gently at her. “But I *know* he needs to reform, somehow. And especially as I spend more time with Pip and Christine and all the others, it's like I'm starting to see this

future laid out for him, you know? In theory, I still object to what this place does, but it's become almost a mechanical objection. Like, my morning routine: get up, brush teeth, object to the programme, participate in it anyway. Did she tell you everyone here went through it?"

"Not in so many words."

"*Everyone*. Even Beatrice and Maria, the ones who're in charge. Although—" her face firms, "—they didn't exactly go through the same thing as Christine or Pip. Even if I wasn't just plain *tired* of staking out my position, *you* try living with a bunch of girls who got cured of toxic masculinity and tell them it can't be done."

Lorna's had her own thoughts about that, although nothing so severe as kidnapping boys and forcibly changing them; hers have gone in more of a PowerPoint direction.

"It's rehab," Pippa says suddenly. "What she doesn't like telling you, because she's too close to us, is that *all* of us were dangerous. All of us had either hurt people, or were *extremely* likely to do so. And, Stephanie—" she smiles at her friend, "—I know you worry about my lost potential, about what the old me might have become... I promise you, he would have just got more and more bitter and angry. As much as the methods have left their mark on me, that mark's fading, and in exchange I got a life, Steph. Trying to turn Pippa, to turn *me*, back into *him* would, at this point, be more injurious to my psyche, to my wellbeing, than becoming Pippa was in the first place."

Lorna's legs feel weak. This is *madness*.

"I know how you feel, Lorna," Stephanie says, standing and taking a few steps towards her. "When I came here, seven weeks ago, I thought I'd found a place that helps trans people who've escaped toxic families." Another step. "And I shouted, and I protested, and I said it was awful. I even questioned Christine's gender, right to her face. I still think about that."

"It's okay," Christine says, behind her.

Stephanie briefly looks back. “I’ll *always* think about that.” And then she’s advancing on Lorna again. “But that guy I mentioned? Declan? Rapist. Manipulator. He made himself into a trap some poor woman kept willingly walking back into, until Dorley took him away. And he was actually beyond the pale; he’s gone now.”

“Gone—?” Lorna says.

“Gone. But the others are still here, and all of them are better here than out there. I’ve read *all* the files. Ollie. Constantly getting in fights. Married his teenage sweetheart, which was bad news for her because he hit her a lot. Got on our radar when he hit her so hard her head bounced off the bar.” Behind Stephanie, Christine mouths, *Our radar?* to Pippa, who shrugs. “Raph. Another guy who just seems to get off on controlling and hurting women. Will.” She frowns when she says his name. “When his brother came out, he beat him into the hospital. Martin! Killed someone driving while drunk! And then there’s Aaron.”

“Your friend.”

“My friend. He’s sweet, and he’s clever, and he’s actually quite shy under all the babbling and the bluster. But he sexually harassed a lot of women. So many I still can’t quite believe it. And his rich family shielded him from all the consequences.”

“Stephanie,” Christine says. She’s wearing her disbelief on her face. “I look away for five minutes and you become a true believer?”

Stephanie leans against the wall, next to Lorna. “I’m not a ‘true believer’,” she says, voice cracking. She swallows, concentrates for a second, and then continues in a clearer tone. “If I had my way, I’d... well, I don’t know what I’d do. I wouldn’t release the boys, because you’d all get arrested, and your faces and mine would be all over the internet. It’d end our lives, basically. *And* I wouldn’t get to transition.” She looks at Lorna. “Yes, I know. I’m selfish. But we wouldn’t

take anyone else. If I had my way, this year would be the last one.”

Lorna can't seem to stop shaking. “I don't get how this isn't just a fucked-up punishment,” she says. “You're taking those men — yes, terrible people, I get it — and inflicting lifelong dysphoria on them! I don't get how you can go along with that, Stephanie!”

“Ask me about *my* dysphoria, Lorna,” Christine says, but doesn't give her time to ask anything. “I'm fine. We all are. I'm not saying it's not an adjustment—”

“It's a heck of an adjustment,” Pippa mutters.

“—but I'm not clawing at my skin, trying to get out of my body. In many ways, I like it a lot more than I used to, and not just because I exercise now.”

“You exercise?” Pippa says, as if Christine suggested she can fly.

Before Christine can reply, a loud yawn comes from the corridor. Paige follows it in, and Lorna hides her groan; Vicky's entire friend group lives here! And they're *all*—?

She can't even think it to herself. Stephanie said she once misgendered Christine, and Lorna realises how *wrong* that concept is. She can't imagine Christine or Pippa as boys, especially because it leads inevitably to the conclusion that Vicky was one, too.

Oh, Vicky.

“What's the racket?” Paige says, blinking rapidly to chase the sleep out of her eyes. “I'm charging all of you bitches serious money for waking me up on the morning my lecture got cancelled. Oh, hey, Stef.”

“Stephanie!” Pippa and Christine say in unison.

“I'm trying it out,” Stephanie says.

“I like it,” Paige says. “And you look great. And, um, Lorna. Hello?”

Lorna brushes her hair out of her face and sighs. “Hi, Paige.”

Paige looks around the room. “What don’t I know?” she asks.

“We had to tell her everything, babe,” Christine says. “You want some coffee?”

“I’ll make it.” Paige fetches a cafetiere down from a shelf and starts filling it with coffee while she waits for the kettle to boil. “Everything about Vicky, or...?”

“Everything,” Christine says.

“Including...?”

“Yes,” Lorna says, “I know why you’re all here.”

Paige drops the spoon heavily into the sink. “Well, ignorance was bloody bliss for a while,” she whispers. Christine stands up and hugs her from behind, resting her forehead against Paige’s back.

“The thing about us,” Pippa says, “is we’re not who we were. We all made a choice to change.”

Paige snorts. “Not Vicky.” She half-turns her head; Lorna’s alarmed to see tears in her eyes. “The thing you should know about Vicky, Lorna, is that she’s not like us. Like Pippa said, we all made the choice to be the women you know now, but Vicky was *always* a girl.” She turns all the way around and practically picks Christine up to position her more favourably, head to Paige’s bosom. She encircles her with her arms. Protective. Protecting her from what?

Oh, Lorna realises. From me. I’m the threat. The thing that came into their lives, demanding answers to questions that hurt them. Tears in Paige’s eyes, still. That *she* put there.

She latches on to the last thing Paige said. “What do you mean about Vicky?”

“I mean, she didn’t *learn* to be a girl like I did,” Paige says. “And she didn’t embrace it like Christine. One day, down

there, early on, it was like she woke up from a bad dream, and she was just... Vicky.”

Once again, Lorna’s legs feel weak, and this time she acts sensibly, pulling in a chair and sitting heavily on it before she falls. “What are you saying? Vicky’s a trans woman?”

“No,” Christine says.

“Yes,” Paige says, at the same time. She’s blinked away the tears now, but she still looks vulnerable, and when she speaks she’s more hesitant than usual. “I’ve been thinking about this, ever since Stephanie came out. There are ways in which ‘trans woman’ is the most appropriate descriptor for *all* of us here, and there are ways in which it is... inappropriate. My womanhood, no matter how accustomed to it I am, was coerced. But Vicky’s wasn’t.”

“She’s always insisted she’s not trans,” Christine says, turning around in Paige’s arms to face out into the kitchen again. “She says she had no dysphoria, no eggy feelings or anything. And I’ve tried to respect that.”

“You’ve literally made fun of her for it.”

“Yes, but—”

“You showed her all those egg memes.”

“And she didn’t find them relatable!” Christine says.

“I think she would have if she let herself think about it,” Paige insists. “But I also think that a subreddit is not a diagnostic tool. Yes, Lorna, I think she’s trans, like Stephanie is. Like you are. She might have lasted another five years, even ten. Maybe even decades, if she put herself deep into denial. But I think she would have died by her own hand, or lived to be a woman. The programme simply found it inside her, ahead of schedule.”

“Paige, I don’t—” Christine says, but Lorna can’t stop herself.

“You *really* think that?” She doesn’t know why it’s important, but it is. If Vicky’s trans, the way *she* is, then does

any of this really matter? Vicky as a boy, transitioned against his will... that makes no sense. But if she was always a girl, if she's trans, if she's *like Lorna*, that changes the nature of all of it. That makes the lies she was forced to tell much more like the lies Lorna's told herself, the ones imposed upon them both, to make them boys against their will.

If Vicky's like *her*...

And the image Paige conjured, of Vicky dead by her own hand, is not one she'll ever forget.

"Yeah," Paige says.

Lorna laughs. It's a bitter, broken release of tension, and threatens to become a crying fit, so she hugs herself and bites the inside of her cheek for a second. "You mean to tell me," she says slowly, when she has herself under control, "that I have to tolerate this... abattoir, because it cracked my girlfriend's egg?"

"Yes. That's the position you're in. I'm sorry." And Paige does look sorry; looks almost haunted, forcing Lorna for the first time to wonder what it's like to come out on the other side of this blood-soaked programme's coerced regendering, and face life again. "There are no good options for you. Only compromises. You can't hurt this place without hurting— Ah."

Lorna's blood runs cold. She turns slowly in her chair and there, standing in the entryway, is her girlfriend.

"Hey, Lorna, someone said you're up here, and—" Vicky starts, still out of breath. And then she looks at Lorna, absorbs the tension in the room. "Oh no. Oh, God. Christine, what have you *done*?"

Still unsteady, Lorna makes the couple of paces over to the door without issue. She takes Vicky's hands in hers, steps right up to her and looks carefully, unflinchingly into her eyes. They're level with each other — Vicky was always tall; something *else* that suddenly makes sense — and Lorna punctuates her silent reassurance with a quick kiss.

"Hi, sweetheart," she says.

“What’s going on?” Vicky whispers.

“They told me everything.”

And the weight in her arms increases for a second as Vicky overbalances, almost falls, and has to steady herself against the door frame, against Lorna.

“Lorna,” Vicky says, “oh, God, angel, I’m sorry.” She starts babbling, the words coming out of her in time with her tears as she buries her head in Lorna’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry, you shouldn’t have to be part of all this, all this endless fucking *bullshit*, you’re too good for this place, you’re too good for me, you should run, you should get far away, you should forget about me and Saints and *fuck* I’m so sorry I dragged you into this...”

Lorna shushes her, strokes her between her shoulders, and accepts from Paige a guiding hand, leading them into the privacy of one of the bedrooms and shutting the door behind them.

On the bed together, she whispers to her lover that she’s glad she finally knows all her secrets, and that maybe it’s time she told some, too.

* * *

They give them some time alone, while they share a plate of snacks (courtesy of Indira) and talk amongst themselves. Stef’s had time to think about what it means to her to finally meet another trans girl and to immediately try to persuade her of the relative merits of the kidnapping ring with whom she has thrown in her lot. And that’s a scary enough thought that she welcomes Christine, Pippa and Paige’s distractions.

“Shoot,” Pippa says, interrupting Paige’s story about Christine’s first time in high heels, “it’s almost three. Sorry, Stephanie; I have a tutorial.”

“It’s fine,” Stef says, pushing back from her chair and stretching. “You need to change?”

“No, but I need my laptop. Come upstairs with me?”

“To the third floor?”

“Fourth, actually.”

Stef hesitates. There are non-Dorley people up there, right? Ordinary people, who’ve never even been in a basement except to look for the plastic Christmas tree. And she’s...

No. Screw it. She’s Stephanie today, and — she suddenly decides — Stephanie is confident! Stephanie takes risks! Stephanie goes places, like fourth floors, that Stef would fear to tread.

“How do I look?” she asks.

“Lovely,” Pippa says.

“Beautiful!” Christine says.

She turns to the last girl. “Paige?” she says. “How do I look?”

“You look great,” Paige says, “and also like you’re in early transition. But I don’t think you’ll be recognised. You were in your third year, and no-one upstairs shared a class with you before; the non-programme residents usually move on after their first or second years. And it might be good for people to start seeing you as Pippa’s friend. It’ll give you more freedom to move around the dorms.”

“Assuming you want to be trans as part of your NPH,” Christine says.

Stef doesn’t have time to ask. “New Personal History,” Pippa says. “We all have to decide if we’re going to be cis girls out in the world, or trans girls. Being a trans girl is non-

optional if you don't get bottom surgery, but if you do, it's open season."

"I *am* a trans girl," Stef says, and finds she likes saying it, likes claiming it, likes the feel of it. Lorna's a trans girl, too. And so's Vicky, if Paige is right, and from what Christine says she generally is. That's good company to keep. "So, uh, that's probably fine."

"Come on, then." Pippa takes Stef by the hand and leads her out of the kitchen and back through the corridor. Stef tries to open the door to the stairwell with her thumbprint, just for the novelty of it, but it doesn't let her through. Pippa nudges her aside and unlocks the door. "I'll ask for you to be added to these doors," she says, as they start heading up. "All the doors. It's ridiculous for you to have, like, *half* access."

The fourth floor isn't like the first or second, which are arranged around a single long corridor that threads through the building like the Snake game on the emergency phone back home, and they're not full of unused rooms, either. She and Pippa walk out into a large common area, organised around a handful of sofas and a TV — connected up to a PlayStation and what looks to Stef's uneducated eye like a nineties Nintendo console — which leads off to a large, open-plan kitchen-dining area to one side. On the other side, regularly spaced doors suggest bedrooms, and twin corridors extend down from the common area, leading to more rooms.

"Wow," Stef says, and she's glad she kept her head voice up because two people playing a vintage video game — a *Star Wars* racing game? — turn around on the sofa and smile at her.

"Hey, Pip!" one of them says, waving.

"Hey, Naila," Pippa says. "Can you keep my friend company for a minute? I've got class and I need to grab my stuff. Stephanie, this is Naila and they're Ren. Visiting from the fifth floor for what I can only assume are nefarious reasons."

"How dare you!" Ren says.

“Hi,” Stef says, waving back. Noting the pronoun Pippa used, she adds, “She/her.”

“Ditto,” Naila says, smiling. “You want to play?”

“Um, does it matter if I’m terrible?”

“It’s preferable,” Ren says, waving her down onto the couch and handing her the oddest-looking game controller Stef’s ever seen. They talk her through selecting a pilot and, despite the fuzzy graphics, Stef recognises some of the designs.

“Is this... a *Phantom Menace* game?”

“This *is* where the fun begins,” Ren says, and Naila hits them.

“That’s from *Episode 2!*” she says.

“Actually,” Ren whispers, “it’s from *Episode 3.*”

It’s relaxing, playing the game, chatting, joking, and being apparently instantly accepted as a woman, as who she is; it’s hard not to think of it as another gift from Dorley, one which she will have to pay back — which she has *chosen* to pay back — by returning to the cold, depressing, concrete basement and performing *boy, but what if...?* for Aaron and the others.

Pippa taps her on the head a few minutes later, and Stef lets herself get dragged up from the sofa. She hands back the controller before she gets her legs tangled in the cord, and Naila and Ren resume playing against each other.

“What *are* you two doing down here, anyway?” Pippa asks, before they leave.

“We came to see a friend,” Ren says.

“But they weren’t in,” Naila says.

“And you guys have an N64.”

“And a load of free crisps in the cupboard.” Naila indicates the decimated foil bags on the table.

“Someone has to pay for those, you know,” Pippa says, and she slings her laptop bag over her shoulder and leads Stef out into the stairwell. She closes the door and checks quickly around them before she speaks again. “So? How did you find it?”

“What?” Stef says. “The pod racing game?”

She laughs. “No, hanging out!”

“Just teasing. It was nice, actually.”

“Just that?” Pippa hops down a few steps, so she can turn and stare back up at Stef. “Just ‘nice’?”

Stef briefly sticks her tongue out. “Okay. Fine. Better than nice. Like... a preview of what it’s going to be like. When I’m a girl.”

“You’re—”

“When I look more like the girl I am inside. Better?”

Pippa snorts. “Paige would say you’re a very binary thinker, Stef.”

Stef takes the last stairs down into the main hallway two at a time. “And what would you say?”

“I’d say, I get it,” Pippa says. And then she wags a finger. “Which I *shouldn’t*, because I’m me and you’re you, so, you know, think about it.”

“I don’t have to think about it. Gonna be a girl whatever happens.”

Pippa swipes at her, but Stef intercepts her hand and hugs her instead. “Have a good tutorial,” she says.

“I will!” Pippa sings, and waves as she kicks open the main doors and marches off into campus. Stef’s almost tempted to follow her, to add to the euphoria of being treated in an absolutely mundane and ordinary fashion by two complete strangers by going out there and finding other people to gender her correctly, but she turns on her heel instead and jogs back up the stairs.

On the second floor, she has to knock to be let back in. Christine opens the door for her, and Stef follows her to where Paige is standing outside one of the bedrooms, struggling with whether to enter.

“They’re still in there?” Stef whispers. The other two both nod. “You want to check on them?”

“We’re not sure,” Paige says.

“Lorna might throw things,” Christine says.

“That’s Vicky’s room. Nothing in there to throw but my clothes.”

“*And* some decomposing kitchen detritus,” Christine says. “There might be forks.”

“Maybe we should tell her we can probably get her free bottom surgery now?”

“Bribes are unethical, Paige.”

Stef pushes past them. “Cowards,” she says with a grin, and knocks on the door. “Lorna? Vicky? It’s Stephanie? And the other two.”

The other two? Christine mouths at her.

“You can come in,” someone says through the door.

Paige lets them in, and there they are, Lorna and Vicky, wrapped around each other on the bed — with a pile of clothes shoved roughly off onto the floor, which Paige immediately picks up and quickly sorts through — red-eyed and so tightly entwined they’re almost one person.

“Hi,” says Stef.

“Hey,” Lorna says, reluctantly disentangling herself from Vicky and getting into a crossed-legged position on the end of the bed.

“So,” Paige says, “you’re both fully debriefed?”

Lorna nods.

“Almost,” Vicky says. “She wouldn’t let me tell her my old—”

“You don’t know *mine*,” Lorna says, “and I don’t want to know yours. From what you were telling me, and from what *you* said, Paige, Vicky was always kinda sorta *in waiting*. The girl in hiding. The... bad stuff, the things she did, that was her beating on the walls of her prison.”

“Apt,” Christine whispers.

“I still can’t believe you’re accepting this,” Vicky says.

“I’m accepting *you*,” Lorna says. “You’re my Victoria, you’re my girl, and I’m— I’m fucking glad to *know* you, at last. To see behind all the secrets *they* made you keep.” She turns an angry finger on Christine. “You lot very nearly fucked up a perfectly good trans girl, you know.”

Christine holds up her hands. “Not guilty,” she says. “We were in the same intake. I couldn’t fuck her up; I was catatonic because they took me away one day and castrated me.”

“Oh,” Lorna says, covering her mouth, “shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m mostly over it.”

“That’s the other side of the coin,” Paige says, pulling a stool over and arranging herself on it. “Whatever you think of us — the rest of us, that is — you have to remember that we were all remade here. *All* of us. And the scars are worse for some than others.”

“What she’s saying is, be kind to us. We’re new.”

Lorna leans forward, cupping her chin in her hands. “I still think this place can’t work. That it shouldn’t work.”

Christine shrugs. “We put a lot of work into making sure we only take people we think can make the adjustment. Some people just can’t change. We don’t try to make them.”

“And some people *have* to,” Stef says, and giggles. Lorna looks affronted, so Stef swallows and coughs, to drown out the laughter that still wants to come out. “Sorry,” she says to

Lorna, “I’m still riding kind of a high. But also... I think I want to make a point, if that’s okay?” Lorna nods warily. “I just went up to four with Pippa, played old video games with a couple called Ren and Naila—”

“Oh?” Christine says. “How are they?”

“Good! I stole a bunch of their food. And it was just... It was so *normal*, you know? Just me, *as me*, playing a video game with people I’d just met, and they just... I was Stephanie. I wasn’t Stefan, the guy who hangs around with Melissa — or Mark; whatever — and I wasn’t Stef, the trans girl pretending to be a guy down in the basement here. I wasn’t even Stef, the girl all you lot know. I was just me. And that—” she hiccups, and her throat tightens; this is more difficult to talk about than she expected, “—was something I’ve *never* had before. And it was so fucking random.

“And now I’m thinking,” she continues slowly, mind racing, “that it’s not just that Dorley gave *me* that experience. All those guys down there are going to have it, too. Lorna, you haven’t met them, and I guess neither have you, Vicky, although you know what sort of people come through here.” Vicky nods. “Those boys have been living poisoned lives. And, yes, sure, most of them poisoned themselves, but still, they’ve barely got a single un-fucked-up relationship between them, familial or otherwise. They’re all of them eventually going to get to do what I just did: they’re going to sit down on a sofa and play Nintendo games with complete strangers, and it’s going to be one of the first truly *normal* things in their whole lives. They *need* that.” She shrugs, surprised by her own vehemence. “I want them to have it. They might have been hurt differently to me, but, here, the cure is basically the same. Just a bit more bitter, for them.”

“God,” Christine says, “You are *so* fucking Dorleypilled. And I remember when you used to call *me* that.”

“If you can’t beat them...”

“If I can make a request?” Lorna says, shuffling back across the bed to put her arm around her girlfriend. “Don’t try

and sell me on this place any more, okay? Not for now, anyway. I don't know, maybe I'll get like Stephanie here, and see the sunny side of a bit of light torture, but... eh, probably not." She squeezes Vicky around the shoulders. "But she's my Victoria. I came here thinking this place hurt her, and yes, it did, very much so—"

"It really fucking did," Vicky says.

"—but it seems like it found her, as well. And brought her to me. I'll... I'll keep your secrets. Just promise me?"

"What?"

"Those boys, the ones down there. They're going to be okay?"

"Lorna," Stef says, "I'm going to do everything I can to make *sure* they're okay."

* * *

Aaron. Erin? Ellen? Karen?

He's run every variation through his head, every cutesy modification of his name to make it into something appropriate to what they claim to want him to become. He'd ask someone for better ideas, but he doesn't know who he'd even ask any more, and he knows no-one has anything suitable. Alien names, all of them, names for a version of him who was never created.

No. Names for the person who will succeed him.

God, he wishes he could turn off that stupid light, the one above the bed that does nothing but slice day from night and deny him true darkness, like he's a child who needs a

nightlight. Like he's an animal who needs constant supervision.

Well? Doesn't he? Didn't he tell Stef his whole plan? Passive aggressive resistance, emphasis on the *aggressive*? Fucker's probably told Indira by now. Or Pippa. They'll have shared Aaron's secrets like they share everything else, giggled over it, made it part of that weird bond they have, the one Aaron can't work out if it's between lovers or a brother and a sister. A bond he aches for, wants to reach out and snap whenever he sees them together, wants to twist and use against them if only he can find a way.

A bond he once felt was in reach. Still, he's good and fucked *that*, now, hasn't he? Stef offered you closeness and you threw it back at him, didn't you? Who gives a fuck that he scared you? Because now he's *gone*.

It's too much like it always is. Too much a part of the pattern. He arrives somewhere, and he misbehaves because what the fuck else is he going to do? And then they hurt him. Who *they* are differs every time, as does the manner of it, but it doesn't matter. It never matters. All that's real is that he, Aaron, fucked up again, and now he's paying the price.

And he's sanitising it. He knows he is. He keeps thinking of Stef's face as he watched the names and dates scroll past on the screen in the common room; his horror had been obvious. Narrow escape for you, mate. You almost got close to *this*.

Monica's voice stays with him, too. Dispassionately evaluating his future along with his past. The harm he would inevitably cause. And wouldn't he love to argue? Wouldn't he love to throw it back in her face, like he tried to do with the accusation about the abuse he suffered? But all he'd had were insults and anger, and in the time since he's not come up with anything better.

Who cares if she's even right? She *feels* right, and that's the worst thing. Maybe he wouldn't have continued to spiral, continued to lash out, continued to hurt people — women — over and over, because he could and because he always got

away with it and because it was a little glimmer of power in a life bereft of it? Maybe he'd have grown the fuck up, like his disappointed mother always wished? Maybe, without this place, he'd have finally become something, someone worthy of... anything.

He laughs. What a fantasy.

The other reality, the one Monica painted in the common room, the one she repaints every time he lets himself dream, the one she claims they're saving him from, that's the one that feels real. It's all too easy to look into the future and see Aaron, thirty years old, settling into a sinecure thanks to his father's residual contacts, some pointless position where he does nothing of use and experiences nothing he'll ever remember except for the slap of his hand on his secretary's arse, a piece of insectoid superiority to get him through the day.

Maybe one day he'll fuck her.

Aaron hits himself. Open palm, nothing too flashy. Right in the cheek. He hopes it'll leave a mark, and wants to do it again and again and again, like he's taking revenge for this woman he imagines, but it's as pointless and stupid as anything else he's ever done in this room. He sits on his hands instead, presses his weight onto them, holds himself in place.

His other self. His older self. His past self. *Him*. Always him. Hurting people for the smallest amount of unimpeded sensation. It's like pinching yourself to wake from a dream, only someone else feels the pain.

Stupid.

He'll never become that man now. And as he pictures him, with his shiny-arsed suit and his unchecked casual cruelty, he's glad of that. He hates him. If he could reach into his future and strangle him, beat him, claw at him until he rips into pieces, he would. In less than a heartbeat.

His hands twitch under him.

But the other future, Monica's future, Maria's future, Indira's future, the one they're forcing on him with indifferent calculation and undisguised irritation and what feels disconcertingly like love, he doesn't want it, either. He rejects it as thoroughly as he does every other possible version of himself.

He won't be the older man, hurting people. He can't be any kind of man, not any more, not if they're telling even the slightest fraction of the truth about their intentions. And he refuses to be what they claim to want. He's looked in the mirror, seen the slight but, now he knows what he's looking for, unmistakable signs of estrogen working its way through his body, and tried to see himself altered to their specifications: bigger here, rounder there, softer everywhere. Whether he sees a misshapen, ugly creature (as he did yesterday) or something that could actually be mistaken for a woman (as he does today), he rejects the vision entirely.

Why not leave him be?

Idiot. You *know* why.

He knows what they see when they look at him, when they open him up, look past the surface; they see a serial sexual harasser. They see a rich boy, graduate of a prestigious private school, who walked into a well-regarded university and proceeded to amuse himself at the expense of the women around him, secure in the knowledge that his parents' money would make any and all consequences vanish.

Well, rich boy, here's a consequence you can't escape, at last.

That's what *they* see; what does *he* see when he looks inside himself? If he has to be honest — and what other choice does he have, here, in this prison, where all directions lead right back to this concrete cell? — he's not sure there's anything inside him to find. He's barely a person, just a collection of bad habits and poor self-control, masquerading as human.

But Stefan...

Stef.

He acted like he mattered. Like he could see something, someone there. Someone to care about, to befriend. Someone to — and let's fucking say it, Aaron, right here in the near-dark — love.

You broke that like you broke everything else.

Fuck it.

Fuck *him*.

'You're my reason.' Fuck *off!* Friends don't do that to each other. They don't step over that line, no matter what.

Sent him away. For good or ill, he's gone and he's not coming back. Just you now, Aaron.

Not *Aaron* for long, though...

The funny thing is, now that he's started thinking about the woman they want to make from him, he almost can't stop. His mind's eye ably lengthens his hair, swells his body in the appropriate places, dresses it in clothes like the girls here wear. The woman wears her hair loose and her nails painted and she smiles like the world's a joke only she understands; she walks out of here with Stef and the others, and doesn't look back.

He can see her, but he's *not* her. She's someone else, someone better, someone new. And for a moment he's happy for her, in a way he can't imagine ever being for himself.

He opens his eyes, embraces the dull light, dispels the image. She's a dream, a fantasy, a person he can't ever become. Maybe it's the idea of the new start he hasn't earned; maybe it's the thought that there's a way out of here that doesn't end in death. Maybe it's the womanhood, the transition; maybe *that's* the chasm he can't cross, the thing he can't withstand, the fate he'll fight against with everything he has.

Maybe it's because he knows, more clearly than he's ever known anything, that he doesn't deserve it.

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SIX

GUNPOWDER BOY

2019 DECEMBER 5 — THURSDAY

She fell asleep last night with her phone by her head and the alarm set to vibrate, but she wakes early, anyway, and silences it before it has a chance to wake her companion. She quickly checks to see if the night shift left any urgent messages — no, all quiet — and sets the phone down carefully on the bedside table, turning over after to make sure Maria's asleep. She is, and Edy steals a few moments with her.

The bandage came off yesterday, and the skin underneath, while still bruised and swollen, looks healthier now than it did when they inspected it together last night. Edy checks it over again, just to be sure, reaching out and flipping up a corner of the curtain behind the bed to let in a little more light, and shielding Maria's eyes with her other hand so as not to wake her. Everything looks fine. Maria turns over in her sleep, prompting Edy to drop the curtain and move aside, to give her the space she needs, and her gentle snores give way to long, slow sighs.

Edy can't resist leaning over a little more, until she's inches from Maria's cheek. She mouths a silent prayer and kisses her as softly as she can, lips barely grazing the skin, indulging in the barest contact, in the reassurance that Maria, her Maria, is fucking *alive*. Slowly she turns away, swings her legs out of the bed and hops silently to her feet.

“Right,” she whispers to herself. “Back to work, then.”

She tiptoes her way around, quietly assembling her morning routine. The low light doesn't matter; she knows this place like she knows her own room. She's been spending her nights in Maria's flat for far longer than just the past week of Maria's convalescence, and there's talk, should their relationship prove stable in the long term — she snorts, insulted, at the suggestion they might ever break up — of moving her stuff out of her room and giving it to one of the other long-time sponsors. Edy's failed to come up with a decent reason for being allowed to keep her own place when she barely uses it any more — “I need it to store my shoes!” is not, apparently, sufficient, even given the size of her collection — so she's resigned herself to the loss. She glances at Maria again; if she has to sleep here for the rest of her tenure at Dorley Hall, she's not going to complain.

Cami and knickers go in the hamper; necklace goes in the wicker basket by the sink; Edy goes in the shower.

She leans out of the bathroom door when she's done, to check if Maria's still asleep. She is, and that's good, but it does mean she can't blow dry her hair. She towels it vigorously instead, scrunches some curling gel into it, and ties it up, finger-twisting a few bangs out around her forehead, because she knows Maria likes it like that, and because it alleviates Edy's fear about her hairline. Which, yes, has never to her knowledge outed her, but it's been a source of considerable dysphoria since her transition, since before she would even acknowledge that the word *dysphoria* might mean something to her, since before she truly accepted her new name, her new role. She remembers examining herself in the mirror after eighteen months of hormone therapy, disappointed that the one thing estrogen didn't change was the thing she'd always disliked about her appearance. She could get it fixed, sure, but the prospect of letting someone take a scalpel to her face is *beyond* intimidating! It doesn't matter how many Dorley girls get work done every year and survive with nothing more than a bit of swelling and a spot of bruising and a lot of

complaining about not being allowed to sniff for weeks, she'll never so much as follow them into the consultation room. She'll instead take pride in being pretty despite her unaltered face, she'll tease out her hair to de-emphasise her hairline, and she'll curate a folder on her laptop of photos of professional models with tall foreheads.

She double checks her reflection. It's fine. Like always, it's fine. "Silly girl," she chastises herself for the thousandth time, and blasts her bangs with hairspray.

She reclasps her necklace, adjusts the crucifix so it sits properly in the hollow at the base of her neck, and pauses to reflect on it for a moment, and to say another prayer, asking to be blessed with good fortune. Maria's made good-natured fun of her for her beliefs, but she's always insisted that not *everything* she was taught was wrong, that there's value especially in the things her mother whispered, before her father got to her.

All done. Time to get dressed! Most of her clothes are still back in her room, but she and Maria are basically the same size and have been sharing clothes for a long time, so it's entirely possible that the stretchy jeans and peach top she digs out of the wardrobe are hers, actually.

No, she decides, as she checks them over; definitely Maria's. She's the one who likes the big department store in the city, and the tags suggest expensive brands. She smiles as she pulls them on, imagining Maria justifying spending the extra money on them because they're just that fucking cute and it turns out, as she poses in the mirror on the back of the door, that she's right.

It's not as if either of them has rent to pay, anyway.

Her earbuds are charging off the laptop in the kitchen, and she sticks them in, re-syncs them to her phone and loads up one of Maria's bands. "We must continue your modern cultural education," Maria said, when she came home from the hospital, "if you're going to keep subjecting me to your emonineties shit. Give and take, Ede; the foundation of a healthy

relationship.” Which means listening to Maria’s playlists at least half the time. Some of it’s grown on her, though. She cues up a recent favourite and hums along as she puts the coffee on, throws bread in the toaster, and digs in the fridge for the butter and jam. She has some time while the bread toasts and the coffee percolates, and she spends it leaning on Maria’s kitchen counter, listening to Maria’s music and watching Maria sleep, her chest rising and falling as she breathes.

Goodness, but she loves her *so* much. There’s no-one stronger and definitely no-one more beautiful and it still astonishes Edy sometimes that it took them so long to recognise their feelings for each other. But Edy had to become first someone worthy of love and then someone ready for it, and Maria had to let her guard down. Damaged women, both of them, but carefully and lovingly mended. They both know how and where they’ve been hurt and they press gently on each other, always; Maria, especially, can’t always keep her wounds hidden, sometimes can’t walk or speak or breathe for the memories that overwhelm her, and Edy’s there, every time, to help her come back to herself, so that for the next day, and for the next month, the next year, Maria can be *Maria* again.

The woman she loves is so fucking strong.

Edy prides herself on being a kind woman — the requirements of the programme permitting — but sometimes when Maria sleeps she speaks her memories aloud, relives in her dreams the burns and the cuts and the girls she couldn’t save, and in those moments Edy wishes for nothing more than the means to find old Dorley’s so-called Grandmother and hurt her, hurt her the way she hurt Maria, hurt her so badly she never recovers. At least the nurse’s fate was grimly satisfying. The woman deserved no less than what she got: segmented and buried in pieces, her fingers and teeth thrown in bags into the sea.

Ah! The toast is done. And the smell of it wakes Maria. Edy pauses the music, butters and jams the toast, pours the coffee, and carries it all over on a tray to the bed, where Maria’s piling up pillows behind her head, smiling at Edy, and

bouncing upright with an energy she hasn't shown since before the attack. That's good; that's great! She's healing well, returning to her old self, and when she's better she can go back down into that dank, awful basement and confront Will fucking Schroeder and make him face up to what he did to her.

Edy pushes down the flash of rage — it's neither Godly nor becoming, it helps no-one, and it's actively counterproductive to get angry with the boys, even when you're not around them; she remembers well what it was like to *be* them — and concentrates on arranging the tray so Maria can eat her breakfast and drink her coffee without issue.

“Hey, baby,” she says, squatting down by the bed.

“G'morning,” Maria says, and Edy wants to exult: she left the lights on in the kitchen, they're right in Maria's field of view, and she's *not* squinting! Another good sign. Maria reaches out, cups Edy's cheek. “Coming back to bed?”

“I can't,” Edy says, pouting. “Back to work today, for real.”

Maria slowly blinks away her sleepiness. “I *could* unilaterally give you another week off,” she says. “I still have that ‘head injury’ get-out clause; I can basically do what I like.”

“I think Monica might expire aggressively at me if I take any more time off.”

“Fine,” Maria says, leaning into the word with a grin, “I will *generously* allow your *highly important* work to take you away from me. For a while.”

“You're so magnanimous, baby.”

“Those boys won't rehabilitate themselves,” Maria adds, and takes a bite of toast.

Edy lingers while Maria eats, and they share the idle joy of mundane daily tasks undertaken with the one you love, but then work does indeed take Edy away, out of the door and down the corridor and into the third floor proper, where she

greet a handful of early birds, up making coffees and teas and filling thermoses and bagging sandwiches; people to whom she is Edy, the grad student. She waves to a friend who really is what she merely pretends to be, reconfirms their plans to meet for lunch later, and taps her earbud; the song starts up again, and gets to the chorus.

She treasures these mornings. It's not just about time with Maria, it's about time as herself, as the woman she gets to be ever since she was saved from herself, saved from the confused, angry, lonely boy, prone to bigotry, zealotry, and all the other things that were stained onto her flesh as a child. It doesn't matter how many years she puts between herself and him; she'll always be grateful that it's Edith who greets the morning sun and not that broken, spitting, desperate child who once sneered with her mouth and hated with her voice and hurt with her hands.

Every day's a victory.

On the stairs down the music pauses itself; Aunt Bea's calling. She's been checking in every morning since she was finally persuaded to stop moping around the house, sent back to her responsibilities with a promise that Maria will definitely take it easy and *absolutely* won't return to work until she's fully healed, and Bea wouldn't be Bea if she didn't call every day to confirm that Maria's keeping that promise.

"Good morning, Aunt Bea," Edy says. "Just a moment." She ducks into the second floor and hurries around the corridor to the kitchen; she doesn't actually know who'll be awake at this time of day, not without pulling up the timetables, and she doesn't want to disturb anyone by carrying on a loud conversation outside their door. Julia and Yasmin are breakfasting at the kitchen table, but as soon as she comes in, they clear out, ignoring her conciliatory gestures and whispering to each other. It'd be nice if they didn't hate her and the other sponsors quite so much, but at least Christine's started getting through to them, thank the Lord. "Okay. Ready."

“Edith,” Bea says. “How’s my Maria?” Straight to the point, as ever.

“She’s sitting up, she’s eating toast, and given that I’m obediently listening to one of her playlists right now she’s probably listening to one of mine, God help her.”

“No signs of—?”

“*None*, Aunt Bea. I know what to watch for.”

“Sudden changes,” Bea says, in a voice tinny even over the expensive earbuds Maria bought her, “repeated vomiting, seizures—”

“I *have* the list,” Edy says.

“Sorry.”

“She’s fine. She’s recovering! And, once I’ve been to work this morning—” *and discharged an obligation to a friend*, Edy doesn’t add, because Bea doesn’t need to know about every single one of the deceptions and accommodations they all have to make in their lives outside the programme, or the guilt would eat her alive, “—I’ll be back with her, watching out for her. We might play some board games.”

“Be careful with that, Edith.”

Edy laughs. ‘Board games’: code for sex. For all that Bea’s role as the prudish custodian is almost entirely an act, she still doesn’t like to think of the woman who is almost her daughter doing such things, and neither Maria nor Edy want to raise the topic with her; they arrived at a succession of polite euphemisms almost by accident.

“*Light* board games,” Edy says, and hopes Bea understands that she’s teasing her, or she might end up like the nurse.

Bea sighs down the phone. “You’ll be the end of me, you two,” she says. “If the current lot don’t get there first.”

“Which current lot? The first-floor hooligans or the... eclectic mix in the basement?”

“Please. The worst thing the second years have done is somehow defeat the sound dampening on their rooms. I’m talking about the trans girl who, I’m told, is now *volunteering* to stay in that concrete hole because she thinks *we* can’t be trusted with the care and feeding of her horrid little friend.”

It’s almost entertaining, the way every conversation in the house seems to come back to young Stephanie. Almost. “It’s okay,” Edy says. “Maria will be back with Aaron soon, and Indira’s doing a great job in the mean—”

“Is she wrong, Edith?”

Uncertainty from Aunt Bea; unsettling! “What do you mean?”

“Stephanie’s actualising, *growing*, so fast. She’s a perfect example for the boys, better even than Victoria! So why do I feel like her every victory is a defeat for me?”

Edy puts her weight on the kitchen table. “I still don’t understand.”

There’s a long pause on the line, and when Bea finally says, “No, no, I suppose you wouldn’t,” it’s with the weight of years, and she sounds for the first time like a woman of fifty-five, to whom life has not been especially kind. “It doesn’t matter. I’m just second-guessing everything I’ve done in my life.”

“Aunt Bea, no! One precocious trans girl doesn’t change anything.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“No.” Edy says the word with as much certainty as she can. “She *doesn’t* change the good you’ve done, the lives you’ve turned around. Aunt Bea, you saved Maria, you saved *me*, you saved, goodness, I don’t know *how* many girls—”

“Did I? Or did I just... make assumptions? Put my pet theories into practice?”

Edy bites down on her immediate reply. Says instead, “Are you alone out there? Or is Elle with you?”

“It’s just me right now,” Bea says. “Just me.”

“Maybe you should come home. Or maybe one of us should come out and stay with you.”

“No. No, but thank you, Edith. You’re very kind.”

“It’s the way you made me,” Edy says.

“Edith... You made yourself,” Bea says. “Maybe... maybe I *will* come home. There are no leads, anyway.”

Fruitless tasks undertaken for loves lost become ritualised so easily, and Bea’s search is an annual memorial. Always conducted during the first week of December, always ending in failure and renewed grief. No-one expects a fifty-three-year-old woman — or however she might choose to conceptualise herself, this long after she was taken away — to resurface after so long, but her memory is owed, and Bea obliges. It probably wasn’t the best idea for her to go so soon after the trauma of Maria’s attack, but she wouldn’t be talked out of it. Edy’s always been surprised Elle still allocates funds to the task, but the woman is nothing if not sentimental — sentimental and ravenous, she remembers — and considers the disappearance of Valerie Barbier a major loose end.

Or, perhaps, she’s simply indulging Beatrice. Edy’s never found herself in a position to ask.

“I’m so sorry, Aunt Bea.”

“Edith, please. Just Bea.”

“If there’s anything I can do, Bea...” She leaves the sentence hanging. Aunt Bea’s story’s changed a few times in the telling, and Edy doesn’t know if that’s because she prefers not to remember it vividly or because the experience was so traumatic that the memories simply never fully formed, but one thing’s always been consistent: Val and Bea named each other. They were, in a sense, in the only sense that matters to Bea, born together under Grandmother’s hand, and there’ll always be a part of her that believes they might still, one day, die together.

Bea's quiet for a long time. And then, with a sniff rendered crackly and loud by the poor connection, speaks with the businesslike tones Edy's come to find almost reassuring from her. "Edith, my dear," she says, "if I thought there was something you could do that you weren't already doing, I would have docked your pay. Good morning. And... thank you."

Edy doesn't start the music again until she's back on the stairs, because she stopped to listen to the faint sounds of argument coming from Yasmin's room. She taps a reminder into her phone — someone needs to check in on Yasmin and Julia, and it needs to be someone other than their sponsors, who share at least some of the blame for their isolation; perhaps not the long-suffering Christine, though, considering the rate at which she's been accumulating responsibilities — and takes the rest of the stairs at her leisure, singing along quietly until the much-interrupted song ends.

There's no-one in the downstairs kitchen, which isn't all that surprising for the time of day, but Monica, an earlier riser than anyone, has left two thermoses in a clear carrier bag by the sink. She opens them, sniffs to check the contents — the pink one with red hearts and happy faces on is hers; cute, Mon, if Edy was six years old — and goes to find Monica, to thank her, swinging the bag from her little finger. Monica's in the makeshift gym, out in the rat's nest of rooms behind the dining hall, midway through her cardio, so Edy restricts herself to a few sardonic gestures, absorbs Monica's answering grin, and steps up to the treadmill to share a high five.

Time to go to work!

She drops in to the security room on the way past — Nell's on the night shift again, as she has been for a while and will be for at least a little longer — and then it's down into basement two, past the corridor to the cells where Will, Raph and Ollie still languish, and onwards, to the bedrooms. Stephanie, rushing past on her way to the bathroom and probably trying to get done before any of the boys wake up, smiles at her, and Edy smiles back.

Is she wrong, Edith?

Edy shakes her head to dispel the errant thought, and watches Stephanie disappear into the bathroom. She's no existential threat to the programme; she's just a girl, doing what she has to, muddling through with guesswork and good intentions, just like everyone else. Just a Vicky who worked herself out years earlier, and who, with luck, will choose a less problematic girlfriend.

Besides, Edy likes her. And it's nice to help someone who's actually aware she's being helped.

She knocks on Adam's door. He doesn't answer, but she knows he's awake, so after an appropriate pause for him to cover his nakedness — not that he's ever *completely* naked, even in private, except during his ablutions; ungodly — she rolls the lock over and greets him with coffee and a hug.

He still looks so *sad*.

He's been withdrawn since disclosure. Not as badly as Aaron but worse than she hoped. Still tied up in his conception of manhood, his perception that his worth, his entire self, is bound up in his man's heart, his man's soul, and that silly little thing between his legs. It's what *they* taught him, and with rather more focus than is usual. Patriarchy's messages are implied, insinuated, inserted into TV shows and playground bullying and open-palm slaps from your father, but Adam... For him, they made it explicit, codified it, made him learn it rote, dressed it up as virtue and love and holiness. Edy's still not worked out if the method of his indoctrination is going to make it easier to get it all out of him, or considerably harder.

She hugs the boy tight. At least he's stopped trying to push her away, like he did right after disclosure. He releases her earlier than he used to, though, and she takes her tongue between her teeth for a moment to hide her disappointment.

Baby steps, Edith.

She sets the bag with the thermoses down carefully on the dresser and motions for him to join her at his bedside, kneeling

on the rug they repositioned for comfort on his first day. He kneels without hesitation and she arranges herself next to him, knees on the rug, ankles tucked under, hands clasped over her heart, just like him.

The prayer's a simple one, an entreaty for strength to face the coming day, to withstand troubles, carry burdens, and so on, recently rendered into modern English by some luminary. She smiles as she always does at the closing lines: *Your grace is your most precious gift. Please, Lord, make me worthy of it.* Isn't that the point? To make him *actually* worthy of the Lord's grace? To sift through the poisonous muck they pumped into him and find whoever's left underneath it all?

He taught her the prayer at the end of the first week and said it aloud with her at the end of the second, a sign that her attempts to develop a rapport with him were bearing fruit. He showed her how to kneel, how to hold her hands, which words to emphasise; talked through with her the meaning behind every line.

She didn't tell him she already knew it.

* * *

Christine's frowning at her reflection when Paige squats down next to her, reaches out and delicately takes the open tube of primer out of her hands.

"I want to do your face today," she says.

"Why today, all of a sudden?" Christine says, leaning forward to inspect herself more closely in the mirror set into the vanity. She lets Paige keep the primer; she's more interested in whether that's just a bit of discoloured skin by her nose or— yes, it's a zit.

“I *want* to do your makeup every day,” Paige says, bouncing on her toes and continuing in a childish whine, “and I haven’t gotten to for *ages*.” She turns a toothy grin on Christine, who looks at her supposedly adult girlfriend in mild astonishment. “Please?” Paige stretches the word out, distorting the vowel as her smile widens under Christine’s scrutiny.

There’s no defeating her when she’s set her mind on something, but Christine makes a token effort. “I’m supposed to be doing it myself. Aunt Bea said so.”

“And you’ve got pretty good,” Paige says, straightening up and moving to stand behind Christine, encircling her with her arms. Christine raises a sceptical eyebrow, and Paige squeezes her in response. “Yes, you’re no makeup artist, *but—*” she punctuates her faint praise with a kiss into Christine’s hair, “—you’re at least as good as half the cis girls out there on campus. I’ve seen the looks you’ve been doing.” She rests her chin on top of Christine’s head. “It’s no secret that I spend a lot of my time watching you.”

“But—”

“And Bea’s not even around!”

Leaning into Paige’s embrace, Christine looks up at her — dislodging her as she does so — and says, “She has eyes and ears everywhere, you know.”

Paige takes advantage, plants another kiss on Christine, this time on her nose, and pushes her head down again. “Don’t you have admin access to her eyes and ears?”

“Not the ones in Edy’s head.”

All it takes, in the end, is for Paige to bring her face down level with Christine’s, meet her eyes in the mirror, and press their cheeks together. “Please, Christine?”

It’s all Christine can do not to blush. They’ve known each other for years and been back together more than a month and *still* Paige can render her helpless with nothing more than a little bit of physical contact. “Fine.”

Squealing with excitement, Paige reaches out with her foot and hooks in the desk chair, rolling it over so she can sit next to Christine. She starts sorting through Christine's supplies, pausing occasionally to kiss her again, and her affection soon has Christine laughing.

"I missed you," Paige says, when she has Christine sitting still with her face immobile; trapped.

"Sorry." It's a word you can say without moving your mouth much.

It's true that between their classes, Paige's obligations towards her Instagram account — a new box of clothes from some brand or other arrived on Tuesday, prompting a flurry of photo sessions with Abby behind the camera and Paige in front of it — and Christine's job here, they've seen each other only mornings and evenings this week. Mostly it's been Christine's fault: in a fit of post-Lorna conscientiousness, she identified a security hole even she never knew about, and the tedious work of patching and updating software, checking the logs for intrusions (none recorded) and the files for signs of tampering (none so far) has kept her in the security room from early until late. It hasn't escaped her notice that it's also put her in contact with almost all the sponsors at one point or another; the very mechanisms of her job keep embedding her deeper and deeper in the programme. At least she had the chance to talk to Nell again, in the brief windows where their duties overlapped. Nell thanked her for pulling her out of a destructive spiral, and claimed already to have asked Rebecca's sponsor, Bella, to apologise to Faye on her behalf. Christine, a girl designed by nature — and Indira — to be terrible at holding grudges, forgave Nell with hugs and a promise to have lunch some time. "In the new year," Nell had said with a sigh. "Maybe March, I don't know. When I'm off the night shift and I've stopped falling asleep at ten in the morning."

"Not your fault," Paige says, "and you don't need to be sorry. But I'm going to pretend that it is, and you do," she

adds, in the voice she uses when she's concentrating, "so I can make you let me dress you, too."

There's no way for Christine to refuse, not with Paige so close, so beautiful and so presumptuous. To be taken care of like this is a reaffirmation of her new life as well as their relationship, so when Christine replies, she leans forward and takes Paige's free hand in a rush of emotion. "Please do," she says.

Paige likes to push things. "Please do what, Christine?" she whispers.

"Please dress me, Paige."

* * *

The fucking strip light in the ceiling. It's all he's looked at with any consistency for days now. Night/day. Night/day. Night/day. Red/yellow. Red/yellow. Red/fucking/yellow, like a playground rhyme. Closing his eyes and listening carefully he can almost hear cadence in its electronic hum, and he could easily believe that if he recorded it on his phone for an entire day and sped it up the waveform would coalesce into something legible, and Aaron knows for absolute certain that it would sound exactly like the ticking of the old grandfather clock in his parents' house.

He hated that thing. An antique, apparently, but he always thought it was artificially aged, all its imperfections painted on or scraped deliberately into the wood. It was just like the manor house, with its wooden beams and grand staircase and suspicious similarity to three other manor houses on the same cul-de-sac. Just like the supposedly vintage carpets they laid down. Just like the fancy clothes they started wearing. Affectations all, fake and utterly pointless, because his father

sold, didn't he? Made enough money to live like a complete bastard for ten lifetimes, and all it cost him was his influence. The man didn't know what he had until it was gone, and now, even though the family had more money than anyone he grew up with ever imagined was possible, it wasn't enough. None of the toffs were interested in them. What use to the truly influential is a man with a pot of cash but no name, and no business venture with which to shape the world? Mere money isn't enough, or lottery winners would be Lords.

So his mother and father sent him off to boarding school, hoping he could become what they never could, and while he was getting the crap kicked out of him and having his shit stolen and being forced to do things he despised, they bought a fucking grandfather clock. When he went home for the holidays he wrapped a shirt around the pendulum.

Red/yellow. Night/day. The distinctions are meaningless; he sleeps when he sleeps (but mainly during the day) and he pisses when his bladder fills (almost always at night). The rest of it's a mire of dead introspection, self-hatred and shit movies. Nothing especially new; another purgatory. How did he survive the last one? By being evasive, bloody-minded and at least twice as clever as the other boys in the dorm, and, oh yeah, there was Elizabeth for a while, too. As much a friend as an idea into which he could escape; proof that the other world, the ordinary world, still existed.

How about here, then? It's just boarding school all over again: people with power over him, imposing their will. And, instead of Elizabeth, he has—

Yeah. He doesn't have anyone, not any more.

Best not to think too hard about that. Best not to think too hard about anything! Think of the consequences! A relentless focus on his own poor decisions, bad behaviour and knee-jerk responses to unexpected advances might lead to something drastic! Yeah! He might be kidnapped and stashed underground and forced to take estrogen and eat vegetarian food!

You know what? Fuck this place. Fuck the implant, fuck the estradiol. Fuck this stupid room and the stupid light strip. Fuck the inoffensive romantic comedies on his computer and the girl-pop music on his phone. Fuck Indira, fuck Maria, and especially fuck Stefan.

And, *fuck*, he stinks. How long's it been since he had a shower? How many days? And why isn't Indira making him do it? He sees her wrinkle her nose up when she comes in!

That's stupid. Are you always going to wait for someone else to fix it? Or are you going to take care of yourself for once, Aaron? Are you going to regain a tiny sliver of pride? If they're so intent on erasing you, on erasing Aaron, and replacing you with some *girl*, some stranger, then why are you fucking helping? Wasting away in your room until one day you just cease to be and someone else walks out is possibly the *most* pathetic way you could have responded to your predicament.

Get off the bed. Turn on a real light. Take off those clothes and — he sniffs them; gross! — throw them in the corner. Gather up your stuff and put it away. Brush your greasy hair. Fuck it; bundle up those bedsheets, because they're probably crusty as shit, and throw them in the corner, too. Put together the wash kit, throw on a robe, and let's fucking go.

Aaron's composure lasts long enough for him to open the door, stride out, and almost walk right into Stef in the corridor.

Staggering backwards, Aaron loses his footing and follows his canvas wash bag to the floor, spilling plastic bottles, his electric shaver and his toothbrush across the concrete. He goes down hard, even with the small amount of padding his arse has acquired thanks to those fucking injections, and the pain conspires with surprise to rob him completely of any notion of what to do next.

“Sorry,” Stef says, pulling her— no, *his* robe tight, and frowning down at him.

Aaron opens his mouth and something fucking stupid falls out. He doesn't even know what; probably nothing more than a lungful of idiot vowels, the kind of noise you make when your body needs to react to something but your brain is busy with more important matters.

Like: who the fuck *is* that?

He can't stop staring, because Stef looks like a different person, and that's completely ridiculous because it's been less than a week since they saw each other last, since Aaron threw him out of his room, threw things *at* him, for having the audacity to claim to care, to boast of an emotional response higher up the curve than mere artless cynicism and chatterbox prevarication, to demonstrate an affinity for something actually fucking real and not the evasions and excuses behind which Aaron habitually hides, shunting anything about himself that might be worth a damn into places from which it can't escape. Stef's standing there looking down at him and he looks different, he *moves* different, he's smiling and bending down a little and Aaron's struggling to keep the pronouns straight in his head and to come up with a word to describe him that isn't —

“Aaron?” Stef says.

No, no, the Stefan Aaron knows is twitchy, moves awkwardly, folds his arms into his body and wears his hair artlessly, but the person looking down at him, wearing an approximation of Stefan's face — and it's *close*, it's really close, but it's like the sharper edges have been filed down just a little and the harder lines have been filled out — doesn't glance around like Stefan does, doesn't seem to have that need to constantly check for people watching her, doesn't make herself small like Stefan does, and her *hair*... It's damp from the shower and finger-combed out of her face, but it's... different.

“How are you doing that with your hair?” He asks the question as soon as it occurs to him, because it's better to grab onto some minute piece of trivia and examine it in detail than

to try to process the whole picture at once, the entire fucking person standing over him.

“What?” she asks. “Oh, yeah, Pip got me some mousse. You just rub it in, then sort of lean over and shake your head and deal with the stragglers after.”

“Oh,” Aaron says. “Huh.” Not, in the end, especially helpful.

Stef — and it definitely *is* Stef, even though his voice is more clear than before, even though he stands and moves differently, even though Aaron spotted before he tightened his robe that he wears his towel higher on his body — starts rounding up Aaron’s wash kit from where its constituent pieces fell, and Aaron would help, or get up and run away, or swear at him, or do *something*, but his disbelief can’t be overridden. He can’t stop staring; it’s been less than a week! How can one man — or something — change so much in so short a time? Or has he been changing all along, little by little, week by week, and Aaron’s just been too self-absorbed to notice?

“Aaron?” Stef says, crouching down right in front of him and tipping bottles into Aaron’s wash bag. “Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself?”

Why would he have—? Oh. Right. He fell. He has a sore arse. “Not really.”

“Then budge up!” Stef says, making shooing gestures. “You’re sitting on your toothbrush.”

Still only half-aware, Aaron lifts himself up an inch and dumbly pulls his toothbrush out from under a buttock.

“Give me that,” Stef says.

“Why?” Aaron asks, holding the thing like a week-old dead fish.

“It fell on the floor,” Stef says, in a voice so dripping with derision Aaron almost laughs. “It’ll be dirty. I’ll get you a new one.”

Aaron doesn't respond, so Stef just reaches forward and snatches it, straightening up and grinning at him. Stef's hair — it's not longer, it *can't* be, not in any meaningful way, there hasn't been enough time, but it *looks* longer, and softer, too, and doesn't seem constantly to fall in his eyes any more; mousse, apparently — haloes him in the ceiling light, its mid-orange colour blazing like the morning sun.

“Um,” Aaron says.

“Tell you what: why don't I go to the storeroom and get you a new toothbrush, and when I'm done, you'll be back on your feet, and we can talk? Catch up? Okay? Aaron?”

Aaron nods, and Stef turns on his heel, takes a right at the end of the corridor. Heading for the storeroom, the one in the common room, which apparently Stef can just walk into now. Another change, since he's been gone.

And what the fuck, Aaron, was *that*?

He replays the encounter. It's easier to believe, on review, that Stef is still basically the same person, because Aaron's seen this new Stef before, in little flashes, when he let his guard down, when he forgot to be worried, when he felt safe... and that would be a reassuring thing to realise, except that Stefan fucking Riley is flowering into a self-assured, confident and attractive person *down here*, in this obscene concrete pit where the pretty girls smile at you as they hold you down and hurt you.

The sound of Stef's bare feet skipping back up the corridor reminds him that he has a job to do, and that job is to stand up and reassemble something like a working brain, so when he comes face to face with Stef again he doesn't say anything dangerously stupid, like, hey, Stef, why are you suddenly so fucking—?

“Toothbrush,” Stef says, rounding the corner and holding it out. It's blue, and still in its packaging. The cardboard's peeled a little at the edges, and Aaron wonders how long it's been in the storeroom. Do toothbrushes have use-by dates? Is that

even a thing? How would that even work? Would the bristles just fall out, or—? “Toothbrush?” Stef repeats.

Aaron jumps, then takes it. “Toothbrush,” he agrees. “Um, thanks.”

Stef’s grinning at him, like what he said was funny or something. He leans against the wall with his shoulder, hands clasped behind his back. “So,” he says, “are you up and about again? Or is this just a one-off?”

Aaron shrugs. “I, uh, hadn’t thought that far.” He points down the corridor and hefts his refilled wash bag. “I was just going to have a shower.”

Stef snorts, and wrinkles his nose, just like Indira did. “I wasn’t going to mention it, but, yeah, maybe go do that.”

Fuck. Yeah. Of *course* he noticed. The first time since Saturday he’s left his fucking room, smelling like an armpit’s arse, and he runs into Stef! Literally! Probably left gross sweaty patches all over Stef’s nice, clean—

“Yeah,” he says, limply waving his new toothbrush, “I’ll just go wash up, then.”

“You do that.” Stef unlocks his door with his thumb and pushes it halfway open. Aaron can see inside: it looks as tidy as ever; oh, yeah, and it doesn’t stink, either. “I’m going to go get dressed,” Stef continues, “and if you want to talk, I’ll be in the common room when I’m done. No pressure.”

Aaron nods, backing away. “I might join you.”

He can’t miss the way Stef’s face lights up. “Really?”

“Yeah. But no gay stuff, okay? And I don’t mean that all homophobically, I’m not trying to get all hate crime-y or anything, you know, I support the gays, I think everyone should get to choose their own sexuality, or, you know, born this way, whatever, it’s just that I, personally, am not into it.”

Stef bites his lip and frowns lightly and Aaron hates the way the rush of blood in his ears and the sudden dizziness

combine to almost obscure Stef's reply: "Okay, Aaron. Sure. No gay stuff."

Aaron practically runs for the bathroom.

* * *

He's back. He's out of his room and he's talking to her and he's *back*. He was looking at her kind of funny, out there in the corridor, but that's not important. That's just a detail. It doesn't *matter*, because the little shit's not going to rot away in his room, after all. Even if he kind of smells like he has been, a little bit.

The sponsors were right: what Aaron needed was time and nothing more. Irritating. Stef makes a mental note to listen to them a bit more in future; they basically wrote the book on making happy girls out of sad boys. And with only a — she attempts the maths in her head, but quickly gives up — fifteen-ish percent failure rate!

She examines herself in the mirror. Decent enough, considering. Eyebrows still a little bushy, obviously, but she didn't miss any spots when she shaved, and her skin looks pretty clear.

That failure rate, though; it's worrying, and it's why she's still down here. All the reassurances, all the promises, all the statistics in the world won't make her abandon that boy entirely to the care of people who, no matter what they say, have seen a hundred boys like him and probably aren't all that attached to any specific one. Not until he becomes more like them, at any rate.

So, how should she deal with him, now everything's (mostly) out in the open? She'll have to be careful not to be

too feminine around him; she'll be the first to admit she's rather let that slide, since it's just been her and Martin.

And 'no gay stuff'! She giggles; she can work with that. Keep her distance, that sort of thing.

She critically examines the contents of her wardrobe. It *sucks*. Upstairs she has skirts and dresses and leggings and jeans and some things she's not entirely sure of the names of yet, and anything she doesn't have can be borrowed or bought, but down here it's nothing but fitnesswear; male fitnesswear, at that. At least she has nicer underwear now — still very nearly possible to explain away as briefs, should it come to that — and sports bras, so she doesn't poke through the t-shirts.

The bras are harder to explain away than the other underwear. She plans to claim, if anyone — such as Aaron — pulls her up on them, to have *very* sore nipples and to have gotten fed up with them rubbing against the t-shirts, which isn't all that far from the truth. The boys will all be getting bras of their own, anyway, sooner or later, and for the same reason. Pippa said they prefer to wait until someone snaps and asks for one, and when Stef raised a doubting eyebrow she said it usually happens eventually, notwithstanding Aaron's early (terrible) jokes. It was Pippa who did so, in her intake, which didn't make it any more pleasant to be around the others. "I swear we had nastier t-shirts than you," she said, rubbing one of Stef's tops between her fingers. "It was like sandpaper on my nips. After a month, I couldn't take it any more."

Stef dumps everything out onto the bed and sorts through sizes and colours. There's not much variation in either, but with a little experimentation she comes up with an outfit that is, at the very least, presentable: a dark green t-shirt (to hide the sports bra), the baggiest pair of joggers she has (for comfort, and to exaggerate what little contrast there is in her figure), and a hoodie, tied around the waist (to cinch the t-shirt tight). She brushes out her hair and experimentally tries bunching it up behind her head; still not quite long enough for

a ponytail, although she can gather a few strands if she really yanks on it. Another few weeks, maybe. She scrunches it, instead, and shakes her head again to even out the slight wave.

In the mirror she looks... androgynous. Barely any more feminine than she looked when she woke up! Not an outcome she particularly likes, but Aaron's back, so for the moment she needs to strike a balance between looking how she wants to look, and looking so masculine she wants to claw at herself. She catches herself wondering if she can speed up his development so she can dress the way she does upstairs, and then frowns and has to stop herself from kicking the wardrobe; necessary or not, she *won't* celebrate Aaron's feminisation. Not prematurely.

"Fuck sake," she mutters. Why does everything good have to come with a side-order of shit?

Never mind. There's no changing his trajectory, so it's better just to forget it. Forget it and help him acclimate to *now*. The future's a worry for another day.

She pulls the case and the charms off her phone, locks them in the drawer, puts her computer to sleep, and heads back out.

Aaron's not in the common room yet — she thinks she heard him pad wetly down the corridor while she was agonising over her hair — but she chooses to trust that he'll show. No-one else is around yet, so she declines to turn on the TV and fetches instead a book from the pile in the corner. Relaxed restrictions in the time since Will and the others got put back in the cells have meant a slow widening of the scope for entertainment in the common room, and the unlocked cabinets now give them access to chess and draughts sets, a Monopoly board, a delightfully dated early 2000s Trivial Pursuit claiming to be the 'Cyberspace Edition' that she wants at some point to torture Christine with, and a healthy supply of romance books, from battered and ancient het stuff Stef's been ignoring, to newer queer romances. She undogs the page she was on in her latest read — she described it to Martin as

‘lesbian baker meets bisexual barista’, which information the man received with the same dispassionate placidity as he does everything else; God, it’ll be good to have Aaron back — and settles down on the couch, arranging herself so she’ll see Aaron when he comes in. She scans the page and picks up where she left off.

Ah, yes: the bakery and the upscale coffee shop are duking it out in the town’s annual Croissant Contest.

* * *

Aaron determinedly recentres the *he* pronoun in his mind as he pushes through the doors to the common room and sees Stef curled up on one of the couches, his elbow on an elevated knee and his temple resting on his wrist, doing that little fucking frown again, and reading a book with a pink, purple and blue cover, illustrated with a cartoon pastry in the shape of a heart. He looks unguarded, relaxed, and ridiculously feminine. Which still makes no sense: he looks barely any different from how Aaron remembers, so what’s changed?

“Aaron!” Indira squeals from behind him, running up from the direction of the stairs. He turns around and backs away from her into the common room, but she follows, letting the doors shut behind her and leaning on them. Does she *know* she’s blocking his way out, or is she just being ditzy? Impossible to tell. “You’re out of bed!” she enthuses. “And—” she sniffs, “—you washed!”

He holds up his hands, as if to ward off evil. “I did,” he says, hating the way he stammers over the words and finding nothing else to follow them; whatever part of his brain ordinarily does the talking for the rest of him is obviously horribly out of practice. It doesn’t help that her boundless enthusiasm and limitless energy are both turned all the way up

this morning; come back, cynical, sardonic Maria! All is forgiven! Even these fucking tits!

Shit. When did he get so bad at dealing with overwhelming people? He survived years of boarding school, years of braying halfwitted posh fucks with no conception of personal space or consent without losing his grip this badly!

Yeah, but you never spent almost a week in the dark with only your phone screen for company back at school.

“What’s the occasion?” Indira says, but before he can reply and before she can say anything else, a hand — Stef’s — closes over his shoulder.

“Hey, Dira,” Stef says, moving forward into the space Aaron occupies and subtly pulling him back at the same time. “Do you mind if I borrow him for a bit? We have a lot to catch up on.”

“Of course,” Indira says, beaming at the both of them. “Why don’t I go upstairs and let them know there’ll be one extra when they start on lunch?”

“Thanks, Dira.”

When she’s gone, and when he’s collapsed on a couch, opposite from Stef, tired out from even this much contact with — he counts — two people, he manages a smile for Stef.

“Thanks for the rescue.”

“No problem,” Stef says, retrieving his book, folding the corner of a page over and throwing it onto the other couch cushion. “She can be a bit much, sometimes.”

“Only sometimes? She’s like if you could fill a nuke with niceness instead of radiation and explosions. And that only makes it scarier when she turns it off and threatens to feed you through a tube.”

He tried the passive resistance thing a couple of times, leaving his food uneaten and then, when she switched him to the nutrient shakes, waiting until the early hours and pouring them down the toilet. The first few times she cheerily provided

more food, more milkshakes, and waited with him until he choked at least some of it down. And then, one time, she didn't bring anything. She let him go hungry, all night and for most of the next day, and came back in the evening with a new milkshake. Before she handed it over — and he was alarmed to find himself instinctively grabbing for it — she gravely informed him that if he didn't cooperate, she'd have him taken to a spare cell, strapped down, and tubed. It was enough to make him reconsider his still-forming plans to resist the injections.

“Jesus, Aaron,” Stef says.

“Yeah, well, I'm getting used to her. Never thought I'd miss Maria, though.”

“Careful,” Stef says, nodding in the direction of the nearest camera array, “someone will record that and send it to her.”

Aaron smirks, cups his hands around his mouth in a makeshift megaphone, and yells, “I miss you, Maria! Come back and save me!”

Stef laughs. It's a real laugh, too, reaching his eyes and rocking his body back a little on the couch. It's good to see. But then he curls up, suddenly *too* serious, and bunches his knees up under his chin, the way he used to, back before he learned to relax; just the sight of it makes Aaron's heart lurch.

“So,” Stef says, “what about me? Am I too much?”

Oh. Yeah. That. “Sometimes,” he says. He doesn't want to push Stef away, push him further into the arms of the sponsors — they seem to have gotten to know each other even better in his absence; he calls her *Dira!* — but lines have to be drawn, you know?

Stef looks away. “Sorry.”

It's Aaron's turn now, to lean forward, to lessen the distance between them. “Hey,” he says, “no, look. I get it.” Stef looks at him again, and Aaron's uncomfortably transfixed. Did Stef always used to bite his lip so fucking much? There's *something* going on with him. Something *beyond* the tits and

arse they're all being forced to grow. But whether it's new or whether it's not, it's distracting, and Aaron's got to look down at his knees or he'll mangle his words. "I really get it. And I'm, you know, maybe a little bit flattered? Maybe a lot? It's good to be noticed and stuff, but suddenly—" his throat goes dry, "—suddenly I'm thinking maybe you never did notice me *that way*, and I've just been stewing on a misunderstanding for nearly a week, like, maybe you were just sort of awkwardly expressing a desire for good, manly company and honest friendship among best bros or some shit, but I read it the other way, the uncomfortable way, and I'm sorry for that, for assuming, and also sorry for overreacting? Oh, yeah, and when I say stewing on it, I mean it's only one of the things I've been thinking about. One of many things. You know. In my room. In the dark."

"You didn't have your lights on? For five days?"

"Not the point. I'm sorry, okay? You apologised to me for, you know, that thing you said that I totally misinterpreted, and now I'm apologising to you for, uh, I guess for throwing things. It's just that I'm not gay, and I probably still have all this latent homophobia, like Maria's books talked about, and I was having a bad day... We all were, actually, because that was when the truth about all this came out and, shit, I need to say sorry for that, too. I basically said you were fine with all this."

"Don't worry about it," Stef says, and Aaron looks up to confirm that the lighter tone of his voice does in fact mean he's smiling. "You were kind of right. I... adapt. Like I said. I keep going. It's not necessarily a healthy coping mechanism, but it works."

"Yeah. Yeah, no, I get it."

Stef unfolds again, tucks his ankles under his backside, his hands under his calves. Still a little closed in, maybe, but not seriously so. Shit, has Aaron *ever* paid such close attention to someone's body language before?

“For the record, though,” Stef says, and the blush is *right there* on his stupid freckled cheeks, “I did notice you ‘that way’.”

Well.

There it is.

Okay then!

This is absolutely something he needs to nip in the bud right away; he needs to clarify his position, confirm that they’re just going to be friends, pals, buddies, *mates*, and no more, because if there’s one complication he doesn’t need while he’s sitting down here underground like a fucking potato growing unexpected tits, it’s—

In his haste to come up with something to say, Aaron swallows air. It bursts back out of him in a hiccup, and he slaps his chest a couple of times, to steady his breathing. Unfortunately, even striking himself right in the centre of his ribcage causes the sensitive parts of his chest to react, which makes recovery more difficult. “Fuck,” he gasps, airless, faint and tingling unpleasantly. “Fuck.”

“Sorry!” Stef says, for the hundredth time, and releases one of the hands he’s had trapped under himself to wave defensively. “I won’t bring it up again!”

Aaron shakes his head, massages his ribcage, and swallows experimentally. “No,” he wheezes, “it’s fine. We can talk about it. Maria always said I should talk more.”

Now it’s Stef who looks like he’s about to faint. “*Maria* said that? To *you*?”

Aaron coughs. God, that hurts. “Talk more *about important things*, she said. Quote: ‘If you paid half as much attention to the contents of your mind as you did to the contents of your underpants you might one day find you have something useful and intelligible to say.’” He frowns. “That’s not an *exact* quote. I think she stopped in the middle to sigh at me. She used to do that a lot, you know, like get halfway through a thought or a lecture and just look at me like I’m the

world's biggest disappointment — which, fair — and do this little sigh, like..." He demonstrates. Hams it up a little, for Stef.

"You legitimately miss her, don't you? For real."

What, actually, is the point of pretending otherwise? In a few months or a few years or however long it ultimately takes, he's not even going to be *him* any more. He won't be around to remember the embarrassment, so why not just say it? "Yeah. Kinda." Stef's watching him, not smiling, merely attentive, and Aaron fills the silence. "She always seemed like she took me seriously, you know? Like, however much she disliked me — hated me — she was *invested* in me. And, even now, knowing this was their plan all along, their big experiment, or whatever, I think she was genuinely rooting for me. Behind the frustration and the, you know, the very real hatred. Indira... it's more like she's babysitting me. Which, I guess, she sorta is. Keeping me fed, keeping me breathing, for when Maria gets better. You think she'll get better?"

Stef nods. "I've been getting updates from Pip. She's on the mend."

He's surprised at the intensity of his relief. "Good." And then not surprised at all by his need to change the subject. "So, uh, you're gay, then?"

"Dunno," Stef says, shrugging. He doesn't seem all that bothered by the question. Of course: while Aaron's been hiding, Stef's been working on himself. And his hair. "Maybe? Or bi. It's never come up before."

And why did *that* make him feel better? "Dude. Seriously? I'm your first?"

Stef laughs, a little too loud. "What? No. I've kissed people before."

"Oh, have you now?" Aaron says, smirking. "Very convincing."

"*Girls*," Stef clarifies. "I've kissed girls."

More than Aaron's done. "Yeah, well," he says, suddenly bitter, "you're going to *be* one soon enough, if these maniacs get their way. And I don't see any way to stop them." Getting strapped down and fed through a straw does *not* appeal. "I don't suppose you've come up with a way to get out of it, have you?"

Stef shakes his head. "Nope. Locked doors. Tasers. Outnumbered like five to one, at best. They have a whole houseful of women trying to make me more like them, and I was never a fighter, Aaron. If anyone threatens to strap me down, I'm going to do whatever they say. I've been making my peace with it."

"Hence the hair mousse."

"Yes," Stef says, laughing. Actually laughing about it!

"Jesus tapdancing Christ," Aaron says. "It's *beyond* surreal, you know that, right? You're all confident now, with your hair mousse, and your..." He flounders. "Okay, so maybe that's the *only* thing, but still, I remember when you first walked in here, all scrawny and glancing around you like a— a—" God, he's not doing well. "Right, um, you know when you catch mice? Like, the humane way, not with traps. You get a tall bucket and a long ruler and you put some peanut butter on the end of the ruler and when the mouse runs up it to get the food the ruler *tips over*—" he mimes it, pivoting his joined arms at the hands, "—and the mouse falls in the bucket. And then you get out of bed and reset the ruler for the next mouse. Anyway, in the morning, when you come for the bucket so you can take them out of the house, and you look down to see if they're okay, they do this thing where they run around, testing the walls to see if they can climb out or otherwise escape, and they constantly stop what they're doing to check on you, to make sure you're not a threat. Like, scurry, look, scurry, look." He mimes that, too. "That's what you were like when you got here."

Stef's watching him, eyes soft. "You used to catch mice in a bucket?"

He's blushing, he knows it. He squirms into the couch cushion. "Our old place, before we got rich, it was near a pub. Pubs get mice. So we did, too. And I didn't want to catch them and put them out the back door because pubs also put down traps and poison and stuff."

"What did you do with them?"

Now he's *really* blushing. He remembers a boy at school — his old school — making fun of him when they caught him with his mice. Took them off him. "I put perforated paper over the lid of the bucket, put the bucket in a rucksack, and walked a few miles down the road to where there was an old farm. Lots of stuff around to eat, no-one putting down traps."

"You're so kind, Aaron," Stef says, and the warmth in his voice is almost enough to push Aaron back to his room right away.

"You're different now," Aaron mutters. "That's all I was trying to say. You've changed. Become, I don't know, more... Look, you're not all *skittish* any more. It's weird. It's like you're happy, even though you've given up."

"I *haven't* given up. I've just... Look, okay, it's like the trolley problem, right?"

"Right. What?"

"The trolley problem, the thing with the two tracks, and the lever, and—"

"I've seen the memes."

"Okay. So there's a guy on both tracks, right? And in this example, he, well—" he smirks, "—he gets made into a girl whatever happens. But by pulling the lever, I can change it from an experience that's a huge, painful struggle from beginning to end, to something that's just kind of not so bad. I chose to pull the lever."

"Stef, that's— that's actually bullshit. It's also not how the trolley problem works." Maybe if it was Declan on the other track...

“It’s just what works for me,” Stef says quickly.

“Yeah, well, I think I need to find another thought experiment,” Aaron says. “Maybe one with a big fucking drill I can use to escape this place. I don’t *want* it, Stef. I don’t want what they’re doing to me.”

“I know,” Stef says quietly. “How *are* you doing with that?”

He has to laugh. “Honestly? Fucking terribly. It’s like I can feel these fucking tits *growing*, Stef. Yeah, I *know* there’s barely anything there right now, but I know how this shit goes.” He starts counting on his fingers. “They’re pumping me with estrogen, they’ve been completely suppressing my testosterone for *months* now, Indira’s been talking about introducing progesterone soon, and I’d ask where it ends but I *know* where it ends. ‘All the way,’ that’s what they said. And I know exactly what that means, because like a fucking idiot I asked: they’re going to take my fucking balls, Stef, and when I close my eyes that’s basically all I can think about.” He winces; it’s exactly a half-truth. “For a while I managed to pretend to myself that it was all just a ploy, a game, all part of some grand punishment. Some fun they were having with our bodies and minds, seeing who breaks first, who lasts longest, and so on. Grind our boners to make their bread and all that. But Indira convinced me: they’re fucking *serious*, Stef. They’re turning us into women because they think it’ll *help* us. Make us better people. And you want to know the worst thing? I blame myself.”

“What? No, Aaron—”

Impossible to stop it all coming out now. “I blame myself, and I fucking should! There were eight of us in this place, with, what, three of us from the university itself? Four? I forget. I didn’t ever care enough about the others to remember. It doesn’t matter. Point is, there were *eight* of us. All of us bastards; even you, apparently, although I struggle to see it. And that’s the other thing I can’t stop thinking about: if I’d been just a little bit less of a prick, if I’d kept it in my fucking

pants, if I'd kept my head down, some other poor fucker would be down here and I'd still be walking around out there, not a care in the world. It's like this place is a natural disaster, a fucking tornado or something, and I was the idiot running up to film it on my phone, and the footage of my fuckup will circulate on the internet forever with a timestamp that will only get more poignant with the passing years. I'm the idiot disappearing into the swirling clouds while my phone drops from my hands."

"You don't deserve *this*, though."

"Didn't say I do. But I fucking might, Stef. I really might! I thought about my future, about the man I was going to become, and I hated him. I hated how inevitable it was that I was going to be him some day because I have — had — *have* no self-control, and I hated *him*." Clenching his fist is involuntary and inevitable. "I hated his guts. It was like coming here let me see myself from the outside for the first time ever. I finally see myself, but only as I'm getting sucked into the fucking tornado. I mean, I always knew I was a bastard, sure — I told you, as a kid I thought those fuckers at school were some grand retribution from the universe — but I never knew I was so fucking *pathetic*. I'm a slimy little fuck who takes no responsibility for his own shit, imagines karmic retribution because it's easier than facing the people he's hurt... I took pictures of my own *cock*, for Christ's sake. What they're doing to me? I don't want it. I hate the thought of it almost as much as I hate myself right now, but I can't pretend I didn't bring this on myself."

Silence for a little while. Stef's just looking at him, compassionate.

"You know what I don't get?" Aaron says. "Why *you* like me. Even now. Especially now! They gave you a whole fucking PowerPoint presentation on my shit." Stop talking, Aaron. "What is there to even like about me?" Stop talking *now*. "There's nothing *to* me, Stef. Nothing there. Take away the bad shit and there's nothing left." It doesn't matter that they're in the common room any more, doesn't matter that

someone might come in. Doesn't matter that all this is probably being recorded. It's all coming out and that's that. "And that's what scares me, you know? Even more than *everything* else. More than what they want to do to me. I'm scared I'm just a hardened shell of shit around nothing. I'm scared because I know it's *true*."

He expects Stef to come over, to hold his hand or pat him on the arm, the way he used to, occasionally, but he doesn't. On the other couch, miles away if he's an inch distant, he stiffens up, plays with his hands. He looks lost, but when he talks, it's with a conviction Aaron's not sure he's ever heard from him.

"Who's talking to me, Aaron?" Stef says. "Right now, who's talking to me?" Aaron doesn't answer; he doesn't know. "Remember, weeks ago, when Declan attacked us? Who was it who charged him, pushed him aside, stopped him from seriously hurting me? When I hurt myself, when I tried to bloody scald myself all over, who brought me back to my senses? Was it the 'nothing' inside your shell? Or was it you, the *real* you, the one who doesn't *need* to do all the shit you used to do? The one who isn't defined by what you've done, or what people say about you, or even what's going to happen here?" Stef doesn't get up, but he does move to the other end of the couch, almost close enough to touch. "I hated you when I first got here. Like, *really* hated you. Because I saw the shell. Like Maria did, and the other sponsors. But when we got to know each other, I started seeing *you*, and God help me, I *like* you." He pauses, knots his eyebrows again. "I think Maria sees you, too. A bit. Maybe not the *way* I see you, but she does."

It pulls a smile out of Aaron. "I never understood you," he says. "You're too good for this place."

Stef smiles. "I got some help recently. While you were in your room. And it helped me realise just how much we filter when we look at ourselves, when we think about ourselves. I got so used to seeing myself one way..." He trails off. Is *that* why he seems so different? Someone helped him to see himself in a different way? *Here*? That seems... risky.

“What other way is there to see yourself?” Aaron asks. “As a— as a fucking *girl*?”

“No. As someone with potential, not as someone whose life has been squandered.” Stef leans back a little, and Aaron resists the instinct to lean forward to match. “I always saw myself as someone kind of... waiting around for life to start. Everything was awful and kept getting worse, and it was like, if I waited long enough, maybe everything would just *work out*. Even though I knew it wouldn’t. Stupid as hell, I know. And then, obviously, I came to Dorley.” Stef shakes his head. “I made everything so complicated, up here—” he taps his temple, “—but it’s pretty simple, really. The guy I was, he was an idiot. But I don’t have to *be* him any more. Not if I don’t want to.”

“I mean, that’s not really optional, is it?” Aaron says, without thinking.

Stef rolls his eyes. “I don’t mean it like that. Although, I guess, kind of a little bit like that?” he adds, looking thoughtful. “Whatever. That’s not the part that matters.”

“Not the part that *matters*? Stef. Stefan.”

“Yes?”

Fuck it. “Never mind.” It’s starting to become clear now: the different way he stands, his confidence, the *hair mousse*... Stefan’s been spending too much time around women. That’s why he bought into his trolley problem bullshit; the women around here are simply too nice to him, whereas the men are sub-fucking-par. It’s too easy for him to see men as the failure state. That’s *got* to be it. What man does Stef even have, if not Aaron? Adam? Martin? Tweedles Dee, Dum and Dickhead in the cells?

“Aaron?” Stef says. “You okay?”

Is he? It’s getting to be a complicated question. “Yeah. Sort of. I don’t know. Look, uh, Stef. I’m going to head back to my room now, for a bit. And I mean just for a bit!” He adds quickly, to combat Stef’s obvious disappointment. “It’s not

going to be like it was; I'm not going to go all fucking hermit again. I need a bit of time to get back up to speed, you know? After so long on my own, it's kind of tiring just being around people."

Stef nods. "Sure," he says. "Sure. Just don't be a stranger, okay?"

"I won't," Aaron says, standing up and stretching limbs made stiff and sore by tension. "I'm, uh, glad I didn't fuck things up between us completely. You know. The other day."

"Yeah," Stef says, unfolding from his couch and hopping to his feet, "I'm glad I didn't, either." There's an awkward moment where neither of them seems to want to look at the other one, and then Stef blurts out, "So, um, hug?"

"What?"

"I've missed you, man."

"That's still so weird. That you miss me. That anyone would."

"Elizabeth missed you, right? When you saw each other regularly. She missed you when you weren't there."

"I suppose."

"And that was strictly platonic. So's this."

"You want a platonic hug?"

"Yes."

"Because you missed me."

"Yes."

"Fine." Aaron doesn't know quite how to proceed, so he loosens his arms and waits.

"Okay, just, if you come over, like—"

"Oh, sure. Shit, I'm stuck in the sofa."

"So move your foot?"

"Okay."

“Okay?”

“You *have* hugged someone before, haven’t you?” Stef says, embracing him. He sounds all too smug for Aaron’s taste, so he steps lightly on his toes for a moment.

“No trick questions.”

“Sorry.”

“Okay. We’re done.”

“We’re done.”

“Yeah. Just let me step back—”

“Sure, and I’ll—”

“Hah!”

“Don’t laugh.”

“Now *you’re* stuck in the sofa.”

Aaron sidesteps out from between the couches, to give Stef the space to extricate his foot from the troublesome spot where the flap of fabric intersects with the front leg of the couch. When he’s done, Aaron nods, smiles, and scurries out of the common room. Halfway down the corridor he turns and yells back at the closing doors, “Tell Indira I’m sorry I’m going to miss lunch! I’ll have something later!”

Stef yells back, “Sure!” and Aaron wonders, as the doors close, how he got his voice to sound so clear.

* * *

She sits back down on the couch after he leaves, sinking heavily into the cushions and thinking furiously: he seemed... okay? Still railing against the changes, obviously, but *surviving*. Making jokes. Even reflecting on his past! And she

saw the look on his face when she did her best to ram home that there *are* things about him that are real, that are likeable, that are worth preserving. He looked like she'd offered him a frozen hippo. Like she'd presented him with a concept he never considered before.

Stef retrieves her book and flicks through it but leaves the page corner folded because she knows she won't be able to concentrate on anything else. She runs the pages against her thumb as she thinks.

Could she have supported him more vocally against the programme? Perhaps. He's definitely still dwelling on the changes that are to come. But there'll be time to talk to him more about that, if he's true to his word and doesn't disappear into the dark for another five days. Maybe tomorrow, now the air's cleared, they can talk in more detail about his future.

That went pretty well!

"I don't think any of us could have done better," Indira says, flopping down onto the other couch, into the exact spot Aaron just vacated. "You brought him out of himself *just* enough."

"He did that himself," Stef argues, sitting forward again. "I didn't get him to leave his room. We just... bumped into each other."

"I saw you lingering in the corridor when you heard him banging around in there, so take *some* credit. It's okay, Stephanie, really. Seeing him again is good for both of you."

"Do you have to make everything I do so transactional?" Stef says, and when Indira laughs, adds, "What?"

"Think about what you just said, Steffie. Play it back in your head. Slowly, if you have to."

"I still don't understand what you're getting at."

"*Everything* you do is transactional. By definition. Because *you're* doing them. They're trans actio—"

“Oh my *God*,” Stef snaps. “Really? Now? After...” She waves her hands around as she tries to think of the right word to sum up colliding with Aaron, dressing for him, talking him through his self-hatred, and having to watch him leave again. It takes a few seconds before she realises her brain, still running on useless adrenaline, isn’t, in this instance, going to be helpful. “After *that*?”

“When you’ve been here as long as I have,” Indira says, “you learn to see the humour in everything.” Her tone turns mournful, inspiring Stef to look back at her; she’s frowning, and twitching her upper lip. “You have to, or it’ll all get too much.”

“You could just stop, you know. If it’s all too much. I know you’re kind of committed with this lot. But why not close it all down when we move on?”

“Are you kidding?” Indira says, blinking hard and wiping at her eyes. “The programme will go on as long as we can *make* it go on. I know you’re still sceptical, but we do good work! If we hadn’t intercepted this intake — yourself excluded — Declan would still be assaulting his girlfriend, Ollie and Raph would still be Ollie and Raph, Will would be wandering around campus like an unexploded rage bomb, Martin would be, admittedly, mostly only a danger to himself as long as he stayed away from cars, and Aaron... Well, you know what *he* was up to.”

“What about Adam?” Stef says. “I’ve never been able to get a handle on exactly why he’s here.”

She shrugs. “Adam spent his entire life being wound up like a toy by a Christian sect of fanatical bigots. He was on the verge of being unleashed on the country as a deeply conflicted young man with prejudice practically tattooed onto his bones and the need for righteous justice drilled into his head. He was a walking hate crime, Steph. The way he was raised, he had almost no choice not to be. At the *very* least, we’ve saved a few Pride parades and abortion providers from being picketed by him; at worst, we’ve prevented something truly awful.”

That's close to Stef's conclusions about Adam, put together from the pieces he gave her when she went to see him in his room a week or so ago, but it's still startling to hear it confirmed. "Yeah," she says. "Point made." Not exactly, but it's not a conversation Stef's keen to have over and over again.

"And 'transactional' is still funny," Indira says, smiling again.

"It's not."

"I'm going to have it put on a mug."

"No."

"Yes."

"I don't want to inspire one of those bloody things."

She pulls her phone out of a pocket in her dress and taps at it for a moment. "Too late!"

"Shit."

"Sorry."

"I meant what I said, though," Stef says. "I don't want to think of everything I do as so... cynical. Even if some of it has to be."

"You sound like Pippa."

"Well... that's fine. She has good instincts."

"She does. And she knows when to suppress them, just like you. You got your foot stuck on purpose, didn't you?"

No choice but to admit it, really. "Yeah. I wanted to keep the tone light. He got his foot all wrapped up in the fabric under the sofa, and it seemed like a good thing to copy. Don't grin at me like that! I don't *like* manipulating him."

Indira switches couches, sits next to her and wraps an arm around her shoulder. "It's okay," she says. "He needs it. He needs to have a friend, an ally, just as he needs me to play my role and Maria, hers. When Aaron leaves here — and she will, with your help — she'll have a life she could never have

dreamed of. The fact that he never knew to dream of the exact life we're giving him isn't as important as the opportunities she's going to have."

Stef would protest, but what would be the point? She nods instead, and sinks into Indira's arms, allowing herself to be comforted. Like she said to Lorna, her objections have become routine; everyone here knows them, herself included. It's exhausting to keep trying to fly into the wind. She's not exactly Dorleypilled, like Christine said — like she used to accuse Christine of being — but she's one woman against a whole platoon, whose commanders are all true believers and whose troops are, at best, just going along with it for the sake of a quiet life. She can't beat them; why not join them?

"It's okay, sweetie," Indira whispers. "He'll be okay and so will you. We're all here for both of you."

Besides, it's nice, here in Indira's arms. Easy to see why Christine loves her so much.

They decide to go upstairs for lunch. No point hanging around the basement, Indira said, if there's no-one else to hang around with. Christine and Paige join them out of the security room, with Christine packing up three laptops to bring with her, "So no-one messes with them. You people have no instinct for opsec." Indira responds with an injured look and an exaggerated finger pressed to her breast that makes Christine giggle and lunge for her, and the two of them arrive in the dining hall ahead of Paige and Stef, because Paige wants to add a little more volume to Stef's hair and try some eyeshadow colours on her, and pointedly holds Stef back to get her permission before doing either.

"Yes, yes," Indira says, "you're *so* ethical. I'm very impressed." She ignores the rude gesture Paige directs at her, and asks, "Who wants pizza? I want to order in."

A show of hands — including from two other groups of women in the dining hall — approves the idea, and Indira goes around the room, taking orders. Christine, Paige and Stef claim a smaller table near the kitchen, so Stef can meet people

coming and going and get another precious glimpse of the outside world through three sets of double doors, and Paige unwraps a new-looking eyeshadow palette and bids Stef sit very still.

“Thank you, Stephanie,” she says.

“Oh, uh, no problem.”

“I’ve been wanting to try these shades,” Paige says, frowning in concentration, “But there aren’t many here with your colouring. Would you mind if I took a picture afterwards? I won’t upload it anywhere.”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” Stef says. “If I look okay, can you send it to me, too?”

“You’ll look more than okay, Steph,” Christine says, poking her in the upper arm. “You’re really pretty already, and only getting prettier.” She giggles. “We saw how Aaron responded when he saw you. Like you were a sexy cartoon fox and he was a skunk with his jaw dropping to the floor.”

Stef wants desperately to close her eyes, but Paige is still layering colour onto them, so she settles for having a minor, perfectly stationary panic attack. “You were watching?”

“On and off. Didn’t listen, though. Just wanted to make sure he wasn’t going to lunge at you, or something.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“All the same,” Christine says, “it’s my *job* now. I have to be responsible.” She sighs grandly, holding the back of a hand to her forehead. “It’s awful.”

“It actually is,” Paige whispers.

Christine stretches, giving Stef another chance to look at her outfit. “You look great, Christine,” she says, taking in the eye-catching makeup and the artfully faded green dress with the faint white spots down each side.

“I know, right?” she says. “I was Paige’s first victim of the day. Did you see the shoes?” She angles her feet so Stef can

see: white sandals with black soles and black detailing on the straps. “The shoes are my favourite part.” She covers one side of her mouth with her hand and stage-whispers, “I’m keeping them.”

“I already said you can keep them,” Paige says absently. “You’re not a rebel.”

“She thinks I’m not a rebel,” Christine says to Stef, shaking her head.

“Life is hard,” Stef sympathises.

“Her feet are smaller than mine, too,” Paige says. “Those shoes are literally useless to me.”

“Paige, you have lovely feet!” Christine says, a little too loud. She slaps an embarrassed hand over her mouth, too late to stop the entire dining hall overhearing.

A girl on the other side of the room, wearing a hoodie and pink and white thigh socks, yells, “Woo! Yeah!” before her friend silences her by pulling her hood, which has cat ears on, down over her head. Stef giggles at Christine’s mortified face, now mostly hidden behind her hands.

“Thank you, Christine,” Paige says, and air-kisses in her direction.

“Why is it,” she says, “that I can spend a year in a dungeon and have my testicles nonconsensually removed, but it’s only at times like this that I want to die?”

Indira, returning from her rounds, sits next to Christine and rubs her between her shoulder blades.

“So, how *is* Aaron?” Paige asks, while Christine copes with her mortification.

Stef tries to shrug without jolting Paige’s hand. She’s moved on from Stef’s eyes and is doing something around her temples. “He’s struggling. But he’s out of his room, as you saw. I presented my acquiescence as me simply acceding to the inevitable, and he was... well, he wasn’t okay with it, but

he didn't throw things at me, either. And we talked about his guilt, his self-hatred, stuff like that. Progress, I think.”

“I never would have expected you to like him,” Paige says, as she does something to Stef's cheek.

“Me neither,” Indira murmurs, still comforting Christine.

“Yeah, well,” Stef says, trying to frown without moving her face too much, “I kinda do. So we all just have to accept that I have terrible taste in men — or whatever — and move on.”

Paige grins, sits back, and extracts from her shoulder bag a truly massive phone in a sparkly pink case. “Moving on. I'm done! Say cheese?”

Stef obliges, and has to admit, when she sees the picture, that she looks pretty good. A lot like Pippa's makeup from the night she came home from the club, but in a mixture of oranges and blues that feather away from her eyes. “Did you put something sparkly on my cheeks?” she says.

“I put something sparkly on your cheeks. Don't worry; I have stuff in here to get it all off you before you go back down.”

A part of Stef, the part that wants to throw all her responsibilities to the wayside, move upstairs and indulge herself, tempts her to tell Paige not to worry about it. She ignores it, thanks her again, and turns to Indira and Christine, who are still wrapped up in each other.

“Hey,” she says, “I've been meaning to ask... Melissa doesn't know I'm here, does she? I know she didn't before, but...”

“No,” Indira says, shaking her head, “and that's intentional. Abby was all set to tell her about you, back when she thought you were one of our—” she smiles toothily, “—more ordinary residents, but she changed her mind after Christine told her the truth about you.” She elbows Christine. “And hey, Chrissie, sweetie, I'm still offended you told her and not me.”

“Sorry,” Christine says, stretching out the final vowel. “But I was still your *job*, back then. I didn’t want to have to make you choose.”

“She didn’t tell me, either,” Paige says, smirking.

“Stop stirring, babe.”

“Never.”

“Why wouldn’t Abby want Melissa to know about me?” Stef asks. She’s assembled, from talking to Abby, about half an explanation, but Christine was right when she said Abby prefers to see only the best in everyone.

“The programme was difficult for Melissa,” Indira says, leaning forward on her wrists. “She came in late, and she was very obviously of a different character to the others. Steffie, about Melissa... this might be difficult for you to hear.”

“I’ll be okay,” Stef says, reaching out to touch Indira’s elbow where she’s resting it on the table. “I want to know. If it’s about her, I want to know.”

Indira nods, and double taps her phone screen to wake it. “Pizza in fifteen,” she says, reading off the website on the screen. “Ish. Okay, the thing with Melissa is that Abby thinks she got to her just in time. That she might only have been months, even weeks, from doing something drastic.”

“To someone else?” It comes out quickly, but the idea of Melissa hurting someone on purpose has to be dispelled.

“No. Not unless it was collateral damage. It’s why Aunt Bea okayed such a late entry; the chances of her surviving another year were slim. Did you know that sometimes, with people like Melissa, we don’t necessarily bring them in straight away? One of us will try to befriend them, steer them gently towards better outcomes. Find them a therapist, pay for it if necessary; we have access to all sorts of very believable fake grants. As much as some here might fervently believe that womanhood is the preferable state for anyone who can handle it—” Indira rolls her eyes, and Stef wonders who, exactly, thinks that, “—it’s not *actually* our first choice. Sometimes

lives can be turned around with the most minimal of interventions; a few targeted acts of kindness. I have a friend who graduated from Saints last year who still doesn't know we helped him. *Definitely* doesn't know what we do here. But with Melissa... She was in real trouble. Abby said you could see the end in his eyes. And, um, sorry about the pronoun. It's just that I remember the exact way she said it. Hard to forget, actually."

"It's okay." "You could see the end in his eyes" — it really had been that bad, then? "Is that why it was so hard for her here? Because she was... close to the end?"

"That's how it *started*. But she came in late, as I said — in *November*; imagine if we added someone new around the time your lot started getting your first estradiol shots — and that meant slotting into a developed dynamic, and she wasn't exactly an assertive girl. *And* it was kind of a rough intake, and she was an easy target. So she spent most of her time with Abby. And because the sponsors assigned to her year had their hands full with the other residents, and Abby was a first-time sponsor who *really* wasn't cut out for the job... It was a recipe for isolation and heartache. Melissa left the first chance she got, and she's barely been back since. Broke poor Abigail's heart."

"I thought they were still friends?" Stef says, thinking of the photobooth pictures.

"Friends, yes," Christine says. "But Abby wants more. Always did. She told me the story of how they first met, properly, outside the club, and I think she fell in love with her right there and then."

"The club? The one where Mark disappeared?" The deadnaming's accidental, and Stef winces, but there's something about the period between Melissa retreating from her life and her disappearance — the part of Melissa's history she has no access to — that's indelibly stained with *Mark*. She decides to do better; *she's* the actual trans girl in this bloody place! She should be better at this than the rest of them.

“Yeah.”

“I thought she would have just knocked her out? Isn’t that what you did to me?”

Christine smiles. “It’s probably best if Abby tells you herself. Or if Melissa does, when you see her again. Because you *will* see her again. When you’re both ready for it. I think Abs has a plan to soften her up, to slowly prepare her for the idea of you, here. And, hey! I didn’t knock you out! You just can’t handle your drink, Steph.”

“I think the overall impression,” Indira says, “from Abby and the sponsors, including me, is that if Melissa found out you were here, she’d come barrelling in and try and get you out, by any means necessary. And you don’t want to leave yet, do you?”

Stef gets a flash of Aaron in his concrete room, in the dark. “No,” she says. “Not yet.”

“Abby thinks she’ll think it’s her fault you’re here,” Christine says.

“Which is true,” Paige says. Indira glares at her. “What? It is! I’m not saying that’s a *bad* thing. If she hadn’t come here, Stephanie would never have even thought about us.”

“And Melissa’s got a rather... poor view of her younger self,” Indira says, rolling her eyes at Paige and returning her attention to Stef. “It’s yet another thing that colours her view of the programme.”

“She’s okay, though, isn’t she?” Stef says. She knows she is — she’s checked her file often enough — but sometimes it’s better to hear it than read it.

“She is. She’s got a nice life. She’s up in Manchester now. Doesn’t seem to have a steady girlfriend — a handful of short relationships, Abby says — but she’s got a flatmate and a job and, of course, Abby visits *constantly*. It’s fifty-fifty, if Abby’s not here, whether she’s at work or she’s up with Melissa. Right now, for example, I haven’t seen her for days, so I assume

that's where she is." Indira smiles with her tongue between her teeth. "Pining."

"They could be together," Paige says idly. "Romantically, I mean. You don't know."

"They're not," Christine says. "Abby would be *insufferable* if they were."

"True."

"Hey, kids," a voice says, and Stef looks around to see Tabby approaching, clutching a steaming, bright red mug in one hand, and a laptop in the other. "Mind if I join?"

The four of them wave various hands and Tabby sits at the end of the table, rests her elbows and cradles her head between them, groaning theatrically. Indira shifts her chair over, pushes Tabby's things out of the way and starts rubbing her back the same way she rubbed Christine's. Stef reaches over to move the mug farther away from the laptop, in case of spillage, and takes the opportunity to look at the design: it says, in capitals, *KEEP CALM AND CAPTURE MEN*, and where the crown would normally be is a stylised cartoon prison cell. Just once, Stef would like to see a mug with something innocuous printed on it. Christine's promised her there's the odd mug with simple boomer humour on, and the occasional innocent visual pun, but Stef's decided Christine probably imagined them.

"You okay, sweetie?" Indira says.

Tabby, with her head still facing straight down, continues moaning and groaning. On the other side of the table, Christine picks up her phone, unlocks it, and frowns. Stef isn't quite sure what to pay attention to.

"I hate those bloody boys," Tabby says. "Oh, avoid Harmony. Ollie pissed her off so much I think she was headed out to the campus gym to beat the crap out of something, and if anyone gets in the way she might unload on them instead."

"Are they really that bad?" Paige asks.

Tabby straightens up. “They’re... difficult. Ollie’s worst. Raph is merely obstructive. And Will... Fuck. Stephanie, I’m glad you’re here, and I’m glad Dira is, too, because I need to ask a really big favour.” She drinks deeply from her mug. “Will’s asking to talk to you.”

“To *me*?” Stef says.

“He said he has to talk to someone, and that it can’t be me. I asked him, who then? And he picked you. Instantly. But I didn’t say yes. Didn’t even say I’d think about it, or that I’d ask you. So he has *zero* expectations here.”

“It doesn’t seem like the *best* idea, Tab,” Indira says. “But Pippa’s out today, so I’ll cosign it with you if Steffie agrees.”

Stef’s thinking. Why would Will want to talk to her? They didn’t exactly part on good terms; she shouted a warning to Maria that might have saved her life and certainly ruined Will’s escape plans. Admittedly, those plans were pre-ruined, and she merely hastened their demise, but still: he has good reason to hate her. And she has no reason to help him.

Except for Adam.

Damn it.

“I’ll do it,” she says. “When’s best?”

“Really?” Tabby says, loud with relief. “That’s brilliant, Steph! And after lunch is fine.”

“You’re sure?” Indira says.

“He’ll be behind a locked door, right?” Stef says, and Indira and Tabby both nod. “Then I’ll be perfectly safe.”

“Thank you *so* much,” Tabby says. “I feel like I should give you a present. Um, I could make you some lunch?”

“Pizza’s on the way, actually,” Indira says sheepishly. “You just missed it.”

“Damn.”

Christine, who's been whispering with Paige for the last minute or so, raises a hand. "You can have mine, if you want, Tab. You like spicy beef?"

"Love it. What's up?"

Christine turns her phone around, showing a half-dozen texts from Vicky.

"We have to go do Lorna damage control," she says. "Again."

* * *

Christine really should learn to drive, and then she wouldn't have to keep roping Paige into these things. They signed out one of the Hall's handful of cars, and Paige didn't complain for a moment about the need to chauffeur her girlfriend to their friend's troublesome girlfriend's house, and miss out on her pasta salad. She keeps glancing at Christine, the frown that lightly puckers the bridge of her nose firmly in place.

Paige finishes lurching the hatchback through the roundabout and onto the bypass, settles into a steady seventy, and asks the question Christine's been dreading.

"How much shit are we in, exactly?"

Christine scrolls up and down the text messages from Vicky for a moment — all, apart from the ones exchanged after Christine got in the car, variations on a theme: Lorna's working herself up to do something to force Vicky's release from her responsibilities — and eventually admits, "Quite a lot. It's not as bad as it could be, since she hasn't actually *done* anything yet and she's still centring Vick's wellbeing, so she *shouldn't* do anything rash, but... I did half a job, I think, when I read Lorna in. I was trusting Vicky to do the other half,

and I know she's tried, but she's too close to her." She shrugs. "My fault. My responsibility."

"Not your fault," Paige says instantly. "The sponsors are too eager to get you to do things like this. I know Lorna asked for you, but this kind of thing is too much to drop on your shoulders." She drums her fingers irritably on the wheel. "She's your friend, too; reading her in should *not* be your sole responsibility. And, yeah, I love Vicky, obviously, but she should have been more careful and she should have done the work. She didn't."

"I can't be too upset with Vicky—"

"I can. I won't show it, but this is her mess you're stuck with — and it's our day together she's intruding on."

Christine nods. "That's not all I'm worried about. Lorna knows about me, Paige. I told her *everything*. And I remember how she looked at me, after. She sees *him* when she looks at me, and I'm... not good at handling that."

Paige reaches over the gearshift and squeezes Christine's thigh. "But you're *not* that person any more. You're Christine. You're amazing. If she sees some stranger when she looks at you, some guy she only knows about because *you* told her about him, that's her problem, not yours."

"I think all of Dorley is her problem."

"Well," Paige says, "she never lived through it. She can't understand, no matter how much she claims to love Vicky."

"You don't trust her, do you?"

"I'm keeping an eye on her. It's just a shame we can't lock her in the basement with no outside ideological input and wait for her to come around to the Dorley worldview. Vicky would get very upset with us."

"Paige—"

"Worked with Stephanie, didn't it?"

“Paige Adams, that’s the most cynical thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Am I wrong, though?”

Christine’s forced to think about it for a second. “No, not *technically*. But it wasn’t on purpose!”

“All the same.”

“You’re joking, aren’t you?”

“Obviously,” Paige says, grinning. “Vicky would never let us do it.”

“God,” Christine says, massaging her temples. “I’m so tired of these constant adrenaline spikes. I want *one* normal week. I want to go to class and relax with you and not have *anyone’s* girlfriend threaten to out us as kidnappers and torturers. One week. To relax.”

“It’s a shame we don’t have more time,” Paige says, “or we could pull over and I could help you relax right now.” With her left hand resting on the wheel, she raises the first three fingers.

“Are you being filthy again?”

“Yes.”

Christine smiles, forced once again out of a bad mood by Paige, and whispers, “Later.”

Vicky and Lorna live with their other housemates in a four-storey terraced house on the other side of Almsworth, a long way from most of the city’s student-aimed accommodation and actually quite nice, for a student rental. Paige pulls up in the first available space, a little way down the road, and Christine takes the opportunity presented by the short walk to the front door to calm her nerves. It’s just Lorna, right? She’s a fundamentally nice person, right?

A fundamentally nice person who is convinced that Christine and everyone else involved with Dorley — with the

sole exception of Vicky — is complicit in kidnapping and torture. Which, once again, *yes*, but it's not that simple!

Hmm. Very calm, Christine. At least she has her lines of attack prepared.

Lorna opens the door, looking irritated. “Hi,” she says, packing a lot of insincerity into one syllable. “Vicky told me she texted you.”

“And you wish she hadn't,” Paige says.

“Astute. Well, come in, then.”

The ground floor's laid out exactly as Christine expects, with the main space divided into nominal dining and living areas, with enough furniture for several people and a stack of cheap-looking wooden chairs in the corner for guests. At the back of the room, one door leads into an L-shaped kitchen extension and another out into what is probably an extremely small garden. Vicky emerges from the kitchen as Lorna shuts the front door behind them, carrying a tray with four mugs of tea and a plate of biscuits.

Christine has to smile. Vicky always did like to play the host. It had been barely a week into their second year before she had the two of them and Jodie over to her room, and had them sit in communal confusion while she served drinks and snacks and engaged them all in enthusiastic conversation about what they were going to do with their new lives. At the time, Christine assumed Vicky was just revelling in feeling normal again, after their year underground; now, looking back, it seems more likely that she felt normal for the first time in her life.

Those small but sunny first-floor rooms already feel like a lifetime ago. Not a care in the world, except for the requirement to construct an entirely new self out of the scraps left to her.

Vicky silently hands out mugs, slides the tray onto the coffee table, and curls up in an armchair. Defensive.

“She shouldn’t have texted you,” Lorna says flatly, pointedly sitting in another chair on the other side of the table and embracing her mug of tea with both hands.

“Lorna—” Vicky says.

“Vicky! You can’t just call on your kidnapper mates for help when you lose the argument.”

“Lorna,” Christine says as kindly as she can, “yes, she should.” She and Paige are perched together on the central sofa, because if nothing else Christine’s going to need Paige’s reassuring warmth as close to her as possible. “You have to understand what’s at stake here. Whatever you’re planning—”

“I’m going *right* to this Beatrice woman,” Lorna snaps, “and I’m going to tell her I’ve got files on a flash drive mailed out to a friend in another country, and if she doesn’t give Vicky *complete* freedom, then my friend will make those files public. Vicky needs to get *away* from that place, she needs to be allowed to see family and friends from before she was kidnapped, before she was *tortured*; she needs to be able to tell people she’s trans; she needs to be able to *live her life!*”

“Lorna, darling,” Vicky says, half out of her chair in alarm, and Christine wonders if Lorna’s never actually vocalised her plan before; she’d assumed Vicky was being circumspect via text for opsec reasons, which, now that she comes to think about it, was probably foolishly optimistic of her, “that’s *such* a bad idea! You can’t *do* that!”

“Why not?”

Vicky’s falling over words in the haste to get them out. “You know why the programme still freaks me out so bad? Why I got out as soon as I could? It wasn’t just because I didn’t need them any more, it’s *also* because I knew the lengths Aunt Bea will go to in order to protect it! It was drilled into me! She’s capable of some *really* dark things, Lorna. You have to let this *go*.”

“You know I can’t.”

“I’m fine. Really!”

“And you know that’s a lie. You’re *not* fine, Vick.”

Christine, pinching the bridge of her nose, leans forward on the sofa. “Lorna, okay. There’s some stuff you need to know. Stuff we only touched on before. But, first, have you mailed the flash drive yet?”

“I haven’t even made it yet,” she says, affronted. She glares at Vicky and adds, “I wouldn’t have *done* it without talking to you first! You *know* that.” She looks back at Christine. “You didn’t *need* to bring in these... people.”

Great! Christine gets to be ‘people’; an upgrade from ‘kidnapper’. She rubs her fingers together as she breathes slowly. Vicky glances over at her, nervous about her reaction; Paige takes a bourbon cream from the plate.

“Vicky’s right, Lorna,” Christine says. “You have to drop this. Remember how I told you about the people who were made to disappear? One of them was just a violent rapist who was already in our custody, but the other... I need to tell you about Karen.”

Lorna sits back in her chair. All defiance. “Who the fuck is Karen?”

“Karen was a relic. A remnant of the old days, before Aunt Bea took over, when the programme at Dorley was about nothing more than sick pleasure for the people in charge. Long story short: she was trained as a nurse, and we needed her this year, for routine medical examinations. Awful person or not, she was in the know already; we can’t exactly contract out. And from what Maria’s said, not everyone who used to work under the old regime was a *true* sadist; she thinks a few of them were as under the thumb of the woman in charge as *she* was. But not Karen. She was a sick woman, Lorna, and I mean *sick*. She loved to humiliate people, loved to hurt them. And she hurt *our* boys, and she hurt Stephanie.” Another controlled exhalation. The briefing on Karen’s fate hadn’t been pleasant. “And she was also a game piece, a way for the old custodian of Dorley — the one who is *actually* sadistic and cruel — to remind us of her influence. Maybe as a prelude to some other

action; we don't know yet. So Beatrice... took her off the board."

Lorna shifts uncomfortably, behind her mug. "What do you mean?"

"Bea had her killed. Through her contacts. Her very rich contacts, who can do more or less whatever they want. It wasn't *just* because she hurt us, although she did. It was because of who she was, what she represented. And Karen wasn't just anyone; she was connected. They had to be careful how they went about it. You, Lorna, with the greatest respect, are not. If Bea perceives you to be a threat, you will be *controlled*. Through insinuations, through threats, through restrictions placed on your freedom and your movements; possibly even through death. Bea doesn't like to hurt people and she doesn't like to waste them, but she has generations of women and other graduates to protect, and their loved ones, and their livelihoods, and I cannot promise you that if you go up against her, she won't *hurt* you."

"Tina," Vicky says, "do you really think—?"

"Yes," Christine says. "You said it yourself: Aunt Bea is capable of dark things, and you're absolutely right to be wary of her. She might seem like an affable middle-aged fuddy-duddy, but she scared the crap out of me even before I found out what happened to Karen." Memory makes her shudder. "I will *not* show you the pictures. Bea's dangerous, Lorna. Please believe me, and please don't do anything to piss her off."

Lorna, in her armchair, nods. Sniffs noisily, wipes her nose on the back of her hand. "Thank you, Christine," she says. "Thank you for showing me *exactly* who you are." She leans forward, dumps her tea mug on the table, and folds her arms. "I kept thinking about you. After I got back home that day. And all the others, sure, but especially you. I was *fixated* on you. And I couldn't figure out why. Until I woke up sweating, because it all came together: you, Christine, locked me in! You told me, right there in the kitchen, that all the doors were locked! You told me *you* had control over them! And then you

told me the worst shit I've ever heard in my *life*, fucking torture and kidnapping and nonconsensual fucking *surgery*, and you *threatened* me. *Exactly* like you did just now. You told me all the awful shit your precious programme is capable of, and told me it could all be directed at *me*, should I step out of line.

“And you told me about yourself, and the more I think about you, the more I get it. The boy who threatened women for money! Pathetic and disgusting and — oh look! — incredibly familiar! You think you've changed, Christine? You think you're a better person because they abused and gaslit you into thinking you're a fucking *girl* now? You're not. You're *him*. The boy you claim to hate so much. The boy who threatens women. You just do it for Aunt Bea, now, instead of for yourself. And that's even *more* sad.”

Vicky shouts at Lorna and Paige tenses but the room fades away, becomes irrelevant, useless. Christine wants to argue, she wants to fight, she wants to step up out of the couch and scream. And she wants to run out of the room and find a dark place and never come out, she wants to scratch at her arms until they bleed, she wants to tell Lorna she's wrong, she's *wrong*, she's so fucking wrong! but nothing comes out, nothing makes sense, because she's right, she has to be. Christine's *him* and always has been and always will be, no matter the shapes they bend her into or the dresses they wrap around her.

While Lorna spoke Christine could feel her jaw tighten and her limbs shake and her head lighten and her belly ache, and now she unravels, is unmade, piece by agonising piece, skin and senses stripped away until near nothing is left, and when Paige's arms close around her she's almost surprised to find she can feel the heat of her at all.

* * *

The absolute fucking *gall!*

Lorna watches as Christine crumples in her seat, as Paige wraps her arms around her and whispers in her ear, as Vicky yells and reaches out— towards *Christine!* As if *she's* the injured party here! She comes barging in, bringing the whole horror show with her, and immediately starts making the same threats she made before, as if everywhere is her domain, as if every house in the city belongs to Dorley fucking Hall, and fuck *that*.

Paige and Christine are intertwined and Vicky's sat back in her chair, having decided against going over to join her friends on the couch; she's watching them both instead, fingers tented in front of her mouth, anxious and concerned.

Ugh.

Lorna kicks the table to get everyone's attention, spilling some of her tea. Paige and Vicky look at her; Christine's still a motionless mass in Paige's arms.

“For fuck's sake, Christine,” she says, “don't just—”

“Shut up,” Paige says. She's crying, but not silently like Christine; Paige is crying in ugly gulps, and they make her voice uneven.

“She fucking—”

“Shut *up*, Lorna!” Paige shouts. “I will *not* tell you again!”

It's enough to make Lorna obey, to dry her protests in her throat, because Paige isn't just shouting, she's holding herself still, making herself into a rigid cage around Christine and looking at Lorna with an expression of absolute fury, contorted into a sneer by the tears she's still getting under control.

“Paige...” Vicky whispers.

“When she told you about herself,” Paige says, and her voice is quieter now, steady and controlled, and Lorna would

prefer she was still shouting, “she made herself vulnerable. Incredibly vulnerable. And she did it because she thought of you as a friend. She liked you, Lorna. She really did. And you have the wrong reading of your conversation on Monday; it was *you* who came into *our* house, asking questions. She gave you several chances to leave, but *you* insisted, and she let you in. And, as part of that process, she made herself vulnerable to you because she thought it would help you understand.”

“She’s a—”

“*If* you interrupt me again I will send the recording of this conversation to Beatrice and let the cards fall where they may. Clear?” Lorna doesn’t even nod, she just stares, and Paige continues. “She liked you, and so did I. But I thought you were brighter than this, Lorna. This behaviour... Do you know how much you’re scaring Victoria? Do you even know what she risked, starting a relationship with you? Of course you don’t. But she loves you and she thinks you’re worth it, and so here you both are.

“I dislike the programme, Lorna. I refuse to participate. I have been, with one or two minor exceptions, the cooperative, compliant woman Beatrice intended to make of me, and that is because I want to *leave*. I want to take Christine and I want to move away and discover who we both are without that place constantly weighing on our thoughts. But I am also a *product* of the programme at Dorley. Before the programme, my self-destructive behaviour threatened to hurt people and my limited outlook prevented me from recognising that. They took me in. They showed me another path. I took it. I chose womanhood, or my interpretation of it, and I am, thanks to them, the woman I always could have been, but never would have been. I am the possibility no-one else thought to offer me. I owe them my continued life, just as Christine does, just as Vicky does. I am no cheerleader for the programme as it currently operates, but I have no argument with the results. So, do you think you can *try* to understand my position, the way I try to understand yours? You can answer.”

Lorna frowns. Paige is *so certain*... “I can try. You... like who you are now. You like who Christine is now. You’re glad you were kidnapped and manipulated.”

“Try harder,” Paige says, and stops for a moment to consider her next words. “Christine told you her story. But she’s *Christine*; she is not one given to the most generous interpretation of her own history. She described to you a monster, a man who hurt people for no reason. So I want to tell you who *I* saw, the first day we met, in the basement under Dorley Hall.”

And Paige does. In her even, steady voice, as she comforts her girlfriend, she describes a wounded boy, defensively crass and instinctively aggressive. She talks about the day he first walked into the main area of the basement, arms wrapped protectively around himself, where Paige and Vicky — or the people who were to become them — greeted him cautiously and he responded in kind. She talks about how he gradually opened up, how he talked about his family, how he shouted at Indira and then apologised the next day, genuine in his regret, terrified that he’d made the one wrong move that would wreck their fragile developing relationship.

“She makes no excuses for what she did,” Paige says, “and I intend to offer none of my own. But she was broken, Lorna. She’d been hurt so much that there was almost nothing left of her. She lashed out at people because, inside, she was bleeding to death; she just couldn’t see it.”

“And you could?”

“Indira could. She saw her potential almost as soon as she met her. She told me once that she had a clear vision of who she would become, that she knew they would be sisters. And they are. And that brings me to my second point, now that you are, I trust, aware of just how cruel it was to dig up her trauma and throw it back at her: she and Indira are sisters, and not just in the way that, for example, Victoria and I are sisters. Christine is *so* close with Indira’s family that they have done everything short of formally adopting her.” She’s been tapping

away at her phone as she speaks, and now she holds it up. There's a photo on there, someone Lorna recognises. "And you may know of Indira's mother: Aasha Chetry."

No. *Fuck* no. "Is that the same Aasha Chetry who—?"

"Yes."

"Fuck. I don't know *of* her; I *know* her!" They've been to protests together; she once said Lorna should meet her daughter, Indira. "Aasha Chetry's trans daughter is a fucking *Dorley girl*?"

Paige nods. "And she and Christine are family."

"Shit." She hadn't even noticed the familiar name, back in Dorley Hall's kitchen, when Indira introduced herself; it would have been absurd to even consider it.

Christine leans up from Paige's lap, moving slowly. Paige brushes her hair out of her face, kisses her on the forehead, and leans her carefully back in the sofa cushions. She keeps one arm around her as Christine closes her eyes and wipes her face with a tissue Vicky hands her.

"These are the people Dorley saves," Paige says. "People like Indira Chetry. You'd love her, if you got to know her. Assuming, that is, you can get over your habit of seeing people like us as who we used to be."

Paige doesn't have to spell it out; her tone does it for her. She thinks Lorna should respect the identities of the Dorley girls the same way she expects people to respect hers. But it's different for them than it is for her; it has to be! On some vital and important level, it's fucking different.

How, exactly? she asks herself, forcing a moment to herself to try and be at least a little generous to Paige and Christine. How many times has she told some struggling egg or some nervous newbie there's as many ways to be trans as there are trans people? How many times has she fought back against the pathologisation of transness? How many times has she insisted that rigid categories are the enemy of true gender diversity?

It's still different! She is *not* going to grant a bunch of reformed bad boys the same access to transness as her and— and—

And Vicky.

Vicky, who came from the same place as Christine and Paige. Who is best friends with both of them. Who can't be claimed to be meaningfully different to her friends, as much as Lorna wishes it to be true. And why *can't* Christine be just like Vicky, why can't she be an egg who never realised she was being cracked? She's a fucking idiot; does that count?

And who said access to transness is yours to grant?

She kicks the table again. "Fuck it," she says. "I get it, okay? You're good girls now, or whatever. I fucking get it. God, I wish I didn't, but I do."

"You don't, actually, because I haven't even got to the point yet. If you start digging, if you make threats, if you release information, then you risk outing all of us to the whole country. All of us *including* Indira Chetry. Forget what those idiots in the papers would say about the rest of us; how do you think they'd react if it comes out that trans campaigner Aasha Chetry's beloved trans daughter is actually... one of us? Actually a *man*."

"She's a trans woman, Paige," Christine whispers. Her eyes are still closed. "She sees herself that way. She's very serious about it."

"Yes," Paige says, "I know, but that's how they'll spin it. Normally they have to make things up in order to portray transness as illegitimate; this will be a gift to the grift. They'll get weeks of coverage out of it. Months. Katherine Frost will probably write a book. The damage done to trans rights in this country will be catastrophic."

And the principle of trans collective guilt means every trans person in the country would be tainted with Dorley's shit. Lorna groans; justified or not, the place would be at the centre of a proxy war for trans rights nationally. Globally!

There really is only one response. “Fuck,” Lorna says. She leans back in her chair, rubs at her tired eyes. “Fuck! Why couldn’t you lot have shut down years ago?”

“Not our decision, darling,” Vicky says.

“You should know,” Paige says, “that I’m not threatening you; all I’m doing is relating the consequences of outing Dorley. And Christine wasn’t threatening you, either. She was describing our reality, the one *you* insisted on stepping into. We graduate from the programme as part of a delicate and interdependent web of people, and we survive because we trust each other. And if we don’t trust each other to be compassionate — and every graduate I’ve met is — then we at least trust each other to not work against our own interests. No person in the web can break it without exposing themselves.”

“She’s right,” Christine says, sounding delicate. “I wasn’t trying to threaten you. Not at all. Just warn you.” Lorna risks a look, and she seems so *small*. And Lorna did that to her! Well done, Lorna! Well fucking done!

She can’t hold on to her anger; the more time she spends around the girls, the more ordinary they seem. It’s like when she left Dorley Hall on Monday all over again: Christine and Paige are once again just *Christine and Paige*. Only in her head, in her nightmares, do they become anything else.

Except she knows she’s not being fair to them, doesn’t she? They’re just trying to live, day to day, the same as her. With many of the exact same problems, day to day.

But they torture people! Okay, maybe Christine and Paige don’t, but they’re part of a *system* that does. Some kind of bizarre, generational Omelas where everyone takes a turn at being the child at its heart, and comes away full of praise for the experience.

“All of us have restrictions on our behaviour,” Paige says. “You’ve opted into some of them. Nothing more. If Vicky, for example, were to get it into her head to run to the papers and

spill everything, we'd be trying to persuade her otherwise just as fervently."

"What about coming out to people?" she asks. "Vick can't tell anyone she's trans, can she? Because of some stupid form she signed."

"No," Paige says, and Lorna wants to leap out of her chair, to seize the remnants of her rage because that, if she's honest, is the crux of the whole thing, that she has a girlfriend who is even more like her than she ever thought, but she can't *tell* anyone, has instead to keep living lies she thought she threw aside when she transitioned, but Paige continues, with a stricken look on her face, "and neither can I."

It's like cold water thrown in Lorna's face.

Christine, still moving slowly and carefully, takes Paige's hand and cups it between both of hers, and Lorna aches suddenly for Vicky. So, as Paige talks, Lorna stands up and makes her way over to Vick's chair, where she is accepted with an embrace she decides right there and then she'll never leave again.

"I worked out what I wanted to do when I was still in the first year," Paige says. "I knew I wanted to get into fashion somehow, and I knew I wanted to do humanitarian work. We get access to a stipend when we graduate, enough to live a comfortable life in the dorm or a frugal one outside it, and I decided I wanted to volunteer. I still plan to, for as long as I don't have to pay my own rent. And the two vocations, they dovetail." She tries to touch her index fingers together, but Christine won't let go of her hand, so she brings the other one down to meet it and crosses her fingers in Christine's lap. "As a minor fashion influencer, I have a following. I can use it to shine a light on issues and communities that need it." She shrugs, smiling. "And I don't have to pay for clothes. Useful, for someone on a fixed income. To that end, I took a long, hard look at the relative rates of engagement for trans women and cis women in fashion, and the relative safety of trans versus cis women, in this country as well as worldwide, and

made up my mind quite quickly. I don't *like* pretending to be cis, but if everyone important to me knows who I really am, then why should I care what my followers think? Or what some NGO thinks?"

Christine nuzzles her, whispers something in Paige's ear that broadens her smile, and they share a kiss. Lorna feels foolish — worse: cruel — for the things she imagined about Christine. For the things she *said* to her! And why, she asks herself, is she inventing enemies in dorks like Christine, when real ones abound, for someone like her? What's one potentially misguided boutique forced feminisation operation against the shit out there hurting people on an industrial scale?

But they *still* kidnap people! And yet here she sits with three kidnap victims; two of them are kissing each other, and the third cradles her in her lap. And all three of them are planning to *leave*, which the kidnapping ring actually permits...

Screw it. She squirms around in Vicky's lap and meets her lips, squeezing a very sweet sound out of her girlfriend and consolidating her advantage by throwing her arms around Vicky's neck and pressing up against her.

Maybe there really is something to worry about at Dorley. But maybe it's just not her fucking problem.

* * *

The cell corridor looks different than she remembers. Much more cluttered: there's a love seat at one end, paired with a couch and a small stack of chairs; a small table with unfolded wings has been pulled away from the wall, and bears evidence of a foil-packed lunch; and there's a sheaf of power packs on one end of the couch. No plug sockets in the cell corridor,

apparently. Sloppy! Stef has notes for version three of the basement.

She passes Ollie's cell first. He's asleep, and twitching. His cot, pulled out into the middle of the cell and bolted back down — the cells seem much more modular than she thought! — has straps hanging from it, currently unattached, in position for all four limbs. They've been force-feeding him, Tabby said, and it shows: Ollie's sleeping topless, and below his shallow not-quite-breasts unmistakable ribs stretch out bruised and discoloured skin. Are they beating him, too? Or is he doing that to himself?

Raph is next. His cell's less bare than Ollie's, with a soft-looking duvet on his cot and a pile of books under it. He's sitting on the floor, on a small square of carpet, clothed and healthy-looking, holding a tablet like he's watching something on it. He doesn't seem to notice her walk by, which is a relief; Stef doesn't know what she'd say to him, and now she doesn't have to find out.

Will's on the end, in the cell Stef first woke up in. It's laid out similarly to Ollie's, with the cot against the far wall, and he's already wearing the shackles that are bolted to its base. Even with his legs stretched as far as they'll go he can't reach even halfway down the length of the cell, Tabby reassured her, and that's good because Stef agreed that if she's really going to listen to him and if it's really going to do him any good, she'll have to enter the cell. Join him in his space. It worked when Christine did it with her.

They insisted she take protection, so Tabby temporarily issued her a taser. It's larger than the one locked in her bedside drawer, and heavier in the hand; she holds it up, makes certain it's ready for use, and knocks quietly on the glass door.

Will, lying on the cot and staring up at the ceiling, sits up, frowns at her for a moment and then nods, and she lets herself in with the biometric reader set into the wall. Will's door unlocks with a click and hangs open by a couple of centimetres.

“Hi,” Stef says.

The last time she saw him, he had the look of someone who exercised daily, and his muscle tone had survived the testosterone suppression better than she thought it would. Now, though, it’s hard to tell: he’s dressed in layers, the way she used to, and it hides everything but his head and hands.

“Hello, Stefan,” he says.

“May I come in?”

He frowns. “You’re asking if you can enter my publicly viewable *cell*?”

She doesn’t recoil from his snarl. A little hostility is to be expected. “Yes.”

“Sorry,” he says, and she’s not prepared for *that*. He clicks his hands in the shackles, makes a show of testing them. “I’m safe. You can come in.”

She doesn’t question the apology — later, perhaps — and hooks the door more widely open with her toe, stepping inside and letting it latch behind her, still hefting the taser but not pointing it directly at him. Making her capabilities and her intentions clear.

“They gave you one of those, huh?” he says.

“Just for this.” Stef leans against the closed glass door, tests it, and leans against it, sliding down until she’s sitting with her feet together and her knees elevated. She rests her arm on her legs, taser ready. Just in case. “Before you ask, we can’t use it to escape. They’re watching on camera, and as soon as that cell door locks behind me again, it gets deactivated. I could throw it at someone, maybe. Although people always said I throw like a—”

“I wasn’t going to ask,” Will says. He’s quiet. Not like before. Maybe time in a cell has calmed him down. Maybe it was disclosure. She remembers his reaction, when they told him everything: total silence. Eerie. “I like your eyes,” he adds, after an awkward silence. “The makeup, I mean.”

She'd almost forgotten about it. Christine and Paige left in a hurry, and then there was pizza, and then Tabby and Indra were talking her through what she needed to know... It's probably fine that she left it on. One of them would have mentioned it if they thought it was important. Probably. Hopefully.

On her internal chalkboard, Stef bypasses the column labelled *carefully choreographed operation* and adds another check mark under *shitshow*.

"Yeah," she says, "thanks. Pippa asked, I said yes. It'll wash off in the shower, she said." It's an easy lie. Will's not been around; he doesn't know Pippa's busy today.

"It's... pretty."

"What's up, Will? Why am I here? Tabby comes up to me before lunch and tells me you want to talk to someone, and it can't be her. So why me? You want to unburden yourself of your guilt for attacking Maria? Or your brother? Or those other people?"

He winces each time. "No. I just wanted to talk. And I can't talk to *them*." He nods sideways.

Stef can't resist rubbing it in. "I thought Ollie and Raph were your new buddies, after Adam was insufficiently violent for your needs."

"Stef—"

"He's miserable without you, by the way."

"Please."

"Sorry," she says. "I'm here to listen. Really. I'll listen."

He closes his eyes, tips back his head and breathes deeply. "I don't even know where to start. Except to say that I *do* feel bad for Maria. And for my brother. And the others. The ones they know about *and* the ones they don't. I see them a lot, Stefan." He taps his temple. "I've hurt a lot of people."

“Why don’t you tell me about your brother? Wasn’t he the first one you, um...?”

“Attacked? No, he wasn’t the first. But, sure, I’ll tell you about him. He’s called Christopher. He likes to be called Topher. He’s funny, he’s kind, he’s creative *as hell*, and everyone always said he’s going to do something incredible with his life. I hope he does. I hope he forgets about me, and lives an amazing life, and I hope I die here.”

“But didn’t you beat the shit out of him? Why do you care about him now?”

“Do you want to hear this, or do you want to ask stupid questions?”

Stef surrenders, two palms raised. “Talk.”

“It was in June. We were supposed to be out of our place the first week of July, right?” Stef nods; the academic year ended with the last full week of June. Some landlords like you to pay for the whole year, others — including the uni itself — kick you out the week after the end of the semester, so they can get the industrial hoses in and rent the rooms to conference-goers over the summer. “I left early. I was done. Tired out. Just wanted to go home. See my family. Catch up with some of the lads, you know? I had a job lined up, full time, and I didn’t want to go straight from uni to work; I wanted some time for myself.” Stef nods again. She’s been on the go more or less non-stop since she left home, but some people’s summer jobs buy luxuries, other people’s pay the rent. “So I’m home a few days earlier than anyone expected. My parents are both at work when I get back, so I let myself in, have a piss, make a tea, all that stuff. I’m going up the stairs when I hear... noises. Coming from my room. Obviously I barge inside, ready to kick off, and there’s Topher. On my bed. With a guy. And they’re *fucking*.”

Stef says nothing. She just waits. Will’s been shifting on the cot as he talks, unable to find purchase on his story, on his body, and firing out staccato sentences in time with the twitching of his fingers.

“I throw my tea at them,” Will continues. “It’s hot. Of course it is. Not as hot as it could have been — I added milk — and most of it got on the wall where the mug smashed. But some of it got on Topher. On his face. In his eye. And in the moment, I really didn’t give a shit. He was like a blur in front of me.”

She’s frozen still now, terrified that any movement, any reaction, could break the spell. Will’s talking in a rhythmic monotone, lost in his recollection.

“I was empty, growing up. Never knew what to do, where to go, who to be. Followed what everyone else did. But never *felt* anything about any of it. I was just there, and empty. And everyone... put things in me. Expectations, hopes, dreams; whatever. Sometimes I thought I could feel it happen. Could even see it when I closed my eyes. Fizzing, popping, glowing things, dropped into me. And I took it all in. Like I was a cheap knock-off of real people, like I couldn’t function without it. Not like Topher. People would tell him what they wanted from him, and he wouldn’t have any of it. He’d fight back. He’d tell them who he was. What *he* wanted. Me, I didn’t know. But I didn’t have to. Mum put things in me. Dad. Teachers. Other boys at school. Girls. And every time something *happened*—” he raises his voice suddenly, becomes animate, grips the frame of the cot with both hands and stares through Stef, “—it set some of them off. All the things they put in me. Fizzing, popping, glowing, lit specks of gunpowder. Chain reaction. Uncontrollable. Explosive. The first time it happened was when a boy set me off by the football pitch out back of the school. He said something to me and it was like a *spark*. I put his fucking face in the mud. Hand on his head—” he mimes the action, “—and the other hand on his back. I put him in the mud and I didn’t let him up until he started wheezing. Got suspended for that. Dad said I did a good job. Said I needed to be prepared. Said if I was going to get in fights I needed to get in shape. Bought me a set of weights and hung a punching bag in the garage. Stood by me while I learned how to use them. Just... putting things in me.” Will

holds up a hand, palm flat and facing upward, and with his other flicks an imaginary bit of grit into the air, away from him. One of his fizzing, popping, glowing, lit specks of gunpowder.

“There’s a moment,” he continues, “after I get set off, where it’s like everything goes white. And it’s like I’m not there. You’ve seen videos of when they set the nukes off? There’s a flash of light too bright to see and a shock wave that obliterates everything for miles around. I’m there. At the centre of it. And then I come around and I see what I’ve done and I’ve got two choices: I act like I fucking meant it, or I run.

“Topher was the first time I ran. I *beat* him, man. Worse than I ever beat anyone. I don’t know if it was just the surprise of it, or if I’m really that much of a piece of shit that my first and only reaction to finding out my brother is gay is to almost blind him and nearly kill him. And I started seeing him everywhere. In everyone. His blood, his dislocated wrist, the red marks on his face. And it just kept—” he hits his open palm with his fist, “—happening. I got fired because I lost it at some woman who wanted to know where the printers were. Then some guy bumped me in the street and I started shit with him right there. Fought him and his three mates. Mum wanted to kick me out but Dad was proud of me and that might have been the worst part. He was always proud of me. Even after Topher. Never even occurred to me before, that Dad might be homophobic, but of *course* he is, Stefan. Of course he is. And he saw himself in me, and why wouldn’t he? He spent years pouring every bit of himself he could find into me. And I saw myself in him and I couldn’t stay there.

“So I left. I went to live with a mate for the rest of the summer. I heard from Mum that Topher didn’t want anything done to me, he didn’t want me committed or arrested or anything. He just never wanted to see me again. Well. Getting his wish, now, isn’t he?”

“I’m sorry, Will.”

“*Save it.*” It comes out with a pointed finger and a wince; he forgot about the shackles, pulled his wrists too tight. There are red marks around them. He must do that a lot. “I got taken down here after I blew up at some first-year kid outside a lecture. He just walked into me. Not his fault. But I was angry and I was guilty and I *made* it his fault, yes? Same as when, staying with my mate, talking myself in circles with him, I made it *Topher’s* fault. He shouldn’t have been in my room. He should’ve told me he’s gay. That kind of shit. It’s easy to make yourself believe things that let you off the hook, right? He got me reading his shitty ‘philosophy of manhood’ book, too. All sorts of excuses in there. Easy to believe. And then, two days after I’m let out into the common area here, I’m talking to Adam, and he tells me, ‘Your actions are yours alone’.” He shrugs. “I’d heard it before, obviously, or some variant of it. But he *meant* it, and that made it mean something to me, as well. And it’d be great if I could say, that was it, that was me, I’m a better man, hallelujah! Of course I’m not. It’s still just someone putting things in me again. I didn’t really think about it until Maria.”

Stef’s been wondering when they’d make it onto the woman Will nearly killed. She keeps her mouth shut; there’s only so many interruptions she can risk.

“Maria was the end. I was isolating myself; you know that. Talking to Ollie and Raph’s like yelling into a cave: your own bullshit coming back at you, distorted. I pushed Adam away after he came to see me the night before, and I already missed him, but I couldn’t say it. That was all the shit Dad put in me, right? You *don’t* miss people. You *don’t* make room for people in your life. You stand alone. Bullshit. And I worked it out, by the way. I already knew what testosterone suppression does, and what it doesn’t do. Adam showed me his chest, and I thought about it. Thought about the way we were all starting to look. I put—” he laughs, loudly, unexpectedly, and Stef jumps, “—two and two together, and got it mostly right. After that I was just... waiting for it. Waiting to go off. But it didn’t happen. I never lost control. I got angrier and angrier and I

was waiting for it to happen and it just fucking didn't. When I did that to Maria, I was in control. I chose it. My fucking decision. My action and mine alone. And I was so angry with you, Stefan, for warning her. But I'm glad you did. I almost did something a lot worse. Tabby says she's okay, now."

"She is. She's doing better. Edy's back to work today." Will frowns, and Stef realises she's being *way* too candid.

"I'd ask how you know this stuff," Will says, "but I get it, now. I never understood you before. Always too docile. Too friendly. Too ready to buy into their whole rehab pretence. But I know now: you're like me." Stef, as patiently as she can, waits out Will's pause, the time he needs to gather his thoughts. If she says anything, if she moves a muscle, she might reveal more than she wants to a suddenly dangerously perceptive Will. "You worked it out. You lied to Aaron and Adam, and you tried to lie to me, to keep us calm, because you worked it out. You knew what they were doing, and you were just letting it happen, weren't you?" Stef just stares. "I get it!" Will whispers, hoarsely. "I get it. Who *I* am—" he jabs both thumbs into his chest, "—who *I* was, who *I* was made into, was a fucking hollow shell, for people to fill with whatever they wanted." He brushes his hands together, as if cleaning the dust from them, and he smiles. "All their little sparkly bits of gunpowder, all their violence and expectations and desires. Waiting for someone to light my short fucking fuse. And if they—" he nods upwards, "—want to rip me apart and put me back together as someone new? *Good*. Maybe they know how to fill all the empty spaces inside me with something less volatile."

"You're... okay with it?" Stef says.

"Not really." Will pulls up his sleeves on both arms, exposing rashes and scratches and cuts, doubtless from scraping ragged nails across the skin, over and over; Stef's familiar with the wounds, and what's required to make them.

"Jesus, Will."

"You should see Ollie."

“I’ve seen him. How’ve *you* seen him?”

“They take us showering in threes. I think he charges the walls in his cell. Don’t know why. Maybe he’s trying to knock his idiot head off.” He rolls his sleeves back down. “So, no, I’m not okay with it,” he says. “Or, actually, sometimes I am. Sometimes I’m not. But—” he makes a show of looking around the cell, “—it’s not like I have a choice, is it? Maybe what comes out the other side of all this isn’t someone who *does* this to themselves. Who does what I did to *other people*.” He breathes deeply. “And I might not be okay with it, but, Stef, I’m not sure I even care any more. It’s not worth it, being me, not any more.” He looks Stef in the eye, suddenly intense. “Yeah. Decision made. I quit. I’m done. As of right now. They can have me. Tell Tabby. I know you talk to her, or you wouldn’t be here. Tell her what I said.”

“All of it?”

“Just the last part. That I’m done being *him*.”

“Yeah,” Stef says, “yeah. I’ll tell her. You’re done. Okay.”

“I mean it. I’m cooperating. I know she won’t let me out of the cell, but if she does, I won’t make trouble.” The corner of his mouth twitches. “I won’t *want* to, anyway.”

This is so much more than she expected. “Look,” she says, standing too quickly and staggering for a moment from the head rush, “I’ve, uh, I should go.”

“You get it, though, right?” He’s too kind, too gentle, and it’s more than disconcerting from Will; it’s like the whole building shook, and it’s trying to take her feet out from under her. “You understand me?”

“Um,” she says. “Yes. A bit?”

“Hey,” he says, smiling, reaching out. “Don’t worry, Stef. You don’t need to say anything else. Not yet. Just... come back and see me again, yeah?”

Stef nods one last time and lets herself out, controlling the urge to run until she’s out of sight of all of them.

* * *

The room Lorna and Vicky share is the largest one in the house, taking up the whole top floor, with windows out to both the street and the laughably small back garden, with a segment cut out for the stairs up and another for their bathroom, which juts out into the room by the back window and reminds Christine of her ensuite, back at Dorley Hall; the whole place is like her room at home, scaled up by a factor of two. It's nice.

"You want another tea?" Lorna says, heading straight for a long table set up under the front window, with desk chairs, laptops, kettle and mini-fridge; a place to work, Christine assumes. Lorna pours water from a filter jug and starts the kettle without waiting for an answer.

"I like your room," Christine says, sitting cross-legged on an errant chair and enjoying the light, airy atmosphere. The windows are open and a December wind is blowing through; normally she'd be too cold, especially in the minimal clothes Paige picked out for her, but for right now the chill air is welcome.

"I can't believe you've never seen it," Lorna says, searching through a small pile of mugs for clean ones. Christine half-expects them to be like the mugs back home, with appropriate slogans and jokes on: *Me, Myself, the Bedbugs and I*, or, *I Joined the Waiting List at the Gender Clinic So I Could Bequeath My Place in Line to My Future Daughter*, or, *Bad Bitches Live Here!! (and so do we)*, which is a mug Christine's seen in an Almsworth charity shop and would have bought and brought home if she hadn't been a hundred percent certain it would have disappeared within a week and turned up again in the downstairs kitchen, altered by

whoever it is at Dorley who gets her kicks that way. “We invited you over often enough.”

“Yes, please,” Christine says, when Lorna speculatively holds up a milk carton. “And I never came because I never wanted to intrude.”

The statement seems to surprise Lorna. “Really?”

“I love Vicky, and I miss her terribly, ever since she moved out, but this is her space. Your space. I’m... I’m part of her other life, I guess. The one she wants to forget.”

Lorna carefully places the mugs on the floor and then bounces over to Christine, lifting her up out of the chair and hugging her. She’s as tall as Paige, and Christine struggles to find an appropriate place to fit her face.

“She doesn’t want to forget *you*,” Lorna says. “And neither do I. I’m sorry.”

“I am, too.”

“I mean it. I’m *really* sorry.”

When they release each other, Lorna hands out cushions and they sit on the floor together, luxuriating in a patch of sunlight like cats, warming themselves against the breeze.

“I don’t see you as him,” Lorna says suddenly, and reaches out to touch Christine’s hand. “I don’t. I know what I said. I was mad, and scared. Scared to fucking death, honestly! I still am, a little. But there’s a version of you in my head, which was just getting scarier the more I thought about everything, and then... there’s *you*. It wasn’t fair of me to make you into the monster I imagined.” She looks down. “And, shit, I get why what I said hurt you so much. Down there, after Paige got done talking, I put myself in your shoes, imagined you saying that to me, and... Fuck, Christine. I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” Christine says, turning her hand over in Lorna’s grip and squeezing her in return. “I admit, I *was* going to ask if you really did see me that way. As, uh, *him*. Because I kind of obsess over that stuff. But you didn’t really know the

old me, so you can't ever see him in me, not really. All you did was pick the scabs off some old wounds."

"I'm still sorry. Do you... want to talk about it?"

Christine lets go of her hand and leans back, closes her eyes in the sunlight. "I think it's good for me to remember him, sometimes," she says. "I've been thinking of him as something dead. Something I killed. Like a stain that got wiped away. And I never really squared that with how I think about my Sisters. And, yes, I *know* calling them that sounds kinda culty, but they're the only family I have now."

"Indira's very nearly your sister for real."

"Yep." A broad smile takes her, and she lowers her head, hides her shyness. "She's my big sister. My closest family. But that's what I mean: I love her more than I love anyone except Paige, and there's no way I can think of Indira as having this dead creature in her past. And Paige, too, I remember who she was, and that person didn't die either; she grew, she changed, she— she *bloomed*, Lorna, into this wondrous, caring woman, who I don't know if I can ever love too much. A woman I'm going to spend my whole life with. And I remember Vicky and she was the same. I don't know if she really was always trans or not, but, just like Paige, she made herself into someone she *wanted* to be. Someone she needed to be. And Paige is right about me: I'm... not generous with myself. So you're right to say that the boy is still me, because he is. I didn't kill him; I *was* him, and he's me. If I killed him, if he's not a part of me... then maybe that makes me more likely to repeat his mistakes? And I do wonder if I've been coming close to that, lately. Once or twice."

"Not from what I've seen."

"Paige says that, too."

Lorna giggles nervously. "Paige kinda scares me."

"She wouldn't have sent the recording to Bea. I don't think she was even recording at all, actually. She's just protective of me, that's all."

“As am I, of Vicky.” And Lorna smiles, takes Christine’s hand again. “We’re lucky, aren’t we?”

“Lorna,” Christine says, “I’m constantly bowled over by how lucky I’ve been. I never, in a million years, thought I would deserve what I have now, let alone be handed it all for free. I’ve accepted the restrictions placed on me because... Well, would *you* complain if the boat that saved you from drowning had some finicky rules about who you’re allowed to say saved you? I’m sorry you’re inside those restrictions, though. All the pain in the arse with none of the benefits.”

“Hey, I got Vicky. Like you, I can’t believe my luck.” She snorts, pats Christine’s hand, and withdraws to drink her tea. “I’m still going to think of you all as trans, though, whatever you say. It makes my brain hurt less.”

“Hell,” Christine says, “maybe we are. Maybe the word can encompass girls like us. Or maybe it doesn’t have to; I’m happy being a girl, being Christine. Like Paige said, everyone important to me either knows the truth. Or, uh, knows something close enough to the truth that I’m fine with it.” Lorna raises an eyebrow, so Christine explains, “Indira’s family think I’m trans, like her.”

Lorna smirks, and says, “Let me get this straight.” She holds up the hand that isn’t holding her mug and counts down fingers as she withdraws them into her fist. “You were assigned male.” Christine nods. “You were uncomfortable with your life before transition.” Christine nods, but wiggles a flattened hand, to indicate, *it’s complicated*. Lorna sticks her tongue out. “You transitioned to womanhood, which you initially found difficult but eventually grew to find comfort and happiness in.” Nod. “And now you live as a woman and prefer to think of your old, male self as something you transcended.” Nod. Lorna pulls in her thumb, the last digit standing. “*And* some people think of you as a trans woman, and you’re fine with that.” Christine nods again. “There. Problem solved. I diagnose you, Christine, with being a fucking trans woman! I’m calling it. I’m claiming you. You’re trans.”

Christine shrugs. “If you say so.”

“I do!”

“You should tell Steph that. She’s been trying to square that circle with me for weeks.”

“I thought she was going by Stephanie now,” Lorna says, frowning.

“We talked about it. She wants people to alternate. Which usually means Bea calling her ‘Stephanie’, everyone else calling her whatever they feel like, and Pippa calling her ‘Stephanie Middlename Riley’ when she’s annoyed.”

“She doesn’t have a middle name?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“God. She should pick one.”

“She should!”

“It’s so weird that she’s down there, with those boys.”

“You should come see her,” Christine suggests.

“What?”

“Come see her! And you can meet more Dorley girls. Come hang out at the dorm.”

“Maybe.”

She looks evasive, so Christine doesn’t push it. Instead, she suggests, “Actually, maybe just come visit once. Next week. Steph’s having her electrolysis consultation, and we’ll be bringing in someone to talk to her about what surgical options she wants, too. She doesn’t know that yet, though. It’s a surprise. You should come! Talk to them, too.”

Lorna blinks. “About what?”

“Your FFS is booked and funded already, right?” Christine says, and Lorna nods. “What about GRS? I don’t know if you want it, but if you do, or you want an orchid or anything, now that you’re in the know, we can probably help with that. No charge.”

“You’re kidding,” Lorna insists.

“Nope.”

“You’d pay for it?”

“Not me, personally, but yeah.” Christine doesn’t actually have confirmation yet, but if Maria or Bea make a fuss, she’s certain she can make Lorna’s case. It’s like Paige said: they can’t keep her in the basement until she comes around to their point of view, but they *can* tie her to them with gratitude. And one visit for a consultation will become another and another and, sooner or later, Dorley Hall will just be the place Vicky lived for a while. The place her other friends still live. The place that paid for her bottom surgery.

“Shit, Christine,” Lorna says. “I mean. Fuck.”

“No pressure, obviously.”

“Fuck that! Give me *all* the pressure. Jesus. I want GRS, Christine. I *really* want it. I only picked FFS first because I value my physical safety. I was resigning myself to a years-long waiting list or doing another fundraiser or just never getting GRS and living with it, but... But! Fuck! Christine! Fuck!”

Christine laughs, and Lorna laughs, and they put their mugs down and share an awkward hug, reaching over from their respective pillows. Lorna’s sweet when she’s not being paranoid.

“I meant to say, by the way,” Lorna says, once they’ve finished their tea and put away their pillows and they’re heading down the stairs to the living room, where Paige and Vicky are playing a racing game on the PlayStation, “how nice you look.”

“Thanks! Paige caught me this morning and wouldn’t let me go until she made me beautiful.”

“Well, she does good work.”

“She really does. Hey, do you want to get food in? We were about to have lunch when Vicky texted.”

Lorna nods, stepping aside so Christine can navigate the narrow first-floor landing. “Are you okay with ordering for my housemates? They’ll probably be back soon.”

“Sure.”

“Are you going to bill it to the torture dungeon?”

“Obviously.”

“Cool! Then what’s the most expensive takeaway in town? Oh!” Lorna bounces down the last few steps and into the living room, drawing the attention of the other girls. “Vick! Remember that artisanal burger place we saw?”

Paige drops her controller and rushes over to embrace Christine. On the screen, her car crashes spectacularly into a tree.

“You’re okay?” she asks.

“I’m good,” Christine says, nuzzling Paige’s shoulder and squeezing her as tightly as she can. “We’re good.” She stands on tiptoes and whispers, “We’re going to get her in to see the consultant about GRS.”

“I’m glad,” Paige whispers back. “But she’d better not hurt you again...”

“She won’t.”

“Then I’m happy we can help her.”

Christine nods, still on her toes, unwilling to leave Paige’s embrace or lower herself from a place where she has contact with her, cheek to cheek, just like this morning. Eventually they separate, and they’re finding places to sit when the front door opens and Lorna and Vicky introduce the first of their flatmates around, inviting her to join the debate over which place to order in from. Vicky raises an eyebrow and a controller and Christine’s taken it before she realises Vicky switched the discs and *Bloodborne* is loading and Lorna is excitedly sitting down next to her, perched practically on top of an indulgent Paige, explaining to her how the gun-parry timing works and recommending which builds to choose.

Today, Christine reflects, as she designs a striking, tall, blonde hunter and wonders if she can find a striped waistcoat and majestic hat for Paige to wear in the many boxes of clothes in her room, could have gone a *lot* worse.

* * *

“Who’s talking to me?” he whispers. “Right now, who’s talking to me?”

Aaron’s lying on his bed, stretched out and almost satisfied. Indira brought him lunch, which turned out, bizarrely, to be pizza. And good pizza, too! And then the pizza made him tired, as it always does, and the grease made him feel gross, so he had a second shower and retired again. He tried looking at himself in the mirror, but he still has good reason mostly to avoid it, especially if he *has* been changing the way Stef has — and he has, all but inevitably — so there he lies, inspecting the parts of himself he can stand to look at in the lamplight and asking himself the same question, over and over again.

It’s not that it’s especially revelatory; it’s basic therapist stuff, probably. Identify the root of the patient’s self-loathing, question it, ask if the terrible things the patient attributes to himself, considers a vital part of himself, actually constitute load-bearing pillars of his personality or if he is, in fact, a whiny little bitch.

Aaron’s never been to therapy. But his guess is, he feels, probably accurate.

So, if it’s not revelatory, then why does he care? Maybe because it was Stef asking the question. Stef, the guy who all but declared his interest in *him*, and who doubled down on it today when offered an out! Stef, the only guy who’s ever

really given him the time of day without extracting from him a heavy price in return, usually paid in humiliation or pain. Stef, the guy who seems genuinely to care what he thinks.

The guy who thinks he can be better.

Oh yeah, one catch: you're here, so, better or not, you're going to be a girl.

The sponsors ruin everything.

But still. He has a friend. A friend who might want something from him he can't give — he's never, even accounting for his defensive overreaction when Stef first told him, at which he thinks his imaginary therapist would probably meaningfully raise their eyebrows, been into guys — but who doesn't seem too bothered about that. And here, especially here, Aaron will take any friend he can get. Screw the complications.

He's gearing up to put on a movie, something mind-numbing, like one of the romances they clutter the hard drives with, when there's a knock at his door, and there's really only one person it can be. He hops off the bed without hesitation and opens the door to Stef, still looking like a—

Um. *That's* new.

“Hey, Stef,” he says. “Nice... eyes?”

Stef blinks, and then laughs. “Oh, yeah,” he says. “Forgot about that. One of the girls wanted to get some practise in, and she cornered me. Apparently no-one else in the building quite has my colouring. I kinda like it!” He runs a finger across his cheekbone. The skin seems to sparkle in the low light.

“Yeah,” Aaron says. “It's, uh, pretty, I guess.”

“Thanks,” Stef says, beaming, and Aaron's thinking of ways to puncture the mood, because it's *weird* for Stef to be so happy about being slathered in makeup, when Stef's expression sours anyway. “Can I come in? I don't want to be alone right now.”

Aaron stands back to let him in, but has to ask: “You sure you want to be with me? You don’t want to call Pippa, or one of your other sponsor pals?”

He shakes his head. “No. Right now I don’t really want to be around anyone who’s... involved in all this. Just kinda want to give my head a break, you know?”

Yeah. Aaron knows. He holds out a welcoming arm, like a fucking greeter at a restaurant or something, and Stef stops loitering at the door and walks nervously in, sits down on the end of the bed before Aaron can stop him.

“Hey, you, uh, might not want to sit there, I mean, maybe it’s okay since I changed the sheets this morning, but, uh, actually, just sit right exactly there, okay? Right there and don’t move. Like, a muscle.”

“What do you—?” Stef asks. “Oh. Right. Yeah. I remember. Last time— actually, the time *before* last that I was in here, you were very, very worried about me sitting in your, uh, what did you call it? Your ‘spectacular nightly leavings’.” Aaron winces at Stef’s grin. “It’s fine, Aaron. I’ll sit in the spunk.”

“So,” Aaron says, closing the door and sitting at the other end of the bed, a nice, safe, chaste distance away, “what’s up?”

And Stef lays out, with a weird flat affect and a look of stress that almost makes Aaron want to repeat their awkward hug from earlier, what just happened. Will baring his soul! Ollie being force fed — emphatically *not* an empty threat, then — and hurting himself. Raph... just sort of existing, apparently. And Stef, shaken enough by the experience, by something he’s not telling Aaron, coming straight here, not even pausing to wash off his sparkly eye makeup.

“Fucking hell,” Aaron says. Stef’s slid down off the bed by this point, and is sitting on the floor, leaning back on the mattress, supporting his head with his hands. He looks nice from that angle; Aaron wishes his cheekbones looked half as good.

“Yeah,” Stef says heavily, stretching his toes out.

“What now?”

“Now, I think,” Stef says, “I want to do absolutely nothing. I don’t want to think about this place, or Will’s shit, or Ollie’s bruises. I know this might be a little selfish of me, to come running back into your room like this, but I want an evening like we used to have. Brainless. Stress-free. But,” he adds, pushing up from the floor, “if you’d rather be on your own, I can—”

“No,” Aaron says quickly. “No. Stay. We’ll watch mind-numbing crap. It’s fine. I, uh, I missed that, too.”

“Cool,” Stef says, leaning his head back against the mattress and cupping his hands in his lap. Aaron’s heartbeat returns to normal. “What shall we watch?”

It takes a few minutes to decide, and they end up picking a vampire romance TV show with nine seasons on tap, all of them likely to be entertainingly terrible. Aaron, to be closer to the screen, moves up on the bed, sits close enough to Stef’s head to be able to prop a pillow behind it, for which Stef thanks him profusely. As they watch, as the girl on screen talks about her upcoming prom, and then gets enveloped in eldritch vampire fog and menaced by crows, Aaron slides down into a more comfortable position, with his legs dangling off the edge of the bed and his head barely vertical enough to see. When teen vampire number three makes himself known, stalking prom with a single drop of blood on his lip, Aaron feels a pressure against his leg. Carefully he levers himself up on his elbows and sees Stef’s head leaning against his calf, and he’s about to make a fuss, or a joke, or push him away, or kick him and order him to leave, when he hears snoring. Faint and slightly troubled snoring.

Fuck it.

He turns down the volume a bit, turns on the subtitles so he doesn’t miss any subtleties of plot or characterisation, and lets Stef sleep, clutching Aaron’s leg like a plush toy.

Stef's been going non-stop lately, it seems. Best to give him a break.

* * *

Hard floor. Kinda cold. And there's... snoring? She's leaning on something. A bed. Her bed? No; Aaron's bed. Aaron's bed!

The realisation causes her to try to stand, quickly, but her back complains enough that she has to cover her mouth to keep from whimpering. Sore! Keeping her silencing hand in place, she massages the small of her back with the other hand, and the movement is sufficient to wake Aaron, if only a little.

"Hey," he says, from up in the sheets somewhere. He sounds barely conscious. "I left my duvet on the floor. Just lay it out and roll yourself up in it, like a sleeping bag."

"You sure?" Stef asks, coming to a crouch as she starts gathering up the duvet, the spare pillow he left for her, and a couple of hoodies that don't smell the cleanest but will do as a makeshift mattress. "I can go back to—"

"Shut up and go to sleep," he says, and she hears a smile in his voice so she doesn't push it.

He's snoring again before she finishes assembling her bed, and it's not long before she joins him, falling asleep in the company of her friend and content to know that he'll probably, maybe, hopefully be okay.

SEVEN

WATERSLIDE

2007 AUGUST 7 — TUESDAY

Sometimes all it takes is getting away from your life for a while, and going for a dip.

Surrounded by hundreds of acres of woodland and bisected by a wide, slow-flowing river, Peri Park is the home counties' premier self-contained holiday resort: a sprawl of villas, apartments, restaurants, plazas and play areas, clustered around an entertainment village which has at its heart an enormous multi-level swimming complex, domed under glass, teeming with tropical plants and complete with its own wave machine, over a dozen waterslides, and nearly two dozen poolside bars, eating areas, and family-friendly chill zones.

It's about the best thing thirteen-year-old Shahida's ever experienced.

For most of her life she lived with her parents in Essex, in a village awkwardly positioned for all forms of entertainment, but most especially swimming, being far enough from both the beach and London that every excursion was an expensive compromise. Worse, the visits to see her gran's sister's family in Edinburgh, to take advantage of the pools there, were forever promised but never delivered, and holidays farther afield, to see their extended family in Lahore, similarly always seemed to fall through. Time and money, work and

responsibilities; Shahida tried not to complain. She swam instead in the pool in the nearby town, but couldn't find much joy there: her mum said the council never funded the place properly, and that plans to extend and expand it always ended up abandoned, but whatever the reason it was a miserable place, squat and dirty, always packed too full of people, with an unpleasant smell and a strict time limit for swimmers. Dad took her every couple of weeks anyway, so she could keep her form up and practise her diving, and it was fun enough, in the absence of better options. Stopping in the park for an ice cream after was reliably the best part.

And then Dad died, and Shahida forgot about swimming for a while.

Six months later, almost to the day, she and Mum moved out of the old house. They went farther inland, to a new suburb on the outskirts of a city called Almsworth, into a nice new-build house, semi-detached at the garage, done up in mock Tudor cladding and with room to expand. It could have swallowed their old house twice over. Mum explained that Dad's life insurance was pretty good, and Shahida decided to view the place as his last gift to them.

Life began again: Mum went back to school and so did Shahida, excited for her new start in a new city.

It's not been everything she hoped. She's had difficulty making friends; there aren't that many kids her age in the suburb, and while there are a couple of local prospects she's cultivating it's hard to get truly close with people when you only see them at school. She's playing the flute again, but doesn't find the music the school band selects especially interesting. And her schoolwork's continued the way it always has, unchallenging and boring. Bit by bit she's made a life, but mostly she finds it notable for the things she wishes for, the lost puzzle pieces: a real, close friend; a challenge; and some bloody excitement!

And she still doesn't get many opportunities to swim! Not until now. Not until the combined incomes of Mum and her

new boyfriend *finally* grant them the opportunity to take the first real holiday of Shahida's life. Not until Shahida begged Mum and Edward to take her to the biggest waterpark in the country, handily located less than forty miles from their new home. Not until *here!*

Dad always said he wanted to take her somewhere like this, but while it's not quite the same without him, she can't bring herself to feel sad any more; two years is a long time to mourn. Eventually she found a spot for him inside her, and remembers him solely the way he asked to be remembered: happily, and with love. He resurfaces from time to time, and it's like she can feel his arms around her, comforting her, telling her that he's okay, that *she's* okay, and everything about that has just become normal now.

Shahida smiles, taps her heart in remembrance, and returns to the view looking out over Peri Paradise.

She already knows the place well. On their first full day at the park she stood in her swimsuit at the entrance and looked out over the stepped pools, building a mental map of all the activities available to her and planning her route. Today's adventures start at the topmost level of Paradise, a rocky outcrop that hosts two restaurants, a sunning area festooned with palm trees and pink people, and this, the viewing platform, which backs onto the Grand Flume and from which you can watch the crowds ebb and flow like the tides.

The sun, diffused by the great glass dome that bends closer here than anywhere else, glows warm and comforting on her bare shoulders. She's about to head off for the flume when someone catches her eye:

Leaning against the railing a little way along from her, but looking down over the edge rather than out across the strata of swimming pools, is a boy, about her height and thus probably about her age, with blond hair plastered wet to his cheeks. Under his loose t-shirt and long swimming shorts he looks thin, almost delicate, but Shahida might still have approached him if he'd been twice her size; she's never been intimidated

by boys the way people expect, probably because, unlike the girls at school, she has no investment in whether or not they like her. Besides, other kids her age, alone and unsupervised and pensive, are inherently interesting!

He looks up as she leans on the railing next to him, and he returns her welcoming smile with the sort of blushing nervousness she likes to see on a boy.

“Hey,” she says, rolling sideways on the railing so she’s propping herself on one elbow, and pretending like she only just noticed him. Nonchalance works best for befriending the shy ones, and the shy ones are her favourites. “It’s pretty great here, isn’t it?”

“Hmm?” he says, and then almost laughs when she gestures out at Paradise. “Oh, yeah. It’s nice.”

“‘Nice’ is absolutely an understatement,” Shahida says, turning again to rest her back on the railing, to indicate that this boy, this stick-thin kid who still has yet to look right at her, is as of now more interesting than all the myriad delights behind and below. “Coming here was my idea, and now Mum and Edward are *already* talking about coming back next year. Because there’s nothing like these pools anywhere else in the country!” It’s true: Edward’s an accountant, and when he explained to a very serious Shahida the kind of budget they were working with for their first holiday she almost screamed. They could have gone anywhere in the country — and many places abroad — but, as luck would have it, the best swimming in England turned out to have been right on their doorstep for two years. Shahida knows this for certain; her research was *very* thorough. “There’s other stuff to do here at Peri, like walks in the woods and horseback riding and stuff, but you can do *that* in a hundred other places. I don’t know why you’d bother when you could come and enjoy—” she straightens, spins around to face out across the dome and throws her arms in the air, “—this paradisaical place!”

The boy screws up his face, giggling. “‘Paradisaical’? Is that a proper word?”

“Who *needs* proper words,” she says grandly, “when you have a tropical swimming complex maintained at exactly twenty-nine-and-a-half degrees centigrade!” She’s aware she’s over-egging it a bit, but her enthusiasm’s genuine, and it’s fun to let yourself get carried away; besides, she got a laugh out of him, didn’t she? She lowers her voice to a whisper and adds, “The ideal temperature for swimming.”

“You haven’t *swum* yet,” the boy says, pointing to Shahida’s bone-dry swimsuit and then blushing and looking away, obviously feeling like he was just hugely inappropriate. *So cute!*

“Not *today*,” she says, flicking at the flared skirt of her suit. “Not yet. I have a plan!” She smiles at him again, draws out another blush. “What about you? Which pools have you tried?”

“Um,” he says, pointing, “just that one.”

She follows his finger and frowns in disbelief. “That’s the kiddy pool,” she says flatly. “You *don’t* want to go in the kiddy pool.” Exaggeratedly she widens her eyes, pretending to have been struck with sudden inspiration. “You should come with me! I can show you the good stuff!”

He looks over towards the gaggle of parents hiding their sunburns under the parasols that surround the plaza. “I’m supposed to stay with—”

“Oh, come *on!*” Shahida reaches for his arm and drags him away from the railing. The queue for the Grand Flume isn’t far, and if she can get him there, away from any family members who might object to her borrowing him, she’s home free. He offers basically no resistance, and she pulls him across the stone tiles. “Let’s ride the flume and then I’ll show you *all* the sights.” Keep him talking; keep him distracted. “How long have you been here?”

The boy staggers a little under her grip; his wrist is so *thin!* “Uh, we got here two days ago. We didn’t come to the dome until today, though.” He smiles at her and she smiles back, to

encourage him. “We went horseback riding yesterday,” he adds sheepishly.

“Mistake!” Shahida says, laughing. “*Clearly* you need to stick with me. I’ll show you *everything* in the proper order.” She lets go of his wrist as they approach the queue, skipping around behind him to trap him in place. She turns him around to face her. “You *have* to see things the right way, or you won’t get the full experience. You should ride the slides and *then* try out the relaxing whirlpool baths, *not* the other way round. Oh, and at three, they empty out the wave pool for an hour so people can ride mini jet-skis! We’re not old enough for that, unfortunately.”

“How old *are* you?” he asks.

“I turned thirteen in March,” she says triumphantly.

“Oh!” he says, rubbing his wrist where she grabbed it. “Cool! I turn thirteen in a month.”

“That’s perfect!” Shahida says. “It’s clearly fate that we met. I needed a friend to share this place with and you—” she turns them both around again and points to the gaping mouth of the water slide; there’s only one person in front of them in the queue now, “—needed to try *that*. It’s the tallest flume in Europe!”

She’s clearly won him over, because he says, “You’re such a dork for this place,” and laughs again, and it’s the kind of laugh she wants to hear over and over, so she broadens her smile. She wants him to feel comfortable around her.

“What’s your name?” she asks. As he tells her, the attendant indicates that it’s her turn to go, so she steps forward into the maw, looks back over her shoulder and says, “One thing you should know about me, Mark, is that I’m a dork for *everything*.”

And then there’s nothing but the thrill of the descent.

2019 DECEMBER 11 — WEDNESDAY

Dorley Hall's still so fucking intimidating.

The rain doesn't help, sure — it's one of those very English days where the sky will occasionally just open the fuck up for a half-hour or so at a time, and Lorna and Vicky's trip from the car park was spectacularly ill-timed — but even in the best of conditions the great brick beast of a dorm makes her nervous. More so, now she knows exactly what goes on beneath. She wonders as they approach if, right now, under her feet, some unwilling boy is being subjected to—

She shudders.

Vicky reaches for her hand and squeezes. Lorna takes the opportunity to latch onto her whole arm, to sink into her, to steady her soul against her as well as her body. She becomes a weight against her, slowing them both to a stop.

Rain collects in the collar of Lorna's shirt. She doesn't care. Right now, she's holding Vicky, and nothing else matters.

It's still tense between them sometimes. Less so as the days pile up, as Lorna manages to keep her shit *contained*, as she stops just unloading on people who don't deserve it, but she still despises the distance between them and takes every opportunity to close it. Christine's visit and Lorna's apology did a lot to reassure Vicky, so Lorna's been actively keeping up the connection; texting with Christine, meeting her for lunch when their timetables allow for it, and making arrangements for her to come visit again.

It honestly feels good to have Christine as a friend again. Bit of a shame she's not going to be around this morning; a catch-up meeting with one of her professors, apparently. Even Dorley's connections can't get you out of missing *that* many lectures.

“We can just go,” Vicky says, positioning herself between Lorna and the Hall. “You *don't* have to take what they're offering.”

Lorna shakes her head, and yanks sopping hair out of her eyes with the hand that's not keeping them both anchored. “I

already did,” she says. “We wouldn’t have covered FFS without them.” It still rankles, finding out that the large, anonymous donation to her crowdfunder came from Dorley. “Not to mention all the estradiol you steal for me. And, God, Vick; I’m fed up with waiting to start my life! They can give me bottom surgery! For *free!*”

“We really can—”

“No,” she says, wriggling out of Vicky’s grasp. She forces a laugh. “I’m being silly, Vick. I’m letting my imagination run away with me. Whatever they do underground is none of my business. It can’t be, not if I’m going to know about this place and stop my brain from dribbling out of my ears. And if *I* don’t care, *they* don’t care. Nothing’s going to happen to me in there that I don’t *want* to happen.”

“I wouldn’t let it,” Vicky whispers. “And we can still make it work without them.”

“I know. Vick, you’re sweet, you’re, God, you’re *so* fucking sweet, and I love you to *pieces*. But I’m here now, and I’m already in on the joke and stressed as hell about it, so I might as well reap the rewards. Come on; I’m drenched and so are you.”

She reaches for Vicky’s hand again and drags her towards Dorley Hall, trying to ignore the way the place still looms so large, and failing: she hunches her shoulders against its bulk as they come up to the entryway, but soon they’re inside and hanging up sopping wet coats and squeezing out soaking hair and too busy for Lorna to spend all that much time worrying about it any more.

““In on the joke’?” Vicky says, grinning.

Lorna groans. “I’ve been talking to Christine too much.”

Vicky’s still reaching for the fingerprint lock when a girl bursts out of the kitchen doors, wraps her in a hug and then immediately steps back, shaking her arms exaggeratedly to dry them. “Ew!” she squeals. “Victoria! You’re so *wet!*”

“You noticed?” Vicky says. “Lorna, this is Jodie, from my intake. Jo, this is Lorna.”

“Oh my God,” Jodie says, leaping forward and grabbing one of Lorna’s hands. “I’ve wanted to meet you for so *long!* Victoria’s told me all about you!”

Lorna smiles, limply accepts a kiss on her knuckles, and says, “Hi.”

Jodie’s dressed mostly in black, with matching wine-red stockings and hair, and she jangles when she moves quickly: jewellery, apparently.

“Jo runs a *World of Darkness* stream,” Vicky says, “and —”

“Right!” Lorna says, making a show of remembering. “You’re *that* Jodie! I caught a little of your stream, once.” It’s a lie, but only just; Vicky’s been briefing her on people she’s likely to run into — fighting against the impediment that is Lorna’s terrible memory for names — and showed her some screenshots of the stream. Jodie dresses up for it. “I like the hat you wore.”

“Which one?”

“Oh, the, uh, it was like a sun hat, but black, with, um, a pink accent? Like a gothic, vampiric sun hat.”

“Isn’t it great?” Jodie says, bouncing on her heels. “I got that locally, actually! Normally I get my things online, because, yeah, Almsworth, *not* exactly the goth capital of the world, but there was a whole outfit in the window of a charity shop in town and it was just *gorgeous* so we went inside and they had *boxes* of this stuff they were still putting out. It was like an awesome old lady witch just died and her familiars were donating all her clothes.” She mimes something complicated which, if Lorna uses her imagination, could possibly be a raven delivering a box of clothes. “Very sad. Anyway, we got first pick and I got *so many* great things for the stream. I can show you sometime, if you’d like?”

“Oh! Yes. Maybe?”

“Hmm,” Jodie says, frowning at Lorna and picking limply at a wet lock of hair, “you’re here to see the consultant, right? Well, she’s *always* running late, so how about you come up with me and get yourself sorted out?”

“Sorted out?” Vicky asks.

“Yes! Both of you! You’re *soaked*. You need showers, fresh clothes... Victoria’s got her own shower, of course, even if she does have to climb over fifty boxes of Paige’s stuff to get to it, so *you*—” she points at Lorna, “—can use mine!”

“Jo, it’s really okay—”

“It’s decided!” Jodie says, and drags Lorna towards the stairs. “And don’t worry about missing anyone; you’ll be done with *plenty* of time to catch up.”

Lorna half-turns and shrugs at Vicky. Getting cleaned up *would* be nice — she hadn’t exactly been looking forward to facing this place while looking and feeling like a drowned rat — and she’d much rather accept a shower from this Jodie girl than ask one of the sponsors. So they both follow her up to the second floor, where Vicky disappears into her room and Jodie opens the door to hers in the manner of someone presenting an ancient tomb on the day of its first unearthing.

It’s surprisingly normal inside. She does have a vase of black roses on her windowsill, though.

“So,” Jodie says, “bathroom’s *there*, and everything you need should be on the caddy in the shower cubicle; there’s a clean towel on top of the basket by the sink; and when you’re done I, um...” She intertwines her fingers nervously. “I have something to confess.”

Ominous.

But the shower’s hot and the water pressure is downright *fantastic* and when she’s done, and found the set of clean — and not particularly vampiric — clothes left outside the bathroom door, and dressed herself and started drying her hair, she feels content and comfortable and not especially concerned about whatever it is Jodie has to confess.

Jodie re-enters the bedroom backwards, with two mugs of tea, pushing open the door with her bottom, and smiles when she sees Lorna's new, much less bedraggled appearance.

"Looking good!" she says, and sets out a coaster and a mug of tea on the dresser.

"Thanks," Lorna says. "And thanks for the clothes, too."

"Okay, so, the thing is," Jodie says, waving away Lorna's thanks and settling down on the end of the bed, "I had an ulterior motive for asking you up here. I wanted to get you on your own, because I need some advice."

Advice? *Not* where Lorna thought this might go. She nods, and embraces her mug of tea with both hands. "If I can help," she says, "I'd be happy to."

Jodie chews on her lip for a moment. "So," she says, "I haven't done my NPH yet. That's, uh— you know what that is? Yeah, okay. And it's not actually *unusual* to leave it so late, like, last year, Pippa's year — you know Pippa? — it was gone Christmas before some of them were making their final decisions, but *this* year, *this* intake, everyone's a prodigy, right? Yasmin and Julia did theirs a while ago, Paige even earlier, *Victoria* did hers *last year* — which I guess you know! — and, sure, Christine's a holdout like me, but she's also the world's most *adorable* disaster and has let *way* too many people think of her as trans to be *anything* else at this point. But. Anyway. It's not *really* my NPH that's the issue? I mean, I'm sort of fixated on it, but delaying it's a symptom, not the actual problem, right? The *problem* is— oh, God, this is *awkward*..."

"Hey," Lorna says gently, "relax." Jodie's not at all what she expected from a random bad-boy-turned-girl. She considers for a moment that she might have been encouraged, or outright ordered, to put on an act for the benefit of the dangerous outsider, but dismisses the thought as useless paranoia: after a certain point, you have to assume either that *everything* is Machiavellian manipulation from a houseful of devious kidnappers, or that the girls are, for the most part,

what they appear to be, and Lorna's experience with Vicky and the other members of her intake strongly suggests the latter interpretation. And even if it *is* sensible to assume the worst from the sponsors, none of Vicky's intake are in that role. "Whatever you want to say, you can say."

"Thank you," Jodie says, nodding emphatically. "So. I haven't finalised my New Personal History, right, and that means my identity is still sort of in limbo? Like, I'm enough of a person as far as the uni's concerned that I can go to lectures and stuff, but my bank account is still controlled by the programme, I don't *technically* have a birth certificate... all that crap." She waves a hand: unimportant. "But it's my identity that's the question. I've been... thinking about it."

There's enough of a pause that Lorna has to fill it. "About... being a girl?"

Jodie's eyes go wide. "No! No, that's, um, very much decided. I like me this way. I *love* me! But, well, also, my history is kind of important to me? *Not* the stuff that brought me here, the bad stuff, the stuff I won't even *try* to foist on you until we know each other *way* better, at least, assuming you even *want* to know me— Shit, that was a presumptuous thing to say, actually!"

"Not at all," Lorna insists, stifling a laugh. There's something very engaging about Jodie, for all that she talks like she's a can of Coke and someone shook her up before opening her. "You're a friend of Vick's right? And Christine's?" Another emphatic nod from Jodie. "Then you're a friend of mine. We can work out the details later." She wonders for a moment if she's going to regret this, and then decides it probably doesn't make any difference. At this point she's knee-deep in Dorley Hall; why not make friends?

"So," Jodie says, "I've been toying with ways to describe myself, should I ever meet another trans woman. Another one I can actually talk to about being trans, I mean! Because I *can't* go unloading on that girl in the basement; she's got enough to deal with. Have you *met* her? She's really nice, but she's

crushing *hard* on this boy down there? And she *knows* what's going to happen to him but she can't *say anything*? And he's starting to see her for who she really is and he's denying his feelings *and* he's refusing to accept what's happening but you can *see* the little glimmers of who he might become, right? And she's helping keep him stable and he's helping her in his own way and, God, Lorna, it's *so* sweet and *so* sad and I'm *so* addicted and where was I? Shit. Yes. How to describe myself. So." She holds up both her hands, one with her thumb touching her forefinger in an oval shape, the other curled into a fist, and wiggles them. "Trans people. You have eggs, right?" She nods at her more open hand. "Well-understood concept. And then you have *me*." She nods at the closed fist. "I've been thinking of myself as having been something more like a *seed*. A girl *in potentia*, right? Now, an egg is fragile, yes? Vulnerable to moments of revelation, random events or people that will crack her shell and reveal the gooey girly mess inside, right?" Lorna, bemused, nods, and Jodie grins and drops her *egg* hand. "Well, a *seed* is tougher. And there's not really any stuff inside, right? It can last years without breaking. Lifetimes, maybe. And it's fine like that! It can happily be a seed until, eventually, it biodegrades. Circle of life! Even if you break it apart, crack it like you would an egg, there's just *bits* inside. Crumbly little seedy bits. But." She plunges her *seed* hand down into her lap, buries it between her calves. "If you *plant* the seed, if you water it, nurture it, love it, then maybe, after a while, you get a little plant. And if you *keep* watering the plant, if you care for it until it's strong enough to stand up on its own, you get a flower, right? And maybe... maybe the flower is beautiful, and enjoys being beautiful, and likes the feel of the sun on her leaves... You get the idea?"

"I think so."

Jodie sips her tea, looking out of the window as she does, at the rain lashing against the pane. "I could've gone my *whole* life as a seed, happy enough, with not a moment of dysphoria and not a second of questioning my gender. I even played a girl in a play at school and that's egg-cracking ground zero,

but it did *nothing* for me. But this place *planted* me and took care of me and helped me grow, and now... Now I'm happier than I ever was! More *me* than I ever was. Free of restrictions, free of expectations. Free! But my *history*, the guy I spent the first twenty years of my life as, he's still important to me, too, right? He messed up, yeah, absolutely, and I'd want to take him aside and give him the *sternest* talking to if I ever met him, but he's still *me*, and he's still *important*, and I don't want to forget him. He's still inside me, in memories, in habits, in some of the things I like, in some of the things I say... Just because I, um, *grew out of him*, doesn't mean he's gone, yes?" She's frowning slightly. "And *this* is what I wanted to talk to another trans woman about. And *not* someone like Victoria, either, or Donna, my sponsor; they're both lovely but they're also both *from here*, you know? Wonky perspective." She wobbles a flattened palm from side to side. "I need a *normal* trans woman, like you."

"Oh," Lorna says, unused to being considered *normal*. "Sure. Go ahead?"

"I'm trans," Jodie says. "I've done a *lot* of thinking and it just fits, yes? I'm a trans woman. It feels *right* to say. But that's not my question. It's the setup to my question." She squirms, wrinkling the bedsheets. "What I want to know is... Being *out*, is it worth it?" She raises a finger to forestall Lorna's answer — unnecessary, since Lorna hasn't yet formulated one; she's not even sure what question Jodie's asking, exactly — and then taps herself twice near the base of her belly. "I'm still intact. Down there. Not my *balls*, obviously—" a giggle bursts through her otherwise serious demeanour, "—but otherwise I'm shipshape. And I kinda like it that way? For a while I thought I didn't, I thought I'd want to get rid of it like Christine and Victoria and all the rest, but then I just kind of got used to the idea of being a girl with a penis, you know? Another thing that just felt comfortable, felt right. *But* if I want to keep it, *and* if I want to be *known* as a trans woman, which I do, those are both things that dictate my NPH, you know? I have to fill it out as a trans girl. Officially."

“You mean,” Lorna says, “if you don’t want bottom surgery, you *have* to be trans? That’s... coercive.”

“Not really!” Jodie says quickly. “I mean, think about it: if they construct a watertight identity for me as a cis woman and then I, say, want to go swimming or something... Well, I can’t ever go swimming. Because if I get found out, then my identity gets looked into, and if it gets back to here...” She waves her hand again, and Lorna understands.

“Suddenly everyone’s in danger.”

“Yes.”

“Because of your penis.”

“Yes. And I’m not *fighting* that, Lorna, I’m really not, and I *understand* why it’s the policy, but this is why Donna’s been telling me to take my time thinking about it even though I *know* she’s waiting for me to choose, because it’s *scary*, Lorna! I *want* to be trans, for real, on paper. I want to be me! I’ve seen what it’s cost Victoria and Paige to have to pretend to be cis girls and I don’t want that for me but, also...” She shrugs. “I’m scared of it. Scared of being out. Because of transphobes. TERFs. The bloody Tories! I’m scared of all of them! So I think what I’m asking, what I want to know, is can I be *me*, and still be *safe*? And, if I can’t, if that’s a sacrifice I have to make, is being in community with other trans people worth the risk of *having* to be trans in this country?”

Well, Lorna? Is it?

Jesus fucking Christ.

That’s a hell of a question to have to answer so early in the morning.

* * *

Therapy's a mirror and a refusal to look away.

Five foot six (and a bit). Aaron's been five foot six (and a bit) since he stopped growing, years back. He'd been one of those boys who shot up early in puberty and then just stayed there, increasingly emasculated as the other boys outgrew him, and increasingly frustrated as his mother measured him against the door frame of his old bedroom in the old house, marking notches closer and closer together. When he went off to boarding school he lost track of it, and endured much from boys both older and larger than he, with his diminutive nature a particular sticking point. So, one summer holiday, staying at his parents' new house, he waited for them to go out, and rummaged in the drawer under their bed for the rolled-up greaseproof paper he saw his mother pack on their last day in the old place. She always had been sentimental, not that it ever helped him, particularly; he always felt like he was her son aesthetically more than spiritually or biologically or whatever, like she clung more to the idea of him more than to the ugly reality of Aaron himself. So she ritualised their relationship, performed it, and one of the things mothers do is keep track of their growing boy's height. She traced the height marks onto paper before they moved out, and kept it safe. For all he knew she got it out occasionally and imagined what the version of him she preferred was getting up to. Pencil marks on greaseproof paper, describing the boy she wished she had.

He rolled it out and lay on it, flattened down his hair and marked off his new height: a fraction of an inch taller than when they left the old place, years ago. So that was it, then: already his adult height at fifteen.

He tore the paper up, scattered the remains on their bed. He kept his resolve when he heard her crying over them; she didn't cry when the head of the house at school called them in to tell them he'd had his arm broken, but she weeps over paper?

Five foot six (and a bit). That's how tall he was at fifteen, and that's how tall he was when he came to Dorley Hall. And when he found out about the Goserelin implant, and got the

lecture from Will on its effects, he marked his height next to the mirror, stood with his back to it and scratched it into the wood with his fingernail. Just in case. Because that's what happens with old people, isn't it? After they've run their bodies dry of testosterone or estrogen and begun supplementing with oils and tinctures out of cans with peeling paper labels and sell-by dates from the seventies, they shrink, right? Denying your body testosterone, it's like the male menopause, or something.

Whatever. Will called him a moron when he asked about it. He probably wouldn't even have bothered making the marks if this concrete girlboss purgatory hadn't been so fucking *boring*, if he hadn't been filling the brief periods between wanks with whatever he could find to keep himself busy. It'd been the wildest of precautions.

Not so wild, after all.

His eyes flick from the new scratch by the mirror, to his naked reflection, and back again. His imaginary therapist has been telling him to face up to it, to understand every detail of what they're doing to him, to document it, and while he despises the impulse to do so he has to admit that it's better than hiding from it and letting his imagination run wild. Even if what he sees in the mirror is horrifying, it could probably still be worse.

Compared to how he was when he got here, his chest is unmistakably swollen (in two places), and his arse and hips are getting fleshy (which might be why his lower back hurts). His face is a little softer (in the way Stef's is) and his arms... those are probably the most different. He used to be proud of his arms, the way the veins stood out, like they do on body-builders. He might have been short and average-looking and physically unimpressive no matter how many push-ups he did, but he had veins like the ripped guys had, and that was enough. And it was sort of fun to press down on them and watch them pop back up again. Gone now, though. Melted into his softening skin. Another piece of himself he won't get back.

That, and the height.

Five foot six (and nothing). And that's being generous.

He asked Stef his height once, and got an answer in centimetres. Not helpful, for Aaron; at the boarding school they insisted on teaching primarily in imperial units — one time, he's certain, his History teacher cried when he was telling the class how the glorious British Empire gifted its weights and measurements to the world — and while he's happily converted for almost everything else, human heights are a black box to him. Stef laughed when he came up with a conversion that put Stef at over six foot, and put him out of his misery: Stef's five foot nine. One hundred seventy-five centimetres. Which would make Aaron...

How should he know? He's a Geology student. Whatever he is in centimetres, he used to be at least one more.

And it's exhausting to stay angry. It's coming up on two weeks since they came clean about their intentions — and more than two months since they started suppressing his testosterone! — and, God help him, it's sunk in and then some. Yes, he hates it, and he renews that hate every time he sees his reflection, every time he brushes against a sensitive nipple, every time he gets naked to wash and has to feel his arse and his thighs and shave his softening face, but nothing can bring that early anger back. It drained out of him, along with his resolve to fight. And that's probably for the best: keeping up his rage felt like feeding a cancerous organ, a growth inside him that poisoned his bloodstream and offered him nothing but pain. And he has examples, in Martin and Adam and the others who've been shut away in the cells, of the futility of fighting against it, whether mentally or physically. So: resentful resignation, that's where Aaron's landed, firmly and decisively.

He snorts, and prods at his bottom. Firmly indeed.

His second phone alarm goes off. 9am. Late for breakfast, so where the hell's Indira? Usually she's bustling around him by this point, asking friendly but pointed questions, making

veiled threats, ruffling his hair. Is this another one of her little lessons? Is he expected to intuit something from her absence?

Or maybe there's been some kind of horrible plague, and everyone upstairs is dead? Hmm. Wishful thinking. And it'd suck for Stef, who inexplicably has friends up there. *And* everyone down here would all die of hunger.

He shrugs, noting in the mirror the slightly different way his chest moves now when he does so, and returns to his routine. He takes his daily photo, saves it out to the computer, throws the phone lightly onto the bed, then turns away from the mirror and rummages in the carefully arranged piles of clothes in the wardrobe. He spent a while late last week sorting through the clothes in there, checking for softness, testing for thickness, trying them out, and eventually settled on a selection of five long-sleeved cotton t-shirts, which he keeps apart from everything else. He grabs one, stands up straight and wraps it carefully around his chest, looping the arms all the way around himself and tying them tight over his belly. He bunches the material up around his sore, swollen parts, and rolls it tightly underneath for a little extra protection.

He's gotten good at avoiding his reflection during this part, because he knows what it looks like when he wraps his developing chest like this. A few days ago, just to mess around, he posed in the mirror, pulling the t-shirt wrapped around his breast buds tight, like a crop top, and moments later wished he'd had breakfast so he had something inside him to throw up besides acid. He turns his back on the mirror instead, pulling out a short-sleeved t-shirt and tugging it over his head, and finishing with a hoodie and joggers. *Then* he looks at himself, from every angle he can attain in the mirror, and confirms that he looks more or less like he used to, with perhaps a little extra bulk from the improvised support. Blame it on hormonal weight gain.

Aaron might not be able to stop what they're doing to him, but he's fucked if he's asking for a bra.

* * *

The direst warning about Dorley Hall: it's makeover central. The first and second floors in particular are swarming with girls who are still learning, or who have become expert and enjoy exercising their talent, or who have become expert and enjoy inflicting on others the tortures their sponsors subjected them to. Jodie, at least, asked first.

Lorna's quite enjoying being pampered, actually. And the prep's given her time to assemble her thoughts, so she can answer Jodie's question honestly and thoroughly.

"It's worth it," she says firmly. "For so many reasons, it's worth it. For one, you get to be part of a community of people who understand you, who share some of your base assumptions. You talked about Vicky before, and you're absolutely right that play-acting as a cis girl hurt her; especially because she felt — was *made* to feel — like she had to do so in front of *me*. But that's shit you already knew, or could guess."

"Mm-hm," Jodie says, nodding. She's been sorting through foundations on her dresser, looking for a match for Lorna's skin; they're close in colour, but Lorna's less inclined to accentuate her pallor. She dabs a couple of colours on the back of her hand and lifts a lock of Lorna's hair, to check the foundation against her skin, and brushes accidentally against the small spot of stubble Lorna's been letting grow the last couple of days. "Oh. You, uh, missed a spot."

Lorna bats her hand away, gently but quickly. "Sorry," she says immediately. "I hate anyone touching that. I hate feeling it on me." Jodie's innocent fingers brought with them a familiar cascade of unpleasant memories, the most vivid of which is always the man at the hospital where she worked admin for a while, who reached up from his bed, grabbed

roughly at her face and rubbed at her chin and cheeks, checking for facial hair; evidence of maleness.

Jodie, wide-eyed, shakes her head: an apology. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not right now?” Lorna says, rubbing at the fine hairs herself to dispel the sensation. “I’m fine. Really. I’m fine.” Repetition helps. She forces a smile. “I grew out a bit of beard because I want to see Stephanie’s electrolysis consultant today.” She shrugs, sheepish. “Laser didn’t get everything, and I’ve been meaning to get finished off for ages...”

“...and if Dorley’s going to pay, why not take advantage?” Jodie finishes.

“Exactly! It’s not too noticeable, is it?”

“No. I had to lift up your hair to see it. You’re fine. After your consultation, if you want to get rid of it, you can come back up here. I have clean razorblades and stuff, and I’m done with my lectures at eleven.”

“Thanks, Jodie,” Lorna says, and Jodie beams at her and starts dabbing spots of foundation around Lorna’s chin.

“I can avoid the whole area, if you’d like.”

“It’s fine,” Lorna says firmly. “I’m expecting it now. I’ll be fine.” Jodie nods, and Lorna puts her thoughts back together. “I was talking about community, right? And why it’s worth it. And I think it’s because community *is* safety, Jodie. Your question’s backwards: it shouldn’t be, ‘Is community worth the risk of being yourself?’; it should be, ‘Can you safely be yourself *without* community?’ If that makes sense? Okay, so, I’m thinking aloud here, but Dorley Hall, the programme, it’s failed you. All of you! It’s all set up to make cis-like women out of you, to push you out into the world to live as cis women, to pretend that the first two decades of your life never happened. And you can live that way, I’m sure — I don’t doubt there are reams of success stories — but, Jodie, it hasn’t escaped my notice that a *lot* of graduates still live here.” It had been quite startling, when Vicky was first going through the

names of the people she might run into, just how many women and nonbinary people still orbited Dorley Hall well into their thirties. “They still live here, or they come back here a lot, and they spend most or all of their time around other graduates. And that’s not a criticism of *them!* But I think it’s a criticism of the process. Because it’s not just that Dorley girls are the only ones who understand Dorley girls; it’s that the understanding keeps you all safe!” Lorna nods to herself. She likes sorting through her thoughts like this, aloud and preferably with an audience, even if Vicky sometimes has to banish her up to the bedroom when she’s working on an essay. Jodie steadies her head with a hand, and Lorna remembers she’s not supposed to be moving. She continues, as Jodie sponges makeup around her jaw and neck. “Dorley Hall’s like the trans community in microcosm. You’re a big found family — kidnapped family, I suppose — and you all look out for each other and instinctively understand each other’s needs and tell terrible jokes that only make sense inside these walls.” Jodie bites her lip, and nods. “And everyone comes back here because *here’s* the only place where they can have that. But. *But.* If you come out as trans, if you embrace it, if you make it your, uh—” Lorna waves a hand, forgetting the terminology.

“—New Personal History—”

“—New Personal History, thank you, then you can *still have that* when you leave Dorley. We, the great and intermingled and *heavily* dysfunctional LGBTQIA-plus community, we have our *own* shit jokes and our *own* support networks, and we *will* look out for you, just like your Sisters do. Yeah, we’re far from perfect and we have a fresh bout of infighting every other Wednesday, but we’re *out there*, Jodie. Dorley Hall doesn’t *have* to be the only place that understands you.”

“But I *could* still be cis,” Jodie says, slowly and uncertainly. “Not cis like Victoria or Paige, where they hate it, but cis like Julia and Yasmin. You know them? They’re just down the corridor — only not right now; right now they’re at work — and they’re cis in the world, but to each other they’re

just... Julia and Yasmin. They don't have to pretend with each other like Victoria did with you, and they get the benefits of being, you know, *cis*."

"But you don't *want* to do that, because..." Lorna says, and pauses for a moment as she decides exactly how she wants to continue. "Because! Jodie, you're *not* cis! None of the people here are! And the more I learn about you, the more of you I meet, the clearer it becomes to me that you *have* trans experiences. Trans *lives*. It doesn't matter that you wouldn't have chosen transition on your own; if you were a seed, like you said, or a pine cone, or a— a— a fucking *potato*! It doesn't even matter that you pass well enough that you *can* fake being cis! Because this country — fuck, most of the fucking *world*, Jodie — imposes from top to bottom a gendered system on bodies and lives that are *incredibly* diverse, and when you go out there you're going to have to survive in compliance with it. You're going to have to live in a world premised on an assumption that's *hilariously* false, that takes as a foundational component the belief that *man* and *woman* are two simple and separate categories with no crossover, no complication, no nuance, no third or fourth or four-thousandth option... You're going to have to exist inside that system just to earn money, to pay rent, to *live*, and that's before you even think about actual personal fulfilment! And facing all that down alone is *hard*, Jodie, it's so fucking hard, because when you've seen the eighth and ninth and tenth colours of the rainbow, you can't go back. You *need* the community, because we create little bubbles of reality in the mad, structured chaos of the cis world; places where you can exist as yourself, people around whom you don't have to keep up the act. And we're— we're—" And Lorna stops, snorting as she tries to hold in a laugh and not upset Jodie's steady hand, keeping herself as still as she can while her shoulders shake. "Sorry," she continues, once she's got herself under control. "I just realised I dropped into a speech I wrote a few months back. Imprinted on my brain, you know? You get my point, though, I think. Community is safety, but it's more than that. It's a place, and it's a conceptual space, *and* it's a huge

group of people who are downright *excited* for you to be yourself, no matter how weird and delightful that is, and who will help you live that way. We've housed people; we've funded surgeries; we've provided guidance and roadmaps and medication and— and fucking *love*, Jodie. When I say I wouldn't be cis, even if it meant no-one would treat me weird in the street any more, even if it meant better employment prospects or not bracing for a heart attack whenever I open Twitter, it's *because* I can't imagine giving up the community. Giving up the knowledge that there's more to life than cis gender mythology. Giving up all those extra colours in the rainbow. I love being trans, Jodie, because it's *me* and because it's *real*. I love it! And I think you will, too."

Jodie wants her to present her lips to be painted, so Lorna does so, consenting to be silenced. Jodie dabs at her, still frowning, in concentration and contemplation.

"I think you're right," Jodie says after a little while. "Um, do *this*?" She pops her lips, and Lorna copies her. Jodie nods again, smiling, and starts putting things away as she talks. "I think you're absolutely right. God, Lorna, you don't *know* how long I've been *obsessing* over this! And I've bugged Donna about it and Tabitha and the handful of other grads who are officially trans and they were just like—" she lowers her voice a little, dropping into an impression of someone Lorna can't identify, "—'Oh, it's easy, Jodie, it's just better this way,' which was, you know, reassuring but not actually *helpful*, and I suppose I could have pressed harder and got into an actual *conversation* about it but I've caused Donna enough trouble over the years and Tabitha's so *busy*, and kind of intimidatingly pretty, actually, like, *God*, have you *met* her? I hate that she's straight, shit. *Unfair*. But, yes, wow, *Lorna!* I've been chewing over this for *so long* and it's like you just reached into my head and pulled out all my thoughts and picked them apart for the good ones and threw the rest away because, shit, yes, I'm going to do it."

Lorna blinks. "You're...?"

“Lean back?” Jodie says, and Lorna, confused, obeys; Jodie douses her in fixing spray. “I’m going to be a trans woman. Legally. Paperwork-ly. I’ve decided. And I always wondered, if I do decide to get bottom surgery one day, but I go trans on my NPH now, will I regret being out? And I think, now, actually, that I won’t. Although I also, y’know, think that I won’t get bottom surgery. You know?”

Lorna sorts through her words for the salient ones. “You’re going to be a trans woman?” she says. “That’s great! Jodie—!”

She’s interrupted by a raised finger. Jodie’s digging in her bag for her phone, and when she finds it she places it on the dresser and dials out, on speaker.

“Hi,” an unfamiliar soprano voice says, picking up after just two rings. “Everything okay, Jo?”

Jodie, suddenly overcome with excitement, seems unable to speak. Lorna prods her, unblocks her, and it all comes out at once. “I’m ready, Donna. I’m ready to do my NPH! I’ve been thinking and talking and I’ve decided and, Donna, I’m going to be trans. I’m keeping it and I’m going to be *trans*, Donna!”

There’s a moment of silence, and then Donna replies, “Really? Seriously?”

“Yep!”

“*Fuck* yes, Jodie! Welcome to the winning team. What tipped you over?”

“Remember I told you about Vicky’s girlfriend, Lorna? She’s here, and she talked me through it. She helped me make up my mind.”

“God. I’m going to buy that girl a present.”

“She can hear you, Donna.”

“Hi,” Lorna says, hesitant.

“Oh! Hi, Lorna! I’m going to buy you a motherfucking *present!* Well done! Jo, I have to get back to work, but I’ll drop by tonight and we can go over everything, okay?”

“Sounds great,” Jodie says.

“Proud of you, sweetie.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too,” Donna says, and the line clicks as she hangs up. Lorna, for a moment, envies the connection the two of them seem to have. What was that about found families?

Jodie turns back to Lorna with a huge smile on her face, and almost tackle-hugs her, leaning back at the last moment so she doesn't mess up the makeup job. “Thank you,” she whispers, and kisses Lorna behind the ear. “God,” she says, sitting back, curling her legs up under herself and spinning from side to side on her chair, “there are *so* many people I can't *wait* to tell!” She squeals. “I can come out on stream!”

“That's really something it's okay to do?” Lorna asks.

Jodie flaps a dismissive hand. “Oh, yes. Donna's been hoping I'd jump this way. She'll have everything ready, and we can have preliminary documents done by the end of the week, probably.”

“How does that even work?”

She shrugs. “Don't know, actually. Never really been all that interested in the mechanical side of things, you know? I think we do birth certificates from hospitals that have since been demolished, or something? Paper-only records, electronic filing mislaid, et cetera. Donna says the machinery of the British state is like all other machines made in Britain: unreliable and full of holes.” She stops fidgeting on her chair for a second and reaches out for Lorna's hand. “You think it's okay for me to do this, right? To be trans? Like, specifically a trans woman? I'm not appropriating anything?”

Lorna laughs, and pats her hand. “Jodie, we've known each other for about an hour, and we've already talked about *my* beard hairs and *your* penis. You're definitely trans; no-one overshares like us.”

Jodie giggles, and takes in and lets out a lungful of air, blowing her hair out of her face and leaning back on her chair. “God,” she says. “Weight off my *mind*.” She flips her phone screen-side up on the dresser and pouts at it. “Ugh. Why can’t it be lunchtime already?”

“Hungry?”

“It’s when my partner gets out of lectures. I don’t know if you know xem? We do the stream together.”

“Oh, yeah,” Lorna says, concentrating. “Connor, yes? With the big vampire teeth.”

“Xe’s known I’m trans since we first met,” Jodie says. She blushes. “I, um, sort of broke the rules to tell xem, but I told xem I was still deciding if I wanted to be stealth, and xe said my secret was safe with xem. Actually... You know what? I’m going to wait until Friday night. We don’t stream until Saturday, and on Friday, Connor’s making us dinner, so I’ll make it into an event.” She giggles. “A night to remember. *God*, I’m so excited to be open. Really open. No more existential crises for me, at least until we can decide whether to use my stored sperm.”

Lorna can’t help but look away.

“Oh,” Jodie says, “sorry. Sore point?”

“A little. I couldn’t afford to get any stored.” Lorna chews on her cheek, thinking. “Actually, I guess, maybe I could, now?”

Jodie nods vigorously. “Yep. We’d pay for it. Ask Auntie MILF.”

Lorna coughs. ““Auntie MILF”?”

“Just my little revenge,” Jodie says, grinning. “I called her a MILF in my first year and got an earful and a week in the cells. But now that I’m a girl... She likes us to be a little rebellious.”

Lorna cross-references that assertion with the thing about being put in the cells for a week. “She... likes it when you call

her a MILF?”

“She pretends she hates it. But I’ve known her a while now. Beatrice angry and Beatrice *pretending* to be angry are very different. Donna says she likes being busted out of the role she plays, that she mainly puts it on to help the first and second years acclimate, and to remind the rest of us to play *our* roles.”

“God,” Lorna says, “this place is *so* weird.”

“I know. We’re the mice who chased off the scientists, and now *we* control the maze. But the street mice say we’re kind of odd. Come on!” Jodie grabs at Lorna’s hand, pulling her up from the chair. “Let’s go back down to the kitchen; I want to tell Tabitha.”

“Tabitha?” Lorna says, smoothing down her borrowed clothes. Jodie’s mentioned her a few times; Lorna’s blanked on the name each time.

“I thought you met her? Black, about your height, somewhere in her thirties, tragic love life? *Crazy pretty?*”

“Oh,” Lorna says, stretching the vowel as realisation dawns, “Tabby. Yes, I met her.” The one whose ex-boyfriends are all ex-girlfriends, Vick said. Lorna had a thought about that...

“She’s a darling. Now come on!”

Lorna, closer to the mirror, peers at the makeup Jodie applied: heavy eyeliner, dark lipstick, and contouring — something Lorna never learned how to do. “You’ve made me look a *little* bit goth, haven’t you?”

“I think it suits you!”

“You know what?” she says, grabbing her bag from the bed and following an ecstatic Jodie out of the room. “I think it suits me, too.”

* * *

Like everything else down here, the dining room's gotten a little more plush since the more violent boys had their batteries taken out and got put away in their boxes. Metal cutlery's still a rare treat, but the chairs have sprouted cushions, the lights have dimmed and warmed from their prior harsh blue-white, and a few plants have appeared on the sideboard; plastic, Aaron assumes, and shudders to think what Declan might have achieved with access to a ceramic pot, fake dirt, and some fake leaves. Breakfast these days has also been upgraded, and now includes a choice of cereals, toast with butter and Marmite, fruit, and orange juice. Even the coffee tastes better.

Just a shame Stef isn't around to eat with him this morning.

No-one is, actually. No Stef, no Indira. Edy, sitting with Adam in the common room and comforting him after his morning cry — or possibly his morning tantrum; the soundproofing between rooms is pretty good, and all Aaron can see is the doubled-over Adam's shaking back — is keeping a discreet half-eye on him, and brought him coffee when he first stumbled in, but aside from her he's had no human contact since bidding Stef goodnight. Martin, may his personality rest in peace, is probably knocking around somewhere, although Aaron's long since given up keeping track of him, ever since it became clear that he wasn't going to do or become anything interesting any time soon.

Where *is* Stefan? Since Aaron finally emerged from his room they've spent a lot of time together, enough time that Aaron's having a hard time not thinking about how close they've gotten. But it's only natural that they'd intensify their friendship, right? The two of them are basically the only sane ones *left*, what with the drunk and the church boy taking turns being the least functional person in any given room, the interchangeable violence twins Ollie and Raph rotting away in

the cells — with one of them, according to Stef, smacking himself around for reasons and gratifications Aaron can't fucking begin to imagine — and Will... Will asking for Stef, unburdening himself like he's a sensitive boy with real feelings and a real human heart inside his wooden body, despite being the one who slammed Maria's head into the fucking *floor*.

Jesus, this place.

Stef, though. Yes, it's normal and natural that they should be so close, but he finds himself thinking about Stef when he's not around, and *that's* crossing a line, surely? He shouldn't look forward to seeing another guy quite so much, right?

Hah; if Stef can even be thought of as 'another guy' any more. Aaron's seen him with little bits of makeup on a few times now, when he hasn't washed it all off properly. Every time, he wants to grab him, drag him away from Pippa and the others, shut him away in his room and provide for him a space where he can be a fucking man for a while, away from the pervasive and pernicious influence of the sponsors, of his so-called sister.

His sister. Stef's been calling her that. And he means it! Aaron knows he does because he made fun of him and Stef, very seriously, doubled down. He had to agree to be nice to her, to treat her the way he'd treat Stef's *actual* sister, but, if he's honest, he only put up a fight for the look of the thing. Because what's the point of being rude to any of them, anyway? What does it get him? A moment's satisfaction, which down here goes about as far as he can spit. And the few times he's really pulled it out, when he's dug deep into the worst things he can think of and tried actually to hurt one of the girls for what they're doing to him, it's reminded him of before, of the faces of the women who *didn't* deserve it, so much so that it's ruined the simple joy of calling his captor a bitch.

And what would *those* women think, anyway? The women he persistently harassed? If they knew the little shit who

persisted in broadcasting his dick at them had been locked in a basement for months, that he was on course to have his fucking balls removed? Would they care? Would they call the police?

He rolls his eyes and shovels another plastic spoonful of Coco Pops into his mouth. No. Only two people have ever gone to bat for him: Stef, who is stuck down here with him, and Elizabeth, who no doubt would react with disgust if she found out about the things he did after she left.

So he'll stop trying to antagonise the sponsors, because it gains him nothing. And he'll be a little nicer to Pippa if Stef asks it of him, because it costs him nothing. Pippa's cute, anyway, if a little sharp-featured. Aaron likes his girls a little softer, like—

No. Cut that thought *right* the fuck there. Stef's his *friend*. Nothing more.

Where the hell is Indira?

He's working on his coffee when he gets his answer: Maria walks carefully into the room and sits down at the table opposite him, and he has to lock his legs to stop himself from jumping up and giving her a hug. She's okay! Yes, Stef said she was, Indira said she was, and so did Pippa and Monica and Jane and Harmony and Ella and Edy and everyone else he's not-so-subtly asked about her, but knowing it is one thing, seeing it quite another. Lies are hardly unusual here.

"Hi, Aaron," she says.

"Maria! You're back!" He looks around the room, hunching his shoulders suddenly, as if Indira might jump out from behind a chair or a cereal box or a plastic potted plant and drag him off to be tubed.

"I'm back. But you'll have to be gentle with me." She's talking quietly, without the edge he remembers, and he nods almost unconsciously. "I'm still sensitive sometimes," she says, tapping the side of her head, where the flesh is discoloured and still healing, and Aaron blinks as the memory

of her hitting the floor returns in technicolour. He hadn't exactly behaved well that day. He winces, remembering shouting for the guard guys to help him; *he* should have been helping *her*... Like Stef did. "And I still get dizzy occasionally," she continues, directing a slightly puzzled frown at him, like she can see his thoughts, "but that does *not* —" she points at him, "—comprise an invitation to try anything funny, Aaron, should you catch me in a moment of weakness."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he says quickly. "Seriously. Where would I even go? And I don't want to *hurt* you," he adds, annoyed with himself for how true that is, "I just, you know..."

"Consider it a test," Maria says, dropping her finger and smiling. "I am unpleasantly vulnerable at the moment. If you can be around me without exploiting that, I'll consider relaxing more of the restrictions on you. You'd have more freedoms."

"Like Stefan?"

"Like Steph." Maria softens the *f*, somehow. "Although probably not as many. She's— he's been cooperative for longer." She realises Aaron's noticed the pronoun slip, and winces.

"That's his reward for cooperating, then?" he says, allowing a little venom into his voice, leaning into Maria's error. "He gets girled more quickly?"

"Bluntly?" Maria says. "Yes. You both know what's happening here, Aaron. Warts and all." She gives him a second to acknowledge that yes, in fact, he *does* know about the estrogen and the tits and the impending mutilation, that he hasn't somehow forgotten, or forfeited his intellect entirely, like Martin. "So, just the same as Steph, you have a choice: are you going to make it harder for yourself, or easier? Indira will have shown you the lengths we're willing to go to."

He nods. “When I refused to eat,” he says, keeping his voice controlled, “she played along for a while, acted like it was all a game, and then, before I knew it, it was a day since I’d had anything and she was threatening to strap me down and feed me forcibly. I, uh, didn’t pick that option.”

“We’re serious about this,” Maria says, nodding, satisfied with Indira’s manipulation. “And that is the least of what we will do if you are uncooperative. The most is Declan.”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t need to drop his name. He’s fish food, I know.”

“So?” Maria says, leaning her chin on her hand and smiling. Aaron hates how pretty she is, how much he wants to please her, how glad he is that she’s okay.

“So what?” Aaron says, projecting annoyance.

“Are you going to make it harder for yourself, or easier?”

“I’ll take option three.”

“Aaron,” Maria says, frowning at him.

“No, listen. I know the choices. And I can *see* the consequences. Martin’s unpersoned himself; Adam’s cried so much I don’t know how he hasn’t shrivelled up like a grape from dehydration; the psycho gang are all in literal solitary confinement—”

“They have entertainment,” Maria interrupts. “And visits. It’s *not* literal solitary confinement.”

“Hey!” Aaron raises a finger. “You got to list all *my* crimes without interruption, didn’t you?” She looks at him. “Okay, marginal interruption.” She looks at him. “Okay! But you still had tasers! Just... just let me finish, okay?” She nods, and he sips lukewarm coffee to moisten his throat. “I get it. I understand the limited room I have to work with. I fight back, I get put in what is, whatever you say, *basically* solitary confinement. Solitary confinement with iPads, or whatever. I fight back too much, I end up like Declan. And I’m not stupid, no matter what you all think of me, so—”

“—no-one thinks you’re stupid—”

“—*so* I’m not going to do anything that restricts me further. But I have a loop, Maria. I have a friend, and I have meagre entertainment, and I have the scraps of my pride. I’m not going to risk all that. And, yes, I *know* Stef has accepted what you’re doing. *He*—” and he leans nastily on the pronoun, to make a point, “—explained to me how he’s trolley problem’d the whole thing out, come to the conclusion that the best thing for him, personally, is to embrace it, to treat Pippa like his fucking sister, to put on makeup and act *different* and — and *change* from the man I knew... and I hate to watch it. I hate that he seems to be happier. And I understand that I’m supposed to be like him, to see him thrive and decide to follow in his footsteps, okay? It’s so obvious, you might as well have put it up on the fucking screen. But I’m not going to. I’m not ready. I’ll never be ready. And I told him, I can see how it might work for him, but it can’t work for me. I can’t just accept *this*.” He wants to pull at the fabric of his hoodie, to tent it out in the appropriate places and accentuate his point, but he doesn’t; it might unbalance his DIY bra. He settles for flapping his fingers at his chest. “That’s... that’s what I told him.”

“You also told him you hate yourself,” Maria says. It’s not an accusation. More like an acknowledgement. He can see the compassion on her face and it makes him want to run. Into the fucking wall, like Ollie. “You said you imagined your future self, and you hated him.”

“You watched the videos, did you?” Aaron spits. “Have a bit of reality show fun?”

Maria nods. “Not fun. But yes, I watched the videos. We talk about you, you know. Up there. And the girls who hated you at first, who thought you were — and I’m sorry to be rude — a worthless piece of shit... some of them are rooting for you now.”

“They’re rooting for me? To become a fucking *girl*?”

“To *change*,” Maria says, leaning forward. “To throw aside the abusive man you used to be, and the even worse man you *know* you were going to become. And you’ve changed a lot already. You see that, don’t you?” Aaron takes the fucking fifth. “I remember the boy who came here. He was flippant, arrogant, actively ran away from his feelings—”

“Maria, I want to run away *right now!* That’s *all* I want! I have *dreams*, I have *fantasies* about waking up and finding all of you unconscious or something, because Will got out, or someone pumped the building full of knock-out gas, or aliens invaded or what-the-fuck-ever, and all the doors are open, and I walk up those fucking stairs like it’s the end of the movie! I want to get out of here, Maria! I want to go back to my *life!*”

“Do you? Do you *really*? Now you’ve seen yourself clearly for the first time — and I *know* you have, because I know *you*, Aaron — do you think you could go back out there? You know what’ll happen. Maybe you’ll report us, sure, and maybe some or all of us get arrested, and maybe Steph does, too, for cooperating with us—” no, no, do *not* play the Stef card that way, “—but then you’ll be in the same position you were in before. *Same* family who don’t give a shit about you. *Same* empty life. *Same* crappy future everyone’s trying to shoehorn you into. The man with a bit of money in a *very* smart suit. And slowly, surely, your old habits will come back.” She can’t know this. Just because he fears it, because he sees it when he looks past the changeling in the mirror into the eyes that are still his, that still belong to the boy who did those things, doesn’t make it true. “Only it’ll be worse, this time, because you’ll *see* yourself doing it, and you’ll hate yourself for it. You’ll push against the temptation but you don’t know how to be anyone else, Aaron; you haven’t learned *how* yet, so eventually you’ll give in, and that will be *it*.” He remembers it, sees it, feels it in the pulse hammering in his palms: the hundredth hour alone in a room barely any more homely than his hole down here, only from there he can look out of the window and *see* all the people living lives they want to live, being the people they want to be, and *how dare they*... “Before

you know it you'll be that piece of shit guy again, hurting women because you're bored and lonely and borderline suicidal and you hate yourself. Is that what you want to run back to?"

"Stop, Maria," he whispers. "Please?"

"All right," she says. "I'll stop. I'm not here to make you miserable, believe it or not. I'm here to help you."

He sniffs. It's getting hard to talk. "You're helping me? By making me into a *girl*?"

"You have to break the cycle, Aaron." She raises both hands like she's holding a thin piece of wood, and mimes snapping it. "You have to break free. And you can't do it on your own. And you can't do it and remain as you are."

"How do you even know that'll *work*?"

"Because it has to. Because I'm not throwing you back out there to die."

"I won't."

"You'll die," she says, quietly, evenly, "or you'll wish you were dead."

He only has so many denials in him, and he has nothing useful to say in response. Whatever. Whether she's right or wrong, she has the keys to all the locks. So whatever.

Why *does* she care?

What is there, under all this, to care about?

"Aaron," she says, and he looks up, realising she's said his name a few times, that he went somewhere for a while. "Hey."

"Hi," he says.

"You okay?"

He shrugs, smiling. "I'm here, aren't I? Of course I'm not okay."

She nods, and pushes up from her seat. "Finish your breakfast. I'll be in the common room when you're done. We

have a group activity planned.”

“Will Stefan be there?”

“Steph is on a different schedule today. Don’t worry; you’ll see each other later.”

“Wait,” he says, before she can leave. “About Stef... He told me about Will. About going to see him. Going to see him in his *cell*. Why would you risk that?”

Maria leans against the wall, regards him for a moment before she answers. “There was no risk. Will was cuffed in place, and we gave Steph a taser. Part of Will’s rehabilitation is going to involve visits, now and then, if we can persuade people to make them.”

“Okay, fine,” he allows, “just *not* Stef. Not ever again.”

“You’re not the only one who needs Steph, okay? Will is —”

He hits the table hard enough to hurt his hand. “*Fuck* Will! Don’t risk Stef’s safety again! If you must use him, if absolutely no-one else will do, then send someone with him, keep him on the other side of the cell door, I don’t know, just *be more careful*.” Maria’s still watching him, her expression controlled. “He’s my friend, okay? He *chooses* to be my friend. Even after all the shit you put in his head about me — which, yes, I know, is all true, don’t even say it — he still wants to be my friend, and you know how many people I can say that about? One. Him. I had one other good friend, and she never really knew me, and she left, anyway. Stefan stayed. So take better care of him, okay? Or I really will make trouble.”

She smiles, steps forward, reaches down and takes the hand he used to hit the table. He goes limp, unwilling to trust himself, and she holds it, massages the part that hurts. “We’ll be careful, Aaron,” she whispers, and lets him go. She pauses at the door. “We won’t risk Steph. We won’t risk any of you. You’re *all* important to us. That’s what you need to understand.” She smiles. “Oh, and we can get you a sports bra,” she says. “So you don’t have to improvise.”

Fuck. She noticed. Idiot; she always notices things. “No thanks,” he says, as smoothly as he can.

“You did ask for one, once.”

Does she have an encyclopaedic memory, or does she just rewatch old surveillance videos for fun? “That was a *joke*. A bad one.”

She shrugs. “Not one of your best, I agree. You’re sure?”

“I’m fine the way I am,” he says.

“Suit yourself,” she says, and then she’s gone, striding into the common room to link up with Edy, leaving him alone with the cold dregs of his coffee.

* * *

Breakfast in the kitchen’s always nicer than breakfast downstairs. Actual sunlight, for one thing; no boys, for another. She hopes Aaron isn’t too lonely, though, eating breakfast alone. Maybe Maria’s return will do something for that; Stef cheered with the rest of them when Maria came through, announced her return to work, stole a croissant from a complaining Monica’s plate, and threw up V signs on her way down to the basement. She wonders how the reunion’s going. Aaron definitely missed her, and not just because Indira drove him up the wall; he’s gotten... softer, over the last week or so. He’s still not okay with what’s happening — he might never be, despite what every sponsor claims — but he’s dealing with it better. He’s changed.

It was horrible, when Monica put Aaron’s abuses up there on the television for all — for Stef — to see, and sometimes she looks at him and he looks back at her and she can almost see him thinking about it. He’s always wondering what she

sees in him, why she chooses to come back to him every day, why she pursued his friendship. She can see the shame written all over him. Christine told her that shame is one of the sponsors' most powerful tools, particularly for certain types of people, and the way she avoided her eyes suggested to Stef that Indira leaned hard on it, when it came to finding Christine in the remains of her former self.

She really hopes he isn't too lonely, even with Maria to keep him company.

God. Croissants! They don't get pastries downstairs, but the main kitchen appears to have a never-ending supply. This morning's are apparently courtesy of Aisha, a second year with a passion for baking, and her sponsor, Charlie, who, according to Pippa, supervises Aisha's baking from a suitably safe distance. Stef doesn't get why that's funny, but some of the other sponsors laugh, and Pippa leans over with her phone and another croissant to show her a video of Aisha treating cake batter as if it personally wronged her. That the final result looks impeccable seems to Stef to contravene the laws of physics.

When Lorna, Vicky and Jodie return, stumbling through the doors in a congenial huddle, Stef, trying to be a welcoming presence, catches Lorna's eye and smiles at her; Lorna's returning smile, though, has none of the hesitation it had the last time they met, and Stef wonders what's turned her around on this place. Surely not *just* the offer of free surgery.

Stef's smile turns into a laugh as she remembers how annoyed Christine was when Pippa spoiled the surprise that she'd be seeing the surgeon today as well as the electrologist. "That's not the kind of thing you just spring on people, Christine!" Pippa had said, and then dissolved into giggles as the whole room collectively and simultaneously pointed out to her that, at Dorley, it is *exactly* the kind of thing they just spring on people.

Jodie's announcement — that she's decided to be a trans woman, officially — prompts hugs and congratulations from

the table, a high five from Tabby, and sincere thanks from Indira, who claims that with Christine now the last holdout she'll *have* to sign her NPH before too long, and then Indira's mother finally can boast to her friends of her daughter's beloved almost-sister, who is sweet and kind and beautiful, and who swept all the viruses off her computer and set her up with free movie streaming.

"Hey," Lorna says, settling down at the table with a cup of coffee and leaning over to Tabby, "I heard you were single, and looking?"

"Oh," Tabby says, clutching her croissant defensively, "I'm, um, flattered, but I'm—"

"I don't mean for me!" Lorna says quickly. "I just, I was told that, uh, you've been having some trouble with, um..."

"Oh, God." Tabby buries her head in her hands. "Does *everyone* know? Has someone been putting up posters on the corkboards? Was there an announcement on the uni website?"

"Vicky told me," Lorna says, as Indira muffles her laughter.

"I've been helping her get up to speed about everyone," Vicky says, from her position by the door. "I made a spreadsheet," she adds, blushing.

"What's Tabby under?" Indira says. "Expert egg cracker?"

"Indira Chetry," Tabby says, "I will bury my croissant in your hair if you don't zip it right now."

"So," Lorna says, "I know someone. He's thirty-four, single, and he could *not* be more of a guy. And I don't mean that in a bad way; I mean that he is absolutely, definitely, no doubt in the *world* a guy."

"You can't know that," Tabby says gloomily.

"I can. He went to a *lot* of trouble to be a guy."

"Oh," Tabby says, perking up. "*Oh!* Fuck. Yes. Set us up. I promise I know how to be super normal, not like all these

other weird bitches.”

“Hey!” Indira says. “I’m normal!”

Tabby wordlessly points to Indira’s coffee mug, which says *WORLD’S BEST KIDNAPPER* on the side. Indira sticks her tongue out.

“Oh,” Tabby says, “is he okay dating T4T?”

“You’re trans *and* out, right?” Lorna asks. “He won’t want to deal with stealth shit.”

Tabby nods. “First one here to try it. Got my Gender Recognition Certificate and everything. Government registered trans woman.”

Lorna and Tabby settle down together to swap details, and Lorna starts telling her about her friend, pausing only to receive from Vicky, who has to go to lectures, a kiss that lasts long enough to make Stef feel a little uncomfortable. At the mention of lectures, Pippa, who’s been complaining all morning about her workload, groans and leans back in her chair.

“Three lectures today, Stef,” she says, as Stef hugs her. “Three! *And* a workshop. Why did I go to university, again?”

“Because,” Indira says, picking up coffee mugs and pastry plates to wash them, “deep down, you really, really wanted to be captured and feminised.”

“That wasn’t in the prospectus,” Pippa mumbles, and rests her head on Stef’s shoulder.

* * *

“Fuck, that’s actually terrifying.”

It's Lorna's first time seeing the basement entrance up close, and it's not making a more positive impression than when she saw it, briefly, from the other side of the kitchen, on her first visit to Dorley Hall. An extrusion of concrete supports surrounding a metal door, it's both uglier and more crude than she remembers, and creates an impression that anyone stepping through might not ever emerge again. And Stephanie lives down below, almost all the time? Shit.

"Pippa says they can hide it," Stephanie says, "in case the authorities ever visit." She's leaning against the closest table, watching Lorna with an unavoidably amused expression on her face. "See those bookcases? They move, but they're not on wheels, because that leaves marks in the wood; there's a metal support behind them, set into the wall, and at the push of a button they just sort of—" She mimes two enormous bookcases arcing up and along the walls and back down again, meeting in the middle. The mental image is amusing, and Stephanie rolls her eyes at Lorna's laughter. "It's not that quick. Takes about two minutes, I think. You can see the guide rails in the concrete, look."

Lorna looks. "That's fucking wild, Stephanie."

"Right? I kinda wanna see it."

Indira returns from the kitchen with two thermoses and escorts them both down, through the horrible concrete arch and into the first basement. It's surprisingly cool; Lorna expected the underground areas to be warmer — possibly because she can't get the *gates of hell* imagery out of her mind — but a light breeze flows over their heads, carrying dust motes through the spotlights. She reaches up and feels it tickle her fingers.

"Air con," Indira says. "We don't want the boys to *boil*, do we?"

Lorna's still working on her response when Stephanie starts making smothered gasps, and she turns around to see the girl leaning against the wall, hands over her mouth, making apologetic eyes at Lorna.

“Sorry,” she says, when she gets her breath back. “It just hit me: *cool and unusual punishment.*”

Indira snorts. “You’ve been here too long, Steph,” she says.

“No arguments there,” Stephanie says, and massages her chest.

Indira’s got it into her head that Lorna will benefit from a tour of the facilities, so she gets dragged around the first floor basement and witnesses all the amenities: a security room with more computers than she can quickly count, a comfortable-looking couch and table arrangement, and two girls Lorna doesn’t know but who Stephanie peels off to talk to; a rec room, done up with wallpaper and softer lighting, more couches, and a TV hooked up to a battered laptop and a couple of games consoles; a break room and bathroom for the PMC soldiers, with its own stairs up to the back rooms on the ground floor and an access door to the rest of the basement that doesn’t even unlock unless a sponsor hits the panic button; various storerooms, unused spaces, and a small bathroom with shower facilities; and, finally, the medical area.

“Waiting room,” Indira says, guiding Lorna in, sitting her down on one of the ubiquitous couches, and pointing at other doors leading off, “surgical rooms, recovery rooms, storerooms, and other stuff that’s yet to be developed. We don’t do any actual surgery here, yet, beyond the orchis, but we’re slowly getting set up for it. Don’t ever let anyone tell you setting up a full surgical suite is easy.”

“The, uh, orchis?” Lorna says, before realising: oh, yeah, the nonconsensual surgery. The mutilation. It happens here. Fucking hell. “There’s none scheduled for today, I hope?” she adds, attempting to sound light and failing.

“No,” Indira says. “Not for a couple of months yet, unless Steph wants to get hers done before the rush.” She pulls up a plush stool and sits, cross-legged and leaning forward, and Lorna feels suddenly like a kid at summer camp, about to be lectured on safety procedures by the teenager in charge. “I

know it makes you uncomfortable. I'm not going to give you the speech about how necessary it is. I just want to remind you that I had *mine* done here, too, and I didn't ask for it."

"Would you want to undo it, if you could?" Lorna asks. She knows the answer — all the Dorley girls seem to feel the same way — but asking feels like an obligation.

"No," Indira says, and smiles. "In fact, I'd ask why they didn't do it sooner. I'm told you know my mum."

"Oh," Lorna says, wrong-footed and stumbling to keep up, "yes, uh, I don't really *know* her, not as a friend, but we've been to protests together. Chatted a few times, you know."

"I'm surprised we never ran into each other," Indira says. "Although I suppose this place does keep me busy," she adds, thoughtful. "And I've been spending a *lot* of time with Hasan..."

"Hasan?"

"My boyfriend." Her smile turns wistful. "A childhood friend, actually. He's... he's wonderful, Lorna."

"What does he know? About you, I mean."

Indira doesn't seem to mind the question. "He thinks I ran away, came here to finish my education, and finally contacted my family again when I felt ready. He doesn't know what we do here. He knows I'm trans, though, obviously; he knew me when I was a kid."

Lorna nods slowly. "Christine said you think of yourself as a trans woman. She said you're very serious about it."

"I am. I may not have come to it by the same path as you, but—"

"No, no, I get it," Lorna says, holding up surrendering hands. "After Vicky — and now Jodie — I can't possibly dispute it. Actually, it was Christine who made up my mind on that front."

“About that,” Indira says. “About what you said to my Christine...”

“I know. I was awful to her. I apologised. To her. *A lot.*”

“Yes,” Indira says, waving a hand irritably, “I’m aware. If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t have let you in the building. I would have blocked your access to surgeries and whatever else you think you’re going to get out of us and I would have found a way to make your life hell.”

It takes Lorna a second to come up with something to say. “What?” she manages, eventually.

“I know you have it in you to ruin us, if you choose,” Indira continues, “and *you* know very well that we can ruin you back, ten times harder, before you get the chance to do anything.” She’s talking levelly, like she’s dictating a shopping list. “But I don’t care about that. I care about Christine. I love the others, too — all of them are my Sisters — but Christine is my *sister*. And I will defend her like *family*. You hurt her *bad*, Lorna, with your little speech, and I know you think you made it all better, but Paige told me she’s been crying at night again, like she used to, and—”

“Oh, fuck, I’m—”

“Do *not* apologise to me!” Indira snaps, letting out all the fury she’d been keeping contained. “Yes, you helped draw something out of her that needed to come out. She’s needed to stop hiding from who she used to be for a long time. But it’s a *process*, Lorna. It’s something that needed to happen *carefully* and over time and *you*—” she points at Lorna, who jumps, “—yanked the plaster off all at once. Irresponsible. Don’t forget, she’s been in transition for just over two years and she’s identified as a woman for even less time than that; she needs to be cared for, not... assaulted. Now, she’s coping. She’s dealing. Because she has Paige, and she has me, and she has all her Sisters, and she’s surrounded by people who love her. But you need to know how close you came to lighting a bomb, Lorna, because if you’re going to be here, around *our* girls, and especially around girls who have yet to graduate, you need

to learn to think before you speak. *Say you understand and agree.*”

“I do. Fuck. I understand and agree. Indira, I’m— I didn’t mean it. I was frightened and confused and— and—”

“We’re a rehabilitation facility.” Indira’s voice is calm again, but not neutral any more. She’s talking like a teacher now: brisk, indifferent. “And that means we have within our walls and under our floor a lot of people who are processing *massive* amounts of trauma. Some of it self-inflicted, some of it lifelong, and, yes, some of it inflicted by us, as part of the process. Their relationships to their Sisters, to their own bodies, to their own *minds*, can be tenuous, and the last thing they need is someone wielding their past against them as a weapon. *Especially* someone who should know better.”

She should defend herself. She should fight back! This place is a fucking kidnapping ring, for Christ’s sake, and one of the chief kidnapers is lecturing her for not being sufficiently respectful! And yet... what would be the point? It’s the same old dance, one she’s been going through the motions of for weeks, and she’s tired of it. What was it Stephanie said? That her objections to the programme had become mechanical? That had been a horrifying thing to hear at the time; now, it sounds absolutely reasonable.

After all, if she’s not going to bring the place down, brick by brick, abuse by abuse — and she’s not — then she can at least try not to trigger the victims. Especially if they happen to be her *friends*.

“I’m listening,” she says, leaning forward, because even though she doesn’t especially enjoy being so close to Indira when she’s in this kind of mood, she wants to make clear her sincerity. “I fucked up. I realise that. But you lot could have done a better job with the initiation, Indira. Adjusting to the existence of a place like this? Hard. Realising there’s nothing I can do about it, or I’ll start an avalanche that will consume innocent people? Harder. Finding out that the *love of my life* was... helped... here? Hardest of all.” She snorts. “Even if

sometimes I feel like I should thank you for her, like I should find her sponsor and fucking kiss her or something. But Christine... I know what I said to her was wrong. And not just because it hurt her; she and Paige and Vicky made me realise it was *factually* wrong. I was working off incomplete information and a hell of a lot of assumptions, and I was panicking, spinning out. But she— Christine— Fuck, Indira... I saw *all* of her. I saw how wrong I was. I saw how badly I hurt her. And, fuck, if she's *crying* now, because of me, then —”

“It’s moved beyond just what you said,” Indira interrupts. “It was merely the trigger. The thing is, Lorna, she was hurt so much when she was a boy, and she never dealt with it. Never faced it, not properly. She always concentrated more on the terrible things she *did*, on the ways she lashed out and externalised her pain. Now she’s facing up to all of it. All at once. That she’s still mostly the same kind, cheerful girl we all love is a testament to her strength. And in the bad times... She has Paige. She has me.” She almost smiles. “We’ve got her. We’re taking care of her. Christine will be okay. I just need you to know: it can’t happen again. With anyone here, not just her. Clear?” She says it kindly, sweetly.

“Clear.”

“Well done. And thank you again for talking with Jodie. We haven’t, historically, had much chance to incorporate positive outside influences into the programme.”

Lorna nods, acknowledging the thanks silently because she doesn’t feel up to more than single-syllable responses right now. Christine... She needs to apologise again. Or talk to her again. She didn’t say *anything* about having a hard time!

Fuck. Maybe she doesn’t trust you with that, yet? She’d be well within her rights.

Fuck!

She rubs her eye with the back of her hand, and isn’t surprised that it comes away damp. She has that stinging

feeling all through her head that suggests her whole system's building up to a big cry. She swallows, and takes a few seconds to breathe and calm herself. Indira sits back, gives her the space she needs.

"Sorry about this," Lorna mutters, swallowing, popping her ears, flexing her jaw; getting herself back under control.

"Take all the time you need," Indira says. "And your point about our initiation methods is well taken; I will give it some thought. And Lorna, I do apologise if I was... a little harsh. Remember Aaron? Steph's 'friend'?" She doesn't finger quote; she doesn't have to. "I've been filling in as his sponsor after Maria was attacked, and I'm still a little bit in that mode."

"It's okay. I, uh, think I've needed someone to really yell at me about it, to be honest. Paige was angry, but she's, y'know, my friend. Kind of. I think. I hope she still is!"

"She is," Indira says. "But, like I said, I'm sorry if I pushed too hard. Christine's my sister. She's my weak spot. And she's *so* special. She might well be the future of this place."

"I don't think she wants to be."

"Not in its current form, no," Indira says, shrugging. "But Dorley can change. It's changed before; ask Maria what *her* transition was like."

"Still. I think she wants to take Paige and get the hell out."

"She does. But she's young. And, yes, I know I'm not *that* much older than either of you, but those years do bring perspective. I *never* thought I'd sponsor, but I'm good at it. I'm good at finding the woman inside the boy; good at finding boys who need to change, and who can come to accept it. *Not* a talent I ever expected to develop."

"What does Hasan think you do for a living?"

"He thinks I'm a grad student and live-in Big Sister to all the disadvantaged girls of Dorley, paid by a charitable trust.

Both things are, broadly, true. Now, how about you nip down the hall to the bathroom and get yourself cleaned up, and I'll tell Steph she can come in."

"Did you ask her to give us some time alone together?" Lorna asks, standing and wiping at her eyes again.

"Yes," Indira says, with a toothy grin, "I'm *very* devious. Come on."

Stephanie's waiting alone in the room by the time Lorna gets back, with repaired eye makeup — she's already texted an apology to Jodie for ruining her excellent work; Jodie had to be dissuaded from ditching to come down and redo it for her — and for all that she understands Indira's position better than Indira thinks she does, she's grateful not to have to face her again.

"Hi," she says, and Stephanie looks up from her phone, puts it away in a pocket and smiles at her.

"Hi!" Stephanie replies. "Sorry to leave you alone with Dira. Did she say what she needed to say?"

"Hoo yeah," Lorna says, flopping down onto the stool Indira vacated. "She really fucking did."

"You okay? She's lovely, but she can be... intense."

"Yeah, I'm okay." Lorna stretches. Stephanie's quite a calming presence, sitting as she is in very basic clothes and no makeup and still very obviously early in transition but with the newfound confidence many early transition girls have: she's discovering herself for the first time in her life, and loving it. Lorna's experiences during the same period of her life were rather tainted, and she's come to enjoy experiencing it vicariously through other trans girls. "Did you hear about what I said to Christine?"

"Yes. From her. No details, but I don't think I need them. You've made up?" Lorna nods, and Stephanie smiles and says, "Good. I owe my life to Christine, I think."

"Oh?"

“How much did I tell you about how I ended up here?”

Lorna frowns. “Not much, actually. I think you said you got yourself kidnapped? Or something? I remember being kind of overwhelmed at the time and, uh, not following up on things I probably should have followed up on.”

Stephanie tells the story: how she struggled with her gender all her life; how she refused to accept her womanhood, largely on the basis that she simply didn't believe she could pass or be happy with the resources available to her; how her surrogate older sister — and she corrects herself: older brother, at the time — vanished, and how she traced the disappearance to Saints, to the doors of Dorley Hall itself; how she followed her lost friend, didn't find her, and gave up on ever transitioning.

And then Christine. Stephanie accidentally revealing that she knew something was going on at Dorley Hall, and waking up in a cell. Lorna's prepared to rekindle a little of her outrage until Stephanie gets into how Christine repeatedly put her own safety on the line to try and get her out again. How when she found out Stephanie was trans she basically begged her to let her rescue her. How she ran all of Dorley Hall, including her own beloved sister and Aunt Bea, around in circles, keeping Stephanie hidden, until Steph herself fucked up and exposed herself.

“You ever think this place could use its resources to help trans girls?” Lorna says, slowly, thoughtfully.

“Aside from us, you mean? Yeah, and Beatrice has an answer to that: you know how the NHS is always going after private transition services?”

“Fuck.” Yeah. Obviously. The political and medical establishment in the UK seems set on keeping the population of happy, alive trans people as low as possible, and gatekeeps access to transition services jealously. No private transgender diagnostic service has survived more than a few years without invasive and, in most cases, terminal investigation. Not

something Dorley can afford. “Shit, Stephanie, that’s— God. I hate it. This stupid fucking country.”

“Yeah,” Stephanie replies heavily, nodding.

“So,” Lorna says, attempting to lighten the mood, “what *did* attract you to the sinister basement that offers free FFS, GRS, electrolysis and hormones?”

“The view.”

“Well, yeah.” Lorna looks around at the walls. “I can’t imagine living in this place. I’m barely getting used to above-ground Dorley Hall, which is plush and posh and full of friendly, happy people who are... Well, okay, I’ll be talking to someone who seems completely normal and then someone else will say something that’s just a little *off* and I suddenly remember: oh yeah, they kidnap boys here.”

Stephanie laughs. “I know what you mean. The sponsors are like this whole houseful of nosy older sisters who love you and want to help you, and it’s easy to get used to thinking of them that way, and then one of them hands you a cup of coffee in a mug that says, *An Apple a Day Keeps the Missing Persons Unit Away*. It’s jarring.” She shrugs. “They kind of remind me of teachers, though. Or nurses, maybe. They’ve got a difficult, stressful job, which they mostly see as a calling, and they feel a deep obligation to the boys. Yes, they make rude jokes about them sometimes, but they’re committed. You can ask questions about what they’re committed *to*...” She grins. “But I think I’m a convert, overall. I’ve not met a single one who isn’t happy, and I’ve met most who are in the building. Even the second years, the ones who’ve accepted themselves as women for only a few months... They seem happy. Genuinely so. They even bake! Chalk it up to selective entry procedures, I guess.”

“God,” Lorna says, absorbing it all. “God. What’s it even like, down here?”

“Well, I spend most of my time one floor down,” Stephanie says, pointing at the floor. “I doubt Dira’ll want to

give you a tour of *that* place. It's mostly just kinda boring, though. I hang around, I talk to... well, mainly I just talk to Aaron because Adam's in his own little world, Martin's *completely* checked out and the others are still in the cells for attacking Maria."

"I heard about that."

"She's okay now. But, yeah, I hang out, I read, I watch TV... I pretend to be one of the lads. And if it all gets a bit much, I go upstairs and spend time with Christine and Paige and Pippa and the sponsors. Or go to the upper floors and see people who don't even know what happens down here. Get a slice of normality. Be Stephanie for a while."

"And you got to see your friend again," Lorna says, conversationally. "That must have been nice."

"My friend?"

"Melissa? I think?"

"Oh. Yeah. No. She doesn't come back here much. She's actually a bit of a stranger to most people here, Abby says."

"Abby?" Lorna asks, frowning. She hasn't met an Abby. Mentally she searches through the lists of names and faces Vicky showed her.

"Abby was Melissa's sponsor. And from what everyone says, they won't let her sponsor anyone again after that."

"Too mean?"

"Too *nice*. Jane says Abby got lucky with Melissa but Tabby says they were well matched. Said that 'Mark'—" finger quotes, "—was the most docile boy they'd had in years. Whichever; they were very close, to the exclusion of almost everyone else. And then Melissa left and Abby stayed. Kinda stayed. She works, but she's still around sometimes." Stephanie taps her chin thoughtfully. "Haven't seen her much lately, though. Anyway, Melissa doesn't like this place, and she's got her own life, and, honestly? I'm glad. I'm glad she's happy, and I'm glad she doesn't come back here."

“Don’t you want to see her again?”

“Oh, I do!” Stephanie says. “I really do. I *dream* about it! She was basically my sister, only I didn’t know it, and *she* didn’t know it, and she never knew the real *me*... And that’s the thing. I want her to meet the *real* me. I don’t want her to see me like this.”

“But you’re so pretty!” Lorna says. She’s not lying or exaggerating: Lorna doesn’t connect beauty to cis-passing, and Stephanie’s rather captivating.

Stephanie laughs bitterly. “I’m waiting until people stop putting the ‘but’ in that sentiment. Until I do, too.”

“Ah.” Yeah. Lorna’s been there. Still *is* there, to some extent. Because while other trans women can be beautiful, *she* can’t, not while she structures her life around avoiding places that will subject her to cruelty for looking trans. “I understand.” She nods, vigorously, holds a hand out to Stephanie, who takes it. “Maybe more than anyone else here can, I get it.”

Stephanie returns her nod, and Lorna stands up from the stool and joins her on the couch, where they settle into a friendly hug. Lorna’s not quite sure who needs the comfort more: Stephanie, missing her sister, stressed out from having to play a role; or Lorna herself, still shaken from Indira, still conflicted about accepting help from this place. But it’s nice, it’s companionable, and it gets them through the next ten minutes of small talk before the consultant and the electrologist arrive, and they hurriedly disentangle.

The electrologist winks at them anyway.

* * *

Maria's promised group activity turns out to be another instalment of Monica's much-interrupted series of lectures on feminism, and Aaron's protests — that he's read all the books Maria gave him, that it's ridiculous even attempting to give lectures when, with Stef off on some unspecified other task, he's the only person in the room capable of giving coherent responses — fall on irritated ears. So he decides to display his conscientious objection to and contempt for the whole process by giving deliberately wrong answers. It's hard to concentrate, though, because Maria, sitting at his table with him, keeps laughing at his bad jokes.

“What's with you?” he hisses to her, after Monica calls a break and swipes near — but not *at* — Maria's head on her way out.

“I don't actually know,” Maria admits. She's leaning her chin on her hands and looking at him from just one chair over. Too close; he wants to warn her that she's not safe here, that the last time she let her guard down—

“Maria!” he says, forcing the memory out of his head. “You're actually scaring me a little. Where's the arch sarcasm and hyper-critical nagging I've come to know and love?”

“I don't know,” Maria says, and bites her lip as she thinks. It's both an attractive gesture and one that reminds him of Stef, and he directs his attention firmly towards the metal table until she starts talking again. “I think I'm different. Or my priorities are.” She walks her chin forward a little on her elbows, so she's closer still to him. “When I was young, I spent a long time thinking I was going to die. So much that it became background noise. And when you live with something dark and horrible like that for so long that you get used to it, it shapes you. You think it doesn't — because you barely think about it at all any more — but it does. I was... kind of hard. Not hard as in uncaring; more like unyielding. But then Will happened, and hospital, and recovery, and for the first time since I was young, I got scared. Scared for my life. Because I have someone who loves me, someone who'll be hurt if I die. Someone to live for.”

“Jesus,” Aaron mutters. It doesn’t cross his mind to wonder if she’s lying; she’s never seemed so sincere. “What happened to you, when you were younger?”

“I’ll tell you,” she says. “Someday, I’ll tell you all of it.”

He nods. God, someone must really have hurt her, way back when. *Who?* He needs the knowledge like he needs oxygen, and why *is* that? What’s changed? Is it just that she says she wants to help him? Does it not even matter any more that her methods are the most twisted he’s ever heard of? Is the expression of interest, of investment, all it takes?

Yeah. Maybe.

He lays out his right hand, palm up on the table, for her to take if she wants.

She does. She shifts her weight so she’s only propping her head on one hand, and clasps his with the other, interlacing their fingers. Their hands are almost the same size, he notices. Both of them are relatively small people.

“It’s not just my recent brush with death,” she says. “There’s... new people in my life, making me reassess the way I think about things. I’m proud of you, by the way.”

“You’re... proud of me?” Around him, he’s aware of Edy leading Adam out of the common room, and Martin following Ella, but it’s hard to concentrate on anything but Maria’s clear, brown eyes looking directly into his. “Why?”

She squeezes his hand. “You’ve been here a little over two months, and already you’re well on your way to being a new person. Not in the way you’re about to say,” she adds quickly, her smile broadening. “I don’t mean your gender. But you’re different. More thoughtful. More careful.”

“I was always those things,” he mumbles, unable to look away.

“No. You always had the capacity to be those things. You just... weren’t. You built this character to hide behind, this

shell, this idea of the funny guy, the sarky guy, the rude little misogynist. You built him to help keep yourself safe.”

“Didn’t work then, did it?” Aaron whispers.

“You don’t think that, though,” she says. “I *know* you don’t think that. You’ve always believed, deep down, that if you dropped the act, if you let yourself find out who you actually are, the bullying, the isolation, the alienation would all get worse. That the man you built really did keep you safe.”

“That’s not true.”

“Don’t lie to me, Aaron,” she whispers. “And don’t lie to yourself.”

This is too much like Stef. Too much like his notion that there’s more to Aaron than the front he puts up. Are they comparing notes on him? Is she deliberately mirroring his arguments after watching videos of his conversations with Stef? Or is he just that easy to read?

“I’m not lying,” he says, aware of how unconvincing he sounds. *Who’s talking right now, Aaron?*

“You *know* you’re better than the cruel, careless, *ugly* person you used to pretend to be.”

“No,” he says, matching her whisper, fighting to breathe properly through a thickening throat. “I’m not.”

“You will be.”

He knows what she means. He’ll keep changing. Without and within. Whether he asks for it or not.

“There’s no way out of this,” he says, “is there?”

“No,” Maria says.

“I still don’t understand why you think this can possibly work.”

“You will.” Maria rebalances again and, still holding Aaron’s right hand with her left, reaches out with her other

hand and tucks a stray hair behind his ear. “In the end, you’ll get it.”

“You can’t know that.”

She runs her knuckles down the side of his face, takes his chin between her thumb and forefinger, and cups his jaw, gently moving his face from side to side. He can no more stop her than he can raise the dead.

“You’re going to be so very beautiful,” she whispers.

There’s a long pause before he feels able to reply. “I don’t want this.”

“I know.”

She releases him, frees both hands, and shuffles closer again, hopping over onto the seat next to his, close enough for their shoulders to touch. With her right hand she fiddles with something in her pocket, and she nods at the corner of the room. He follows her gaze: the light on the camera bump has gone red. He looks around, and all the cameras are the same. Switched off.

“We’re alone, Aaron,” she says.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because you haven’t been alone in a long, long time.”

“But you’re not *safe* with me...”

She reaches for him. “I trust you,” she says. “And you need this.”

She’s right, he realises, and as she takes him into her arms, cradling his head between shoulder and palm, as he grips her right back, clinging tight to her belly and her shoulders, as he cries into her clothing, as he takes great gulps of air and expels them into her embrace, he wonders who will come back from this: the hateful, vindictive man Stef and Maria say he constructed to protect himself, or the thoughtful, kind person they both claim to see, deep inside him.

* * *

It's enough to make anyone's head spin. Lorna saw the electrologist first, while Stephanie saw the surgery consultant, and then they swapped. The electrologist agreed that her remaining finer, lighter hairs were best taken care of with electrolysis rather than laser, arranged with her a timetable structured around her lectures, and even offered her a choice of where to attend: here, in basement one, or at the clinic where she sees her usual clients. Lorna, surprising herself, picked Dorley, which turned out well; the electrologist has to come to the Hall, anyway, for Stephanie and anyone else they can persuade to get started with hair removal, so this way she gets to block out a whole day for it.

The surgeon's a more complex proposition. She introduces herself as Mrs Prentice, and shakes Lorna's hand like a steam piston. They cover GRS, including timetables, realistic expectations and a possible date, allowing a few months for her to recover from FFS first.

"My calendar's reasonably open," says Mrs Prentice, as Lorna flips through a leaflet, feeling lightheaded, "but we should probably make a decision sooner rather than later."

"Um," Lorna says, and shakes herself. "Yeah. Summer, probably. So I'm not missing any lectures? I'm missing some for FFS already so that's non-optional. How's August?"

"August..." Mrs Prentice flips through her phone calendar. "Yes. I can do August. How about the seventeenth? Get it done on a Monday and you've got the whole week free!" She laughs, and it fills the room. "Sorry. A little surgery joke. No, you'll be flat on your back for days. The seventeenth do you?"

"Yeah," Lorna says. "That's good. I can do that."

“Excellent! We’ll do the operation out of a little private hospital in the city. One of the girls here—” she pronounces it ‘gels’, with a hard g, which makes Lorna smile, “—can give you the details. You’ll come in on the Monday, fast for the day, have a *lovely* enema and poop your guts out — marvellous fun! — in the evening, and we’ll do you first thing Tuesday morning. Did you talk to the electrologist about de-hairing down there?” Lorna nods. It’s going to take up the bulk of their sessions; fortunately, they have numbing cream.

“Excellent! I look forward to it.” Mrs Prentice snaps shut the leather cover on her phone and drops it back into her bag. “I must say, it’s nice to discuss this with someone who actually wants it, for a change.”

“Do you do all the, uh, boys down here?”

“They’re gels by the time they come to *me*, but yes. I do the face as well as the bits downstairs. The facial consultations can be a bit dicey, and some of them call me all sorts of colourful names, but by the time it comes to the vagina installation they’re generally here by choice. Still. You sure you don’t want me to tackle your face, too? It’d make a lot of sense to keep it all in-house, so to speak.”

“Oh, no,” Lorna says, “it’s fine. We’ve raised the funds, paid the deposit, done the consultation... I’m happy with the surgeon I have for that. No offence.”

“None taken! But do think of me if you decide to have any revisions. Ms Quinn pays above market rate.” She waggles her eyebrows suggestively. If Lorna had been closer, she’s certain Mrs Prentice would have elbowed her, too.

“Ms Quinn?”

“I believe you know her as ‘Aunt Bea’?” She smirks, as if it’s the most wonderful joke.

“Oh. Right. Um...”

Mrs Prentice’s smirk broadens into a knowing smile. “You have something to ask, don’t you?” she says. “Well, gel, out with it!”

“Are you really... okay with operating on people who don't want it?”

Mrs Prentice laughs. “Quite okay with it, gel, quite! Oh, I had some qualms in the beginning, at least until my palms were crossed *generously* with silver, but it's something else when the gels come to see you a year later, looking like butter wouldn't melt, and they *thank* you for your good work. One gel, who was truly a pleasure to work on, she hugs me every time we run into each other, and, goodness, I have to say, she came out *beautifully*.” She leans back on her chair. “And she had *strong* features, before. Pronounced brow, prominent eve's apple, all the stuff young gels these days worry about. I *knew* what she'd look like when the swelling went down, but when she came running up, when she hugged me, when I saw how happy she was, when she gave me the address of her 'picture-gram' account, or whatever it's bloody called, well, *that* was a true pleasure. You know, with some of the gels here, I feel like I'm tinkering, making tiny adjustments, but with her? We practically remade her. Gave her a whole new life! And she *loves* it. It's rather an intoxicating feeling, I have to say.”

Lorna presses on a few other topics, satisfying her curiosity — no, Mrs Prentice doesn't do work on the NHS, but she has discounts available for 'friends of the Hall'; no, she doesn't do the orchietomies, but she knows the gel who does, and she's ever so good — and returns to the waiting room with rising excitement.

FFS in less than three months; GRS in nine!

2020's going to be an incredible year.

* * *

Ten test hairs, all at the back of her jaw in the patch of stubble she grew out just for the occasion, and each one of them hurt like hell. Stef *felt* the needle go in, even before the blast of intense pain. She was ready for the test session to stop after less than a minute and practically begging for it after two; awful to know she has hours and hours of this ahead of her. At least the electrologist promised numbing cream, codeine, and headphones so she can distract herself with an audiobook.

She's committed to genital electrolysis, too. At least Lorna's going to suffer with her on that front. When she left to go back upstairs, Lorna was suggesting she bring a bottle of schnapps to share, to get them both through the pain; she'll drain half and go in for her appointment, and then when Stef comes up she'll polish it off. Collaboration!

The surgeon talked her through the orchi — “Don't worry about it! It's so simple and quick, it's like pulling an olive out of a jelly salad!” she said, and made a popping sound to accompany her mime — and agreed to table the GRS option for now. But Mrs Prentice was enthusiastic about Stef's face. She took photos from all angles, pointed out the bits she wanted to shave down and the bits she wanted to build up, and then showed her a photo manipulation that made Stef want to leap across the room and embrace her right there and then. Mrs Prentice saved the pictures out to the network — Stef quickly moved them to her private folder — and told her with every appearance of pleasure that she looks forward to working with her.

So now she's sitting in the security room, practising her deep breathing, calming herself down, preparing to pretend, for the benefit of the boys downstairs, that an upper-class megaphone of a woman hasn't just changed her life. Maria finds her there, and sits quietly at the other end of the table until Stef's ready to speak.

“Hi,” Stef says, eventually.

“Good session?” Maria asks.

“Electrolysis is awful,” Stef says, poking gingerly at the aloe-covered patch of skin on her jaw, “and the surgeon is... a lot. But the FFS projections kind of blew up my remaining doubts. I might actually come out of this looking okay.”

Maria grins. “Haven’t we all been telling you that?”

“I have a very thick skull,” Stef says, affecting the most serious voice she can, “which impedes the efficient transfer of information. Fortunately, Mrs Prentice is going to shave it down.”

Maria throws an imaginary pastry at her; Stef fields it, takes a bite out of it, and beckons her over to show her the pictures.

“So,” Maria says, when they’re done with their small talk, “I know you were probably planning to, anyway, but I wanted to ask you to drop in on Aaron when you go back down.”

“Has something happened? Is he okay?”

“He’s okay,” Maria says, making mollifying gestures. “We connected, actually. He let me hug him! And he cried into my shoulder.”

“Oh,” Stef says. “*Oh*. That’s huge, Maria. That’s actually *huge!*” She silences the jealous voice that says it should have been *her* Aaron hugged. She was up here, wasn’t she?

“The next few hours will be important for him, Steph. He needs to feel like what he did was okay, that it wasn’t taboo, that it wasn’t a mistake. You can help him with that.”

Stef frowns. “You’re asking me to cooperate in his... regendering.”

“I’m asking you to be his friend,” Maria says. “Nothing you weren’t going to do anyway. I just thought some context might help.”

Nodding slowly, Stef stands. “Okay,” she says. “Okay. He’s all right, though?”

“He’s fine,” Maria confirms, with a slight frown.

“What about you? Are *you* all right?”

“I’m adjusting. Strange being back at work. Do you know how long it’s been since I had a holiday?” Her mouth twitches, and for a moment she’s looking at nothing at all.

A few minutes later and Stef’s on her way back down to basement two. As she takes the last step down into the main corridor she trails her fingers in the air-con, like Lorna did, and smiles. Lorna seemed more comfortable this time, despite her encounter with Dira; hopefully she’ll get over the last of her reservations with more regular exposure to the mundanities of the programme. Because it’s like she said: life down here really is mostly boring.

She whips out her phone and checks her face and hair with the selfie camera. She didn’t do anything special this morning, aware that she was going to be both poked and prodded by the electrologist and photographed and analysed by the surgeon. But she’s had a tendency recently, which Aaron and the girls have all pointed out, to trend feminine in her presentation, and the last thing she wants is to look too much like she chose to be here.

Aaron opens the door quickly when she knocks, and he practically drags her inside.

“Where’ve you *been* all morning?” he spits, kicking the door shut behind her and then, when the safety hinge kicks in and the door slows to a crawl two centimetres from closing, irritably pressing against it with his toe until it’s fully shut.

Stef, not wanting to antagonise him, waits for them to have a semblance of privacy before answering. “Busy,” she says. Does she *want* to tell him? He’s agitated, and his hands are trembling, but he’s also got damp hair and he smells of mint; he’s showered, and that’s not something he does when he’s having a hard time.

“‘Busy’,” Aaron mimics.

“Do you *want* to know?” she asks, flopping down on his bed at the pillow end, leaving plenty of room for him to either

join her, sit down on the chair, or pace, as he prefers.

He joins her on the bed. “Fuck. I don’t know. Probably not.”

“Did something happen?”

“Stef,” he says, tucking his feet under and leaning back against the wall, “I’m worried about Maria.”

“Did she hurt you?”

“What? No!” He looks away, hunches his shoulders, hugs his belly. “She’s just being stupid, that’s all.” Then he explodes outwards, gesturing wildly with his hands. “And I should hate her! Stef, I should fucking despise her! Look at what she’s done to me!” He unzips his hoodie and pulls up his t-shirt and there, underneath, is... another t-shirt? Wrapped and tied tight around his chest?

“Aaron, what’s that?”

He drops his shirt again and glares at her. “You can’t guess? It’s the DIY version of the thing they have you in.”

“You mean, this?” she says, pulling off her t-shirt and throwing it onto the bed between them. It’s a risk — ever since their first interaction after Aaron’s self-imposed solitude, she’s made at least something of an effort to present mostly neutrally; revealing her sports bra is a big step away from that — but he’s evidently seen it under her clothes, so why not?

“Yeah,” he says, not looking directly at her, “that.”

“Sorry,” she says, not putting her top back on, “but it’s better than having my nipples rub against—”

“Damn it, Stef, I *know!* Why do you think I wrap a fucking t-shirt around my chest? Like, ten percent of the time, when I’m in the right mood, which I’ll have you know is getting rarer and rarer, I’m sensitive there in a way that’s kind of exciting, but the rest of the time it’s like having an itch I can’t scratch the size of two flattened tennis balls! It’s infuriating.”

She points at the ruffled material, now clearly visible under his top. “Does that... help?”

“It’s better than nothing.” He shrugs. “Kind of. Not really. I have to sit leaning forward so there isn’t as much pressure. I have to think about it *all the time*. No, actually, that’s not right. I *used* to think about it all the time. But I think it’s become habit.” He frowns, taps a finger on his knee. “It’s like Maria said...”

“Tell me about Maria.”

“I told you. I’m worried about her. She’s not behaving like herself.”

“Well, she had a pretty bad fall.”

“She was attacked, Stef! Will *attacked* her! And you! You did the right thing straight away. You *helped* her! Me, I just sat there, watching, complaining.” He clenches a fist. “And that’s... fuck. I want to say it’s only fair. Because she’s the one holding me here. I know, I know, it’s actually a whole building full of sexy prison guards, but it’s always *felt* like it was mostly her. She was the one I saw the most. And when Will attacked her... I was happy, Stef. I was fucking happy. She was getting what she deserved.” He’s been looking away again, and when he looks back at her his eyes are wet and the muscles in his jaw are tense. “She has someone who loves her,” he continues, clearly having trouble keeping his voice under control. “She has someone who *loves* her.”

“She does,” Stef says, nodding.

“You know? Of course you know. You know everything around here. You’re practically a sponsor.”

“Aaron, I—”

“No,” he mutters, “I don’t care. You’re coping, in your own way. I don’t hold that against you. That would be *so* aggressively stupid, right? That would be just like a judgmental little prick like me, to decide the way someone’s playing the hand they’ve been dealt is wrong, just because *I* wouldn’t do it that way, wouldn’t it?”

He's gesticulating again. Stef catches his closest hand by the wrist. "*Aaron*," she says, when he's been startled into shutting up. "It's okay. It's *fine*. You can disagree with how I'm doing things if you want."

"I don't *know* what I want, Stefan!" He snatches his hand back and lifts himself up off the mattress, so he can sit facing her, cross-legged. "That's just it!" He starts counting on his fingers. "I don't know what I want. I don't know who I am. I think the guy who came here is fucking *dead*, and I'm just what's left, trying to figure out how to relate to people from first principles, and the corpse of the fucker I've been raised from is no help because he never knew, either. *She turned the cameras off, Stef!*"

"What?"

He plunges his hands into his lap, makes himself small and undemonstrative. "She turned the cameras off," he says. "Everyone else left the room and it was just her and me, sitting at the table together, and she was telling me all this stuff about how she was feeling, and she turned the cameras off. It was... so stupid of her. I could have done *anything* to her."

"So?" Stef says. "Did you?"

"No," he whispers.

"Would you ever?"

"No. I don't think so."

"She trusts you. And I think she's right to."

"She says I've changed."

"She's right about that, too."

"Stef," Aaron hisses. "Stefan. *Stef*. I'm so *fucking* scared, man! Everything's shifting under me! Even my fucking *mind*! I know what I *want* to say! I want to say I haven't changed, or I don't want to change, or... or fucking *something*! But I can't stop dwelling on all the shit I did, and saying I don't want to change is a lie, because the guy who came here? If he's dead then I'm *glad* and I will piss on his grave, but, Stef, I'm

starting to have trouble recognising myself. I look in the mirror—” he unearths a hand from his lap and flails in the direction of the wardrobe; Stef intercepts it as he brings it back, holds onto it, keeps it as a point of contact between them, an anchor for him, “—and everything’s different. Different like you’re different. Only I can’t shrug it off like you! I’m, God, Stef, I’m even shrinking. I’m shorter than I was. Isn’t that fucking ludicrous? I’m shorter and I’m softer and I’m *changing* and I’m alone with Maria and she’s acting like I’m... like I’m a...”

“A friend?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that such a bad thing?”

“We *hugged*, Stef! She hugged me and I just fucking clung to her and cried like a little girl.”

He’s whispering still, urgently, his voice hoarse and his whole body leaning towards Stef, as if he can make her understand through proximity and urgency alone. She shifts closer to him, keeping hold of his hand.

“And boys don’t cry?” she asks.

“Boys might. I don’t.”

“Tell me why, Aaron.”

“Because!” he snaps. “That’s my reason. Fucking *because*. I don’t know.”

Only son of nouveau riche, social-climber parents. Boarding school kid picked on for his height and his accent and his family’s lack of connections. Forced to hide his sensitivity under so many layers of shit that he forgot how to access it.

“Because it’s not safe to be seen as weak,” Stef says. “The places you’ve lived, and the people you’ve been around, have put you under pressure to be strong, right?”

He shrugs. “Maybe.”

“Well, it’s safe here. In this room, with me, it’s safe. When you’re with Maria, it’s safe. What use is strength, down here? Why *not* let yourself be weak?”

He doesn’t answer, just curls up more tightly. But he doesn’t take his hand back again, and Stef, not at all sure that this is the right thing to do, carefully pulls on it. Aaron looks up, his face a mess, and Stef holds out her free hand. Hesitantly he takes it, shuffles closer to her on the mattress, and lets himself be accepted into her arms.

“You’re safe,” she whispers, gathering him up, feeling his arms tighten around her, resting her chin on the top of his head. “It’s just me here. No-one else. You’re safe.”

He’s buried in her now, his shoulders heaving with quiet but insistent sobs, and she holds him, strokes his hair with loose fingers. He stiffens for a moment, likely wondering if it really is okay to be doing this with another guy, and then he relaxes, pulls on her waist with both hands, and lets it all out again.

* * *

The lasagne really is very good. Lorna’s been waiting in the kitchen for Vicky to get done with her lecture, and she’s met several new residents and several new ex-residents, who apparently all have developed the habit of just dropping in when they’re in the area and hungry, and she can only watch so many people rummage in the fridge and un-foil and microwave something that smells delicious before she succumbs. The atmosphere reminds her very much of her first-year home in Windsor Tower, only with much better food.

And, yes, everyone here but her is technically a kidnap victim, blah blah blah. The refrain’s more than tired.

“So?” one of the new girls says. “How are you finding the infamous Dorley Hall?”

She does wish people would stop asking her that, though.

“We’re not ‘infamous’, Bella,” says the woman who introduced herself as Rabia. “That’s the whole point. Infamy implies fame, and we’re a secret underground feminisation operation. *Sec-ret*.” She accentuates the syllables with her fork, extracted from her moussaka.

“Right,” Bella says, slapping herself on the forehead. “I only hope the other places keep quiet, too.”

“Other places?” Lorna asks.

“Well, yeah. We don’t know anything for certain, but you hear rumours. And I *doubt* Grandmother got the idea all by herself, you know? Besides, forced fem in fiction is a really weird thing to just come out of nowhere; that’s always felt like cover, to me.”

“This is like the bit in the vampire movie,” Rabia says, grinning at Lorna, “where the woman in the catsuit explains they planted the stories about Dracula so no-one would take the idea of vampires seriously.”

“Don’t be silly,” Bella says. “Vampires don’t exist.”

“What about the one upstairs?” says one of the second years clustered around the other end of the table.

“That’s just Jodie,” says another. “And, Lorna, they’re messing with you. We’re not a franchise.”

“This has *got* to be the only place like this,” says the first one.

“Yeah,” says a third, “if there are other forced fem shops around the country, then why was I taken from Cardiff University?”

“I was on my holidays,” Bella says, with her mouth full.

It’s strange to watch the second years, who’re barely months out of the basement, uniformly pretty and almost

uniformly a little nervous, interact with the older women with close to the same level of flippant disregard for their experiences as she's used to from Christine and the others. One of them catches her looking and smiles shyly.

"I made that," the girl says, nodding at Lorna's plate.

"The lasagne?"

"Yep. Bex and Aisha helped, but I made it. What do you think?"

"It's lovely."

The girl beams at her. "Good! Because layering the pasta took *ages*. I wanted to make a spag bol, but Bex—" she nods to her right, at the girl sitting next to her, currently chatting with the girl on her other side, "—she said she really wanted lasagne, so..." She spreads her hands in front of her, saying, *Who am I to disagree?*

Lorna grins.

She's almost done with her lunch, and chatting with Rabia about her degree, when a pair of hands close over her eyes, accompanied by a kiss on the top of her head and the second years saying, "Aww!" in unison.

"Hey, Lorna," Vicky says, leaning down and scooping up some of what remains of Lorna's lasagne with a finger.

"Hey, Vick," Lorna says. "And, hey! Get off my lunch!"

"I'm hungry!" Vicky protests. "And, wow, this is *good*."

"Thank you!" a voice from the other end of the table pipes up. "You want me to wrap some up to take home?"

"Oh, goodness, Faye, would you?" Vicky says. "I haven't had time to eat."

The girl nods and jumps up and Lorna returns her attention to her girlfriend, who's pulling her chair back and crouching down next to her.

"How did it go?" Vicky asks.

“Good!” Lorna says. “I’ll tell you later.”

It’s not long before they’re heading out, hoping to beat the next rainstorm, with Vicky clutching a portion of lasagne in tupperware. “Really,” she says, when the kitchen doors close behind them, “are you okay? I hated leaving you alone in there.”

“It was actually fine,” Lorna says, dodging around a woman pinning something to the corkboard by the entrance and pushing open the front doors. “Seriously. You don’t have to worry about me while I’m— Hey, Vick, you okay?”

Vicky’s tarrying, beckoning for Lorna to come back. “Yeah,” she says, “I’m fine. I just forgot something, that’s all.”

Lorna holds the door open for the woman, lets her through, and then joins Vicky by the corkboard. “Seriously, Vick, what’s up?”

Wordlessly, Vicky points to the poster, pinned up by the woman who just left. Around a central picture of a delicate-looking young man and above tear-off slips with phone numbers and email addresses, are the words:

MISSING: MARK VOGEL

*Last seen November 2012
in the vicinity of ‘Legend’ nightclub in Almsworth*

If you have ANY information, please contact:

Shahida Mohsin-Carpenter

Rupa Mohsin-Carpenter

Edward Mohsin-Carpenter

OceanofPDF.com

EIGHT

FORGET ME NOT

2019 DECEMBER 11 — WEDNESDAY

“Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck *fuck!*”

“Uh, Vick? Usually I’m the swearsy one.”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

“This is bad, then?”

“It fucking might be.” Vicky tears the poster from the corkboard and examines it up and down. She checks the back, as if it might become less terrible on closer inspection. “I can’t believe this. Shit!”

Lorna holds out her hand for the poster, and looks it over. The man on the front wasn’t, by the looks of him, much more than a boy when the picture was taken, and a pretty boy at that. She rereads his name: Mark Vogel. “Who is this guy?”

Vicky takes the poster back, and with her other hand pages through her phone. “Melissa,” she says. “Used to be Mark, obviously. Graduated years ago. Ah.” She stops swiping through and taps on an image. “Graduated 2015. Left the same year. Within days of graduation. Technically she kept a room here while she finished her degree, but that ‘technically’ looks *very* technical, and—” she peers at the screen, “—she never actually finished, I guess. Reading between the lines, she came

back as little as possible until she just... stopped coming back.”

“Jesus, Vick, is *every* missing person around here a girl now?”

She shrugs. “Mostly only the ones who weren’t girls already.” She *must* be distracted, or she wouldn’t be quite so flippant about Dorley’s history around Lorna. “Here,” she says, holding up her phone and showing Lorna a photo of a beautiful blonde girl, recognisably related to the boy on the poster. She’s smiling and hugging a Black girl who is, Lorna notes with tired inevitability, also beautiful. A girl could get a complex hanging around this place.

“That’s him?” she asks, uselessly.

“Her,” Vicky confirms. “And, look.” She scrolls down, and Shahida’s name is listed, along with Stephanie Riley’s and a few others — although for Steph there’s a note that says her surname is placeholder — in a column marked *PTA*.

“Parent Teacher Association?” Lorna asks, feeling stupid.

“‘Pre-Transition Associates’,” Vicky murmurs. “What’s interesting is you can go onto your file entry and make notes. I have, and so’ve Christine, Paige, Pippa, Jodie; all of us. Melissa doesn’t seem to have done anything. Someone else must’ve updated Steph’s name.”

“What does that say to you?”

Vicky shrugs. “Maybe she hasn’t touched her file because she left this place and never looked back?”

“I like her already.”

“Yeah. Same. Come on. We need to talk to this Shahida woman.”

“Do we have to?”

“I don’t like it any more than you do, but you *know* the consequences of letting this kind of thing slide. For us; for her...”

Christine's warning echoes again. "Fuck," Lorna says. "Yes. I know. *Fuck.*"

"*Now* you're getting it."

Lorna leads Vicky out, kicking open the doors and heading for the path that leads to the campus proper. She knows, logically, awfully, that she has to become part of protecting this place so Vick doesn't get outed, along with Christine and her other friends here. Hell, even the evil bitches who stuck around to torture boys are kind of okay when you get to know them, and they're paying for her GRS and they make a mean cup of coffee; probably she should keep *them* safe, too. So she'll help check on this woman and try to find out what she knows, and if she happens to kick the main doors to Dorley Hall open with enough force to rattle them on their hinges, well, that's probably just a fucking coincidence, isn't it?

"Hey!" she shouts, when she judges them close enough, thanking God and her extensive voice training that her yell is clear and comes from the head; she repainted her face after the electrologist got done with her, and she judged herself as passing about as well as she does normally, i.e. middling-well, but she doesn't know this woman, doesn't have any clue how she might feel about trans women, and Lorna's discovered that sounding 'right' can push cis people into gendering you correctly, and that it can even help if they clock you. The kind of people who respond to trans women with violence are sometimes mollified by a feminine voice, and have been given to sort her into the *nonthreatening* category because of it.

Roll on FFS. A life without these constant calculations, where her gender is in her own hands and not in the grip of strangers' prejudices, sounds pretty fucking sweet.

The woman turns around. "Hi?" she says, stopping and waiting for Lorna and Vicky to catch up.

"Shahida, yeah?" Lorna says. "That's your name on the poster?"

"It is," Shahida says, frowning but not hostile.

“Um, am I saying it right?” Lorna says, lowering her voice, understanding suddenly that while *she* was running the talking-to-cis-people calculus in her head, Shahida may well have been running the talking-to-white-people equivalent in hers.

Shahida smiles gently. “Right enough. Do you have any information?”

“Oh,” Lorna says. “No.” Clever! Came running. Didn’t have a plan.

“We wanted to ask you about Mark,” Vicky says quickly. “Since you’re looking for him and all. I used to live in that dorm, and we know a lot of people there, and they know even more people, et cetera. Was Mark a student here?”

“Yes,” Shahida says. “But not for very long. He started in 2012, and... left the same year.”

“We probably know someone who knows someone who was around back then,” Lorna says. “We can ask around, put the poster in the group chat, tell people to message you, all that stuff.”

“Thank you,” Shahida says, nodding. “What did you want to know?”

Crap. What *do* they want to know? And are they helping this woman get closure, or just getting her away from the Hall? She gestures to Shahida’s shopping bag full of posters. “Where are you putting those up?”

“Everywhere. *Every* dorm, and every major building here at the university. Outside that bloody club in the city. The bus stop where they found his iPod. The station. And anywhere else I can find a corkboard or a spot of spare wall.” She shrugs, looking at the floor. “I’m not stupid,” she says, subdued. “I don’t expect to find him. I think... I think I always expected it to end the way it did. Mark was always like that. He was ephemeral; like snow. Something... *someone* you appreciate in the time you have, because you know it can’t last.” Lorna wants to reach out. Can’t help feeling it would be

unwelcome. Shahida's in her own world for a minute; best to wait for her to return on her own. When she does, it's with a quick shake of her head and a businesslike smile. "I just want to know whatever there is to know. And I want something to tell his brother."

"His brother?" Lorna asks. She remembers another name on the list on Vick's phone, and almost says it aloud.

"He's got a younger brother," Shahida says. "Probably about your age, actually." She waves a loose hand at Lorna and Vicky. "I've been checking in with him, now and then; just emails, mainly. That poor kid..." She starts counting off on her free hand. "His mother dies when he's just a boy, like, eleven, or something. And he fights a lot with his brother about it, because they're both dealing badly with it in their own special ways, and then *he* disappears, and then his best *friend* just ups and leaves—"

"His best friend?" Vicky asks.

"Kid called Stefan. Met him once, but Mark could barely shut up about him; he was more like a younger brother to him than Russ was. And he and Russ weren't talking, haven't for ages, but it's one thing when someone you always meant to make up with is just up the road, and quite another when he's halfway round the world. Which is," she adds, frowning, "a little worrying, given what I know about him. But whatever; he's gone, and he's taken any chance they had to make up with him. And Russ' dad's been a mess — a *big* mess — since his wife died, and worse since Mark disappeared." She clenches her hand into a fist. "Russ' world just *keeps* retracting, year after year after year. I want to give him some closure, if I can."

Lorna doesn't trust herself to say anything. That one act, taking Mark/Melissa, keeps snowballing, and all these poor people, people who loved a boy who doesn't even exist any more, are left hurting and alone. *Fucking* Dorley.

"Russ asked you to put these up?" Vicky says.

Shahida smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "No. I think he'd get pretty mad at me if he found out what I'm doing. This is all me. I got back into the country a few weeks ago, and just... being back in Almsworth. It brought it all back. I haven't been able to stop thinking about Mark ever since. Besides, it's almost exactly seven years since he went missing. Anniversaries, you know?" She kicks at the dirt at the edge of the path. "And we didn't leave it in a good place. Now he's gone, and that's where things will always be."

A part of Lorna, a part she hates, cheers at this: no new evidence, no long chain of people all searching; just one woman, fondly remembering someone she used to know. She glances sideways at Vicky, thinks she sees the same relief — and the same disgust — pass through her girlfriend, and resolves to hug her as hard as she can as soon as this is over.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"It's okay." Shahida swings her shopping bag in idle circles, transfers it from hand to hand almost like a juggler, apparently without paying attention. "I've got nothing. I know it. But I'm going to look, anyway. Ask around. I *have* to."

"Yeah," Lorna says. "Yeah. I get it."

Small talk carries them a few more minutes, and Lorna feels every one of them. Thunder splits them eventually, rolling in the distance and threatening a return of the rain, and Shahida excuses herself, rushing off towards the car park and leaving Vicky and Lorna free to walk unsteadily back to the safety of the Hall.

"What do we tell them?" Lorna says, when the doors have closed behind them and they're alone in the echoing entryway.

Vicky swallows. "Everything she said. And then we walk away. Whatever happens, I want no part of it."

"Yeah," Lorna says. "Agreed."

Hands find hands. For a moment they stand together, holding each other up, and then it's time.

* * *

“No,” Vicky says, irritated, “I don’t know her! She left before I even got here!” She’s leaning forward on the kitchen table, head cradled in her arms and with a laptop open in front of her with a list of contact numbers on the screen; Melissa’s is highlighted, but all of them have tried her phone, Lorna included, and she isn’t answering.

“And don’t yell at Vicky,” Lorna says.

“Okay, fine,” Rabia says, “keep your knickers on. If you don’t know her, you don’t know her! I just *thought* that since we have exactly *one* sponsor here right now—” she jerks a thumb at Bella, sat in one of the chairs in the far corner of the kitchen, hissing into a phone, with the girl Lorna thinks is called Rebecca rubbing her between the shoulder blades, “—we could maybe give her a bit of a hand.” She’s drinking from a mug which reads *Boys: Just Raw Material for Girls*, which strikes Lorna as rather tasteless, considering the conversation she and Vick just had.

“Where’s Indira?” Vicky says.

“Security room, keeping an eye on Steph and the boys.”

“Get Edy, then!”

Bella covers the phone with her hand. “Edy took Maria to bed for a nap. In my opinion, this does *not* constitute the kind of emergency we want to wake up the concussed woman for.”

“What about Tabby, then?” Vicky says. “Or— or— Where *are* the third year sponsors, anyway? We haven’t *all* been released, have we? Someone must be on duty.”

“Your sponsor’s taken the year off,” Rabia says, peering at the screen of another laptop. “Christine’s been released from

Indira, who's downstairs, anyway, and Francesca's off... somewhere. Everyone else is at their other jobs." She jabs at the trackpad. "Izzy, babe, there's only two girls on call today, Abby and Christine, and neither of them are picking up."

"They're both out today," Bella says, having finished her phone call. "This was *supposed* to be a quiet day. Everyone's off running errands. Going to class. Going to work. Even on-call people."

"Seems short-sighted."

Bella laughs. "If you can find us twenty more staff, you go right ahead," she says. Rebecca offers her a hand and she takes it, moving with Rebecca's support over to the table, where she slumps into a chair, rests her chin on her hand, and drums her fingers on her cheek. Thinking.

"I don't see why this is such an emergency," Lorna says. "All she wants is closure. She won't find it; she'll stop." She clenches her stomach against the bile that threatens to rise over such a glib summary, but it doesn't make *sense* for the poster to have incited such panic!

"Attention is attention," Rabia says. "A name that could be connected to us comes up after, let's see—" she flips screens on her laptop, eyes darting as she reads, "—seven years, and people start talking. Normally we deal with all this kind of stuff while we're still *here*, but Melissa, if I'm reading this right, basically ghosted us after doing the bare minimum. This Shahida woman was already on the outs with her before she came here, and by the time *you know what* happened she was at a uni at the other end of the country. Sometimes things don't get resolved cleanly; sometimes they fester. And when they pop, we deal with them." She glances at Bella with a smile. "The last one I was involved with, though, we had more people around to deal with it."

"Yeah, yeah," Bella says. "*You* try telling the current crop of third years they should stick around to usher the next generation into womanhood. Julia and Yasmin'd laugh in your face, Jodie might honestly actually bite you, Paige would

ignore you, Christine'd follow Paige wherever she goes, and Vicky..." She points across the table. "Well, she already left."

"Still," Rabia says, "you could make it easier on yourselves by being more careful with these local pickups. Melissa lived locally before she was a student here, and that means *local roots*. Tearing those up is always going to be messier."

"You're welcome to become a sponsor, you know, if you have all these suggestions."

"Sorry. Just a nurse."

"Anyway," Bella says, "I'm barely older than Melissa. Address your complaints to the management."

"There has to be *someone* around," Vicky says.

"What about Nell?" Rabia says, tapping on her screen. "Says here she's a sponsor *and* she was in Melissa's intake. If we can't get hold of Abby, why not try her?"

"*Bad* idea," says one of the second years. Faye? She folds her legs up under her chin and Rebecca immediately starts comforting her.

"Agreed," Bella says, and leans far enough away from the table to hold Faye's hand for a moment. "Nell wasn't on good terms with Melissa."

Faye mutters something that sounds like, "She's not on good terms with *anyone*."

"She *is* working on herself, Faye," Bella says firmly. "And she gave you your second chance—"

"—so I should give her one," Faye recites, with foul humour, but she unfolds a little and leans into Rebecca's hug. "I know, I know."

Lorna wonders if she can get Christine to give her access to the files or the logs or the diaries or whatever the hell they keep around here, because now absolutely is not the time to

ask for the backstory on that, and she knows she won't stop wondering until she finds out. Maybe Jodie knows...?

"Anyway," Rebecca says, slightly muffled by Faye's hair, "Nell's probably still asleep. Night shift."

"Punishment detail," Faye mumbles gleefully.

"She's been given time to cool off," Bella says, "that's all." She's trying for a censorious voice and failing; there's a hint of glee. Apparently she doesn't like Nell, either.

"Oh," Lorna says, remembering, "something else that might be important: Shahida says she knows Stefan. They met only once, but supposedly Mark talked about him a lot. And she knows Stefan's gone to find himself, or something, but she seemed like she's worried about him, too." Vicky nudges her. It takes Lorna a moment to get it. "Shit! Stephanie. Melissa! Her, not him. *Hers*. Both of them! Shit."

"Don't worry about the names and pronouns," Rabia says drily. "You get used to rapid context-switching around here, especially in emergencies."

"Oh? Deal with a lot of grieving relatives, do you?"

"Yes," Bella says. Faye snorts, cynical.

"Of course you do. Of *course* you do. Jesus fucking Christ, what *am* I involved with?" Lorna lays her head on the table, and Vicky scrunches her fingers in her hair, the way she likes. She reaches behind her neck, grabs Vicky's hand and holds it. Together. They survive this madness together.

She *is* better at dealing with names and pronouns than this, anyway. Obviously! It's just that, up until recently, most of her friends and acquaintances were people who've never in their lives been kidnapped and forcibly regendered, and Lorna rarely gets involved in situations that require her to use deadnames and old pronouns.

She frowns, and counts in her head — including Vicky, she's close with at least five Dorley girls — and confirms that, yes, while it *is* still true that *most* of her friends have never

been kidnapped and regendered, the ratio's closer than she'd like.

The conversation's been going on around her. "What do you think, Rab?" Bella's saying.

"About what? *You're* the sponsor; I'm just the nurse."

Vicky leans closer to Lorna, so she can whisper. "Yeah, right. *Just* the nurse, I'm sure."

"If this Shahida woman's got her mind on Stephanie as well," Bella says, as Lorna wonders what exactly Vick could mean by that, "then we have a potential point of escalation."

Rabia nods. "Yes. If she starts investigating her, too, she might poke a hole in that backpacking story. If that falls, then she's got herself a very easy game of join the dots."

"Yeah."

Someone clears their throat, which makes Lorna jump. Judging by the way the kitchen table scrapes slightly across the floor, almost everyone else in the room reacted similarly. In the doorway into the dining room stands Mrs Prentice, smiling and peering in.

"'scuse me, gels," she says, "but I was told to expect a lift. I didn't want to disturb you as you seem to have a crisis on, but—" she taps her wrist, "—time's getting on, and all that."

"Shit," Bella says. "I was going to drive you, but I'm caught up in this."

"We can," Vicky says quickly, raising a hand. "We're no use here, and our car's not far." Lorna wants to kiss her; anything to get away from all this ghoulish speculation.

"Wonderful!" Mrs Prentice announces, beaming. "Tanya's just getting her things together — she won't be a moment — and then we can all head out together!" She looks around the room, at tense faces. "I'll, um, help her get everything packed up, shall? Yes. Good. Back in a few!"

“Okay,” Bella says, clapping her hands as Mrs Prentice heads back downstairs, “I’m putting together a plan. It’s not ideal, but until people start trickling back in, we work with who we have. So. Rab, are you okay holding down the fort here for a little while?” Rabia nods. “Good. I have to go and have a long and probably horrible conversation with Elle’s point woman, to let her know we have a minor crisis on our hands. Vicky and Lorna—” she points, “—are taking our friends home. So... Rebecca. How are you feeling today?”

“Good,” Rebecca says. She and Faye are less wrapped up in each other than before, but they’re still holding hands. “Pretty good.”

“Do you think you could manage a trip across campus?”

“What?” Faye says, as if Bella just asked if Rebecca could go for a dip in a volcano.

Rebecca’s startled by the question but assembles her wits quickly, putting on a confident face and nodding. “I think so,” she says. “Can Faye come, too?”

“Would you be okay with that, Faye?” Bella asks.

“Yes,” Faye says, fierce. She stands, pulling Rebecca up with her. “Yes, definitely.”

“Good. You know the offices on the far side of campus? The ones where they warehouse some of the lecturers?”

“The Halliday Building?” Faye confirms, and Lorna swallows a cynical retort. The Halliday Building is only barely on campus; there are car parks with greater prestige. It doesn’t surprise her to learn that Christine’s Linguistics lecturers have offices there, rather than in the newer, considerably more plush, and considerably more central quad offices, reserved for those who teach more fashionable degrees. Saints’ Linguistics programme might well be one of the best in the country but it’s still, in the university administrators’ likely opinion, *only* Linguistics.

“Yes. Go there, find Professor Dawson’s office. She’s on the third floor, if I remember correctly. Christine’s got a

meeting with her today. Go there, tell her we have an emergency, and we need her, and bring her back here, okay?”

“Christine’s *not* a sponsor, Isabella,” Vicky says, as the two second years nod. “I know she’s on call, but she’s just tech support!”

“I’m aware, Victoria,” Bella says patiently, “but we need an expert on Melissa and Shahida, to tell us whether this is a complete shitshow, or just a—” she waves a hand distractedly as she searches for a way to complete the metaphor, “—just a speck of stubborn stuff on the bottom of the bowl. Abby’s our expert. No-one else got close to Melissa in her time here — don’t give me that look, Victoria, I wasn’t on staff then and I wasn’t in her intake — and Abby wasn’t the most thorough record keeper. By design, probably; she and Melissa kept secrets. So we need her, and she’s not picking up and she’s not answering her messages and we don’t know where she is, which is troubling, because we *should*. But Christine’ll know where she is, and even if she won’t tell *us* — she and Abby share secrets, too — she’ll be able to get in touch. So.”

“You really think this is urgent enough to pull her out of her meeting? She’s going to fail the year if she misses much more.”

“Please. You and I both know that girl could recite her textbooks backwards. We’ll lean on the staff if we have to. That sort of thing is what the crisis fund is *for*. Rebecca, Faye, you’re sure you’re up to this?”

“Yes,” Rebecca says.

“Yes, Bella,” Faye says.

“Then go. And—” Bella raises her voice as they head for the door, which Rabia stands up and opens for them with a thumb and an eyebrow cocked at Bella, “—take umbrellas from the pot in the hall! *And no running away!*”

“You’re sure they’ll come back?” Rabia says.

Bella shrugs. “All their stuff is here.”

“Be serious. Please?”

“Yes. They’ll come back. They’re committed. And they won’t want to leave Aisha and Mia behind. And they quite like me, too. They’re good girls, Rab. It’s fine.”

“If you say so.”

“Jesus,” Vicky says, watching the girls walk stiffly down the path, hands held tightly, folded umbrellas wielded like weapons, looking furtively around as if monsters might leap out from behind every bush. “That’s unexpected.”

“It’ll be good for them,” Bella says. She’s paging through her phone, frowning.

“What’s the big deal?” Lorna asks.

“It’s December,” Rabia says, “and they’re second years. Still healing from the FFS, still *barely* out of the basement. No-one goes out solo — or even in an adorable twosome — this early.”

“Melissa did,” Bella says.

* * *

Christine doesn’t like to stand out. At school, it was a way to get hit; at home, a way to get hurt. So she kept to herself as much as she could, kept her interests to herself, and returned home every day to dodge her father, complete her schoolwork in the quiet of her own room, and escape to the balcony or the shop in town, to smoke, to switch off, to retreat from consciousness and become nothing more than a need, fulfilled by her cigarettes. She missed a lot of meals, claimed at home to have eaten at school, and at school simply avoided the cafeteria.

Whenever she talks about her school days in front of Paige, the conversation has a tendency to end in hugs and tears.

But now Professor Dawson's looking at her like she might *be* someone, and Christine's fear of standing out collides with her awareness that she has yet to complete her NPH; technically, she's no-one. She hopes the professor doesn't get it into her head to look her up. She's sure her provisional identity can stand up to the scrutiny — she's run the usual tests on it herself — but the fear of it won't leave her.

"Ms Hale," Prof Dawson says, leaning forward on her desk and swiping away the course list Christine's been rolling up in her fingers, "while I am both grateful and impressed that you are so up to date on the material, despite your absences, our tutorials and workshops become rather more vital next semester, and your presence will be required." She smiles, to soften her words. "Marks are assigned according to contribution, and the weightings are fixed; when I say required, I *mean* required. Unless you plan to submit mitigating circumstances forms on a weekly basis."

"No," Christine says. "No, Ma'am, I don't."

"Good. Because that would give the panel one hell of a collective headache." When Christine nods solemnly, Prof Dawson shakes her head. "That was a joke, Ms Hale. You're allowed to smile."

"Sorry, Ma'am."

"And please, call me Professor. Or Marianne!"

"Sorry."

"You're *not* at school any more, Ms Hale, and a measure of independence in your work is a *good* thing. It's a valuable skill to cultivate and something we — I — recognise. But I'm afraid you're going to have to start showing your face again, or I will be required to follow up. Yes," she adds with a grin, "there's that word again: required. I can no more dodge the obligation than you. So, while I'm perfectly happy to allow

you your privacy when it comes to your... extracurricular activities — whatever it is that keeps you out of my lectures — you have to meet me halfway.”

Christine’s refused to explain her absences, tried instead to imply she’s got a job, that she needs the money, and when Prof Dawson pointed out that Christine lives in Dorley Hall, famously a dorm that does not charge for its accommodation, Christine shrugged, tried to look haunted, and hoped the professor’s imagination would fill in the rest: terrible debts, perhaps, or a stricken family who can’t provide for themselves. Sometimes the best lies are the ones other people come up with themselves.

She wonders which truth the professor would find most appalling: that Christine watches the saved videos of her lectures while monitoring the inmates of an underground prison, or that she watches them at 200% speed.

“Um,” she says, speaking thickly through the treacle in her throat; for some reason she can rattle off course materials and lecture notes with ease, but asking anything of an authority figure always spikes her anxiety, “could you, perhaps, put that in an email?”

Prof Dawson raises an eyebrow. “I’ve put it in several.”

“No, I mean, that wording exactly.”

“I don’t follow. How will that help?”

Christine swallows her irritation and pulls her laptop out of her bag, quickly typing up a spec email that covers the salient points: Christine will be required to attend two tutorials and one workshop per week, at these times, and there can be no allowance made for rescheduling; Christine’s final grade is dependent on her attendance; Christine will be investigated if her absences continue to pile up.

The professor peers at the screen. “What precise wording, Ms Hale.”

“Please?”

“Oh, fine,” Prof Dawson says irritably. She snaps a picture of the screen with her phone. “You’ll get the email before the day is out.”

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Christine says, letting another *Ma’am* slip out in her relief. Something concrete to show to the sponsors, to get them off her back, to perhaps even force them to admit that since the security audit is complete and the network patching is done, Christine can go back to being mostly an ordinary student once more, and earn her salary on call. She wonders if she ought to have added something about *attendance is considered crucial for Christine’s continued feminine development*, but that would probably be pushing it.

“Are you *sure* there’s nothing you’d like to tell me, Ms Hale?”

Christine shakes her head, but her reply is interrupted by furious hammering at the professor’s door.

“Oh, good grief,” Prof Dawson says, and raises her voice. “I’m with a student!” The knocking pauses to absorb this information, and then resumes. The professor hangs her head and shares a resigned roll of her eyes with Christine, who doesn’t know entirely what to do with it. “Fine. Come in!”

The noise ceases and the door creaks hesitantly open. Behind it, holding hands and shyly examining the floor, the professor’s bookcases, and all other points of interest in the office bar the professor herself, stand Faye and Rebecca.

The *second years*.

From *Dorley*.

What the hell? Christine almost wants to check the date on her laptop, to make sure she hasn’t lost track of time justifying her absences to Prof Dawson and accidentally let six to eight months slip by.

“Yes?” says the professor.

“I, um, know them,” Christine says, and then tries to force some levity into her voice; if they’re here, now, *something’s*

happening. “Hi, girls. What’s up?”

“Hi, Christine!” Faye squeaks, and Christine returns her little wave as Rebecca swallows hard and prepares to speak.

“Um,” Rebecca says, “we need to borrow Christine, Professor Dawson.”

Top marks. Barely a stutter.

“May I ask why?” Prof Dawson says, leaning forward, interested.

When she gets back to the Hall, Christine’s going to find whichever sponsor had the bright idea to send the girls after her and attack her with something dense, like Aaron. The professor’s already curious about her; this can do nothing but make it worse! And as for the effect this could have on the girls...

“We need her,” Faye says, cowed into monosyllables by—well, by any number of things, Christine realises, as this’ll be her first time out since she was taken. She remembers her first time leaving the dorm; terrifying. The fear of discovery around every corner. Only Indira, whispering reassurances into her ear, kept her from bolting immediately for the safety of the Hall, the prison that became home.

She starts packing up her things. “Sorry, Professor,” she says, and silently congratulates herself for strangling the *Ma’am* on its way out. “It must be important. Could we continue this another time?”

“We were more or less done,” Prof Dawson says. “Look, Ms Hale. Christine. If there’s anything going on at home, or in your dorm, or—”

“There isn’t!” Christine promises, remembering to fetch up her umbrella from the coat stand by the door on her way out. “Thank you so much for seeing me!”

“I’ll be pleased to see you again,” the professor shouts at the closing door, “in my lectures!”

In the corridor, Christine grants herself a moment to lean against the wall and pinch the bridge of her nose, before more pressing concerns take over: the girls. She checks up and down the corridor to make sure they're alone, and whispers, "Hey. You two okay?"

Faye nods, biting her lip.

"First time out, huh?" Christine says. "You're doing way better than I did."

"Really?"

"Really. I was a basket case after ten minutes. Dira practically had to drag me around campus. I'm proud of you." She turns to Rebecca. "Both of you."

"It feels silly," Rebecca says, "that it's such a big deal. I mean, going out was never like this before."

"Well," Christine says, "it *is* a big deal. And you *know* why. It's not silly *in the slightest* to feel like this is a big step. Yes?"

"Yes," Faye says.

"The first few minutes were hardest," Rebecca says. "But then we were just, like, talking, concentrating on each other, and it was... less awful? Even though I'm still kind of puffy in the face. I'm amazed nobody said anything."

"You are not puffy!" Faye says, startled into animation by Rebecca's self-deprecation. "You're beautiful! Bex, you're *so* beautiful. It's me who's puffy."

"Nope."

"Neither of you is puffy," Christine says. It's true: it's been long enough since FFS that the most obvious healing is largely done with, and it takes a practised eye to spot where the girls are still slightly swollen.

"Anyway," Faye says, "I kind of thought walking past Café One was hardest."

"Oh," Rebecca says. "Yeah. Actually, I think you're right."

“What happened outside Café One?” Christine asks.

“Some boys started yelling at us. Calling us dykes. That kind of stuff.”

“It’s 2019!” Faye says, indignant. “You can’t say that stuff in 2019.”

Rebecca smirks and pokes her. “Didn’t you say you used to—?”

“Nope. Nope. Never that.” Faye relents under Rebecca’s poking, and attempts to escape. “Yes. Okay! I said other stuff! Really bad stuff! But not that! I’m technically correct!”

Christine corrects for the instinct that’s telling her to take the girls’ hands like they’re a pair of toddlers, despite them both being almost as old as she is — and ignoring the other instinct that says she needs to drag the still-wriggling Faye away by her ear — and leads them out of the Halliday Building. Thankfully, the rain hasn’t yet returned.

“Lesson one about being a pretty girl out in public,” Christine says, once they’re clear of the building and can talk relatively freely, “is that men will *comment* on you. Sometimes they’ll try to touch you. So you have to be ready for it. And that goes double if those men think you’re gay.”

“That really sucks,” Faye says, with an edge of guilt to her voice that makes Christine wonder exactly how much of a little shit she used to be.

“Yeah,” Christine says, “it does. Welcome to the gender *everyone* looks at.”

“We *were* holding hands,” Rebecca says to Christine. “Maybe they’d’ve left us alone if we weren’t?”

“They’ll take any excuse,” Christine says, as they walk up the steps up towards the quad. “You just have to learn how to not let it get to you. Which is a lot harder than saying it makes it sound. And,” she adds, switching into a rote, sponsorly voice, with an appropriately exasperated expression which

makes the girls giggle, “you’ve learned your lesson from when *you* used to do things like that, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” Faye says, in a primary school voice.

“Yep,” Rebecca says, “that’s exactly why I was basemented. For yelling ‘dyke’. I would like you to believe that with your whole head.”

“I will,” Christine says, and Faye snorts. “Come on. Let’s get back home, and then your idiot sponsor can tell me why she packed you off to fetch me in such a hurry.”

Faye tugs on her sleeve, and Christine slows up enough for her to whisper in her ear, “Melissa.”

“...Of course.”

Melissa, whose disappearance ultimately sent Steph to their door, whose absence has Abby so lonely she’s risking contacting her family without permission — which, thankfully, seems to be going well, and thus has probably used up their institutional supply of good luck for the rest of the year — and whose spectre has seemed to hang over the place for years; *why can’t you be pretty and compliant, like Melissa was?*

Everyone admires her, no-one knows her.

Melissa. Always bloody Melissa.

* * *

Meal replacement shakes *suck*. She’s tried every kind, and they’re all the same: chalky, thick, and with an aftertaste that can’t be masked no matter how much chocolate or red berry or banana flavouring they throw at it. She drains it into the sink, half-drunk, and guesses she got maybe 200 calories out of it. Not quite enough. Whatever. She’ll add a bit of garlic bread to

her dinner tonight, make it up that way. A memory of Abby rises up in her head: *You have to eat, Mark!*

No. No, we are *not* feeling nostalgic for Dorley today! Hard not to think about it, what with all the phone calls, but she's capable of being dispassionate, damn it; she's capable of remembering what the place was *really* like. That her second year wasn't too bad and her third actively quite nice doesn't change the fact that her first year, even with Abby's support, was hell.

God. Yes. The phone calls. Several of the girls from there have been calling for the last half hour. She's ignored them, obviously; probably someone from her intake is visiting and reminding everyone of The Girl Who Left. Perhaps Nell's telling stories about her again.

It doesn't matter. If it's anything important, Abby will call.

And she's not supposed to be thinking about Abby, either! Abby's consented to give her the space she asked for, so why isn't she cooperating with herself?

She rinses the horrible milkshake bottle and throws it and its plastic cap a little too hard into the recycling bin.

"Lunch piss you off?"

She whirls, smiles, laughs it off.

Zach. Her immediate boss. Lovely guy. Took her aside on her first day and explained, 'to get it out in the open', that he's trans, he's in a relationship with another trans man, and that anything she reads about him in the papers is probably a lie. "The perils of activism," he said, and showed her a tweet from a History professor at Saint Almsworth that made her breath catch in her throat both from the association with Dorley Hall and the repulsiveness of Professor Frost's mode of expression. She even questioned his choice of name! "I wanted a name that was a little unusual for the UK," he'd said, "because I like to stand out. But I didn't want one of those *trans* guy names, you know? And of course the good professor had to needle me on it." And she nodded politely and schooled her face and

pretended not to know what the hell he was talking about. And *that* led to a five-minute primer on trans man naming conventions of the mid-late-two-thousands. Eventually he showed her screenshots of Tumblr posts on the subject, and she let herself laugh.

That had been an interesting first day.

“Never go on a diet, Zach,” she says. “You have to eat literal garbage.”

It’s her explanation for the meal shakes and the times people have noticed her counting calories on packet lunches and emailing conference organisers for nutrition information: she’s on a diet. No-one questions it, even though she’s still technically slightly underweight; diets are virtuous.

“Not *literal* garbage, surely?”

She kicks at the bin. “My ‘healthy soy milkshake’ had the consistency of that gross, thick liquid I’m always cleaning out of the teabag graveyard.”

He places an innocent hand over his heart. “I don’t know *what* you’re talking about, I’m sure.” With his other hand he picks up and hides the metal tin, the one he keeps by the sink and dumps his used teabags into.

“I can still see it,” she says, grinning. “You’re— Zach—” she leans around slightly as he passes it from one hand to another, behind his back, “—you’re terrible at this.”

“Fine,” he says, returning it to the counter. “*I’ll* empty it next time. But I’m docking your pay.”

“You pay me to scrape mouldy tea bags into a plastic bag and take them down to the skips?”

“You *do* that?” Zach says, gasping. “God. I’m so sorry. I’ll do better.”

“See that you do,” she says, but can’t maintain the stern attitude without laughing. The laugh turns into a cough. “Ugh,” she says, patting herself at the base of her throat, “I think some of that horrible milkshake got stuck.”

“Poor girl,” Zach says, rubbing her shoulder. “Hey, are you still seeing, oh, what was her name... Joyce?”

“She likes Joy,” she says. “And no. It didn’t work out.”

As per usual. She can’t let herself get to know them, no matter how much she wants to; she’s too much like she used to be. Almost a decade since Shahida, and she’s still stuck in the same pattern, even if the reasons are different this time, even if the secret is a new one. It’d be funny if it weren’t so heartbreaking.

“Sorry, kid,” he says, and she laughs and pushes him off. He’s older than her, thirty-seven to her twenty-five, and likes to remind her at every opportunity. She doesn’t mind.

He opens the door for her, at once chivalrous and reminding her that her lunch break is over, and she follows him out of the tiny corner kitchen and back to the office, where she drops into her chair, shares a smile with him as he slips back into his room, and dumps her phone back out of her bag onto the desk.

Two more missed calls.

She scrolls through. Just like the others, they’re from women associated with Dorley; she gets the updated directory every time there’s a new intake, which is a delightful yearly reminder of what still goes on under those antique floorboards. Rabia, Victoria, Lorna, none of whom she knows, and Bella, who she’s pretty sure was gearing up to sponsor someone for the first time when she left. Or perhaps it was when she was in her third year? God. Who even cares? What does it matter which exact batch of people she tortured?

She hates that she’s thinking about Dorley again. She’s long gone — even if sometimes it feels like her mind never left — and they’re not supposed to be bothering her. Whatever! Her phone will play a tune if Abby calls; for everyone else it’ll stay silent. She flips it over, places it face down on the mouse mat. Out of sight, out of mind.

She kicks up from her desk, walks over to the counter, pulls up the blind and smiles at the first student of many, shuffling nervously up to the counter, paperwork in hand.

“Hi,” she says, “I’m Melissa. How can I help you?”

* * *

“Bloody blonde bitch still isn’t picking up.”

“Still? Does she have the world’s longest lunch break, or what?”

“World’s longest, blondest pain in my arse, more like.”

The first thing Christine hears when she opens the kitchen doors and ushers a subdued Faye and Rebecca inside is Bella complaining about — who else? — Melissa. She didn’t get much out of the girls on the way home, having decided that keeping them comfortable and safe took priority over whatever slow-motion disaster’s engulfing the Hall this week, so they kept up a light-hearted chat all the way through campus. Just three girls, walking home, joking, laughing; perfectly normal. A good lesson for them.

For her, too, if she’s honest. Technically, she hasn’t graduated yet, for all that the sponsors seem content to heap responsibilities on her. Sometimes she forgets how little time she’s spent as a woman; sometimes that terrifies her. The thing with a basement transition is that you don’t get gradually acclimated to the attentions of unruly straight men and cis people in general, as someone transitioning out in the world might; you’re dumped straight into it. Sink or swim. And sometimes she still feels like she’s drowning.

She needs her *Paige*. Unfortunately, it seems she has shit to do.

Christine waves away Bella's attempt to say something to her and instead escorts the second years into the dining hall and sits them down together on one of the couches at the far end of the room. Almost immediately they cling to each other, and Aisha and Mia, who look to have been absorbed in what Faye and Rebecca ought to have been doing instead of gallivanting around campus on the whim of their irresponsible sponsor, abandon their laptops and rush over, flanking their Sisters.

"You girls okay?" Christine says.

"Yeah," Faye says. "Yeah."

"I don't want to do that again for a while, I think," Rebecca says.

"What happened?" Aisha asks. She's sitting on Faye's right, stroking her shoulder.

"We saw you were gone," Mia says, "but we didn't know where." She's on Rebecca's left, holding her hand.

"Give them some time," Christine says. "I'll go get Bella. She'll take you all upstairs, get you some tea or something."

She's turning to go when Faye grabs for her, finds her hand, and pulls her back. "Thanks, Christine," she says. "Not just for this. But for everything. At the dinner. Everything after. I'm... I'm really glad I met you."

Rebecca nods emphatically, and the other two echo a moment later. Christine smiles as warmly as she can. "I remember being you," she says. "It was only a year ago. Seems longer. So I want to help."

"It's so weird you're only a year on from us," Mia says. "You're so... together."

Christine snorts. "I'm a mess. Ask anyone."

"Maybe," Mia says thoughtfully, "but maybe I want to be a mess."

“Live the dream,” Christine says. “Message me if you need me, girls.” She pulls away, but Faye keeps hold of her, leans forward, and kisses her on the knuckles.

“Seriously,” Faye says, “thank you.”

Once again, Christine wonders if this is how Pippa became a sponsor: you keep trying to help, and someone always has to notice how bloody helpful you are, and before you know it you’re being handed the keys to some poor kid five minutes into adulthood whose only mistake was being a complete bastard.

She halts the thought. Now’s not the time to be thinking about mistakes. Because hers were many, and weren’t really mistakes at all but decisions made in desperation and cruelty, and she needs her girlfriend, her sister, or something to drink or smoke if she’s going to contemplate them.

Everyone here has a similar story. Everyone except Steph.

She shuts the kitchen doors behind her, and rounds on Bella before either of the older women can say anything. “Isabella Callaghan, if you send those two outside without an escort again any time before, I don’t know, Valentine’s Day, I’ll make a *very* unsatisfied report to Aunt Bea.”

“Christine—”

“You could have waited. Half an hour. Forty-five minutes, maybe. And I’d have been done and checking my phone again.”

“The day’s getting on, Christine,” Rabia says. “And she *is* the sponsor here. If she thought it couldn’t wait, it couldn’t wait.”

“This isn’t some clever psychological ruse to get me to say I’d be a better sponsor than her, is it?”

“No,” Rabia says. “I’m not involved with that side of things. I’m just the nurse.”

“Why not send someone from upstairs to get me, then?” Christine says.

“Upstairs?”

“You know, the cis floors.”

“The cis floors?” Bella repeats, amused.

“Does that mean you think of *all of us* as trans?” Rabia says.

“I think we need a whole new word for us, but until we get one better than just capitalising *Sister*, I’m cleaving closer to trans than I am to cis. And if *you* call yourself a cis girl while you’re under this roof then we’ve effectively expanded the definition of the term beyond usefulness. And we’re getting off the point.”

“We can’t involve outsiders in Dorley business,” Bella says.

“You. Don’t. Have. To. Loads of people up there know me! Hell, some of them even know Steph!”

“Wait, *what?*”

“Oh, sorry, did we not run that one past the good decisions gang down here?”

“Christine, that’s an unacceptable level of exposure—”

“No, it’s giving Stephanie the opportunity to hang with outsiders and socialise as who she is, with people who can see she’s a trans girl and don’t care. It’s healthy. And she *won’t* expose us.”

“Whatever,” Bella says, “the point is, I don’t mean ‘outsiders’ as in people who don’t *know* you, I mean people who mustn’t be involved in our operation in any way.”

Christine wants to scream. Wants to take Bella by the lapels and shake her. She slumps into a chair instead and glares at her, hopes the sheer psychic energy of her frustration will reach her.

“You tell them I have a family emergency or something,” she says. “You’ll be drowning in volunteers. Why are all you sponsors so bloody stupid?”

“Christine,” Rabia says, calmly, quietly, with a hand laid on the table between Christine and Bella, “you know you’re not being fair. We’re between a rock and a hard place today. Staff out or sick, you and Abby both on call and yet both unavailable, and we needed Vicky and Lorna to drive the surgeon and the electrologist, and, well...”

“We don’t *trust* Lorna yet,” Bella finishes, exchanging a glance with Rabia. “She has just enough knowledge to fuck us, really hard, and—”

“Wait,” Christine says. “You had Vicky and Lorna here and you sent *second years* out to get me? Fuck it. Conversation over. I’m making the report *today*. No—” she raises a finger to shut them both up, “—don’t say anything. I’m on staff. I have the authority. Bella: go into the dining hall and fetch those two girls and their cute little polycule back to their rooms and sit and talk to them about their experiences out there, because *they need you*. They need you to be their big sister, so go do it. Rabia will brief me, and I will do *everything* I can to help. And *if* I hear from Faye and Rebecca — and maybe Indira, too, when she gets looped back in — that you *did your job as a sponsor*, I will erase my draft report and make a new one that says you did the best you could in a difficult situation. And next time, I don’t care how sweet we have to keep her, the surgeon can take a bloody taxi. Now, Bella, *go*. Do your *job*.”

She glares at Christine, mutters, “You’re Indira’s kid sister, all right,” and leaves.

“Proud to be!” Christine shouts after her.

“Go easy on her, Christine,” Rabia says.

“Why? She ought to have enough experience by now with getting yelled at by someone younger than her. Personally, I think you’ve all forgotten what it’s like to be brand new. Go easy on *them*.” She jerks a thumb towards the dining hall. “They’re the ones who need accommodations made for them. Now, talk me through it.”

Rabia shrugs, clearly unwilling to escalate, and fills her in: Shahida showing up outside with the posters; Lorna and Vicky asking her some questions — “*Not* our idea,” she makes clear; their inability to reach Melissa; their inability to reach Abby; finally, their inability to reach Christine.

“Yeah,” Christine says, “I get it. You need Abby because everyone else here was a complete freak to Melissa because, I don’t know, she was too pretty, or too kind, or too sad, or too weird, or something. And Abby’s not around, so you need *me* to go get Abby so she can talk to Melissa and work out how scared we need to be about this old girlfriend, or whoever she is.”

“That’s about it,” Rabia says. “But I think it was more complicated than that, with Melissa—”

“Don’t care. We brought her here; we have responsibility. Abby’s talked about her at length, and I *know* things got better for her in the second and third year, but what was that thing Aunt Bea used to say? ‘Only necessary trauma’. I think we inflicted way more than was necessary, out of carelessness, or from being too busy or whatever. Stretching the duty of care to breaking point, because this place has no *staff* and no *time* and it runs on the *edge* of the catastrophe curve. I’m amazed it all hasn’t fallen apart yet.”

“Money,” Rabia says, shrugging. “Papers over a lot of cracks.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it does. Okay. I’ll go get Abby.”

“You know where she is?”

“Of course.”

“And why she’s turned her phone off?”

“Of course.”

“And you’re not going to tell anyone?”

“No.”

“Fine,” Rabia says. “Fine. I get how this works. You have your little clique, you run around doing whatever you want, and Aunt Bea lets you get away with it because you have useful skills and a pretty face and she’s desperate to keep enough girls around to keep this place running ‘on the edge of the catastrophe curve’.”

“Yeah,” Christine says, tiredly, “we all have our little cliques. This whole place *functions* because it’s a bunch of interlocking little cliques.” She meshes her fingers to illustrate. “That’s the whole point. That’s why we don’t rat each other out, because for every person who drives *one* of us up the wall, there’s someone else we love more than life itself. Rabia, I’m not trying to *fight* with you!”

“Yeah. I’m not, either.” Rabia shakes her head, runs her hand through her hair. “Just stressed. And it’s... *weird* being back. For more than just a visit, I mean. I’m still settling in at work and now all *this*, and... and I’ve been trying not to let it get to me. Sorry, Christine. I shouldn’t be rude; I barely know you.” She stretches her arm as far as it’ll go. “Stressed *out*,” she says.

“Back at you,” Christine says. “I go straight from a frankly terrifying meeting with my course supervisor to *this* shitshow, via a pair of second years who couldn’t have been more freaked out if they tried. So. Yeah. I’m sorry, too.”

“Will they be okay? The girls?”

Christine nods. “Yeah. I know them both pretty well. And it’s nothing *we* didn’t do, once upon a time.”

Some of the tension eases, and Rabia smiles. “I remember my first time out. Later than theirs, obviously. April, maybe? I remember it was just about the nicest day so far that year, and I was so happy to be out in the sun again. Trish took me to Café One. We had omelettes.”

“Trish was your sponsor?”

“She was. She’s moved on. Sells houses. We keep in touch.”

“Huh. Don’t suppose she’d consider coming back?”

“Fuck, no!” Rabia laughs, and Christine smiles, grateful that Rabia doesn’t seem to be holding a grudge. It’d suck to have the new nurse as an enemy. “She visits, and we talk all the time, but she’s living the normal life.” She sighs. “Much like I was.”

“How bad is it, being back?”

She looks away, plays with a stray lock of hair. “I mean, I get to see Bella again. Pick up where we left off. So *that’s* good. And the hospital here’s actually nicer than my old work. Being *here* again? That’s more complicated. I didn’t like who I was when I came here, even before I had it all thrown in my face.” She grins, and adds, “By Trish.”

“Yeah. I get that. Most days the Hall feels like home; occasionally it still feels like the prison where all that shit was done to me. But I met Paige here, and Indira, and Vick, and everyone else, and even if I do occasionally lose my shit and yell, it made me a better person. So... yes. It’s complicated.”

Rabia nods. “Go on, then,” she says. “Go get Abby, and we can get this shitshow on the road. I’ll make sure Bella isn’t too mad at you. I think she’ll realise you have a point.”

“Thanks. And, um, apologise for me, will you?”

“I will.”

“What will you do while I’m out?”

Rabia raises her hands and takes in the whole kitchen, strangely quiet now it’s just the two of them. “Hold down the fort, as instructed,” she says, “and that’s all. I’m not a sponsor; I’m just the nurse.”

* * *

A pressure around her midriff wakes her, and she stirs, stretches, and tries not to dislodge whoever it is who has an arm around her waist. Pippa? She's been known to latch on when they drop off together. No, Pippa's busy today. And Stef hasn't seen her much lately, anyway; she's been buried in schoolwork and dividing her time between the library, the university's many small kiosks, and her own bed, for what she's described as a series of increasingly short and unsatisfying sleeps. Pippa's been so absent from Stef's life she actually apologised! Stef shushed her: they see each other all the time, still, like at breakfast this morning; movie nights and sleepovers and gossipy catchups and all the other things Pippa shyly calls 'sister stuff' can resume when she has the time.

So. Not Pippa, then.

Her hand automatically finds the one holding her and she closes her palm over it, realising as she does so that there's only one realistic candidate remaining.

Aaron's hand twitches. Unconsciously, he curls his fingers through hers.

There's not a lot of light in the room, but there's enough to make her momentarily regret opening her eyes. They switched from the overheads to the bedside lamp as they talked, as he let her hug him, as the setting became more intimate and warm from their shared body heat. It might well have been late morning, and it might now — she leans her head up enough to check the time on Aaron's phone, charging on the table — be only mid-afternoon, but Aaron's tears, and the long, difficult conversation they had after, had the feel of a post-midnight confessional. They said to each other the sorts of things you say late at night, when the alcohol or the weed is wearing off, when sleep is only minutes away.

She told him again that she likes him. That she thinks about him when he's not around. Tried to reinforce that there really are things about him to like, aspects of him that are worth saving, and for once he didn't argue back. Progress?

Looking back, she still doesn't know. But she's pretty sure she fell asleep first, and that means it was him who hugged her.

But now she has to answer the question: does she want him to wake up with her in his arms? Will the delicate balance they achieved just hours ago have survived? Is it even *safe* for him to rouse and to realise he's been hugging his— his *friend* for hours? Or does he genuinely not care about that any more? Before she can come to a decision, Aaron moans, squeezes her for a moment — she's being held tight around her naked belly *she's being held tight around her naked belly!* — and then with a sheepish smile withdraws his hand and shuffles a little way back. It's not to get away from her; it's so he has room to sit up.

“Morning,” he says, sleepily, with a delightful curl to his lip that Stef has to hold herself back from leaning forward and kissing.

“Afternoon,” she corrects, and she's amused to note that it comes out in something like the head voice she's been practising. He's seen her in a bra, now; little point in pretending she isn't changing in other ways, too. *Fine work, Judas goat.* “It's a little after three.”

“Don't care. I could sleep forever.”

“I couldn't,” Stef says, stepping up off the mattress. “I'm hungry, and I'm pretty sure I smell.”

“You do not.” Bless him, he actually sounds offended on her behalf.

“I do!” she insists. “It's warm in here, and even hotter with, uh...”

“With the two of us under one duvet,” he says, unbothered.

“We got all sweaty,” she says, wondering how to respond to an Aaron who appears to have suddenly dropped all or most of his misgivings. “Or I did, anyway, and—” she lifts her armpit to sniff it and exposes to Aaron, if he hasn't already noticed, that she's shaving her pits now, “—it *lingers.*”

He humours her, sniffs himself through his shirt, and grimaces. “Me too,” he says. “I might not be wearing *just a sports bra*—” he briefly adopts a we’ll-talk-about-it-later tone of voice, “—but I can still kinda smell it, even through the shirt.” He closes his eyes, and sounds something closer to conflicted when he speaks again. “It’s the fucking hormones. Everything smells different. Including me. And don’t ask me how I’m dealing with that. I’m dealing by ignoring. For now.”

“I wasn’t going to ask anything of the sort,” she lies.

“Convincing,” he says, curling his lip again, and Stef has to turn away because there’s a warmth in her belly that has nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with his lips and the memory of his arm around her. So she’s not looking when he hops out of bed and brushes by her with the kind of casual closeness she’s never seen from him, even at his most convivial. But he’s not paying her any attention at all: he’s collecting his wash kit from the dresser; she was just in the way. Disappointing.

“I’ll, um, get my stuff, shall I?” she says.

Back in her room she has to lean against the door for a minute so she doesn’t yell out. He *held* her! It’s not just that he didn’t object to her hugging him, he flat-out full-on fell asleep with his arm around her waist!

Is she ready for this?

Fuck no.

Will she follow it wherever it leads?

Extremely yes.

And while she could certainly pretend to herself that she’s trying to help him acclimate, that demonstrating physical closeness even as his body changes under him might make it feel less alien to him, she’d be lying to herself and she’d know it. As bizarre as it would have seemed to the Stefan who first met him, she wants to kiss the little fucker and she wants him to kiss her back.

Robe. Shampoo. Conditioner. Shower gel. She buzzes her face again with the razor, just in case — avoiding the little patch of longer hairs that the electrologist told her to leave alone for at least a day; horrible, but necessary, since some of their number have been zapped, and the dead follicles could get infected if she messes with them overmuch — and practically leaps for the door.

He's waiting for her with a smile, right on the other side. Shit! She tries not to stagger, manages to pull up to an embarrassed stop, and steadies herself on the door frame.

God. He's smiling. *How* is he still smiling? "What's changed?" she asks, unable to stop herself, and when he laughs, she laughs too, at the absurdity of it.

Everything's changed. Silly question!

When they've calmed down he shrugs, and she follows him down the corridor to the bathroom as he talks. "I just realised that I can't stop this. They have all the power, and I have none. Except... Maria put herself in my power today. Sat close to me, turned the cameras off—" he shrugs off his t-shirt and throws it haphazardly into the corner of the shower annexe, and Stef has to smile; whatever else has changed about him, he's still messy, "—made sure I could see her injury's still healing... practically dared me to try something. And I didn't want to." Fully naked now, he picks a shower, turns on the water and steps under. "I felt sick at the thought of it." He starts lathering up, and Stef realises suddenly that she's just standing there, still mostly clothed, watching him wash. Thank God her mouth hasn't been hanging open. "Obviously I'm not going to do anything to get out of here, so why *not* surrender to the inevitable?"

She nods, stepping out of her trousers and stacking them on the wire rack, and carefully pulling off her sports bra. She has to contort her shoulders to get it off without grazing her sensitive chest too badly, but she's become more flexible since the hormones; it's getting easier to make her body do what she wants. Pippa says to expect that to get even better, and she

can't wait. "That makes sense," she says. "And, listen, if there's anything I can do to help—"

"There's something I wanted to ask you, actually," he says.

Stef channels her reaction into setting herself up in the shower next to his. It's hard not to compare their bodies; they're really not all that different. She has a little more development in the hips and the butt, he has more in the chest, and if she's any judge she'd say his face has changed more than hers: there always was a nice shape to his jaw, and the way it's starting to round out is... nice. Really, really nice. And his eyes, which had been kind of sunken when they first met, are brightening. He'll always have quite pronounced eyelids, but not only do they suit him, she thinks they work better on a face that is gradually feminising. And his—

Stop, Stephanie!

Whether he's putting on a brave face or not, he doesn't *want* this. The least she can do for him is to stop fantasising about him, stop obsessing over the way his forcibly altered body pleases her.

Shit. He said something, didn't he? How long has she been standing under the water, watching him?

"Um," she says, having failed to find anything actually useful inside her head.

He pauses in soaping under his armpits, and smiles at her. "What should I call you?" he asks.

Okay. She was wrong. Before, she was a picture of eloquence; *now* she's lost for words. "What do you mean, what should you call me?" she manages, eventually. She's vaguely aware of warm water sluicing down her face, and she absently brushes her hair out of her eyes.

"Don't you think you should, maybe, wash?" Aaron says wryly.

"Oh. Yes." She unhooks her shower gel from the pipe and starts applying it. His eyes follow her hands as she does so,

and even when she soaps up her chest he doesn't look away.

“Funny feeling, isn't it?” he says, prodding at his own swelling chest. “I kinda like the tingle when the water flows over them.” He grins, refusing to answer her question just yet, prolonging the moment a little longer, just to be a jerk. Finally he puts her out of her misery. “What name should I use for you?”

“What *name*?” He can't mean what it seems like he means...

“Stef,” he says, rolling his eyes, “you're wearing a sports bra, you're doing your hair differently, you're doing *something* with your voice, and I've seen you in makeup enough times that I feel I should be marking on my calendar the days I've seen you bare-faced, like I'm in a black-and-white newspaper cartoon marking off the days until some obscure American holiday no-one's heard of and all of a sudden your cute dog comic's been taken over by kids wearing huge buckled hats.”

“What?”

“You said yourself, you've decided to stop struggling. And we both know what that means: you're going to be a girl, like they want. You're getting ready for it, right? The voice and everything, and I can see the sore skin you're trying to hide; electrolysis, yes?”

She nods, no longer even pretending to wash. She's just standing there, watching him talk, addicted to his voice, wishing the moment could never end, that this incarnation of Aaron — barely altered, much more calm, and apparently entirely accepting of her womanhood — could freeze, could last forever, could leave Dorley with her.

“It suits you, you know,” he says. “You've seemed more alive lately than ever before. Which, I guess, makes you... lucky? That you're taking so well to this. So... what should I call you? If you're going to be a girl? Just Stef?”

“I'm trying out Stephanie,” she says, almost so quiet that the water drowns it out.

He chews on his lip, tries it out in his head. “Stephanie,” he says, and nods to himself. “I like it. It suits you... Stephanie.”

“Really?” She knows the smile that captures her face is broad and goofy and probably really stupid-looking but she couldn’t keep it down if you offered her the world.

“Really.”

Fuck it. She leaps forward, almost slips on the wet floor, and hugs him, pulls him in tight, as tight as he held her in bed, tries to pour into the contact all her gratitude, all her affection, and her perhaps vain hope that he’ll find a way to follow her.

“Thank you,” she whispers. She has to lean down a little so she can whisper in his ear. “Thank you. It’s been so difficult down here. This... this means the world, Aaron.”

“Just don’t go asking for *my* new name,” he says, his voice wavering.

“I won’t.”

“Um, Stephanie?”

“Yes?”

“We... um... fuck... we’re *touching*, Stephanie.”

She’s about to say something like, ‘Of course we are; we’re hugging,’ and then she realises what he means and releases him, backsteps carefully, and wonders if her blush has reached her legs yet. But when she regains her courage and looks him in the face again, he’s smiling, and blushing a little too, and that makes it all the harder not to just step back in and hug him all over again.

They were *touching*, were they?

Shampoo. Do your shampoo, lady, and stop being weird about the poor man.

“Sorry,” she says, when she’s rinsing it out.

He shrugs. “Occupational hazard,” he says, and while maybe he has to force it, he’s making the effort, God bless him, and she’s so fucking proud. When he asks her to do his conditioner, like always, like before, he sounds normal, like his old self, and she catches a grin as he turns away.

She wants to say it, but she can’t, and maybe she’ll never be able to, and maybe it’ll never be wise, so she won’t, but she mouths it instead, as she massages conditioner into his hair and feels him quiver ever so slightly under her fingers: *I think I love you, Aaron Holt.*

* * *

It’s been a while since Christine was last in the Anthill, which is damning because she’s supposed to have two lectures a week on the second floor. She really *has* been busy lately. With any luck, Prof Dawson’s email will be persuasive enough — and Christine can prostrate herself pathetically enough — that Maria and Edy will take pity on her and stop giving her jobs. She’s not behind, not at all, and it was gratifying to have the professor acknowledge that, but if nothing else, going to lectures gets her out of Dorley Hall. The cis people who comprise the bulk of the student population may intimidate and occasionally confuse her, but they probably have better taste in mugs.

Paige’s lecture is on the third floor, and Christine opens the door quietly, intending to find her and catch her attention somehow. Unfortunately, the lecturer finds her first.

“A late arrival?” he says, interrupting himself. “I’m not sure I know you.”

“You don’t,” she says, and flinches against the attention of a whole lecture hall’s-worth of students. “I’m here for Paige

Adams?”

“Do you have a message for her, or are you here to take her away from us?”

There’s something about the phrasing she doesn’t like, and she squints at him. Wasn’t this the guy who kept looking down Paige’s top? Men are so fucking gross. And they *do* have spare cells back home...

“Minor family emergency,” she says, trying to sound apologetic, trying to keep herself from fantasising too hard about locking the man behind a reinforced glass door and making him write *I will not perv on girls one third my age* a hundred times on the concrete wall. “I need her for the rest of the day. Sorry.”

“Fine! Fine.” He throws up his arms, and then turns on the smarm to say to Paige, down in the third row, “Ms Adams, you’ll find notes and a transcript on the intranet. Come to me if you have any questions. And do please leave quietly.”

Paige nods for him, throws her bag over her shoulder, and trots quickly up the stepped rows. Christine, watching the lecturer’s eyes track Paige all the way up, holds the door for her and covers the last metre or so of her escape with her body.

“What a fucking creep,” she says, when they’re safely away.

“I know,” Paige says. “But this is the only module I’m ever going to have with him, so I only have to put up with him for two more semesters.”

“Should we be worried? He was giving you...” Christine waves her arms, trying to find the right word, and fails. “...a *look*,” she finishes with a sneer.

“Probably not. The TA approached me in the second week, when it was clear it was me he’d fixated on, and advised me to request that our one-to-ones happen down in the nook, rather than in his office.” The nook: a cosy, rounded area on the ground floor of the Anthill, home to a scattering of desks,

vending machines, and booths for conducting impromptu meetings.

“That sounds like he does this every year.”

“With most of his classes, too.”

“Jesus.” Christine doesn’t ask why Saints doesn’t do anything about him; he’s a prestigious name. “We *could* basement him.”

Paige pretends to consider it. “No thank you,” she says. “I need him to finish out teaching the module, and he might be too upset with me to do that from a cell. Kidnap him after.”

Christine mimes writing a note. “Kidnap professor pervert... when do you think, around August time?”

“September,” Paige says. “Let him have some fun in the sun first. So, what’s my ‘family emergency’?”

“I’ll give you the quick version in the car.”

The quick version reminds Christine just how irritated she is. She yelled at Bella! And every time she doubts she deserved it, she doubles back and gets irritated with herself for peacemaking with Rabia. Because they *should* be more careful with the second-year girls! And Christine *should* stand up for them if no-one else will! God, if only Indira hadn’t been stuck down in the security room, if only Bella hadn’t been borderline panicking and making poor decisions, if only Christine hadn’t agreed to see her professor today...

“Christine,” Paige says quietly, turning down the music, “talk to me.”

“It’s nothing,” she mumbles.

Paige smiles, the loving smile reserved only for her, and reaches for her hand. “Nothing’s nothing. We’ve got time before we get there. Tell me.”

So she does, filling in all the details she’d left out of her summary, and notes Paige’s jaw clenching a few times as she listens.

“You were right,” Paige says, the hand gripping Christine’s tightening for a moment and then releasing her, to change gears. “Pippa’s the only new sponsor; everyone else is at least three years out from being in Faye and Rebecca’s position. They’re forgetting what it was like to be so new. I see it sometimes when some of them talk to *you*. I’m... going to propose something to Maria. I don’t know what yet.”

“A kick in the head for every sponsor?”

“Maybe.” Paige drums fingers on the wheel as she turns the car onto the high street. “I’m going to talk to the second years,” she says. “Ask them how they’re doing. What their plans are. How they feel about what was done to them, how they feel about the programme, how they feel about each other. Whether they feel ready to go out. I think they’ll talk a little more readily to someone like me. And then—” she grins, “—we’re going to take them out.”

“Out?”

“Yes.”

“Out *where*?”

“I don’t know yet. Somewhere fun. Somewhere very not-Dorley. We could book out a roller-skating rink, for example.”

“You want to take the second years roller-skating.”

“Yes.”

“Even though Faye and Bex had a hard time today.”

“Yes. They’ll be with *all* their friends. And me, and you. And if we book somewhere out, they’re not going to run into all that many people. I’m certain it’ll be good for their resocialisation.”

“I suppose?”

“And we’ll take a lot of Dorley girls to keep them company and keep them safe. No sponsors. Only those of us who are ‘just girls’.”

Christine shrugs. “I’m on staff, so—”

“Yes, but the second years love you, anyway.” She pauses for a moment to concentrate on downshifting as she pulls into the multistorey car park in the city centre. “Jodie’ll help, I’m certain. Vicky, too, I suspect, and where Vicky goes, Lorna follows, and that’s good, because she’s an outside presence who is *known* to be friendly. We grab Abby, Pippa — yes, she’s a sponsor, but she’d be the first to say she’s not much of one — and anyone else amenable.”

Christine nods, thinking it through. “Maria or Bea will insist on a sponsor,” she says, “and they’ll say Pippa’s too junior and Abby’s too retired and I’m too not one.”

“We get Donna, then. Or Indira.”

“Maybe not Dira. She’s been working with them. They might be nervous around her.”

“Donna will do it,” Paige says, pulling up into a parking space. “She’s always been considerate with Jodie. I’ll roll up a plan over the next few days and bring it to Maria.”

“Are you sure you want to do this? This is much more engagement with the programme than you’ve ever had before.”

“It’s not for the programme,” Paige argues. “It’s for the second years. And it’s for me. I *want* to help them. I’ve been feeling guilty about just leaving them to it.”

“Sweetheart!” Christine says, bumping up against her as they exit the car park and head out into the city centre. “You should have said.”

“If I’d said,” Paige says fondly, “you’d have tried to help. Because you’re wonderful. But also very, very busy. I didn’t want to pile anything else on you. When we do this, it’ll be me who puts it all together, liaises with the sponsors, books the venue, everything; you’ll just have to come along and have a good time.”

“And help show the second years there’s life after castration?”

Paige leans down, shoulder-hugs Christine, and leads them both over the road at the pelican crossing. “They already know that,” she says. “We’ll show them there’s life after *Dorley*.”

* * *

Lunch is takeaway pizza, which is a surprise. Indira shuttled it down in three boxes, and Stef’s about to point out that three larges is way more than the two of them could eat — and possibly more than all four of them could comfortably manage if Martin and Adam miraculously were to reappear — when Indira lays them all out and opens the first box: two-thirds empty.

“We’re burning the midnight oil upstairs,” she says, by way of explanation. “No-one has time to cook. The *metaphorical* midnight oil,” she adds quickly, clearly sensing Aaron about to say something clever about the time; it’s almost four. She points at the boxes in turn: “Barbecue beef, pepperoni, and a veggie one, with peppers and mushrooms and things.”

“Thanks, Dira,” Stef says, and Aaron nods his gratitude.

Stef wonders if Indira sees anything different in Aaron’s body language when she’s around. It’s like he’s afraid of her.

“Shall I do us a slice of each?” Aaron says, pointedly looking away from Indira and reaching for Stef’s plate. She nods, and decides against asking what’s going on that’s so important it’s taken over the kitchen; Dira wouldn’t be able to give details with Aaron around, anyway. Whatever’s happening, Stef pictures piles of empty pizza boxes upstairs, and sponsors gathered around the table, talking, arguing, working the problem, and to her surprise she feels drawn to them. She almost catches Indira’s sleeve as she leaves, to ask

if there's anything she can do to help, but thinks better of it. They have more than enough people upstairs. Aaron's her priority, and she refocuses on him in time to take back the proffered plate, now laden with pizza.

He's so different.

After showering, Aaron propped his door open and got dried and dressed in full view, and Stef still hasn't been able to get a read on why. At the time, she took her cue from him, stepping out of eyesight only when she had to be completely naked; despite them sharing a shower, it felt important, somehow, while she was dressing, to hide from him her genitals and the exact contours of her chest. Something about being in her bedroom made his gaze feel more intimate. Still, if he wanted to look at her, whether he was trying to prove something by it or — and her heartbeat quickens just to think of it — simply to enjoy the sight of her, she was going to let him, damn it, she was going to give him a show, and she stepped back out of the shadow of the door as soon as she was in her underwear and sports bra.

She knows what she looks like; she has the barest of curves, very little development in the chest and her face isn't all that different from how it was two months ago, but the differences are *there*, and they're important to her, important enough for her finally to accept herself and gain a modicum of peace inside her body, and apparently they're visible enough to Aaron for him to flip his perception of her. So, fuck it, she'll stand in his eyeline in her sports bra, arching her back and brushing out her hair, and if he doesn't like it he can turn away or close his door.

He did neither. He dressed himself and then he watched as she donned jogging trousers and a loose hoodie. And when they walked into the common area, before Indira ambushed them with pizza, he called her Steph, and insisted to her he said it with the *ph*, and when she pushed playfully against him, to thank him, to tease him, he pushed back in equal spirit.

And now, here he is, experimentally chewing on vegetarian pizza, and smiling at her when he catches her watching him.

What's *happened*?

He'll deflect if she asks. He always does. He's talked recently about how he doesn't want to do the awful things required to have even a chance of escape, and he's talked about surrendering to the inevitable. But the details are never there.

For now, it's better if she doesn't push.

"This isn't bad," Aaron says, through the remains of his first slice. "There's these tiny lumps of meat-like substance, hidden under the peppers, and they're actually okay. I think I've had them before, actually, these geometric blocks of this-is-meat-we-swear extruded fungal substance. At Elizabeth's. When it was her turn to cook for the family, she always made them have it, because she insisted it was better for her dad's heart than real meat, and she'd marinade it in... Fuck." He frowns. "That was a stupid place for my memory to go."

She reaches for him, and he lets her take his hand for a moment. But then he whips it away, out of her reach.

"Sorry—"

"No," he says, and laughs. "It's not... whatever you're thinking. I'm greasy. From the pizza."

Stef forces a smile. "I'll be greasy, too, before long. It's fine."

"Try the veggie slice," he says.

She obliges, aware of his attention as she tastes it, and when she nods at him he grins broadly.

"Right?" he says. "It's not bad."

"I still like real meat more," she says, switching to a pepperoni slice. She takes a bite, but stops chewing when Aaron snorts into his beaker of water. "What?"

“Nothing!” he says, wiping his face with his sleeve.
“Nothing.”

“Aaron—”

“Stephanie,” Aaron says, leaning into the final syllable, “I’ve got to watch my tongue, now that there are ladies present.” She can’t help looking around, and he rolls his eyes at her. “*You’re* ladies,” he clarifies.

“Hey,” she says, “I might be... adjusting, but I’m not *that* different. I’m still me, still Steph. Remember when you came up to my door and without preamble just started talking about masturbation? I *like* that Aaron. So, if you’re thinking something—” she lowers her voice and leans towards him, “—disgustingly reprehensible, I want to know about it.”

“Well, now it’s just embarrassing.”

She uses a trick she learned from the voice training documents on the server to push her voice all the way to the front of her mouth. “Please?”

He chews on his slice for a moment. “Fine,” he says, “but I’m still not going to say it. I’m going to make you work it out.”

He has to talk her through it in the end. Maybe she’s just slow on the uptake because her relief that Aaron seems to be adjusting is overriding her ability to see the bloody obvious, but it takes him almost thirty seconds to get her to absorb the humorous implications of ‘liking real meat’ in light of her recently embraced gender. When understanding dawns, she snorts and tries to pinch him, and he dodges.

“Aaron!” she exclaims. “That *sucks!* That’s so *My First Innuendo.*”

“And *that’s* why I didn’t want to explain it,” he says, returning to his slice and rolling his eyes at her. “Bad jokes get worse when you explain them; for shitty innuendo it’s, like, that but with logarithmic scaling, or something. Exponential? I don’t know; I study rocks.”

Stef shrugs. “I study language. When the books get mathsy, I glaze over. I always leaned on Melissa for the hard science stuff. I liked it, and I was sorta good at it, but I’ve forgotten a lot since school.”

The thought of Melissa is a hard one, and one that’s been preying on her since Lorna brought her up in the waiting room upstairs; it’s not just that she doesn’t want to be seen by her until she’s ready, it’s that she is, in no uncertain terms, cooperating with the sponsors, with the programme. What will Melissa think of her?

She doesn’t flinch when Aaron takes her hand, but it takes conscious effort. She’d almost forgotten he was there.

“I’m sorry you lost her,” he says. “I know how important she was to you.”

“I’m, um, sorry you lost Elizabeth,” she says.

“You don’t need to reciprocate.” He looks away, looks inward, looks truly unsettled for the first time.

“I do!” she says. “I need to. I *want* to.” She shrugs. “It’s natural! It’s *you*.”

He shakes his head, but in apparent contradiction says, “Yeah.” It’s a long time before he continues, and Stef almost says something more times than she can count, but his eyes are sharp, and she doesn’t want to provoke him into doing or saying or thinking something that will cause him to — what’s the word Christine used? — backslide. “Yeah,” he says again, leaning back in his chair, away from her. “Sorry. Still adjusting, you know? To the new world. To the whole new situation. To the, um... You know what, Steph? I’m still kinda tired. All this shit’s taken a lot out of me. I’m going to have a nap. You can finish my slices; I’ll get Maria to bring me something later, if I turn out to need it.” He pushes his plate away and stands, but puts a hand on Stef’s shoulder when she copies him. “No, you should eat. Really. You won’t be missing much; I’m just going to be sleeping. Loud snores. Very obnoxious.”

“Okay,” she says, and doesn’t reach for his hand.

He’s halfway out of the room when he turns around and asks, “Steph, you’re okay with this, right? With what they’re doing to you? With what they’re making you into?”

Hesitantly, and with what she hopes is just the right amount of introspection, she nods. “Yes. It’s new, but it’s, um... I’m okay with it.”

“Good,” he says, turns away again, and then he’s out of the door and walking briskly down the corridor. She listens to him go, and so she hears him hesitate, turn around, and come back into the lunch room. He dawdles at the doors, not looking at her, and she wants to say something but she’s frozen absolutely, pizza slice dangling comically in her hand.

Like he’s come to a decision and he wants to act before he takes it back, he darts forward, encircles her with gentle arms, and kisses her softly on the forehead.

“I’m happy for you,” Aaron whispers, and then he’s gone.

* * *

“Christine!” Robert Grant bellows, when she and Paige tentatively poke their heads through the front door. She quickly takes in the scene: Robert, seated in a decadently plush recliner; Abby, two other younger women, and Diane, Abby’s mother, all arranged around a Monopoly board; and another woman, older than Abby, holding a baby and sitting a safe distance away from the easily swallowed houses, hotels, boots and boats. Christine instantly wants to hold the baby, and just as instantly realises she won’t have time.

The atmosphere is so damn familial it hurts.

Robert leaps up from his recliner and marches over. She manages to say, “Hi, Robert,” in time to get it out before all the breath is squeezed out of her, but not quickly enough that the last syllable doesn’t come out as a wheeze. When he releases her she adds, “Hi, Diane, Abby, and, um, everyone,” raising her voice so the room can hear her.

“Hello again, Christine,” Diane says, standing up from the Monopoly board and encouraging the younger women to follow suit. “And who is the lovely young lady by your side?”

“Paige Adams,” Paige says, with a curtsey. “Christine and I are together, and I’ve known her and Abby for a while now.”

“Paige Adams,” Diane says, smiling and stepping forward to take one of Paige’s hands in both of hers. “It’s wonderful to meet you. Are you, um, are you like Christine, and our Abigail?”

“No,” Paige says, and only Christine hears the hesitation. “I’m just Paige.”

“Well, come in and have a cup of tea,” Diane says, as Robert steps aside to make room, “and tell us about yourself.”

“Um,” Christine says, watching the frown that’s been developing on Abby’s face deepen, “we’ll have to take you up on that another time, I’m afraid. We need to borrow Abby for the rest of the day.”

“Oh,” Robert says, with innocent concern, “nothing bad, I hope?”

Abby, skilled at decoding messages contained entirely within Christine’s tone of voice, is already sharing a hug with one of the girls around the Monopoly board. The woman with the baby passes up a handbag from the sofa.

“We hope not,” Christine says. “One of the other girls, from where we come from, she’s having a hard time, and she needs Abby.”

Robert claps his hands together. “Say no more!” If Abby and Christine have their own coded language then so do

Robert and Diane, because by the time Abby's halfway to the front door they've coordinated a carrier bag full of foil packages.

"Straight into the freezer with these, Abigail," Diane says, and Abby nods seriously.

It takes a few more minutes to extract her. Abby's family are demonstrative and generous with their affection, and even Paige receives hugs from everyone present, bar the baby, who Christine doesn't get to hold but does, with permission, get to kiss on the wispy hair atop his head. The Grants and the other women — cousins by close association, not blood, but just as important, judging from how firmly they and Abby embrace — extract from Christine and Paige a promise to visit properly next week, before the Grants return home for Christmas and Robert's extended sabbatical comes to an unfortunate end. No rest, he says, for the wicked. "But *some* rest for the lovely," his wife says, hugging him and smiling at Abby, Christine and Paige.

"I hate leaving," Abby says, as they round the corner at the end of the street and disappear out of sight of her waving family. "I really could live with them. They don't care, Chrissy. They've forgiven me and they don't care *at all* that I'm different now. They love it, actually! Mum keeps saying how much womanhood suits me."

"I'm so happy for you," Christine says, with generosity and genuine feeling and absolutely zero jealousy.

"They do seem nice," Paige says.

"They are," Abby says, exhaling all her remaining warmth. "And, since you're here, Paige, when *did* Christine tell you about my family?"

"About two seconds after I got home from meeting them," Christine says. "No more secrets from Paige, remember? Ever again."

"Yeah," Abby says, "I remember. Sorry, Paige. I know you're trustworthy, it's just... they're *mine*. And I'm surprised

by how important that is to me.”

“I think I get it,” Christine says. “And you know Paige; she won’t tell a soul.”

Paige says, “I’m a vault,” and punctuates the sentiment with the double-*beep* from the remote lock on the car.

Abby takes in the situation, which Christine explains as Paige drives them back towards Saints, with extreme tension. “It *had* to be Shahida,” she mutters. “Had to be her.”

“Who *is* she?”

“I’ve never met her. But Liss has told me all about her. They were... something. Something complicated, something close... something that ended really, really badly. I’ve had our people give me annual reports on her; last I heard, she was in the States.”

“Vicky and Lorna said she’s just recently got back,” Christine says, “and started feeling all nostalgic.”

“Fuck.”

“That’s what the rest of us said, too. How dangerous could this get, Abby?”

“For us?” She wiggles a flattened palm at around knee height. “Not very. But Liss says she’s persistent, intelligent, and the reports say she’s earning decent money, so she has resources. She could make herself very difficult to deal with humanely.”

“Melissa won’t let us do anything to her, surely?”

“No,” Abby says. “And neither will I, and Maria will step pretty hard on the idea, too. No-one wants to harm an innocent woman.”

“Which means we have two realistic options,” Paige says. “Fob her off, or brief her and hope she doesn’t go immediately to the police.”

“I’m strongly on Team Fob Her Off,” Christine says.

“Same,” Abby says. “God. Why *now*?”

“What do you mean?”

Abby watches the city go by for a while, and when she replies, it’s slow and painful. “Melissa was my world for a long time. We fell in love. At least, I did. And I thought she did, too. And, yes, I *know* how unethical that is. We kept it a secret from the other sponsors, and from the rest of her intake. A bad secret. I think everyone knew. It felt like everyone did, anyway. We were happy, though, or happy enough. But as soon as she could, she left. Left Dorley; left me. And we still talked, sure, and I still visited her, and she still came back from time to time, since she still *officially* lived on-site, and when we saw each other it was just like it used to be, and I *know* most of her decision was just that Dorley was... not kind to her. But, still, distance changes things. And she wanted it to. She said to me once that she didn’t have a way to know—” she has to stop for a second, to wipe her eyes, to swallow, to breathe, “—to know that *we* were ever real. So she started seeing other people. To, I think, find something that felt real to her? I don’t know. She was never super clear about that, and I didn’t want to go on at her, because, I mean, we really *shouldn’t* have gotten so close, not in the way we did. She was right, really. How *could* it be real? She was in the worst place of her life, and I was the one who held her hand through it. We should never have so much as kissed.” She sniffs. “She asked me to step back from her life a few months ago. No calls, no visits. No contact, unless she initiates it.”

“Abby...” Christine had known some of this and guessed a lot of the rest, but it’s hard to hear all the same. She shouldn’t have sat up front, next to Paige; she should have sat in the back, with Abby, so she wouldn’t have to say all this alone.

“And now... I was just feeling ready to start my life again. I have my family back. I’m moving on. I’m even doing well at work! So, of course, here’s Shahida, and here’s Melissa again, and here I am... A fucking wreck in the back of a car, stupid and vulnerable and— and—”

“It’s okay, Abs,” Christine says.

“It’s not. I’m excited, you know? Like an idiot, I’m excited to talk to her again. To have an excuse to call. Even though it’s been only months since we talked, and even though it’s because of the girl who loved her before I even knew her. I haven’t moved on, it turns out. I’m pathetic.”

It takes longer than expected to get back to the Hall, because Paige stops the car and they both join Abby in the back seat, to make sure she knows she’s loved, she’s needed and she’s appreciated, and whatever happens with Melissa and Shahida, that’s something that will never, ever change.

* * *

Her phone’s been face down on the desk all afternoon and has over the last couple of hours acquired the quiet menace of an unexploded bomb. And with the counter having closed twenty minutes ago and all her work either completed or yet to be started, she’s having trouble filling the last hour in the office without engaging with the bloody thing. Eventually she decides she’s had enough, throws it into her bag with a brief glance at the screen — there’s at least a dozen more missed calls; damn! — and grabs her coat from the rack.

“Zach!” she calls. “I’m taking time in lieu!”

“How dare you!” he shouts back. “Get back to your desk and chain yourself there!”

She smiles, and a couple of the other girls in the office giggle. If he were serious, he’d be far ruder. He pokes his head out of his office and she blows him a playful kiss, which he pretends to be horrified by.

“You’re way ahead, anyway,” he says. Of course she is; nothing else in her life but work. “Nothing serious going on, I hope?”

“No. I’m just tired.”

“See you tomorrow, then.”

She says her goodbyes to the other girls and bundles up, taking the stairs down from the second floor two at a time. Melissa doesn’t live far from the university, which is nice on most occasions but wonderful on a rainy day like today; when first she started working here she had to get the tram in, and there’s little more miserable than squeezing onto packed public transport when you’re soaking wet. She folds up the hood of her raincoat, steps out from the shelter of the admin building, and is immediately brought up short by the tune coming from her bag.

Abby’s ringtone. *I Knew You Were Trouble*. An in-joke she hasn’t wanted to drop. Abby played it for her, down in that cold, concrete room, when Melissa was finally ready to laugh.

She hates how her heart leaps to hear it. She backtracks until she’s under cover again, pulls out her phone, plugs in her headphones and drops it back into her bag, thumbing the answer button on the cord.

“Hello?” she says, like she doesn’t know *exactly* who’s calling.

“Liss,” Abby says, and Melissa’s bombarded by memories. Hearing her voice again is like coming home, and that’s *why* she’s all the way up here, over a hundred and fifty miles from Almsworth, because that voice, that face, that generous heart have enough control over her that she needs the distance to fight back.

“Hi, Abs,” she says, stepping back out. On her hood, the rain drums static. “What’s up?”

“Are you somewhere you can talk?”

It makes her chest tighten: something really *is* going on, and they need to talk Dorley business. What could possibly have happened? She doesn't know whether she feels foolish, having ignored the calls from the sponsors, or viciously righteous; they should be able to solve their problems without her! It feels underhanded, getting Abby involved, since she isn't even a sponsor any more. She just helps out with admin sometimes, or something.

As far as she knows. They last saw each other before the start of the semester. More than enough time for everything to have changed. Maybe Abby's a full-time sponsor again. Maybe Melissa successfully put enough distance between them that Abby got lonely enough to go back to Dorley and take on a new girl.

And that would be your fault, wouldn't it? Selfish, stupid, short-sighted Melissa.

It's hard not to tell herself out loud to shut up, but she manages it by tightening her free hand into a fist and focusing on the pain of the nails digging into her palm.

"I'll be home soon," she says.

"Okay."

Silence on the line. Melissa wonders how she sounds to Abby; the short, cold breaths of someone hurrying along streets drenched with rain, the splashes as she kicks up water with her boots, the clicking sounds she makes with her tongue as she heads off all the things she wants to say. Things like, *I'm sorry*. Things like, *Have you found someone else?* Things like—

"How are you?" Abby asks. The suddenness makes Melissa, currently trying to open the door to her apartment building, drop her key fob, and her irritated mutterings are audible on the line. "Oh, sorry," Abby says. "Bad question?"

"No," Melissa says, scooping it up and jabbing it at the sensor again, "no, it wasn't you. I'm just dropping things as usual. I'm okay, Abs. Not brilliant. Money's tighter. My

roommate moved out. Looking for a new one.” She checks her mail nook; bills. She leaves them there to steep for a few more days. “Work’s fine; Zach’s still great. So I suppose I’m fine. Just fine. Absolutely fine. How’s, um, things with you?”

“That,” Abby says, “is a very complex question, and most of it’s classified. But there’s one thing I *can* say, before we get into the reason for my call, as long as you promise to keep it to yourself?”

“Who would I tell?” Elevator’s broken again. Five flights; fun. “It’s just me up here.” Her voice echoes in the stairwell.

“I’m back in touch with my family, Liss,” Abby says, with bad timing: Melissa misses a step and has to grab onto the handrail to avoid falling over.

“You *are*?” she says, when she’s no longer in danger of braining herself on the tile. “Is that even allowed?”

Abby laughs bitterly. “No. They’re treating Indira as a five-year test case. Five years, Liss! I didn’t want to wait.”

“What will you do if anyone finds out?”

“I have no idea. Christine knows, though, and she’s helping me keep the secret. You remember Christine?”

“Little brown-haired thing? Terribly nervous?”

“She’s come into her own since you met her,” Abby says, with a fondness that makes its way into Melissa’s belly and twists itself into intricate knots. “And she’s not little; she’s taller than you! She’s dating Paige now, and they’re *very* cute together.”

“Paige?”

“Paige Adams, the Instagram girl.”

“Ah. Good for her.”

Melissa doesn’t ask if Abby’s good fortune means there’s any way she might see her own family; she’d rather not. Russ is her only family who matters, and he’s better off without her. Her disappearance opened rifts between him and everyone in

his life, but according to the last report — the last one she could bring herself to open, anyway — he’s back on his feet, with new friends and a steady job and a flat. Living away from their father. And she never got on with Russ, anyway, not really, not like brothers should; he always said she liked Stef more than him.

Probably true.

It *would* be nice to see Stef again, but he’s another person on a long list of people who are, ultimately, probably better off without her. Another memory: a boy, shivering in the January cold, sheepishly holding out a bag of groceries, asking her questions she can’t answer, and all she can do is comfort him one last time.

Worse than useless, always.

“Liss?” Abby asks urgently.

Melissa hiccups, finds herself breathing heavily, pitched forward on the stairs and supporting herself on the railing. “Drat,” she says, straightening up and leaning against the inside wall of the stairwell, unsteady. “Sorry.”

“Breathe, Melissa,” Abby says quietly, and counts for her.

This is why she left. Dorley Hall comes back into her life and suddenly she’s a mess.

With Abby’s encouragement she makes it back to her flat, shuts the door behind her, shuts out the world and Dorley and her family and Stef, and listens to Abby as she talks about her parents, and the family friends from down the street who’ve grown up and one of them has a *baby*, and cousin Derek and how he’s a *man* now, and Christine and how much she’s changed since Indira first dumped her in a cell.

It’s still strange to Melissa that Dorley *works*, but she’s seen too many destructive boys go on to become happy women to fight against it any more. Almost a shame, if she’s really honest with herself, that she can’t count herself among their number.

After a few minutes she puts Abby on speaker, dumps her raincoat on the peg and her bag on the rack to dry, kicks her boots off onto the mat, and collapses onto her bed, face first, wincing as she always does at the stinging pain from her chest, a daily reminder that she needs to break that childhood habit. She drops Abby down on the sheets and curls up around the phone, keeping her on speaker and closing her eyes, so it's more like she's really there. More like she's not alone.

“Go on, then,” she says. “Give me the bad news.”

On the line, and in the bed next to her, Abby sighs deeply. “It's Shahida. She's back from America and plastering Saints with missing posters, and they've all got your old face on them.”

All Melissa has in her is, “Oh.”

So it's not *just* Abby and Dorley Hall that are back in her life, then.

* * *

The kitchen's tense. As soon as they got back, Abby vanished up to her room to make a phone call she insisted not be recorded, and to that end Christine's slumped at the kitchen table with a laptop in front of her, monitoring the live feed for the entire surveillance system, confirming in real time that no-one's sneakily switched on the circuit that covers Abby's room, and that no-one's tried anything stupid like hacking into Abby's phone while Christine's around and in a bad mood.

Neither of those eventualities is especially likely, but Abby likes her privacy, and Christine likes Abby.

A handful more sponsors and hangers-on have drifted in since they got back. Pippa, the most recent arrival, sits sucking

down coffee and looking very much like someone who just got done with a full day of classes and came home to find her dorm in panic mode, and Christine feels her exhaustion on a spiritual level. Maybe all of them can just go fall into a bed somewhere and sleep for a week after this; Pippa can go get Steph and Christine can get Indira, and they can fetch Abby together and all ball up into a sisterly cuddle pile.

“For the record,” Pippa says, inserting herself into the conversation currently happening somewhere over Christine’s head and pointing a pizza slice at Bella, “she’s right. It’s too early to send second years out without support.”

“I know, I know,” Bella says. “I’ve had my kicking. You don’t need to join in.”

“I volunteer, by the way. If you need to talk to someone for whom all that stuff is still pretty recent, call me. Christine’s still, somehow, busier than me, and she hasn’t even graduated yet.”

“Yes, please,” Christine says, aware as she does so that her voice sounds a little slurred; God, she’s tired. “Pippa can be Dorley’s conscience for a while. From now on, I’m tech support *only*.”

Pippa pats her hand and Paige, sitting on her other side, kisses her on the temple.

“How long do you think she’ll be?” Rabia asks.

“Abby?” Tabby says, from her position leaning languidly against the door frame into the dining hall. “Talking to Melissa? Could be *hours*. I know you hate waiting, but—” she sucks air between her teeth, “—sucks to be you.”

“Tabitha Forbes, you malign bitch—” Rabia starts, but she cuts herself off when Tabby makes a rude gesture. “Shit. I’m too tired to throw things at her. Volunteers to do it for me?” Tabby retracts her middle finger and makes a heart with her forefingers and thumbs instead, and Rabia blows her a kiss. “Awful woman,” Rabia says, giggling. “Just awful.”

“Lovely to have you back, Rab,” Tabby says.

“Oh sponsor, my sponsor,” Rabia says.

Before anyone else can contribute, Christine holds up a hand. “She’s done.” She leans hard into Paige’s shoulder for a second, absorbing as much energy as she can from the contact, and then pulls her personal blocks out of the security system, puts it back how it was when she found it. “This was so much more fun when I wasn’t supposed to be doing it,” she mutters, slamming the lid of the laptop shut, and Paige kisses her again.

A few minutes later, a drawn-looking Abby, her face now bare of the makeup she wore to visit her family, returns to the kitchen and accepts the chair Bella pulls out for her.

“Thanks,” she says. “Okay. First things first: Melissa’s going to stay in Manchester. She’s not coming down.” A handful of people around the table sigh with relief; some of the sponsors had been convinced Melissa would immediately come back to Dorley and thus put herself and the Hall in danger of exposure, but Christine hadn’t thought it likely and neither had Abby. “I’ve agreed the story we’re going to tell Shahida; it’s essentially the one the public already knows, but with a few extra details. We’ll call her, arrange to meet somewhere quiet but close by. Christine and I will go see her, talk her through it.”

“Why Christine?” Bella asks.

Abby illustrates with her fingers a chain of connections: “Lorna and Vicky talked to her. Said they know people who live at Dorley. Christine’s going to be the girl they know. And she knows me, and I know— I *knew* ‘Mark’.”

“Should we get Lorna and Vicky, too? Since Shahida met them already.”

“I thought you didn’t trust Lorna,” Christine says.

“I just don’t know her,” Bella says, exasperated. “But you do — a lot of you, apparently — so I suppose I’m fine with her. Someone call Lorna and Vicky?”

“Let’s not chuck a half-dozen white girls at her,” Abby says. “It’ll just be us two. Me, the one who knew Mark;

Christine, the go-between.”

Unspoken: Christine, the one Abby trusts. She can almost hear every sponsor in the room thinking it.

“Fine,” Tabby says. “Approved.” She fends off a dirty look from Bella with, “I’m senior sponsor on duty. If *you* want to go wake up the concussion patient, be my guest, but I’m a hundred percent certain Maria will back Abby and me. Edy will, too.”

“No,” Bella says, “I meant— never mind. Can we at least have the initial contact on the record?”

Tabby nods. “Yes. Abby, you have your work phone? Good. Disable privacy, just for the call, please. Christine, confirm.”

Christine resists the urge to groan loudly and merely opens the laptop again, brings up the network entry for Abby’s phone, and gives Tabby a thumbs up when she’s done switching off all the features that protect her, a graduate and ex-sponsor, from the eyes and ears of Dorley.

The call is brief. Shahida accepts the meeting but disputes Abby’s suggestion for a location, countering with a large café within walking distance of the university called Egg Nation. Christine, thinking back to Abby meeting her parents in a touristy pub in the city, finds herself nodding: large space, plenty of staff, plenty of witnesses; safety. They both get wired, a process far less grandiose than the terminology makes it sound; Bluetooth microphones in their bags. The recordings will still be muffled, but it’s better than relying on the tiny mics in their phones. And then they’re off, Abby waiting indulgently on the front steps while Christine says goodbye to Paige. It’s a half-hour walk to Egg Nation, and when they’re sufficiently far from the Hall and Christine’s pulled out her second phone to check them both for any active signals she doesn’t expect (none, but better safe than sorry), she asks the question on her mind.

“I know that look. There’s something you didn’t tell them, isn’t there?”

“Melissa asked me not to tell Shahida that she’s dead. Just that she’s gone.”

Christine nods. It’s against procedure for a reason, but she’s not exactly surprised. “She won’t be happy with that. She’ll keep looking.”

“I know,” Abby says. “But she begged me, Chrissy.”

They walk in silence for a little while.

“You know you *should* tell her Mark’s dead, right?” Christine says, without much conviction. The good employee.

“Yep.”

“And you’re not going to.”

“Of course not. Melissa asked. And I love her, Christine. Even if she pushes me away. She went over it again, Chrissy. Just now. All the same stuff that sounds like she’s reading off a notebook or something. She said still doesn’t know—” she coughs, and rubs at her throat, “—if we were ever real, or if it was just this fucking place pushing us together. And she’s right. Bonding within the intake is one thing — we’ve had a lot of healthy, lasting relationships come out of there — but what we did was quite another. I had control over her life. Control over her body. Yes, it was mutual, but even so...” She kicks at a stone, watches dispassionately as it bounces down the road. “I want her to be happy, Christine, and I’m okay if that means she finds someone else. I really am. But she’s not happy. She’s making herself miserable.”

“And you, too.”

“Yeah. And me, too.”

* * *

Shahida hates going out alone sometimes, especially in smaller cities like Almsworth. Yes, she grew up here, mostly, but the shine's gone off the place since she's been away. Maybe it's just seeing it with adult eyes. Maybe it's just that her best friend, the boy she thought she might spend her life with, probably died here. Maybe it's that, after so much time in Los Angeles and San Francisco, everything in this country looks... squalid. It's not that Almsworth and even London feel cramped and small after America, although they do; it's that they feel *old*. Worn out. Neglected over centuries, with the cracks in the brickwork and the crumbling and poorly maintained façades inexplicably called heritage, and cherished.

And there are other things about England that have gotten uglier over the years.

Really, she doesn't know why she's doing this. She misses him, and there are fragments of him almost everywhere she looks around here, but he's dead, and that's all there is to it. By his own hand, if that's what you call walking away into the night and never returning. She's seen him a lot, over the years, in her dreams, vanishing into the darkness; it mingles with the memory of seeing the scars on his wrists, the last time she saw him.

Stupid. The worst thing in the world happened here, in this city, and she came back anyway. Exorcising her demons by marching right up to them and daring them to blink first. How did she think she would feel?

She checks her phone: twenty minutes since the woman, Abigail, asked to meet. It's not fair of her to be so impatient — she has a car, was close by, and suggested the venue herself; Abigail said she and her friend (friend *singular*, Shahida confirmed) would have to walk — but she doesn't care and resents her for it, anyway. Which is part of the toxic thought

loop her therapist talked about, actually, so maybe she should be firm with herself and try to be generous.

Or she could distract herself.

Yeah. Better.

She dwells a little on yesterday, spent with her aunts. Her mum's sister and her wife had a daughter who Shahida had thus far communicated with only over the internet, and who turned out in person to be perhaps the most adorable child Shahida's ever seen. She allowed herself to be clambered all over while her aunts filled her in on everything she missed in her years away, and fed her enough that she still doesn't feel particularly hungry twenty hours later. It had been hard to leave, even after Auntie Mona tried to get Suzain to call her 'Shahida MC', which was definitely not funny.

She glances down: twenty-five minutes.

Okay, time for her primary travelling hobby.

Shahida, a veteran of airports, railway stations, metros, and nearly flat expanses of tarmac and dirt on which one might, if one is lucky, find a bus, likes to watch people. Likes to imagine lives for them, stories which just happen to be playing out their most crucial moments right in front of her. Turning a commuter who is late for his train into a panicked father rushing to deliver the ransom for his kidnapped son keeps her mind off the fact that her own immediate future is mundane, as it was when she returned nightly to her small and empty San Francisco flat, or actively depressing, as it is now, chasing dead leads on a dead friend in a town she'd rather forget. So she looks around Egg Nation, and dreams:

The white woman in the severe suit, she's on her way home to her loving wife after a difficult job interview, stopping for a snack before the long train journey. Tonight they'll drown their sorrows in wine and each other, fall asleep together, and wake to find a message from her future employer on her phone. Jubilation! But also complication, because now they have to rip up their lives and move halfway across the

country, and is another thirty thousand pounds a year worth it? It might not be, except that they've been thinking about IVF...

The Black woman in the fashionable dress and the large canvas bag, well, she's *obviously* a buyer for a local art museum. It's not a huge name yet but it has funding behind it and some of the bigger fish are interested but she doesn't care about that, because she's just commissioned an up-and-coming young artist for an installation that will, she's certain, change both of their lives. The woman's building a stage for the girl, dedicating a whole wing to her vision, waiting impatiently for the day the work is finished and the art world will come to Almsworth and be forever moved by what they've seen...

The two white girls talking in hissed whispers a few tables over, they're sisters, running away from home, and the older and more confident one is waiting to meet a broker who can provide new identity documents, while the younger and more apprehensive one keeps watch for vengeful relatives, who might appear at any moment to drag them back to the horrors that await them in the locked dungeon of the family home...

The blonde girl in the corner of the café, staring unblinkingly at the other customers with an uncomfortable intensity, she's *obviously* a serial killer. No ordinary person moves so carefully and so deliberately, and— The girl catches her eye and smiles, and Shahida looks quickly away.

Hmm. What about the Black woman and the white woman, just now walking in and looking around? They could be...

Oh. Right.

She refused to send a picture of herself, but Abigail snapped a selfie during the call and texted it over, and there she is. So the white woman must be her friend. The girl Vicky and Lorna know.

Shahida waves. Might as well get this over with.

They seem friendly enough when they sit down, but Shahida picked a table visible from the counter, anyway.

"Hi," she says. "I'm Shahida."

“Abigail,” Abigail says.

“Christine,” the other girl says.

“So!” Shahida says. “What did you have to tell me?”

Abigail shrugs. “What did you want to know?”

“For starters, how do— how *did* you know Mark?”

She smiles, and Shahida wonders if they were close like she and Mark almost were, and instantly hates her for it. “I was just finishing up my degree when we met,” Abigail says. “And we didn’t meet in class — I was a journalism student and he took Physics. As you know, I’m sure. I was actually working on something for my internship: I interviewed new students at Saints, asked them how they were coping with the classes, what it was like living away from home, that kind of stuff. A puff piece for one of the junior writers at work.”

“And work was...?”

“Work still *is* the Gazette. You can see my byline there sometimes.”

Shahida nods, notes the pride in Abigail’s voice, and gestures for her to continue.

“Mark was one of the first students I interviewed,” she says. “And from the start, something felt different about him. It was like he had something he wanted to tell me, something he *needed* to tell me, but he couldn’t find the words to say it. We had this incredibly mundane conversation where he supplied absolutely the most generic answers you can think of, and the whole time all I wanted to do was ask him, ‘What are you *really* thinking?’ But I didn’t. We chatted a little, after the interview, and then... that was that, I thought.” Abigail crosses her arms, leans forward on the table. “And then I saw him the next day. And I *kept* seeing him after that. Just around. He was taking a couple of modules in the building I worked out of, and you know how it is, once you know a face...”

“Yeah,” Shahida says.

“He always seemed so sad. No—” Abby frowns and chews on her lip for a moment; a professional actor could not have performed *thoughtful* better, “—not sad. More like... empty. Like the thing he couldn’t tell me about, the thing he couldn’t find the words for, was his whole *life*. And it got worse. Quickly. He started blocking people out. Didn’t smile at me in the hallways any more; didn’t notice me. He was always head down, both hands on the straps of his backpack, get to the lecture, get away. And, one day, in the Anthill, he—”

“The Anthill?”

“It’s what the students call the lecture theatre complex down by the lake,” Christine says, breaking a silence which she’s spent carefully watching Shahida’s reactions. “It, um, looks like an Anthill. Or kind of a big poo.”

“Right.”

“One day,” Abby resumes, “he’s walking up the main steps, head down like usual, going fast, and he bumps into a girl. You know, like you might do if you’re not paying attention to where you’re going. And he wasn’t a big g— guy, but he was *charging* up those stairs, and she was standing right next to the railing, and she almost went over.”

“I didn’t know any of this,” Shahida says, and starts taking notes on her phone.

“The girl was fine; her friends grabbed her and she didn’t fall. But she got a scare, and maybe a bruise or two, from the railing. She yelled at him, understandably, and... I was there. I saw it all, and you could see him taking it all in, right there. If you’re... empty, then sometimes the worst things come along and fill you up, you know? It was just an accident, but I think that was it for him. I tried to catch up with him but he got nabbed for a debrief by the security guard at the Anthill and then... then I never saw him again.”

“That’s it?”

“Not quite.” There’s a cruet laid out on the table, and Abigail takes the pepper pot and starts turning it around in her

hands. “I was worried about him, so I went to his dorm, asked around, and someone said he went out, to that club.”

“Legend,” Shahida supplies, with a sneer she doesn’t even try to resist.

Abigail points with the pepper pot. “Yes. So, call me obsessive, I went after him. Never found him. He was just *gone*. I found his iPod, though. That was me. Just off the pavement, in the grass, at the bus stop by the uni. He’d stamped on it until the screen was smashed, but it was easy to recognise. On the back of it, there was—”

“A sticker. The blue flower with the circlet of skin.” Shahida doesn’t have to think hard to imagine it. After Mark’s father got the iPod back from the police, she asked him for it. He practically threw it at her, along with a few boxes of books and other sundries. He had to concentrate on Russ, he said. Whole lot of good that did either of them.

The music player had been his mother’s. The family bought it for her when she started getting sick, to replace her original model, because the new one could play video. Mark spent a whole week torrenting TV shows and learning how to use transcoding software so he could compress them to fit as many as possible on the hard drive, with enough space over to copy the entire library from her old one. It was, he told her, her lifeline through years of repeated hospitalisation.

Days before she died, she called him into her room, gave him her music, and showed him the sticker on the back. She’d had it made, a variant of a logo from the cover of her favourite band’s first album, but with the flower in blue instead of red, and with her own words on the paper double-wrapped around the stems, here rendered as torn and tattooed skin:

My Dearest Mark,

Forget Me Not.

Sometimes Shahida plugs a pair of earbuds into the broken device and listens to the soft and muffled hiss of silence.

“He never changed a single song,” she says, and in the burning of her cheeks becomes aware of the stares of the other women. “Sorry. Memories.”

Abigail’s biting her lip again. “I quite understand. When she— when he disappeared, I was consumed with guilt, with the idea that I could have done something different. I kept playing back his last days, thinking I should have tried harder to talk to him after the accident...”

She keeps talking, but Shahida’s not listening. She’s watching the other girl, Christine, instead, whose reaction to the pronoun slip was to jump as if she’d been kicked, and then go very still. Under her scrutiny, Christine visibly relaxes and returns to nodding along with Abigail, but something about her mannerisms can’t help but ring false. Maybe it’s because the girl refuses to respond to Shahida’s staring, which has passed curiosity and is now bordering on the rude.

Abigail’s still talking. Shahida’s not even there any more. She’s in LA again, and it’s only her third month in the States. This guy, Travis, her first fling in the new country, has invited her on an outing someone at his work is organising, and it’ll be their last night out and their last week together, although neither of them know that yet. Still, she’s frustrated with him, and leaving his side more and more to mingle, to meet people, to find the kinds of strange stories she’s been craving. She finds an older man, *much* older, with pimple scars on his cheeks, a dense but well-trimmed beard, and strange horizontal scars on his chest that are fully visible under his loose denim jacket, and he’s surrounded by people who all look far more interesting than Travis’ work colleagues, so she joins in a conversation on the periphery, makes herself automatically novel by virtue of her accent, and soon enough she’s talking to the big guy, who sits holding court on a bench and occasionally shares kisses and loving touches with another man, not quite as big as he, and somewhat androgynous.

The big guy’s name is Nathan, and he’s transgender. He tells her so when he catches her looking at his scars; don’t worry, he’s used to the attention, and if she’s not going to be

rude, neither will he. No, he doesn't normally show them off like this, but not because he's ashamed; the judge would yell at him if he turned up to work without a shirt on. Why are they celebrating? Well, *this guy here* — another bear hug for the other man — finally worked out that they're supposed to be *husband and husband* and not *husband and wife!* After thirty years of marriage! Isn't he handsome now? He's still picking a new name, so just call him Dumbass for now. No, he won't mind; he's a dumbass. Come, girl, have a drink with us, and tell us about yourself.

She met more trans people after that, and a lot more other kinds of people besides, through Nathan and his now-husband, through their friends, through work, and she returned home a lot more worldly than the Shahida who left a provincial British city to find herself. And now she wonders, as Abigail's talking, if that's been the answer all along, if that's what she was too naive to see at the time. The trans women she's spoken to talked about dissociation, about depression, about isolated childhoods and dysfunctional familial relationships, about bullying and loneliness; about their antipathy towards being touched. And the older ones, they told her about the way things used to be done, the way they still are done sometimes, if things are bad, if you have the resources or you're desperate enough: you leave home, you move across the country, you cut all ties with your former life, and you reinvent yourself.

Is she reaching if she thinks it all just *fits*? And if she thinks the women in front of her know more than they're telling her?

Is Mark not dead, after all? Is he really just... gone?

* * *

It's dark in here again. Better this way, with the new curves on his body barely illuminated, with the reflection of his new shape just a silhouette, a shadow, flat and empty and dead.

The girl. His future. He reaches out, fingers making contact with the glass, and traces the outline of his body.

He withdraws. He doesn't want to touch her.

Aaron doesn't punch the mirror. Maria, back when she first showed him out of that nasty little cell and into his room, she said it's safety glass, or perspex, or plastic, or fucking mithril or something, and it has to be because then angry boys like him can't smash it and use it to hurt themselves, and he fucking *wants* to, he wants to take everything out on it, to see which breaks first, him or the glass.

Angry boys like him.

Not so angry any more. Not so anything any more.

He doesn't punch it but he imagines himself punching it, like a man would, a hulking fucking man like the boys at school who came at him in the dark, like Will used to be, like Declan, with his beer barrel body. He doesn't punch it and instead he sits perfectly still, and tears the door clean off the wardrobe. He hugs his legs to his body and bites his tongue and closes his eyes, and drops the mirror on the floor and stamps on it until cracks appear in its polished surface. He opens his eyes again, looks at his reflection, shattered in his mind's eye but in front of him unbroken, and wonders which version of him, which version of the mirror, he prefers.

Academic. He's where he is, he's who he is, and what's happening won't change. Can't fight it. Accept it, or don't.

Steph. Stephanie. The girl coming out of the man like she was there all along, just waiting for someone to help her, and he didn't help, did he? No, he didn't see it until she'd already seen it herself, and all he could do was acknowledge her. What a helpless, useless little boy he is. Does *she* dream of turning back the clock, reversing the changes, returning to the man she

was? No. No, she doesn't and no, she shouldn't. She's better than him. Always will be; always was.

Hurt people hurt people.

It's what the school nurse said, the first and only time he went to see her, with his bloody nose and his bruised jaw and the raw skin on his buttocks where they hit him with the improvised cane. She said those boys must be so miserable to have felt the need to inflict such pain, and he wondered then if anyone would ever use that excuse for him.

And then he got to find out, because he hurt people. And they found a hundred ways to explain it all away.

Oh, that poor lad. He must have had his reasons. And he has such a bright future!

He wants to spit blood. Fuck her, fuck them, and fuck that poor lad. Never saw an impulse he didn't chase, and he chased them all the way to Dorley fucking Hall. Except this place gave him something nothing and nowhere else ever has: clear eyes. And with them he's seen himself, an infinite reflection of mean, nasty, brutish deeds, moments of joy extracted from the pain of others.

Hurt people hurt people.

But he's not really a person, not any more. No more excuses.

Aaron's glad he didn't kick the mirror, that he wasn't like Declan and Will and the boys who bullied him, because then he'd be scattered into a million imperceptible shards, and that would be like hiding from himself again. And he can't do that. Not any more and never again.

Here, at the end, he wants to live in the world. For the first and the last fucking time: he wants to live in the real world.

* * *

Edy's in the shower, and that gives Maria time to catch up on work without being on the receiving end of a well-meant lecture on recovery protocol. She can always hide the laptop under her pillow if Edy gets done more quickly than she expects. Abby, Christine, Tabby, Bella *and* Rabia have all submitted reports on the drama of the day, and if one combines them into, as it were, one massive document in one's head, the synthesis is that, basically, things went okay, and Bella should have been more careful about sending Faye and Rebecca out on their own. Still, Indira's checked in with the girls and verified that they're okay and watching movies together in Faye's room, and Abby's confirmed that the encounter with Shahida went to spec, so that's fine.

Bea would tease her, echo her own words back to her: see, this place *can* function without you for one measly day!

Maria sips at her tea and, looking away from the screen for the first time in a while, notices that Edy brought it to her in her favourite mug, a present from one of the younger sponsors, who got hold of some unsold and genuinely vintage Royal College mugs from the brief period in the 1980s when Saints had a gift shop. The girl had it customised in such a way that the modifications have withstood dozens upon dozens of trips through the dishwasher. The original text, floating over generic geometric shapes, reads, *Come to the Royal College of Saint Almsworth and find yourself!* The girl added, in blood-red letters, *IF WE DON'T FIND YOU FIRST!!*

It makes her smile every time.

She and Beatrice are the first to admit that the unusual circumstances of their respective transitions have left them with a shared sense of humour that borders on the macabre, but they were surprised when most of the girls who came up under their new regime seemed to share and embrace it. Bea commented at the time that it might mean they were doing something wrong, but by then someone had found her mug

collection, and the first imitation — which read, *To Reinvent Yourself Takes Balls!* — had appeared on a shelf in the kitchen, and it seemed most sensible just to run with it, to let the girls indulge themselves. Maria said at the time it might help them adjust. After a while it became nothing more than a silly tradition, a way for graduates to one-up each other on major gift-giving holidays, or to extract adorable frustrated noises from some of the younger, more sensitive girls.

In the end, she doesn't manage to put the laptop away before Edy gets out of the shower, but her partner favours her with nothing more than a raised eyebrow and a promise to make her another cup of tea when she's dried her hair, and Maria goes back to combing through the day's reports. So she's got her eye on the computer when Consensus chimes: Indira on a voice call.

"It's Aaron," Indira says, without preamble. "He's whispering to himself, but it's too quiet to pick up. He's been acting unusually all day — I've been keeping half an eye on him, despite the palaver — and now he's back in the dark in his room, and he won't look away from his mirror."

"How long?" Maria asks, calling up the camera feeds. Edy shuts off the kettle and returns to her side, frowning down at the screen. Aaron is indeed staring at himself in his mirror, legs tucked up under his chin, arms circling his shins. He's completely still.

"Only about twenty minutes. I was helping out upstairs by the time he started. Nell got on shift and called me immediately; he must have started during the switch-over."

They're still sloppier than they should be, as an institution, but Maria doesn't say it. Five, ten years ago, they had enough staff that they'd spot things like this instantly; now, they're perpetually playing catch-up.

"What's your assessment?" she says.

"I think you need to go to him, Maria," Indira says. "I think you need to go *now*. It's time."

“Yeah. Thanks, Dira.”

“Call me if you need me,” Indira says, and the connection closes with the familiar descending chime.

Before Maria can say anything, Edy’s already thrown an outfit on the bed and is offering her a hand up. Maria dresses, brushes her teeth, puts her messy hair in a tail and tests herself for steadiness. This far out from the incident, the moments of disorientation and weakness are rare, but she has a cane if she needs it. Not this evening, though.

Edy walks with her, all the way down past the kitchen, where the impromptu crisis management team are reheating cold pizza and someone’s broken out a bottle of wine, and the security room, from which Nell waves and Indira nods seriously at her. As they enter the second-floor basement, Edy peels off, finding Adam out of his room, conducting a subdued conversation with Stephanie in the common room, so Maria has a moment alone to prepare herself before opening Aaron’s door.

She knocks. Aaron needs the illusion of privacy. It’s more than *she* ever had, and she’s seen how much it helps them to have their personal space respected, even when they know they’re being watched all the time. And he’s not the same as the boy who arrived here, not any more; he’s earned some respect.

He doesn’t answer. She’s got her phone in the other hand, watching him from above, and she can see that he doesn’t react at all. So she lets herself in, taps on her phone for some low lights to come on to supplement the dull glow from above the bed, and closes the door carefully behind her.

Still nothing.

Indira’s right. This is different. This is new, for him.

Maria’s a connoisseur of toxic male fragility, and she knows by now all the ways such a psyche can shatter, all the points into which one must hammer one’s nails to turn holes into cracks and cracks into waves of broken glass. Aaron’s

someone she originally expected to break much later, months from now, around the time of the orchiectomy; probably she has Stephanie to thank for his accelerated development.

Aaron does, too. The sooner they realise they've stepped over the hard line between their past and their future, the better. Vicky and Christine, to take two examples who've been on her mind a lot lately, illustrate the point: Victoria established a new future for herself early on and was much happier for it; Christine, though, sank about as low as Aaron has, and it took the orchiectomy, the clean break with her past, for Indira and her friends to bring her around.

Take away a vital part of them, create that hard line between the old self and the new. It doesn't have to be anything physical.

She crouches down in front of the silent boy.

“Aaron.”

Aaron unwinds in shudders. He looses his hands from around his calves and places them on the floor behind, he lays his legs down flat, and he raises his head. “Maria,” he says.

“Talk to me, Aaron.”

He nods slowly. Every movement a great effort. “I need your help.”

“Okay. Do you want to sit more comfortably?”

“Sure.”

She stands and reaches for him and he pulls himself up on her arm, staggering away as soon as he's on his feet and waving his hands at her. She's confused until she realises he's spluttering an apology, but it's barely audible.

“Aaron,” she says, more firmly than before, allowing a little bit of sponsor voice to creep in, “you don't have to apologise.”

“I do,” he says, still waving her away. “I fucking *do*, I shouldn't be pulling on you like that, shouldn't be *using* you,

you were *attacked*, I can still see it on you, I can see it in the way you walk, and it's like you said, you have something to live for, someone who cares for you, and you're *worth* it, Maria, and I shouldn't just—”

He's cut off when she grabs his arm by the elbow, trusting in the physical contact to break him out of the shame he's talking himself into, and he looks at her with wounded innocence.

“Aaron,” she says.

“I'm sorry.”

“Apology accepted, if you insist on repeating it. Shall we sit down?”

He nods, and she guides him to the bed. He sits with his legs crossed, easily falling into a comfortable position, and she insists on propping some of his pillows behind him, so he can lean against the wall. He asks why she's fussing over him.

“You're worth it,” she says, rolling the chair over and sitting down opposite him.

“You both think that. You, Stephanie. Indira, too, actually, although she had a funny way of showing it. You all think I'm worth it. And I haven't been able to bring myself to believe it. Because it's *stupid*, Maria, and all of you, you're too smart to miss that. So you're all lying, or you're all seeing something that's not there. But it's okay, because now I understand.”

“What do you understand?”

He breathes deeply, almost smiling as he looks around the room. “I told you. I've seen who I would have become. And I understand now who I was, before I was brought here. I can fill in the details, all the terrible things I've done, all the terrible things I was going to do, and it makes an ugly fucking picture.” He laughs. “It's not one I want *anyone* to see, not any more. So, I understand: I had to be taken out of the world. It's better off without me. And I know that, to you, that's half the job. You want to see me change. You want to see me grow. But I can't. So I won't.”

“You can, Aaron,” Maria says, reaching for him but retracting her hand when he flinches away.

“I *can't*. I've seen how it's supposed to go, okay? I spent the afternoon with Steph. With *Stephanie*. And she's a... a *she*, now. I can see it, and so can she. Fuck, actually, I don't know how I didn't see it weeks ago. Being with her, *acknowledging* her as the woman she's becoming, it unblocked something, you know? Inside me. Like pulling all the hair out of the plug and suddenly the bath's draining properly and that's just it, Maria, I'm fucking *empty*. Take away the mask, take away the armour, the bad habits, everything, and there's just a fucking void. I'm just *this*. And that's all I'll ever be. I don't want to drag this out over days or weeks. She's falling for me. God only knows why, but she is. And the longer I'm around, the more it'll hurt when I'm gone. Because I *won't* survive this, Maria. I won't make it through. I won't be a girl like Steph. Something in her has learned to *want* this. Maybe it was in her all along. And you know what? I can look into her past and I can see it all. Maybe she only acted like a piece of shit because she had something inside her that made no sense, that defied all understanding, that wouldn't come loose when she picked at it or when other people picked at it for her, and no-one could tell her what it was, and then she's brought here and injected with all sorts of dumb shit and suddenly that thing inside her that was always coiled up and taut and— and fucking *strangling her* is loose and pliable and free and she realises: *oh shit, I'm a girl*. And I'm so *happy* for her, Maria. Jesus, I'm so fucking happy. And I think that's a good note for me to leave on, you know? I'm happy for my friend. I'm happy she's becoming the person she was always supposed to be. I think I showed her that today. And that's how I want her to remember me. Not as this empty shell. Not as *me*.” Still leaning away from her, he breathes, dry and empty. “What I want from you, Maria, is your help. I want to end it, and I need you to help me.”

“I won't do that.”

“You'd do it for Declan but not for me?”

She doesn't quibble. "Yes."

Now he leans forward, *now* he reaches for her, but she denies him. She won't support him in this.

"You can do it painlessly," he says. "You have anaesthetic here, right? Just stick me with needles, put me under, and end me."

"Aaron," Maria says, as kindly as she knows how.

"And promise me you'll take care of her, Maria," he says, reaching again for her hands; again denied. "Promise me! She's the *one good thing* in my life and she does *not* deserve to be dragged down with me. Because, look, I nearly fucked up today. I almost ruined it. I got wrapped up in my own shit and I almost let it show and I almost shouted at her just for being happy, just for accepting herself, and I *can't do that again*. I kept seeing it in her eyes, you know, or I was afraid I *would* see it in her eyes, the disappointment that I'm not living up to what she thinks I can be, so I bottled it and ran back here before I fucked up, terminally. And that took everything I had! I've got nothing left for the rest of it." He sits back again. "It's Steph's fucking trolley problem, Maria, only she's on the safe track and I'm under it. And that's where I *should* be. I'm happy there, Maria. I know what needs to be done. I'm waiting for the wheels. I'm ready for the release. But that means *you* have to do it for me. Because—" he loses control, and the last words come out in a breathless gasp, "—because I'm too much of a coward to do it myself."

"I won't help you like that."

It's not even a whisper now. Barely a sound. "Please."

"No."

"Why *not*?"

"Because I think I will love you, Aaron. Not like Steph does, nor how she will. But I'll love you like family." That's his trigger point. His lever. Like a lot of the girls, his family has been cruel or indifferent towards him, expected things of him he couldn't possibly supply or become; chosen for him a

future in which cruelty is an inevitability and happiness an afterthought. There's a missing piece in the boy's life, and she and Stephanie and all the sponsors are ready to provide it, if he'll let them. There's only one requirement. "I'll love you like a sister," she says.

He doesn't even flinch. "You won't," he whispers. "I won't make it."

She holds out her hand, makes him place her palm against hers. Accepts him on *her* terms. Lances her fingers between his, captures him, holds him. He looks like he wants to pull away, but he doesn't follow through.

"There's something you should know," she says. "Look at our hands. Look at my fingers and look at yours. You see how they're the same? And remember how you asked what happened to me when I was younger?"

He says nothing, he just keeps his eyes fixed on hers.

"Aaron," Maria says, "can you keep a secret?"

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NINE

EVERYTHING MUST GO

2006

New house. New town. New school. He screwed up, back in Cherston, and he knows it, and while both his parents promise it's not the reason they moved, the timeline's pretty clear: they completed the move less than two months after the incident in the school changing rooms. It's obvious. His fault. Russ knows it, too, and won't be mollified by Mum's reassurances that it was just time for a new start.

No-one even *liked* the old house, anyway!

He was lucky the rocks got him mainly in the back of the head, Mum says, because the stitches, and the scars they'll one day become, are mostly hidden, although as they've healed they've made the hair the doctors shaved off grow back funny. He's been thinking of growing his hair longer, to cover the scars and make the parts that stick out at weird angles easier to hide. Like some of the guys in Mum's music. Dad fought her on that, but Mum won. It'll suit him, she says.

The cut above his eyebrow — the first one; a punch thrown, a thumbnail grazing — has healed already, almost invisibly. A shame, Dad says, because girls like a boy with a scar they can kiss. He said it over dinner, and Mum hissed, "Matthias! He's *eleven!*" quietly enough that he doesn't think he was supposed to hear her. The idea of it made him angry,

like before, and he wanted to dare his father to say something about the *other* wound, the one his father carefully never mentions, the one healing at the same rate as the wounds on the back of his head; the one on his wrist. He couldn't summon the courage.

He's supposed to wear a watch over it. It's angry raw red under the bandage, and it itches.

But he shouted and he threw things and he ruined dinner, so it was up to his bedroom with no dessert while Russell stuck his tongue out through a smirk. It didn't matter. Dessert was just jelly, anyway, and Mum brought some up on tiptoes while Dad was watching his shows.

School starts in three weeks. Intimidating. But nobody knows him here, and Mum's checked online: the old school made them delete the posts about him. There's nothing left to follow him any more, except for the still-healing wounds on the back of his head and the nick on his eyebrow and his itching wrist.

New house. New town. New school. New start. All he has to do is not screw up again. And he's getting a handle on it, on the bursts of melancholy that strike him from time to time, on the shakes, on the urge to just scream as loud as he can. He's excused from PE until his stitches are judged completely healed, which might be months, the doctor says, and that's for the best; being forced to get changed in front of the others was what started this whole thing in the first place.

He hadn't meant to hit Vernon. Hadn't meant to respond with such rage to his jokes. Even though, when he recounted them to Mum, days later, her face had darkened and she'd carefully drawn his shaking body into the most delicate hug she'd ever given him, and whispered, "You mustn't believe those kinds of things about yourself. They're not true."

But they were just jokes. Vernon said so, and so did Dad.

After the first couple of days they visited him separately in hospital. Mum would cradle his wrist; Dad would ignore it.

The onset of puberty can be a turbulent time for any boy, the doctor said. Especially a sensitive boy, Mum said.

Just ignore what the other kids say.

He wishes he could. It's hard when they won't stop saying it. Hard when you know it's true. Eleven and broken already.

Everyone's quiet now. He's supposed to hide the jelly bowl until Mum can pick it up in the morning, so he stashes it in the second drawer of his desk where she'll know to look for it. He ties his shoes, pulls the hood over his head, tests the bedroom door, and stops still to listen.

No-one reacts to the almost-sound, the near-silent creak of the spring inside the handle. It's safe.

He moves through the house, balancing on the tips of his toes, avoiding as he goes the floorboards in the landing that creak, the stair near the bottom that wobbles, the threadbare patches of carpet in the hall that make footsteps artificially loud; he's been testing them during the day, writing down his notes and hiding the pad under the wardrobe. Dad wants to ask the landlord about replacing the carpet, but they're new tenants and Mum says it wouldn't be wise to make waves, not yet. For now, he knows where not to tread.

He mustn't be heard, and not just because he's sneaking out; these hours are his, are the only time he gets any peace. Being seen, being spoken to, being around people, it all gets in the way. Makes the noise from the world muffle in his ears, makes the tinnitus take over, as if something inside him is so desperate to protect him from other people it does everything it can to block them out.

Around Mum, sometimes, it's okay. When it's just her.

The kitchen door into the garden opens silently, as it's supposed to. A week ago everyone else went out for a whole day, and he waited for them to be gone before fetching the can of lubricant he stole from Dad's toolbox over a year ago; the one that rode in the bottom of his school backpack when they moved out (he had to take his bag into the bath with him one

night, to get the smell out). He ran through the same steps he had at the old place, spraying the lubricant liberally across the hinges and the handle and into the keyhole, and then propping the door open to let the wind dissipate the smell. By the time his family got back there was nothing left to notice, and his route out of the house was secured.

This is his first time testing it, though, and he's relieved when it closes and locks as quickly as it opened. He pats his pocket, checking for the spare key, and hops down off the concrete step into the garden.

It's a *long* garden, and damply messy.

They moved to the city without *actually* moving to the city. This whole place, Rectory Street and the ugly curl of residential roads to which it connects, comprises the outskirts of the outskirts, an old hamlet barely absorbed, clinging to the very edge of Almsworth and seeming to fade away as streets terminate into nothing. Their house, like every house on this side of the road, trails a thin garden down to a band of scrubland that, eventually, according to the map he looked up online, becomes woods, and he escapes into the dark, wending an experimental route through the undergrowth, hopping over the stream at the bottom of the shallow incline and leaving home behind.

The watch Dad makes him wear is an old one, digital, from the nineties, and the screen lights up when you press an indented button on the side. It's practically busted, but the green glow is enough to see the time out here and he confirms: it's Friday morning, 2am, and he doesn't have to be home again, doesn't have to be around his dad or his little brother again, doesn't have to see himself in mirrors or windows or the eyes of his family again, doesn't have to be Mark again, for hours.

2007

The stitches heal and the scars start to fade and he doesn't get out of PE forever. He's ready for it this time, though; the sensation that undressing around others forces into his belly and which works its way out through his throat, all bile and revulsion. He can swallow, he can breathe carefully, he can keep himself calm. And no-one gives him trouble in the changing rooms here. Maybe it's because, a whole school year on, the other boys are more grown up, less apt to abuse someone for being too thin, too small, too unwilling to mess around the way the others do. Maybe it's because it's a much bigger school; he's just one of over a hundred boys in his year, and there are other targets.

They don't even mock him about his hair, even though it's getting pretty long. One of the other boys, Gary, asks him about it after football one afternoon, and he answers mostly honestly: he has scars on the back of his head that make the hair grow out funny, and keeping it longer helps with that. The story he supplies, of falling through a glass coffee table, which he recalls on the spot from one of Mum's books, is sufficiently gory to satisfy, and results in the other boys asking to see his scars and then showing off their own, complete with embellished and often gruesome reenactments. Football cleats through the palm; tripping on a rockery; losing a fight with a garden fork. Several of them got theirs from their brothers: younger ones who left toys on stairs; older ones who responded poorly to losing at some video game. They judge his scars to have the fifth best story out of almost two dozen.

It's nice. Almost makes him feel like one of them. And he has an easier time at school, now he has people to sit with at lunch, people who will greet him by name in the corridor. At the old school, even before it all happened, he always felt the target on his back.

But it's still a relief when the school year ends, the summer holidays begin, and the weight of people in his world reduces. He doesn't have to be Mark quite so much, can be himself instead, the unnamed and shapeless *something* who looks out through Mark's eyes, speaks with Mark's voice, hides inside

Mark's skin; lets Mark take the bruises and the scars meant for him. He wonders sometimes what it would be like to be Mark for real, to be able to make real friends, share real thoughts, but he knows how dangerous that is; rocks thrown at his head.

Mark's pretty good at football because he can run fast. Mark sits with the other boys at lunch. Mark's fun. It's not all bad, pretending to be him.

And then his parents announce a surprise holiday, a proper one — not just a trip to the beach or one of Mum's museums — and they all pile into the car for the surprisingly short journey to Peri Park, which is where he meets *her*.

Shahida. She finds him on the barriers at the top of the water park and pushes her way into him, reaches for him with her smile and her hands both, drags him away from the drop and shows him everything. Peri Park has much to see and do, and she knows all of it, takes him everywhere, occasionally pulls out an annotated map in a waterproof sleeve to illustrate for him some element or other of the resort, all the time talking, asking questions, being *interested*, not just in him but in everything, but sometimes, he can't help but feel, especially in him. He's the first boy ever to intrigue her, she says, and she does so with such arch confidence he can't help but be flattered. It's scary at first, but she proves time and again that she *wants* to know him, and he decides, with care and some thought, to acquiesce, to open up, and she couldn't be happier. And though when he's with her he still uses Mark's name, he's not quite the same person around her as he is at school, and he finds himself wanting to spend time with her as much as she apparently does with him.

She's also possessed of an independence which astonishes him. She checks in with her parents every hour on a mobile phone — stored in another waterproof bag, in another compartment of her hip pouch — and her parents, generously, pass on their location and their choice of activity to Mum; the compromise reached after the flaming row when he returned after his first long day with Shahida.

She's very responsible, Shahida's mum said. She'll take care of your boy.

They spend most of their time in Peri Paradise; she considers a day without a dip to be a wasted one, and doubly so when there are flumes and rapids and heated pools to occupy her attention. But tonight, Friday, the second to last night, her family's taking him out to dinner, and in a rare restriction to her usual freedom Shahida isn't allowed to attend a restaurant smelling of chlorine. So they're walking the trail at the perimeter of the park, taking in the sun — Shahida's got a spray bottle of suntan lotion, and she applies it liberally to both of them, even persuading him to lift up his t-shirt so she can give a good coating to his chest and belly and back, insisting that thin cotton is not, Mark, the defence against sunburn you might assume — and enjoying the rustling quiet of the woods. There's a viewing point, one of many spread around the edge of the park, and this one's empty of people and thus perfect; she pulls on his wrist, takes him up the wooden steps and over to the fence at the edge of the outcrop. She leans over, toes extended, daring him with her eyes to join her, to risk it all, to turn belly-up over the forest below, nearly to fly over the countryside, and when she looks at him streaked with laughter and with watery eyes from the wind he knows that if they were to go over together, they might not fall at all.

The family dinner's special. Dad's glowering but Mum's effusive enough for both of them and Mr and Mrs Mohsin-Carpenter are generous. It's their treat! Try the chocolate cake! Shahida and Mark share a slice, giggling at their icing-smearred chins and at the scowl his dad's wearing.

Two mornings later he runs over to her cabin and they exchange tearful goodbyes and email addresses. Her mum, Rupa, sits him down and tells him very seriously that if he or his charming little brother ever need help, they can give her a call, and Shahida shows him on her laptop that she's already emailed him with all the relevant contact numbers.

Hugs all around. It's hard to let go.

When he gets home the first thing he does is archive the email, saving it out to a USB stick like Shahida suggested, on the off chance that Dad looks on his computer, the way he's always threatened. He doesn't reply, though, until later that night, after the family meeting, because that's when Mum and Dad finally tell him and Russ why they spent so much money on an extravagant holiday:

Mum's sick. She's sick and it might have been her last opportunity to go somewhere amazing and do something special. She's sick and she promises her children it's no-one's fault, that it was always coming. She's sick and they found it late, and there's a chance it'll all be okay but there's a chance it won't, and the two of them need to prepare for that.

She's sick and she holds him in her arms and whispers her love for him and tells him that if the worst happens he needs to be strong, he needs to be the older brother, he needs to take care of Russ, and he needs to help her around the house; and he betrays her, thinks of himself instead, understands that now she's looked into him and loved him and named him and given him a vital role to play that he *can't* be anything but what she wants and needs from him, and that continuing to pretend otherwise would be selfish.

He'll never be anything more, now, than the thing he's been running from ever since he learned how to run. Because that's what he needs to be from now on. Her precious boy. The man of the house. Her *Mark*.

So he writes to Shahida and tells her everything and he runs to the bathroom before his roiling stomach betrays him.

2008

If you're going to vomit up most of your meals, you need to be careful. You need to have a plan. Stomach acid eats away at the teeth, and the body's bad at subsisting on nothing at all, so he keeps the upstairs bathroom stocked with mouthwash and he hides sports drinks and cereal bars and vitamins and

supplements under his wardrobe, behind the wooden slat you can take out. He knows not to brush his teeth immediately after purging; he knows to line his stomach if he can stand it; he knows to take collagen so his nails and hair stay healthy. There's no such thing as *safe* purging, but his options are limited.

He's still getting on well enough with the boys at school. They've accepted him into the periphery of their groups, but the more he talks to them, the more he listens to them, the less he understands them. They don't hate the way they look or the way they talk; in fact, judging by the way they jealously compare themselves to each other, and the way they speak of this or that aspect of their masculinity, they're *proud* of it all. He likes them well enough, but he can't call any one of them a real friend; they're too different from him in some fundamental way he can't properly express. He's been waiting for a teacher or a counsellor or one of the therapists he sees occasionally to chance upon the words that explain it all, that describe him, that he can use to identify himself and find others like him, but it never happens, and in the meantime he interacts carefully with people who joyfully inhabit a world he can barely comprehend.

He's fourteen, growing taller and thickening and *changing*, and every new month seems to bring with it some new horror, some repulsive artefact of puberty. He can slow it, he's read, by eating as little as possible, keeping the creature his body is trying to become from nourishing itself on his flesh; starving it. And he can hide it in the clothes he chooses, with sleeves to cover thin wrists and layers of t-shirts to conceal his frame. He hides from himself; he hides what he's doing to himself from everyone else.

It's because he's weak, Dad says sometimes, when he's drinking, when he dares to talk to his oldest son, when he's quiet and lonely and his thoughts come up in mumbles and spittle, when Mum's too tired to sit with him. Weak, soft, and too much like his mother.

Dad's wrong. One of the few useful gifts his occasional therapists have given him is the understanding that there's more to strength than physicality, and the responsibilities he's taken on since Mum got sick are evidence of that. It's Dad who's the weak one. He never helps at all.

Besides, if they're not going to allow him to *leave* on his own terms, if they're going to snatch him up off the floor and knock the knife from his bloody hands like they did when he was eleven, if they're going to make him into the person they need him to be and not the person he *is*, whoever that might have turned out to be, then he's going to have to find his own way to survive. *That's* strength. *That's* resilience. Not ending each day at half past six, asleep on the sofa, drunk and useless.

And there's a virtuous high that comes from hunger, from the knowledge that his body is trying to grow and change, and that he's fucking *stopping it*.

At first, his methods for safer purging were gathered carefully online, with obfuscated searches — Dad's got their internet provider sending him logs — but then he started babysitting for Jenny Yau. She recognised him as bulimic the first time he showed up at her flat, and agreed to keep the secret if he promised to follow her comprehensive guide to taking care of himself. "You're Laura's boy," she said, "and that makes you special. It means I have a duty to take care of you. I also won't have my babysitter fainting on the job."

When, a few weeks later, she realised he'd spent almost all the money he earned on supplies, she started stocking him up for free, but the supplies came with a requirement: every Tuesday and Thursday, before her night classes, when he comes to sit for baby Ada — an absolute squish of a thing, a beautiful person in perfect miniature who likes to suck on his fingers and responds marvellously to raspberries blown on her belly — Jenny sits him down for a light meal. She shows him the calorie counts and describes the ingredients and what they do for his body and makes him promise to keep it down. He doesn't want to disappoint her, and he needs the money she pays him, so he does.

Two good meals a week, and whatever he can manage in between.

Mum felt well enough to eat with them tonight, so he sat with her and talked and tried to eat as little as possible, and now here he is, standing up from the toilet, wiping the last fragments of dinner from his lips. He flushes, drinks his diet sports drink and washes out his mouth. He bags his trash and hurries back to his room to stash it under the wardrobe, to be pushed to the bottom of his backpack and thrown out on the way to school tomorrow.

Chatter from downstairs draws his attention. Oh yeah, Russ brought the kid from over the road home for dinner. A new friend. Russ insisted on them eating separately, in front of a DVD on the PlayStation in Russ' room, because Mum and Dad would only embarrass him, but they were dragged back down to the living room after, to be nominally sociable.

He should say hi.

The kid, Stefan, is sitting on his own at the cleared-off dining table, books and papers spread out in front of him; Russ is watching TV with Dad. Stefan, Mum excitedly informs him, has a birthday within a day of his! She's already making plans for them to visit each other's parties next year, and even Dad's joining in when the TV's quiet. It makes sense: Russ has been pretty lonely, and this Stefan could become a close friend; his first since the move.

Stefan himself, it's impossible not to notice, is uncomfortable under all the attention, pulling frayed sleeves down over thin fingers, knotting ragged fabric around knuckles, looking towards people but not at them, and saying little.

Too familiar.

Mark takes the chair next to him at the dining table almost on impulse, wanting to build a wall between the boy and everyone else. At least the dining room, even with the double doors open, gives them something like their own space, and if

Mark can engage him in conversation, something private, just between the two of them, then everyone else will go back to watching TV.

Stefan's been using the homework, Mark would bet all his money, as an excuse not to talk to the adults.

"Hi," Stefan says. "You're Mark?"

"That's what they tell me," he says, with aggressive honesty. It's not funny, not even humour, but the kid laughs, and draws from Mark a genuine smile. He looks over the books spread out on the table. "What subject?"

"Oh," the kid says. "Um, Science." Hard not to laugh; at Stefan's age, it's just one subject, the marvels of the universe crammed into a couple of hours a week and simplified almost beyond usefulness.

"My favourite. You need help?"

He asks without thinking, but the offer's genuine. Stefan, eyes wide, thinks for a second and then nods.

God, there's so much about this kid that's familiar: he's withdrawn, almost hiding, every possible centimetre of skin down to his fingers and up to his neck covered twice over and pulled tight; he's shy but, Mark quickly discovers, possessed of infectious enthusiasm that reveals itself the moment someone takes a genuine interest. It's like looking into the past. Guiltily he thinks back just ten minutes, to throwing up his dinner, cleaning up, and all the methodical steps he takes both to break himself more completely and to conceal from others how broken he's become, and he hopes like hell he's seeing things in Stefan that aren't there.

Still, maybe he can help. Stefan's ten; a whole year younger than Mark was when everything in his life went to shit. Maybe Stefan's path doesn't have to be like Mark's.

Stefan shows him the homework question and Mark sees immediately that it's worded confusingly, so they go over the relevant pages together, in the process drawing Stefan further

out of his shell: he starts moving his hands when he talks, smiling, making eye contact.

Another thing that's too familiar: dark red spots on Stefan's palm, wounded skin circling a central point, five times over. Whether someone else did that to him or Stefan did it to himself, ten years old is too young for that kind of wound. On Mark's wrist the scar itches and crawls and he wants to take Stefan's hands in his and promise him that no amount of blood will make anything go away unless it's *all of it, all at once*, but only a monster would say something like that to a kid, so he pulls his sleeves tight, sits closer, and concentrates very hard on the work in front of them.

It's good to have something to do, even if it's something as banal as Key Stage 2 Science. He pulls out passages from the books, suggests conclusions that might arise from them, shows him how to build out an idea into an answer.

"The trick, Stef," Mark says, and doesn't miss the way the boy smiles at the diminutive nickname, "is to draw the stick figures first, and paint on the detail later."

Stef nods like he gets it, and frees his fingers from his frayed sleeves, to make it easier to write. Mark finds himself looking at the boy's wrists, checking for scars; nothing but clear, healthy skin.

A relief.

And then Russ is bounding back into the dining room, complaining about the content of whatever TV show it was that just finished, and Stef shuts down a little, returns to a slower and more considered and, now that Mark knows what to look for, less *real* version of himself, and Mark has to make his excuses and leave before bitter memory overwhelms him.

2009

For the last few months their tiny dining room has been a bedroom, and for the last few weeks Mum's left it only to go to the hospital. Dad put curtains up over the glass doors, found

the dining table a cramped new home behind the sofa, and with the help of Stef's parents brought home a second-hand bed from the church's supply of donated furniture.

It's one of the safest places in the house. No-one wants to lose their temper and upset Mum.

She's been getting weaker, thinner, and tires more easily, so Mark takes his hours with her when they can both find them, after school and at weekends. It's a natural progression: last year he ran errands for her, helped her out in the kitchen, went to the supermarket with her to help carry home the groceries; this year he does all those things in the background, on his own, out of view, and gives his remaining time to her. And with exams coming up, the quiet, secluded room is a restful place to study.

If only he could concentrate.

"My boy," she whispers, and he looks up from his book to find her awake and reaching out with a trembling hand, knuckles almost tearing paper skin. He takes, covers it, lends her his warmth. "My precious boy."

"Hey. How are you feeling?"

"Crap."

"Oh, Mum."

"I feel," she says, rallying, "like I'm a bucket of gourmet ice cream, and some bastard's been scooping out my insides with a silver spoon."

He laughs, because she needs to hear it — Dad hasn't laughed at her jokes for a long time — but it's an effort. She talked before, when she had more energy, about the curious sensation of being consumed from the inside, and the imagery's been difficult for Mark to forget. The medication keeps her numb, but it can't hide what's been taken from her.

"Do you need anything?"

"Just you. Just you, dearest Mark." And she smiles and more of the mother he remembers comes back, all impish

charm and inappropriate glee. When he was a kid they used to bounce on the mattress together, daring Dad to have a problem with it. “I have a present for you,” she whispers, “but I need my hand back to get it.” She wiggles her fingers, and he releases her. She sticks out her tongue at him, a picture of adolescent rebellion.

“Was that the present?” he asks. “Your incorrigible rudeness?”

She grins at him and then, in one of the rapid mood shifts he’s become accustomed to, grabs at his wrist before he can pull it away and runs a thumb over his fading scar.

“Precious,” she says. “So precious.”

“I know, Mum.”

“Never again, Mark.”

“Never again,” he promises, and it’s her turn to release him, to allow him to take himself back and hide from her not only his scar but wrists that are almost as thin as hers. She’s seen them, there’s no doubt, but she’s not said a word. He’s wondered if she ever talked to Jenny Yau about his weight — she must have; they’ve been friends since forever, since long before Dad — but he hasn’t wanted to ask.

He looks away as she leans over on the bed and rummages in the drawer, swearing under her breath. She doesn’t like to be seen to struggle; doesn’t like to be the source of pain in other people’s lives, even as her own is coming to an end.

“Here,” she says, and he looks up again. She’s holding a box, about the size of a small notebook, wrapped in brown paper and tied with a powder-blue bow, and when he doesn’t immediately take it she shakes it, biting her lip, amused at his hesitation.

The bow he unties carefully and, borrowing a little of her cheekiness, ties it around his wrist, covering the scar. “Look, see?” he says. “Gone.”

“Brat,” she says, giggling. It turns into a cough, and he waits until she waves a hand: *get on with it*.

“Yes, yes,” he says, pretending everything’s fine, and pulls at the paper. Inside the box is—

Oh, *Mum*.

“It was mine,” she says. “Now it’s yours.”

“Thank you,” he whispers.

It wasn’t long after their vacation at Peri that the hospital visits started in earnest. Dad got her an iPod, the new one that could play video, and with Mark’s help she filled it with TV shows and, especially, her music, downloading some but ripping most of it off her piles and piles of stained and battered CDs. He even used the scanner from Dad’s computer to replace the normal album art with scans of her CD sleeves, many of which were covered in scrawled, colourful messages from old friends.

He smiles, remembering the first time they listened to her music together. “Your father doesn’t approve,” she’d whispered, dragging his head roughly over so she could whisper, “but what he doesn’t know can’t hurt him.” It was all stuff from the nineties and the early years of the new century, and as she played it, one earbud each, she showed him pictures from her teenage years, all smeared eyeliner and dyed hair and sloppily customised t-shirts with spray-painted slogans like *DESTROYED BY MADNESS* and *ANXIETY IS FREEDOM*. Across the top of one page of the photo album lay a pair of polaroids depicting her and Jenny Yau posing in t-shirts which read, when they were standing next to each other, *THERE IS NO TRUE LOVE / JUST A FINELY TUNED JEALOUSY*. Mum’s cheeks were covered in lipstick stains.

He’s never understood why she married Dad. They’re so different. Jenny said once that when she went off to university and Mum stayed behind, Matthias was just *there*, and filled a void. “I told her,” Jenny said, “that leaving her alone was the biggest mistake of my life, and *she* said that if she hadn’t met

your father, she wouldn't have had you. Remember that, kiddo." At least when they moved house they moved back near Jenny, and Mum got to see her again, before she got too sick to leave the house much at all.

Jenny's not allowed over, not unless Mum wants Dad to make a fuss.

"I left all my music on there," Mum says, tapping on the iPod's scratched screen. "If Dad asks, I deleted all the rude stuff. He won't be able to check; he never could work it."

"Mum..."

"Turn it over."

On the back, affixed so securely to the metal battery cover that it almost looks like it was fitted at the factory, is a sticker: a flower, ringed with the words, *My Dearest Mark, Forget Me Not.*

"Your birth flower," she whispers, in a thick voice overflowing with tears. "Dazzling blue, like your eyes. Remember?" She's losing her voice again, choking on the memory, but she repeats herself insistently: "Remember? Remember when we found the flowers?"

He'd been barely seven. He and Mum snuck away from a school trip she was helping chaperone to explore around the railway sidings and look for hidden places, and they found a huge flower bed, practically untouched. Carefully she pulled up one of the beautiful blue flowers and held it between them both: the colour of their eyes. Russ' eyes, like Dad's, are green; Mark is blue, and so is she.

"Of course I remember," he says. "I remember the field; I remember hiding from the other kids; I remember the bollocking I got from the teacher the next day..."

He doesn't cry. He hasn't been able to for a long time. But as he crawls up onto the bed next to her and embraces her as gently as he can, he wishes as she shudders that he *could* cry, so he could share this moment properly with her. She doesn't

complain, though, doesn't ask anything of him he can't give, and slowly and with faltering grip takes his hands in hers.

She lingers for five more days, speaking little, and Mark takes every minute he can with her. On her last day, hours before the end, she whispers her last words to him, and has to repeat them three times before she can make herself loud enough to be heard.

“Forgive me?”

All he can do is nod and kiss her, and then it's Dad's turn to stay with her. He steals one last look, and runs upstairs to his room to listen to her music and wait for the end.

* * *

Shahida knows the potted history of Rectory Street. Almsworth, like most places in the UK, has a wiki and a rival wiki and a small website run by someone who's at least ninety and who has access to all manner of otherwise-lost information — like black and white photos of the high street when it was used principally as an avenue for the transport of coal — and between them she's assembled what is probably a reasonably accurate accounting of the last hundred or so years of the history of Almsworth and the tributary villages and hamlets it's swallowed as it's grown. Her own suburb, for example, is technically and for the most part just thirty-three years old, whereas the village of Aybury, which provided the raw material around here, was one of the oldest permanent settlements in the region when it was absorbed.

The local church is positively ancient, but she has no plans to visit; once you've seen one thirteenth-century stone church you've seen them all. Like the nearby university, it's named after 'Saint' Almsworth ('Arms-Worthy', and she sure rolled

her eyes when she read *that*), one of those hyper-local figures of myth who turn out, when you look into it, to be eighty percent fiction, five percent fantasy, and fifteen percent landowning legacy family.

It's a decently sunny day and the walk to the suburb of Aybury's been pleasant, but she's starting to get sweaty and is looking forward to the shade provided by Mark's house, which she's never visited but which she's seen in pictures, in the background of some of the photos Mark's (very, very occasionally) sent her, and on the overhead map she found online.

The house at number 64, like all the houses on Rectory Street, has had many lives. Its most recent one began shortly before Mark's family moved in. The new landlord modernised the structure by having all the interior walls on the ground floor knocked in, save one accent column in the centre, which was both in style and load bearing. To this fashionable open-plan layout he added extensions front and back for a cramped downstairs shower room, kitchen and dining room, and raised rents.

The renovations, which started in the late nineties and rippled slowly down the road as the years progressed, are technically still ongoing: Mark says Mrs Jessop at number 90 tied the landlord in red tape when she was asked to move out, so hers remains the only structurally untouched house on the street. The connecting road joins near the Jessop place, so Shahida makes a small detour to peer from a discreet distance through the open curtains. Comparing it to the other houses she's seen into, it looks dark and unpleasantly wood-panelled, and she wonders if it's sacrilegious to, on this issue and this alone, agree with a landlord.

Her mother and stepfather both have strongly held and regularly expressed opinions on landlords, which Edward attributes to his history as a tenant and her mother to having a functioning moral code. Should the family ever become rich enough to afford a second home as expansive as their current

one, Mum says they'll invest in something slightly more ethical than landlording, like flying killer sharks.

Shahida skips up to the porch of number 64 and prods at the doorbell. It plays an unpleasant rendering of the line *In England's green and pleasant land* from the hymn *Jerusalem*, which mercifully is cut off almost immediately by the sound of a hand slapping at something on the other side of the wall. The hymn dies with a comical descending wail, the front door opens and Mark, red-faced and over-dressed as usual, greets her with a half-wave.

She hugs him. It's been so long since they last saw each other in person, and things have been *so* shit for him lately.

"Hi, Ess," he says, pretending to struggle against her iron grip.

"Hey, Em," she replies, pulling back and presenting him with her toothiest grin. "Show me around?" She leans past him to take in the layout, to see how it matches the examples she found on the letting agent's website for another place farther down the street, and it lines up perfectly. Despite the remodelling, the main room downstairs is still fairly small; after the extensions and the stairs have taken bites out of it, the living room struggles to accommodate a pair of ragged sofas, a reluctant television on a table by the front window, and a huge pile of cardboard boxes, piled up behind one of the sofas, sealed and labelled.

The boxes dent her good mood somewhat. They're Laura's stuff, waiting to be sold or donated or put into storage or junked, variously. She can't imagine why Mark's dad would be getting rid of so many of her things, so soon. Mark said he had to steal a couple of photo albums out of a box marked for the bin men.

Mark hasn't answered, so she salvages her smile and adds, "Please?" in her most ingratiating voice. "I want the tour!"

"Sure," he says, returning her grin after a moment, and stands aside so she can explore. It's dark, despite the summer

sun; the near-black curtains on every window are drawn almost completely and Matthias Vogel peers over at her from one of the sofas, where he sits surrounded by scattered papers.

“Hello, Shahida,” he says.

He doesn’t like her and she *knows* why but she greets him anyway, with the plastic smile and the empty words she reserves for people who could make her friends’ lives difficult if she makes a fuss. The implied insult she puts in a box with all the rest; trash. She wishes she could have seen Laura again, the way they planned in their sporadic communications, but first she was sick and then she was *too* sick and then it was all over.

“Hey,” Mark says, “you wanna come—?”

“She’s not allowed in your room, Mark,” Mr Vogel says sharply, and Mark flinches.

“The *kitchen*, Dad,” Mark snaps. “I was asking if she wants to come into the kitchen. For a *drink*. She’s hot; can’t you see that?”

“Oh, she’s hot all right,” another voice says, and Shahida finds Russell Vogel peering down at her from the landing halfway down the stairs. “Mark’s got a *girlfriend*.”

“She’s just a friend, Russ,” Mark says. Always disappointing when he says it, but perhaps she can change that today.

“Mark’s got a *friend*,” Russ corrects, without removing the leer from his voice. “You should feel privileged, Shahida,” he adds. “You’re the first. First one his age, anyway.”

“Ignore him,” Mark says, turning away from her and retreating into the kitchen. She follows. Like everything in this house, it’s small, and dirty at the edges. “Sorry about the mess. I’m trying to stay on top of it, but no-one helps, so...” He shrugs and she wants to hug him again, but she accepts instead the orangeade he offers, fresh from the fridge, in old-fashioned glass bottles. “We get them from the church. And they get

them with the milk.” He shrugs again, meaning, *who knows why?* “You want to go for a walk?”

She doesn’t; she wants to stay here, see more of his home, maybe sneak up to his room, but Mark’s hunched up, shoulders turned in, making himself small, protecting himself, the way she remembers from years ago, at Peri, whenever he had to be around someone other than her or his mother, so she smiles and nods and lets him lead her out the back way.

“Home in an hour!” Mr Vogel yells from the living room.

“Jesus,” Mark mutters, straightening out and stretching. For a moment his long sleeves retract and she expects to see the scar on his wrist again, but it’s hidden under a blue bow. The wrapping for the iPod, she remembers; a remembrance of his mother, worn in such a way as to obscure the memory of the *other* worst day of his life. “I’m sorry about him. He’s got worse since... Well, you know.”

She shrugs, forcing indifference. “I’m used to people being weird,” she says.

He takes her down the garden but not through the woods — neither of them have the shoes on for it — and instead leads her across a rough path the neighbours have made with flat stones laid in the dirt, until two houses over they intersect with a passageway between gardens and return to the street, safely hidden from Mr Vogel’s eyes.

“That’s Stef’s house,” he says, pointing at an identical semi-detached on the other side of the road.

“Stef!” She giggles. “I thought he was a girl when you started talking about him.”

“It’s just short for Stefan.”

“I know!” she says. “I’m only teasing. You’re still tutoring him?”

They start down the street, away from both houses, towards the other connecting road that leads back to what would, in a larger suburb, be the high street, but which in this

place is merely a conurbation of three shops, a cash machine, and the empty building where the post office used to be. If you live here and you need something you can't get locally, you can walk to the big supermarket near the university. "It's not really formal like that," he says. "But yes. Every couple of nights. He's a good kid," he adds, with the grandiosity of a fourteen-year-old talking about a ten-year-old. And then she giggles at herself: he's nearly fifteen and she's barely six months older than him; neither of them has a vantage point from which to be pompous.

"You still worried about him?" she asks.

"Not really. Not any more. He's come out of his shell a lot this last year. When I met him, he seemed so sad, you know? So I was worried. But I think he's going to be okay."

She hugs him, quickly looping an arm around his waist, bumping against him, and releasing him before he can tense up. "You really want to go home in an hour?" she asks.

"I really don't," he says. "I'm not sure I ever want to go home again."

"Well then," she announces, pulling him to a stop and moving to stand in front of him, "I have an idea."

"Shahida—"

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes?"

"Then forget this stupid place and your stupid brother and your stupid dad and *come with me!*"

Amy's parents won't be around, and it's a lovely day, perfect for a dip in Amy's pool. And Rachel's bound to come join them if they make a thing of it. She smiles at Mark, willing him to agree, and when he nods she hugs him again, ignores his reticence, and holds him until he holds her, too.

* * *

“*Ca-non-baaaaaaall!*”

“*How* many times, Rachel?” Shahida says, flapping her hands in the air as if to ward off the splash. “If you keep diving in like that,” she adds, imitating Amy’s mother, “there won’t be any water left for swimming!”

From below the edge of the pool two fingers rise, and Rachel’s grinning face follows them. She inverts them, uses them to brush wet hair out of her eyes, and shouts, “Up yours, Mohsin!” But Shahida’s surname comes out distorted and bubbly, because Amy chooses that moment to sweep a wave of water right into Rachel’s face.

Beside her, Mark, the only person in the garden still fully clothed, laughs. Shahida turns, anticipating the smile on his face, but it looks pained, and he’s clutching his belly like his insides are going to fall out. They’ve been here almost half an hour already, and still he won’t join in. She’s been holding off on jumping in herself in an attempt to persuade him. It’s subliminal, or something.

“Em,” she says, “you should swim with us.”

“I don’t have anything to wear,” he says. They’re repeating themselves.

Shahida tries a new tack. “You can—”

“I’m *not* borrowing anything of Amy’s,” he adds quickly. “Unlike you, I don’t have the figure for it.”

Shahida giggles. When his humour comes through — and it does, sometimes, when he’s had time to relax, to become more like the person he usually tries to hide — she encourages it as much as she can. And mentioning her figure is the closest he’s *ever* got to flirting with her; she wonders what she can do to get him to do it again.

Softly, slowly, carefully. That's been her approach. He's not like any other boy she's ever met.

"I was *going* to say," she says, "you can swim in your boxers, can't you? Take everything else off, swim in your boxers, and we'll leave them out to dry in the sun when we're done."

He frowns, and he's going to refuse, she knows it, so she steps closer and smiles again. She's becoming familiar with the effect she has on him, and she knows she makes his heart beat faster and his cheeks redden. He's very bad at saying no to her.

This is probably the biggest thing she's asked of him, though. She guessed his body issues day one, when she saw him in that ugly t-shirt and those oversized swim trunks, up on the rise in Peri Paradise. She's always wanted nothing more than to reassure him but she knows, from researching online and from watching minor disasters play out at school with some of the other girls, that the impulse to interfere can often be counterproductive, that to accidentally press too hard on someone's triggers can be a cruelty in itself. So she waits, and watches, and hopes to glean a little more from him every time they talk.

"C'mooooon," she says, rubbing her shoulder against his. Amy, watching from the pool, laughs, and Shahida shoots her a warning glare. Mark's not facing her, thankfully, so doesn't see when she zippers her lips, nods in apology, and dives back under the water. Shahida doesn't want him to know she's treating him with kid gloves. She wants him to think that being around her is, for both of them, the easiest, most natural thing in the world.

"Maybe?" he says.

"Then come inside," she says, calling that a victory and grabbing him by the sleeve and dragging him into the kitchen.

Amy Woodley, Shahida's first real friend at the girls' school, has a house far grander than Shahida's. The oldest and

largest in the suburb, it lays credible claim to the Tudor heritage the other houses merely appropriate, having been a minor country manor long before Almsworth crept up to meet it. Not that you'd know to look at it: after extensive renovations, extensions, and a whole new wing just for a garage, the Woodleys' place looks as fake and tacky as every other house in the area and, if the sign over the game room door that says *F**k English Heritage* is anything to go by, the defiantly new-money Woodleys are proud of it. Their swimming pool — not quite Olympic-sized but still impressively proportioned and surrounded by weather-safe speakers and a covered barbecue pit and rugged electrical sockets and all the other amenities required to satisfy any whim that is possible to satisfy legally and safely in an English back garden — brings as many teens to the Woodleys' house as their wine cellar brings upper-middle-class families; it's debatable, Mrs Woodley says, which group makes the most noise and leaves behind the least mess, but at least the kids don't make arch comments about how if one were to tear the wood-effect beams from the ceiling and throw them at the floor, they might bounce.

Today it's just Amy and Shahida, their mutual friend Rachel Gray, who lives down the road in a house almost as large as Amy's but attends Mark's school — her parents claim to want her to get the kind of grounded teenage experiences one can only get at a state school, although she does, to her persistent dismay, also have tutors — and Mark, sweating in his many layers.

In the kitchen, he says, “I *can't*, Shy. I can't get undressed in front of them. I'm... I'm kind of...” He tugs lamely at a sleeve.

“Thin?” she supplies. He nods. “I don't care. *They* won't care, and they won't be mean to you about it. Amy and I go to a girls' school, remember? Half the girls there are—” she pauses for a second, takes care with her words, “—struggling with their weight. It's normal.” She switches to a whisper. “And besides, I don't think Rachel even *likes* boys that way;

you could have a toast rack ribcage and she wouldn't even notice. Then there's Amy, who's still lusting after that posh idiot Charles Carstairs — you don't know him; be glad — so *she's* not looking. Which just leaves me."

She's been watching his face the whole time; he's been biting his lip and, she's pretty sure, chewing on the inside of his cheek as she talks. But she's *got* him.

"I'll look after you," she says smoothly, pressing into her voice every ounce of the authority granted by the six months she has over him. "You'll be fine. I promise."

He agrees to undress down to his boxers as long as she turns away, and when he's done she wishes she hadn't made the toast rack joke. She knew he was thin, thinner now than when they met — puberty seems barely to have touched him, aside from to deepen his voice — but she never expected... this. He's not as bad as some of the girls at school, and if he were a girl she might not have such an extreme reaction, but there's still next to nothing to him.

"Mark..." She reaches for his ribs, and realises her mistake when he steps back from her, his arms returning to their protective grasp of his belly. "Sorry!" she blurts. "Sorry. You're just..."

"Thin."

"I didn't know." A lie. She suspected. Nothing like this, but she suspected.

"I don't talk about it."

"Are you sick?"

"No," he says. "Just thin."

She's been wearing a shirt over her borrowed swimming costume, and she takes it off and holds her bare arm up against his. "I'm thin, too," she says, pretending for a moment that there's no difference between toned muscle, shaped by an active lifestyle, and... whatever Mark has going on.

Wrong tactic. It works to reassure him, or he acts like it does, but he closes off the conversation. “Thanks, Ess,” he says. “And don’t worry about me.”

“I sort of *want* to worry about you, a little.”

“I’m just thin,” he repeats.

There’s more to it than that, obviously, but he’s said all he’s going to say, and the house is air-conditioned; it’s nippy in all senses of the word to be standing around in the kitchen, with him in his underwear — with a button fly, thank goodness! and she hopes he doesn’t notice her eyes flicking down to check — and her in her cossie, so she takes him back outside, not dragging him this time but holding out her hand and waiting for him to take it.

“Thanks, Shy,” he says, just before they step back into the sun.

She wants to *kiss* him. She stuffs the urge back down inside herself.

Amy wolf whistles as they emerge, and Shahida decides it’s meant for her, out in the garden without her covering shirt on for the first time. She curtseys, and she’s about to tell Rachel off for the burst of laughter until she realises that, next to her, astonishingly, Mark’s curtseying too, a wild smile on his face.

They take a moment to rub on sunscreen, after Mark attempts to demur but wilts in the face of three simultaneous lectures — although he does insist on applying it himself, accepting Shahida’s help only with the spot between his shoulder blades — and then they’re ready.

“Ca-non-ball!” Amy chants, splashing flat palms against the water’s surface. “Ca-non-ball! Ca-non-ball!” Rachel, sitting on the edge of the pool and kicking her feet in time with the chant, joins in, and moments later both Shahida and Mark are jumping in, legs curled up under their chins, making a mess.

When he surfaces, smiling and pushing off from her to swim a couple of carefree laps, stronger and more graceful than he's ever been, Shahida buries her uncontrollable joy under the water, and races him.

Over the next couple of hours Mark's phone rings a couple of times and plays the message chime over and over, but it's muffled by the pile of clothes on top of it and Shahida's pretty sure she's the only one who heard it. Mark needs a good day, especially after the year he's had, so she doesn't tell him. The boy needs to make some *positive* memories for a change!

She watches him fondly: he's sat cross-legged on one of the poolside plastic chairs, with Shahida's shirt over his shoulders to protect against sunburn but otherwise apparently unconcerned about displaying his bare — and still terribly thin! — chest, eating microwaved hot dogs and chatting to Rachel about Physics, their mutual favourite school subject. It's too bad he's a year behind her, Rachel's saying, because he knows everything he needs to know for the class she's taking; she suggests he look into being advanced a year, and he shrugs and says he'll think about it, but he has his hands full at home so it's helpful to be able to coast a bit at school.

Amy, who keeps shooting Shahida meaningful looks, makes sure Mark gets a second round of hot dogs, and they both watch him eat. They'll be talking about him all night, speculating, worrying; he's either starving himself or, worse, he's purging.

Maybe it's grief, Amy suggests in the kitchen, as they fetch a four-pack of chocolate fudge cups from the fridge. Maybe they shouldn't interfere. Maybe they should let it run its course, and decide to worry again this time next year if he's still having problems. Shahida chews her lip and can't decide.

He eats the chocolate fudge pudding, though, and doesn't shy away when she links cautious hands with him.

The sun's going to be up until at least nine, and today's forecast to be one of the hottest days of the year, so none of them want to go inside when finally they're done swimming.

Instead they reapply sunscreen and Amy brings out a laptop with a DVD drive, a pile of movies, and a basket of snacks. They lie on the grass together, Shahida and Mark spread under her shirt, shoulders touching, watching bad movies they can barely see on a laptop that's probably dangerously close to overheating despite the umbrella balanced over it, and it's exactly the sort of thing she wants to be able to do with Mark every day. She wants an endless summer with him, to have him open up to her a little more each time they meet, to coax from him secrets he might not even know himself. And, damn it, he's just *fun* to be around, and he gets on well with Amy and Rachel, and even if she wants more from him than she will ever get, she wants him with her and her friends, away from his rude little brother and his ugly mess of a father. She wants some *normal* for him.

She leans into him, nudges him with their joined shoulders, and he laughs and nudges her in return, and they share a look and then they're back to watching the movie and waiting for the sunset.

For now, at least, she can do this for him.

* * *

He gets the bus home with borrowed money — although Amy insisted he doesn't have to pay her back until 2020, and she doesn't charge interest; "Think of me more as a public cooperative than a bank. An extremely sexy public cooperative, who you want to tell all your eligible male friends about." — after getting dressed at the end of a long afternoon and finding several missed calls and a litany of unpleasant text messages. He shot off a quick reply to the most recent one, exchanged reluctant goodbyes and group text invites with Amy and Rachel, and set off for home, and consequences.

And, on the way, borrows some of the spirit of rebellion from Shahida and her friends, decides that consequences can go screw themselves. He got to spend a whole day feeling almost normal for the first time since Mum died — since a long time before, probably — and whatever punishment Dad has planned for him can do nothing but spoil it. So when he steps off the bus at the top of the road he starts planning how he's going to sneak into the house. If Dad wants to tell him off, he can do it in the morning.

He gets as far as the landing on the stairs before he's spotted.

"Mark!" his dad yells, standing from where he's been sitting on the top step, waiting for him, phone grasped in his fist. "What the *hell* did you think you're playing at? You can't just *run off* like that! I said one hour and one hour only!"

He wants to shout back at him, but he can't. He's never been able to, not with Dad. Not with anyone. And as he gathers his breath and thinks about how to respond, Russell sticks his head out of his bedroom door, eyes red like he's been crying.

Shit. Naturally, with Mark not around, Dad's anger earthed itself on the other easy target.

Selfish. Stupid. Short-sighted.

"I didn't run off," he says quietly. "I was with Shahida."

"Yes," Dad says, "and for the last time."

"What? No! You can't control my friends."

"I'm *not* having you pal around with that— that—"

Oh, fuck him. "That *what*, Dad?"

"—that *girl*, especially not if you're going to stay out all day without permission, ignore my calls, ignore my texts—"

"I'm *almost fifteen*," Mark says, standing straighter, raising his voice as much as he dares. Going back down a step. Behind Dad, Russ winces.

“*Don’t* you take that tone with me, young man!” his father roars. “And *don’t* you walk away from me!”

“I’m not,” Mark insists, backing away, taking the stairs down two at a time as his father advances. Dad’s always had a temper, and managing it’s become habit, but this is new; he’s never seen him *this* angry.

“Stay right where you are!” Dad’s following him now, down the stairs, seeming to take up all the space up to the ceiling.

“I just need to—”

“Mark Vogel, you *will* stay right where you are!”

He’s at the bottom of the stairs now, on safe and level ground again. Dad’s still coming, but at least Mark, shaking with adrenaline, is no longer in danger of falling. Dad out-masses him by some insane degree, he knows, so right now his best option is to placate him. He starts running through arguments, justifications and promises he might make, his thoughts made quick by fear.

Dad steps down off the last stair and Mark takes another involuntary step backwards. As he does so his hand goes wide and hits the top box on the pile behind the sofa. In slow motion it wobbles, it falls, and the sound of breaking glass echoes through the house.

“How *dare* you!” his father shouts. “Those are your *mother’s* things!”

Russ, watching from the landing, can’t stop looking at the fallen box.

“Then why are they out *here*,” Mark yells back, “in *boxes*, waiting to be got rid of? Do you even *care* that she’s gone?”

His father’s slap is open-handed, and Mark feels the impact of the wedding ring most of all, the hot scrape of it against his cheekbone. The blow knocks him almost off his feet, and he collides bodily with the central column. He

steadies himself on it, stares up at his father, almost unable to believe what just happened. It felt like the whole house shook.

He's never hit either of them before.

"Mark," his father says, hesitant, no longer shouting but entreating, "I'm..."

He rubs the back of his hand against his cheek and it comes away bloody. His dad moves as if to grab him, corner him, keep him where he is, say whatever stupid justifications he's come up with for hitting him. Fuck *that*. He summons every last bit of energy he has, screams, "*Get the fuck away from me!*" and runs around his father, up the stairs, past Russ, into his room. The thunder of his father's pounding feet follows him, and he gets the wooden chair under the door handle just in time. As the handle rattles he pulls the bed away from the far wall, struggling and sweating as it protests against being uprooted from the grooves in the carpet. He switches to pushing it, swearing under his breath as it lumbers across the room in ungainly, sudden starts.

He gets the end of the bed against the door just as the chair dislodges, and with one last shove beats his father's attempt to get in, forcing the door closed again and pushing with all his strength until it blocks it completely.

His father gives up trying to get in and starts banging on the door, and it doesn't take long for his apologies to turn back to anger when Mark refuses to reply. The only thing to do is block him out, so Mark retrieves his mother's iPod from the bed, presses the earbuds in as far as they'll go, and turns the volume all the way up. As the music plays and his father rages, he stares at the open window on the other side of the room and wonders what would happen if he just walked straight out of it.

* * *

> **Amy's Pool Maintenance Services** has joined the chat!

Amy's Pool Maintenance Services

Hey babes merry crumble

Shahidanism

Merry crumble, Amy.

Em&Em

Merry what?

Shahidanism

She means Christmas.

As the only one of us who celebrates it's strange she has an aversion to spelling it correctly.

Amy's Pool Maintenance Services

That's because you always moan at me when I do

You call me an Idol Fucker

You say I love eating tasteless crackers and drinking cheap wine

You ask me to spell murr

Rachel Gray

liar

Shahidanism

Yes, those all sound like things only cruel bitches would do.
We're not cruel bitches.

Rachel Gray

I'm hurt Amy
hurt

Amy's Pool Maintenance Services

FINE

Merry. Christmas.

Shahidanism

Ew.

Rachel Gray

don't brag about your stolen death cult holiday on this channel

Shahidanism

Desecrate any other pagan rituals recently?

Em&Em

Actually, I quite like Christmas, usually.

Amy's Pool Maintenance Services

Thank you!

See how all my other friends are dreadful people who love to
be rude to me

But you, Mark, I think I love you

Come here

Mwah mwah mwah

(Those are air kisses)

Em&Em

Retracted.

Shahidanism

Tee hee.

Amy's Pool Maintenance Services

You have to stay on my side, Mark

Shy's such a freak

Who the hell sits down and TYPES 'tee hee'

Shahidanism

I do, clearly. Process of elimination, Amy. This is why you're no good at science.

Back me up, Rach.

Rachel Gray

YUP it's obvious who's the freak here AMY

you're the only one of us who celebrates that time a woman had a baby after spending several long, sensual hours on top of a donkey

Amy's Pool Maintenance Services

Mark, help, they're mocking my deeply held beliefs

Em&Em

You're on your own. Sorry.

Shahidanism

Waaaaait. Back up. Em, you said you like Christmas 'usually'.
Not this year, I take it?

Em&Em

Nope. We're very subdued this year.

Rachel Gray

after your mum and stuff?

Shahidanism

Hugging you, Em.

Amy's Pool Maintenance Services

Oh Mark... <3

Em&Em

Mum, yes, but not just her.

Dad got fired, we got in debt, everything sucks. He got a new job but it pays less.

I'm getting a weekend job to help with rent.

Shahidanism

Nooooo, I'll see you even less than usual.

Em&Em

I know. Sorry.

Anyway, we have no money, so this year the tree's that little plastic one Mum used to take to work and the presents are a big shrug.

Shahidanism

I'm getting you something. It's going to be rushed as hell and you won't see it until the new year, probably, but I'm getting you something.

Oh! Question: Any idea where you're going to be working?

Em&Em

I was thinking of applying at Beachway. It's walkable and they're looking for people and it's probably a *little* more interesting than working at a supermarket. Why?

Shahidanism

No reason.....

2010

The uniform code at East Almsworth Community School had been, up until recently, blessedly lax, requiring in practical terms only that students' trousers or skirts were suitably dark and that shirt colours were reasonably close to white. Officially, a pullover with the school logo was required; in practice this was unenforced, and most students, Mark included, wore hoodies or jackets. Ties were most generally

found in pockets, or left at home. The only exception was for official visits from the government. In the week before an OFSTED inspection one year, the art department put up posters around the school which read, 'The government is coming! Hide your contraband, look pretty, and behave!' and then, after the inspectors left, held a vote to decide which of the posters had been defaced most creatively.

Mark always appreciated the leeway, the official permission to dress more or less how he wanted for school. But they've been tightening up lately. Rumours abound: they're chasing funds to refurbish the sixth-form facilities and open them up to adult learners; they're planning to become a technology college; the new headmaster has a fetish for ties. Whichever; hoodies and non-approved pullovers have been banned outside the coldest winter months, and Mark stands at the bottom of the driveway, watching the stream of students walk up to the row of bus stops, exposed and uncomfortable in his shirt and tie.

He turns the blue ribbon round and round on his wrist. He doesn't get shit for it, even though it's not exactly masculine; everyone knows his mum gave it to him, days before she died.

Rachel found him again today.

She means well, she really does, but since the start of the spring term she's repeatedly 'just happened' to be in the corridors outside his classes, or visiting a friend near his house and thus getting the same bus to school in the morning, or passing by his lunch table, and she'll have a spare sandwich or a bag of crisps or an apple or a whole packed lunch she doesn't need or doesn't want, and would he like it? And he's forced to eat it in front of everyone or she'll make a fuss.

She means well.

He's been seen often enough with her that the boys at school have started asking about the hot girl from the year above: has he kissed her yet? has he seen her in her underwear? and why *him*, anyway? He hasn't told them Rachel doesn't even *like* boys.

She gave him a cheese sandwich today, and his stomach twists uncomfortably around it. She looked for him after school, too — at lunch she gave him a look that spoke of how worried she and Shahida and Amy are about him — but this place around the side of B Block is secluded, and he watched her shrug and head for the buses.

He should ask her to stop. He should ask them all to stop worrying about him, to stop wasting their time on him. It's not like he hasn't had the opportunity; they visit him after work most Saturdays, and they text each other and talk on the computer all the time. But they're his only real friends, and he's scared of alienating them, scared of making them realise how much better off they'd be without having to worry about him all the time. Scared of accidentally letting them glimpse the anger that boils away inside him *all the time*. Scared they'll realise he's not like them; that he's not like anyone.

Scared they'll see the bitter jealousy he feels when he looks at them.

The last bus pulls away, with the last student running to jump on before the doors close, and Mark steps away from the wall, slings his backpack up onto both shoulders, and starts the journey home. Better to walk alone than brave the bus on a day like today, when the anger and the envy feel dangerously close to the surface, when any random interaction might cause him to break and ruin everything, the way he did years ago. They can't afford to move house again. Dad wouldn't do it, anyway.

The walk isn't so bad. He's sweating and aching by the time he finally pushes open the front door at number 68, and that's good: he's read that exercise wears away at your muscles, that they have to rest and repair themselves after, and even if his work today will be undone by the natural mechanisms of his body — ever his enemy — it's nice to think that, for a little while, he's pushed it hard enough that it wilts. And if people are going to insist on feeding him in places where he can't safely purge, he'll take anything he can get.

He showers with a towel over the bathroom mirror and luxuriates in the fizzing in his muscles. Imagines himself melting away, coming apart, sluicing in bloody pieces away with the shower water.

Can't stay in here forever, though.

Mark Vogel doesn't have a life; he has a schedule. Things he must do, people he mustn't let down. Shahida and Amy and Rachel; Stef; Jenny Yau and little Ada; his job at the Beachway; even Russ. He cycles through them, one after another, each of them a reason to live another day.

Tonight, his reason is Stef.

His hair's still damp when he goes over, but he's tied it up and it's not dripping, so it's fine. Mrs Riley lets him in, happy to see him as always — Stef's teachers have been thrilled with his work — and notes what a shame it is that he arrived just after dinner. He politely declines the offer of leftovers and heads upstairs to Stef's room, accepting from the boy the nervous hug he always gets, and settling down with the books and the laptop and Stef's rapt attention.

It's fun, tutoring Stef, even if the role Mark occupies has mutated into something more like a big brother than a tutor. They study, they chat, Stef seeks advice, they watch a show or play a game on Stef's PC; Mark is reliably terrible at the games, so Stef considers it a challenge to find one he can be good at, or which they can play together. It's very different from the time he spends with Shahida and their other friends — for one thing, the only person trying to feed him is Stef's mother, and she's much more easily dissuaded — and Mark treasures these evenings.

Sometimes a reason to live can become something more.

Back home, Russ is on the PlayStation again, and yells a distracted greeting through his half-open door as Mark ascends the stairs, and Dad's locked in his room, doing whatever the hell it is he does in there. Mark washes up, says goodnight at

each door and shuts himself in his bedroom, putting on his music and closing his eyes.

It's been like this for a long time. All of them shut away in their own worlds, in their own lives. More like roommates than family.

Probably better that way.

And then the weight of the day collapses on him.

There's something that's like crying, but isn't; it's what your body resorts to when you can't cry, when everything is so wrong and distorted and broken that crying is beyond you; it's catharsis without relief, self-injury without pain, death without release.

He curls up in his bed, head under the covers and arms around his belly, and soundlessly shrieks.

* * *

She gets the call early afternoon and picks up immediately. *No-one* calls any more, not unless it's her mother, or someone trying to sell something, or an emergency; Rachel's ringtone is therefore cause for extreme concern.

"Rach," she says, ignoring the fuss Ms Fuentes is making about one of her girls answering her phone in class, "what's going on?"

"It's Mark," Rachel says, and that's all it takes for Shahida's heart to skip, for her head to feel heavy, for her to slump forward, elbows jammed against the edge of the desk. She doesn't even feel the pain. There's a part of her that's been waiting for this call, and now all she can do is catalogue her mistakes: she should have helped him more; she should have pushed him less; she should have *done something!* It takes a

good few seconds for Rachel to break through and convince her Mark's *not* dead, just missing.

Mark, apparently, was 'being disruptive' in class, which in Rachel's opinion means he probably just zoned out, the way he does sometimes, but today the teacher singled him out, yelled at him for a good couple of minutes, and ignored the objections of a couple of the other boys in Mark's class. The teacher, frustrated with the way Mark just sat there and took his bollocking, slammed a fist down on the desk right in front of him, and that was when Mark suddenly stood up, yelled back, packed up his shit and left the classroom. The teacher followed, and there was a minor tussle in the hallway, with the teacher grabbing Mark's arm, Mark trying to shake him off, falling, and scrabbling away when the teacher let go of him.

"And he just legged it out of school. They've been trying to find him ever since. It's all anyone's talking about; I heard about it from some of the girls in his year. They all know I talk to him, see?"

"Yeah," Shahida says, trying to control her panic. Running off isn't the worst thing he could do — she thinks, as she often does, of the scar on his wrist — but it's up there. "Did anyone call his dad?"

"Probably. Which, petrol on the fire, y'know?"

"Okay. Thanks, Rach." She ends the call. "Hey, Ms Fuentes?" she says, addressing a teacher and class who've been watching her warily. "I'm sorry for the disruption. I have an emergency situation to deal with. Can you tell the dean I'll pick up all my homework tomorrow?"

"Of course, dear," Ms Fuentes says. The dean'll call her parents about this, but Mum and Edward will back her up on the phone and grill her about it later. It's fine. And even if it wasn't fine, would it matter? It's *Mark*.

She shovels all her books out of her backpack to make space; she has an idea where he's gone, and she'll need to pick up a few supplies on the way. Thankfully she had PE today, so

she's got trainers in the bottom of her bag. She kicks off her school shoes and drops them on the table next to her books. With a quick nod she acknowledges one of the girls scraping her things into a carrier bag and promising to give them to Amy to take home for her, and then she's out of the classroom door and calling for a taxi.

Mark's been keeping busy lately, and between her and her friends, his babysitting, the kid Stef, school and work, he's scheduled most days. But some of the Saturday shifts at Beachway don't start until early afternoon, and he likes to go for walks, likes to get away from people, likes to disappear into the woods or up to the north, by the railway tracks. She's the only one who knows where he goes.

And she wouldn't tell his dad for a million quid.

North of the university the countryside gradually gives way to a long stretch of woodland which becomes, at various points along its length, a wildlife park, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and a nature reserve, and Mark's been walking off the paths there for the last few months. He's shown her his annotated map — rather, a grainy photo of his map, taken with his antique phone — and talked of showing her around someday. Privately Shahida's always believed he was showing her so it would be *her* who brought him back, should he one day disappear.

Today's the day, then.

The taxi drops her off at the north end of the nature reserve, and she sets off, thanking her lucky stars she remembered to charge her phone. It takes her a few minutes to figure out the GPS — she's never had occasion to use it — and the map isn't especially detailed, out here in the middle of nowhere, but it's enough.

It still takes over an hour to get to the bridge.

The passenger and freight rail lines both run around the westernmost edge of the nature reserve, fenced off on the reserve side, and local law requires bridges every few hundred

metres, and a ramped, disabled-access bridge every kilometre. She walks the length of the line, checking bridge after bridge, and finds him at the third one, leaning over the railing.

He watches her approach. He doesn't call out so neither does she. She joins him instead, resting her arms on the railing, mimicking him. It's a memory: the two of them atop Peri Paradise. She stands closer now, though, and when the next train goes by underneath and she sees the look on his face she loops an arm around him and pulls him tight.

"Twelve," he says. "That's train number twelve."

She doesn't say anything. After a little while he leans his head on her shoulder; he's still slight, still shorter than her, and she tightens her grip. He's not going anywhere. She can, if necessary, probably overpower him.

The days are getting longer again, and warmer, and it wouldn't be so bad, just standing here with him, her arm around his waist, if she could stop herself thinking about why he came here. Mark's delicate, he's vulnerable, he has difficulty with the things other people take for granted; all of it's been obvious to her since they first met and all of it's only become clearer now that they spend more time together. And she knows why he has that scar on his wrist. But she never seriously thought he'd try again.

And now here he is, in the place he comes to look death in the face.

Another train. They watch it rumble past underneath them, feel the rhythmic thump of the wheels crossing sections of track, struggle to keep their footing against the shaking of the bridge. It makes her feel connected to it; she wonders how it makes *him* feel.

She risks another glance. No, she doesn't have to wonder. She can see it in his face, the fear and the longing, and she knows he doesn't have it in himself to stay up here forever. Sooner or later, despair will win, and he'll throw himself joyfully over.

“Em,” she says, and pulls at him. “Have you eaten?”

“*Ess—*”

“Have you?”

“Fuck,” he whispers, and kicks at the bottom of the railing. “Fuck. No. No, I haven’t eaten.” He looks at her for the first time since she joined him, and his shoulders slump. “Dad’s going to go mental, I know it.”

“Forget your dad,” she says, still pulling him, dragging him away from the edge and down the steps and back into the nature reserve, with the tracks on the other side of the fence and her bag sitting in the grass where she left it. “I have food.”

“I’m not hungry,” he lies.

“You walked for miles,” Shahida says, “and so did I, and *I’m* hungry, *and* I had lunch, which I bet you didn’t. Come on.” She lets him go, half-afraid he’ll run right back to the bridge, but he doesn’t, so she starts unpacking her stuff. “I stopped at the shop on the way, and got some—” and she has to stop because he’s laughing. There’s a hysterical edge to it, but he’s laughing, and it might be the most beautiful sound she’s ever heard.

“You—” he says, and chokes on his words, doubling over, coughing and holding his belly. “You— you brought a *picnic blanket?*”

“Yes?” She pauses in the act of laying it out and examines it. It’s a little cheesy, a little clichéd, with the classic red and white squares and the frilly edges, but it was all they had. “I stopped at the shop,” she repeats, confused.

“You brought a picnic blanket,” he wheezes, “to a *suicide intervention?*”

It’s a shock to hear him say the word, and it has an instant sobering effect on them both. She rushes over to him, guides him with hands on his shoulders to sit down on the blanket, brushes loose strands of hair out of his face, and when he’s stilled she finishes unpacking. It’s good to keep *doing* things;

good to keep moving. Because he said the word, and even if they're not going to talk about it right now, it's out there, and nothing's ever going to be the same.

Mark came out here to die.

“Only you, Shahida,” he says, and when she looks over he's smiling, red-cheeked and exhausted and so, so thin, but he's smiling, and her self-control breaks and she cries, leans forward and cries into his lap while he holds her and gently strokes her spine.

* * *

They don't talk about it. Not yet. They eat egg and cress sandwiches out of a cooler bag and they sit on her absurd picnic blanket and they probably look like something off a postcard in the nature reserve's gift shop, and they don't talk about it. Shahida tells him about her day, instead, about getting the call from Rachel in the middle of class, about fielding panicked texts from Amy while she was in the taxi, about the man behind the counter in the petrol station shop who leered at her. She tells him about Amy's dad falling in the pool last night while he was skimming it and Amy's mum laughing too hard to help. She tells him about her aunts visiting a few days ago and how ecstatic Rachel was to meet them and how bad she is at pretending to be straight around Shahida's parents, who wouldn't care anyway; Mark has to point out that she can't be *that* bad at it, because no-one at the school they share can possibly know about Rachel's sexuality or they wouldn't constantly ask him if they're *together*; and they talk through it, both of them grateful for something to discuss, and in the end they decide that straight people must just assume everyone else is straight until proven otherwise, even to the point of absurdity.

Not *all* straight people, though, Shahida insists. Just the ignorant ones. Not *us*.

It's the 'us' that makes him laugh, the aggrieved innocence, the irritation at their fellow straights. And she keeps doing it, making him laugh, again and again, drawing from him a humanity he sometimes doubts he even possesses, making herself his *reason*, for today and perhaps for every day.

He wants to rub the tear tracks from her face, but they dry on their own in the afternoon sun.

On the way back, in the taxi, he turns his phone on again, ignores every missed call and text and types out a reply to the most recent one, but before he can hit send Shahida snatches his phone and alters the message:

Mark Vogel: I'm safe. I'm staying over at Jason's tonight. I'll be home after school tomorrow.

"Who's Jason?"

Shahida shrugs. "No-one. But you're not going home tonight—"

"—I'm not—?"

"—and I *don't* want your dad showing up at mine, making demands of you. Or of *me*. So, wild goose chase. And I checked; there's no Jason in your year, so there's no way he can just barge in on some rando guy."

"God, I hope not. Wait; how did you check?"

She pulls her iPhone out of her bag and wiggles it. "You can get the internet on phones now."

"Ha ha."

The taxi drops them off at the end of Six Oaks Estate, nowhere near Shahida's house, and Mark asks why.

“Two reasons,” Shahida says, holding out her hand and waiting for him to take it before she continues. “One, this is going to be your first time seeing my parents since you were, what, twelve? I want you to have some time to psych yourself up. And two, it’s best not to show strangers exactly where you live.”

“Really?” The thought had never crossed his mind.

“Call it an overabundance of caution, if you like,” she says, leading him down the road.

He’s never been to Six Oaks, but he’s visited the area before. Six Oaks itself is a little less grand than the street Amy and Rachel live on, but all the houses, Shahida’s included, could swallow him twice over. She’s told him about her family’s circumstances, of course: they’re not exactly rich, but two decent incomes plus a fully paid-for house is, to Mark, close enough that it makes no odds. It’s not as if she’s not generous with her money, though; Mark’s room hosts a half-dozen gifts from her, and she’s promised him her phone when she inevitably upgrades. His can barely even take photos.

“Ready?” she says, on the doorstep. He nods and she lets them in, standing aside with her arms stretched out and announcing, “Welcome to Chez Mohsin!”

The inside’s surprisingly normal. After Amy’s open-plan borderline-mansion, with the huge central stairs up and the half-dozen miscellaneous rooms of mysterious purpose — especially to Mark, who runs out of names for downstairs rooms after ‘kitchen’, ‘dining room’, ‘living room’ and, at a stretch, remembering something he once saw on TV, ‘drawing room’ — an ordinary hallway with doors open to rooms on either side is almost a shock. He peers through the nearest one and finds a large but still very comprehensible living room.

“Shahida,” a voice calls from upstairs, “is that you!”

“Ye-es!” Shahida responds in kind. “I’ve brought a friend in need, if that’s okay?”

“Of course! Who have you—?” Rupa Mohsin-Carpenter reaches the banister at the top of the stairs and peers down over her reading glasses. “Mark! It’s been so *long!* Have you eaten?”

“He’s eaten,” Shahida says, squeezing his hand.

At the bottom of the stairs, Rupa reaches for Mark with both hands, and Shahida releases him so he can be inspected. “Are you sure?”

Screw it. He never was much good at resisting peer pressure. “Well,” he says, “I *did* only have sandwiches.”

Rupa — she asked him when they first met, back at Peri Park, not to call her ‘Mrs Mohsin-Carpenter’ or anything else equally unwieldy — needs no more prompting to drag him by the wrist into a warm kitchen, arranged around a worn but sturdy wooden table.

The food is *amazing*.

“Should we expect anyone?” Rupa asks, as they eat.

Shahida shakes her head. “Probably not. His dad’s... his dad, you know? It’s hard to guess whether he’s going to go completely bananas or just ignore the whole thing, but it doesn’t matter; he thinks his son’s staying with a completely different person, who doesn’t exist.”

“He does know about you, though,” Mark says. “He might still come here.”

“True. But it’s a long journey to make on a guess.”

“If he calls,” Rupa says, standing up from the table, “I won’t tell him you’re here. And if he shows up, we’ll pretend ignorance and send him away. Excuse me; I should let Edward know.”

When they’re done eating — Shahida doesn’t say anything about the food he leaves on his plate, bless her — she gives him the quick tour, which includes poking their heads into the upstairs suite to say hi to Shahida’s gran, who waves at them from a rocking chair, and eventually terminates in her room.

“Wow. Big room.”

“Yeah,” Shahida says, throwing a half-dozen cushions from the bed onto the floor. When they’ve both made themselves comfortable — Mark arranging himself carefully around a stomach that *feels* bloated but which is, he knows, just full the way it ought to be — Shahida fixes him with a serious look and asks the question.

* * *

“What’s wrong?” she says.

The boy — and she’s never felt as much older than him as she does now; he looks frail and tired and *young*, and she wants more than ever to find a way to place herself between him and whatever it is that hurts him — squirms uncomfortably, skittish centrepiece to an explosion of cushions, and doesn’t look at her.

“Mark— *Em*. When Rach called today, when she said your name, I almost blacked out. She had to reassure me, *promise* me, that you weren’t dead. And I realised, right then, that I’ve been waiting for that call, that I have been all along. That I’ve been waiting to hear you’ve died.” His eyes flick up to hers when she says it, and she smiles, gathers him into her with all the warmth she has. On his cushion he blinks at her, but a tiny echo of her smile appears on his lips, just for a moment. “Seeing you up on that bridge, large as life—” he snorts cynically at that, “—was the greatest relief I’ve ever felt, but I need to know, Em; are you going back there tomorrow?”

“No,” he says quickly, and reaches down with his hands to gather up knots of cushion in his fingers. As anchors go, Shahida’s semi-ironic My Little Pony pillow isn’t the best, but it’s all she has to offer. Apart from herself, and as much as she

aches for him, it has to be Mark who chooses that. “No, I’m not going back. It’s too much.” She allows him the silence, gives him the time, watches him knead the cushion fabric. “Too tempting,” he adds in a whisper, and Shahida stills herself completely lest she leap at him, grab at him, hold him down and never let him go. She imagines some vital part of herself straining, bleeding with the effort of holding the rest of her in place. “I’ve been going up there, through the reserve, for months now. Following the tracks for weeks. But that bridge... It would be so easy. I went up there three weeks in a row. Just stood there. Watching the trains. And at first it was only a fantasy, you know? Because I have people. You. Stef. Amy and Rach. Jenny and Ada. I’d think of you, all of you. I try to think of what it would be like for you all, after. At my funeral, or whatever. But I don’t get that far. I drop in front of the train and it goes dark and it’s the end. An end I don’t get to have.”

“Em—”

“It’d be so cruel. So selfish. I read a thing online, ages ago. A driver, a truck driver. He hit someone. Not an accident; the guy stepped out in front of him. Deliberate. He had debts or something. But the driver... He talked about what it was like to be complicit in someone’s death. To be *made* complicit. He said he’d lost someone before in an accident, someone close to him, and he used to obsess over the things he could have done different, the ways he could have saved him. Coincidences he could have engineered, if he had his time over again. But he didn’t have that with this guy. Not because he didn’t know him. But because it was *inevitable*. That man was always going to kill himself. And it was fate, the driver said, that he chose *him*. He was almost happy about it, glad that it was this sixty-year-old guy and not some kid who got made responsible.” Mark’s voice sounds painfully dry; a practical part of Shahida’s mind tries to remember if she has any water bottles left in the drawer under the bed, or if she’ll have to go downstairs and bring back a glass. “The driver died, too. There was an update on the article. He died. Not long after.

Deliberately. Closed up his garage, sat in his car. Sent a timed text to the police so no neighbour would have to find him. So only someone *trained* would have to deal with him.” He looks at her, eyes steady. “When you die, when you choose to die, you make a dangerous choice. And you don’t necessarily make it just for yourself. On that bridge, I wasn’t thinking of my funeral, of crying relatives; of you, grieving. I couldn’t get that far, not in the immediate future. But I managed to make myself think months, years down the line. Think of someone else facing it. Someone else... going dark.” He breaks eye contact, breathes heavily, frees a hand from the pillow and massages his chest, like his lungs need the help. “There’s no such thing as a clean death.”

His voice is cracking and she can’t stand it any more, so she leans back, rummages in the drawer under the bed, finds two unopened bottles of water and passes one over. She takes the excuse to shuffle her cushion closer to his. He thanks her, cracks his bottle open, drains half.

Again they sit in silence; again she allows it. For a while.

“Em,” she says, “I’m *glad* you’re not going to do anything — I’m so glad I feel like bloody dancing — but you have to tell me *why*. What’s wrong that you want to do that in the first place? What makes you starve yourself? I want to help, and I’ve been waiting to help almost since I met you, but I *can’t* if I don’t know what’s *wrong*.”

He laughs. It’d be inappropriate if it didn’t sound so hollow, like there’s nothing left inside him but whatever *this* is.

“I can’t tell you,” he says, cradling the half-empty bottle in his lap, “because I don’t know. I’ve never known. It’s like there’s something everyone else has that I don’t, something that makes them able to live in their bodies, to stand being looked at, being touched... being called their name. I mean, that’s why you call me Em, right? Because you saw how much I hated being called Mark.”

She nods, grateful for something she recognises. “When someone says it, it’s like they’ve zapped you with a live wire.”

“It’s part of why I used to worry about the kid. About Stef. He *lit up* when I shortened his name, and I ended up calling him Stef enough that almost everyone in his life calls him that now, at least some of the time. But I think I was wrong about him. I think he just likes having a nickname. Like it’s proof someone cares enough about him to bestow one on him. And that’s *good*, Shy, that’s so fucking good. I’m glad he was just lonely, and not... like me. Because I don’t *know* what ‘like me’ even is.”

“When did it start?”

“Years ago. Around the time of this.” He raises his wrist and pulls back his sleeve; Shahida knows what she’s going to see before she sees it, before he pulls back the pale blue knot of fabric he wears there: his old scar, faded and pale, like it’s been rubbed clean over the years, like it *wants* to disappear. “I saw a counsellor, you know, right after? Three sessions. That’s all the NHS would pay for. You know what he told me? That a bit of turmoil was perfectly normal, and puberty should sort me out.” He laughs again. “It emphatically did not. It made it worse. So much worse.”

“And that’s why you don’t eat.”

“Oh, I eat. I just—” he mimes sticking a finger down his throat. “But responsibly. It’s why my teeth still have enamel.”

“How long have you been purging?” Not an image she enjoys contemplating.

“Since I was... shit. Thirteen? That’s when I started doing it properly. People notice when a twelve-year-old starves themselves. But I eat in front of people — even more so, these days, thanks to Rachel — so I think people tell themselves I’m just a—” it’s like he chokes on the words; he coughs, swallows, and tries again, “—just a growing boy. They’re all waiting for my growth spurt.”

The wry smile on his face makes her giggle. He's taller now than he was last year, but so's she, and she still has her height advantage over him. She wonders then if he *wants* to be small, not just so thin she worries for his health, but as short as he can be, given his genetics. His dad's somewhere over six foot, and while she doesn't remember his mother very well, she knows she was taller than her mum and Edward both.

How tall might Mark be now, if he hadn't been starving himself since thirteen? It's hard to imagine; he's always been delicate.

She's missing something, though. He's describing symptoms, not causes. Not because he's hiding anything from her; he doesn't *know*. And that's most devastating of all: how can you be so miserable that you attempt suicide as soon as you start puberty, and *not know why*?

"Ess?" he says. "You're staring."

"Sorry. Did you ever see anyone else about this? Other than the useless counsellor guy, I mean."

He nods. "My GP is 'concerned' about my weight, and every time a new financial year starts, I get a handful of sessions with some new therapist."

"And *none* of them have been able to tell you what's up?"

"What's to tell? I'm a fifteen-year-old boy with depression and anxiety, I dissociate, I have nightmares; I have an eating disorder I don't tell them about but which they can definitely guess. There's a million of me. The therapists all say the same thing, that I really need long-term assessment, and then my GP does the referral, and then we wait. I'm waiting now, actually. Usually, it comes up that there's nothing in the budget."

She shuffles closer, takes his hands, which are still clutching the bottle in his lap, in hers, feels the contrast between the lukewarm plastic and his fingers, which seem to be radiating pure heat. "I want to help," she says, stroking his knuckles with her thumb.

“Why?” His question comes out too quickly, and he winces, like he wants to take it back.

“Because you’re my friend, and I love you,” Shahida says, squeezing his hand in rebuke. “Because I don’t want to see you hurting, and if I *do* have to see that, if there’s nothing either of us can do to stop it, then I want to help you manage it. I want to help you find ways to survive it. Because, Em, if you died, it would hurt so bad. I’d never forgive you.”

She’s worried for a moment that she’s piled on a little too much guilt, but he smiles at her and she decides, fuck it, now’s the time. She half-stands, pivots onto the cushion next to his, and takes him by the shoulders, pulling lightly on him so he can, if he wants, fall into her. He resists, but only for a second, and she drags him into an awkward sideways hug.

“I know things are hard at home,” she whispers, “and at school, and *everywhere*. But here — my house, my room — will always be safe. You can always come here. Whenever you need. Come here, come to *me*, and you’ll be safe.”

He breathes deeply and she waits for him to say something but it’s just the prelude to the shattered exhale of a good damn cry, so she loosens her fingers, intending to reach out for the box of tissues, but his composure’s *gone* and he leans completely into her, pulling on her physically for maybe the first time ever, reciprocating and not just accepting her affection. She leans back, lets him find his comfort and holds him as he shakes, as he cries in heaving, airless shudders.

It’s almost as if he’s never cried before.

2011

It’s strange being back in his house again. Only her second visit, after his father’s hostility, but she doesn’t get a chance to look around properly because Mark’s dragging her up the stairs and into his room so they can get a second lockable door between them and Mr Vogel.

Except there's no lock. Shahida realises this when Mark drags a sturdy length of wood out from under the bed and wedges it under the door handle. It's dirty and old and in deference to these facts he's wrapped it in plastic, with pillow cases at the top and bottom to give it traction. With a start she realises what it is: a sleeper from the railway tracks up by the bridge.

She doesn't mention it.

"There," he says. "Privacy."

Shahida flops onto a bed she's seen only in grainy video chats. "Your dad's still at the party, though, right?"

Mark frowns at her. "How long do you think that'll last when he realises you showed up and, half an hour later, we skipped out together?"

She hadn't intended to stay at all, had meant to just show up and grab him, but it was her first time meeting Stefan — Stef — and it didn't take her long to be charmed by the kid. Thirteen now, officially, today, and railing against his parents' wishes for him to dress smart and be respectful at their staid little party with mostly church guests in attendance. With Mark and Shahida's encouragement he'd taken off the tie he claimed volubly to hate, and thrown it over the fence.

Plus, there was cake. And little hot dogs.

"I tried to tell you," she says, flipping up the corner of the duvet to inspect the sheets (white) and casting around the room for anything else interesting she might have missed (a corkboard behind his computer, covered in photos, mostly of her and the girls, and Stef), "he fell asleep after his third beer. Mrs Riley put a sun hat on him."

She realises that at least two of the photos on the corkboard are group shots Mark was definitely present for, and that he's folded them over so he's not visible. She covers her reaction with what is, on reflection, a terribly faked cough.

He doesn't seem to notice. "Oh, he'll *love* that." He sits down backwards on the dilapidated office chair and spins it

around until he's facing her. "So! Why did you pull me away from the party of the year?"

He's leaning his chin on the backrest and drumming his fingers on the plastic. He's *cute*. Always so cute. Why does he hate himself so much?

"I pulled you away," she says, "for a much, much better party!"

"What? Really?"

She giggles. "Well, *much* better might be overselling it. Rach's parents are away and her kid brother's throwing a thing for one of *his* mates who just had a birthday. It's going to be pretty tame, because they're all fifteen and sixteen—"

"I'm sixteen."

"Sure," she allows, "but in six-and-a-half hours you'll be seventeen. What I mean is, it's going to be chaperoned — you *know* what her parents are like; they'd never leave the house if they didn't live in the safest suburb in the south of England — but the shaps are Rach's older brother and a couple of his friends. Who are, you know, still young enough to be okay. And Rach and Amy'll be there, but no-one else you know, which is, I feel, pretty key."

"Pretty key for what?"

"For getting you to have some bloody *fun!*" she says, forcing as much enthusiasm as she can. Mark's been doing better, as far as she can tell, but he keeps himself so busy that, between school, work, tutoring and babysitting he has basically no time to himself. It's been difficult to see him this year, and every week without him has been frustrating. A little scary, too; despite his improvement, Shahida dreams regularly of finding him on the railway tracks. "Now, you need something to wear."

He gives her an exasperated smile and waggles the loose sleeves of his hoodie at her. "I *have* something to wear."

“Nope. Nope. Absolutely not. It’s ragged; look!” She reaches forward and pokes a finger through a gap in the fabric at the elbow; he evades her, covering the hole like a wounded limb.

“Everything I have is basically like this, though.”

“Well,” she says, “I don’t believe *that* for a second.”

She hops up off the bed and opens his wardrobe, rummages through, finds, yes, mostly battered hoodies and loose jeans and school clothes and very little else, just as he claimed. Her toe pokes a panel under the wardrobe, knocking it out of position, and he reaches down to pop it back into place.

“Is that where you keep your... stuff?” she asks. She knows all about his mitigation strategies, his methods for ‘safer’ purging. She also knows he’s not supposed to be doing it any more, after they agreed a calorie-counted regimen, tracked daily on his phone; her old one.

“Yeah.”

“How long’s it been?”

“About six weeks.”

“Em!” she squeals, turning around and lunging at him. *So* much better than she expected. From what she’s read, most people relapse way more often, especially early on. “That’s amazing!” He mumbles thanks into her elbow and she releases him; the angle was awkward, anyway, with him sitting down and still, despite everything, shorter than her. “But you’re right; I give up. There’s *nothing* in this wardrobe. And you’re *not* going as you are.”

“I could just... not go?”

“*Absolutely* not. Your party tomorrow is going to be Stef’s little kiddie party, version two, with more expensive cake.” Mark’s dad, nominally cleaned up and promoted at work, has been throwing the money around a bit more lately, magnanimously letting Mark off the hook from having to help

with rent, and leasing a new and rather ostentatious car. “Okay,” she says, spinning around again and extracting the least awful things from the pile of clean clothes at the bottom of the main shelf, “you can get changed at mine. I have something you can borrow to go with this.” She waves the mid-grey tank top she found at him.

“What? Ess, no; I’m not wearing your clothes.”

She giggles. “I don’t mean a skirt or anything, you perv. I just have a couple of shirts that’ll look nice on you and should go with that tank top; nicer than that bloody hoodie, anyway.”

“Shahida...” he says, unable to mask his exasperation.

“Mark...” she says, matching his tone, and then slaps a hand over her mouth. “Shit. Sorry, Em.” He waves away her apology. She’s still not clear on exactly why he doesn’t like his name — neither’s he, seemingly — but she takes care not to use it anyway.

“I didn’t even know I had this...” he mutters.

“Well, it’s about the least awful thing you own.”

He rolls his eyes, stands up from the chair, which rattles as it pushes away behind him, and accepts the clothes she’s holding out. “I’ll put it on here,” he says, in a tone that dares her to disagree, “and I’ll wear a hoodie to yours. If — and it’s a big if — you have something I like, I’ll wear it.”

Shahida wants to hop on the spot. The boy needs to come out of his shell, and if he’s not going to do it himself, she’ll bloody well yank him out.

She starts sorting through the stack of trousers.

* * *

The tank top she found is heaven only knows how old, and clings uncomfortably to his chest. She told him not to worry: it looks good and it's not actually all that tight; he's just been wearing clothes that are two sizes too large for so long he's forgotten how it feels to wear something that fits.

Still, he pulled his hoodie back on for the taxi ride to her place. He agreed to the trousers she picked out, and to wear the tank top, and all the time she looked so happy, so pleased with his compliance that he swallowed his objections and smiled for her.

It's been so fucking hard to be around her lately. With every passing year she's more beautiful, more driven, quicker and funnier and sharper and so much more clever, and he's... stuck. Unchanging by design. A bundle of failing coping mechanisms in clothes that don't fit. And he lied: it's been just a week since he last purged. An achievement, absolutely, even though the food he chokes down keeps him awake at night, and when eventually he does fall asleep it finds him there, too, in nightmares of a thickening body, of becoming tall, of filling out.

He grew over an inch in the last year alone. It's like puberty is finally catching up with him, inflicting wound after wound, tearing at his flesh, and with every month it becomes harder to resist the urge to starve himself until there's nothing left.

He has other things he can do. He works weekends and one night at the Beachway. On the tills, rather than the position at Cycling he applied for, because there was a shortage of cashiers, and because learning to repair the bikes had been easy but lifting them onto the clamp had been almost impossible. Owen, the dickhead from Automotive, likes to call him one of the 'checkout girls', and the derision in his voice is one of the many things that drives him, after his shifts and on his weekend lunch breaks, to hide out in the men's staff toilets and hurt himself.

He shouldn't purge any more, and he doesn't cut. But no-one questions bruises. Even if Shahida raised an eyebrow at the discolouration on his upper arm and his thigh. He could have gotten those anywhere. He could have fallen. All very explicable.

She asked him to tell her everything and he promised he would, and he lies.

“So?” she says, spreading her hands out in front of her, gesturing at the shirts she's lined up on her bed like game show prizes.

“Uh...” He doesn't know how to have an opinion on this. He doesn't even really know why he agreed to this in the first place, why he didn't insist on keeping his hoodie on, except she smiled when she asked, and despite the static hiss in his ears and the light-headedness that comes on when he's around her, he wants to please her more than anything. “Maybe you should choose.”

She hums to herself, looks from Mark to the shirts a couple of times, and mumbles, “Blonde hair, blue eyes, *very* pale skin...” before yanking a checked shirt off the bed and throwing it at him. “That one,” she says.

He catches it. “It won't be too small?” She's so graceful, so thin, and he's—

“*Em*,” she says sharply. “I'm bigger than you! In *every* direction,” she adds, grinning and jutting her chest out, and giggling when he looks away and busies himself with putting it on. She's been doing that more lately, emphasising the way her body's developed, and it's one of the most difficult things to bear.

The shirt's comfortable, with a soft lining that feels wonderful against the skin on his arms and shoulders. He dithers with it, unsure whether to wear it open or button it up, but before he can make up his mind, Shahida bats his hands away.

“Wear it like that,” she says, fluffing it out and then standing back to take a look at her handiwork. She’s frowning as she looks him up and down and Mark wants to ask what’s wrong, and then it’s too late because she’s right back in his face again, standing *way* too close and grinning all the while, and he freezes because she’s *right there* and he should *say something!* And then she tugs at his hair, pulls out the rubber band keeping it in a short ponytail, and starts brushing it with her fingers.

“Um,” he says, “Shy?”

“Yes?” Too innocent.

“Why?”

“Because!” she says, and sticks her tongue out at him. He glares at her but she just laughs and says, “I wanted to see what it’d look like. You keep your hair long but you always just tie it back and shove it into your hood. And — *wow!* — what a waste!”

She steps around him, takes him by the elbows, turns him slowly until he’s facing the full-length mirror on the back of her door, the one he’s been avoiding. He feels her satisfaction when he takes a sharp breath, but whatever she thinks he’s feeling, he wishes she’d tell him, so he could have something to guide his own response; the experience of seeing himself in that moment is just... baffling.

He doesn’t look like himself. She’s teased out his hair so it falls around his face, and with the open shirt and the high-necked tank top underneath, worn over slightly oversized trousers, he looks—

Fuck. No. No, no, *no*. He’s too veiny; he’s too tall; he’s too angular; he’s too broken. The image in the mirror comes together again, reassembles itself into *him*, into his flaws, into his sharp edges, into all the pieces that are pressed together wrong, and his stomach heaves and the stupid hot dog and the sickly slice of cake force their way up into his mouth.

* * *

He's hugging his belly again and looking around nervously as they cross from Six Oaks Estate onto Rachel's road, appallingly named The Dell, and she wants to grab his hands, pry them away from his body and put them around hers. But she doesn't, because he still stiffens when she touches him, and if she really is going to get him out of his shell it's going to have to be gently, one step at a time, and always leaving him the option to step back, should he need to. Resolutions to be firm and decisive always seem to crumble when he gets that look on his face.

But he *did* agree to keep the shirt on rather than go back to hiding in the hoodie. And it was definitely just nerves that made him rush to her ensuite to throw up. Nerves and that rich death-by-chocolate cake on a near-empty stomach. Still, it had been unsettling to help him deal with the aftermath: they followed his rules together, finding mouthwash in her parents' bathroom and cereal bars in the pantry; he even ate a couple of slices of toast, complete with peanut butter, to line his stomach.

And *wow*, he looks nice, with his hair down and with the shirt open. He looks healthier, more filled-out than usual; despite his protests and especially in combination with the shirt, the material of the tank top is thick enough to imply a slightly bulkier upper body; if she could get one thing through his skull it would be that loose clothing can be more revealing than clothing that fits, given that what he's trying to hide is just how underweight he is. He still looks thin, sure, but the shirt sleeves cover his narrow wrists and the bases of his palms, leaving only his slender fingers on show, and the slightly oversized jeans lend his lower half a little weight. He's *never* looked so good, so much so that when he glances at her for reassurance she finds herself biting her lip as she nods.

She's such a cliché. Confident and outspoken girl, attracted to boy, becomes suddenly shy and flirty. What's next? Will she start laughing too loud at his worst jokes? Already she keeps making mistakes around him, keeps speaking before she's quite thought through what she wants to say — keeps doing stupid shit, like encouraging him to eat the bloody birthday cake that he threw up in her bathroom — and as someone who's always thought of herself as being pretty together and in control, it's distressing to realise that all it takes is one pretty boy (one pretty boy she's known since they were both barely teenagers, one pretty boy she's grown into adulthood alongside, one pretty boy who's always needed her) to go to pieces.

“Nearly there?” he asks, his voice pleasingly steady.

“Nearly there,” she says, holding out a hand for him to take. He does so, and to disguise her delight she points with the other hand to the house on the end of the cul-de-sac. “That's Rach's house. Chez Gray.”

He giggles and squeezes her hand, and she squeezes back and thinks in her most private mind, *What if tonight's the night?*

Rachel's house is unusual for the area. If Amy's house is the blueprint for most of the faux-Tudor piles in the surrounding streets and Shahida's house is a perfect exemplar, Rachel's is the odd one out. Another place that predates the estates, the Grays' house has been extended in all directions, embedding the farmhouse it once was inside a large and lazy capital L, with a two-storey main building facing the road and, trailing into the back garden, a single-storey tail which once had been stables and other associated outbuildings but which now is a contiguous and grandly high-ceilinged brace of rooms with the original timber intact. Shahida's been here many times over the years, and leads Mark around the side of the house and into the garden, where the party's still getting started. The rooms on the rear extension have all had their double doors propped open — with the exception of Rachel's bedroom suite, which will no doubt be locked up tight — and

the kitchen and hall of the main building are both also directly accessible.

“Does everyone have a massive house except me?” Mark whispers.

“Yes. Sorry.”

“*Shy!*” Rachel shouts, and they both look over to see her advancing on them from the kitchen. She’s cut her hair short — she’s been threatening it — and she’s dressed similarly to Mark, except her shirt’s tied around her waist. She’s pink-cheeked, like she’s already been drinking. “Heeeeeeey,” she says, as they meet by one of the wooden benches in the middle of the garden, and Shahida experimentally smells her breath when they hug; yes, she’s already started. “And *hey*, Ems,” Rach adds, pulling Mark into the hug. “You look really nice.”

Rach and Amy have both in the past year picked up on Shahida’s preferred nickname for him, and both have modified it appropriately. Mark, for his part, doesn’t seem to mind, which is a relief, because redirecting Amy in particular from a nickname she’s grown fond of would be an effort doomed to failure.

“Hi, Rach,” he says. “I like the hair.”

“I know, right?” Rachel breaks the hug and runs a hand through it. “I’m fucking *hot*, yes?” Shahida smothers a laugh and Mark, clearly struggling with how to respond, merely nods. “Yeah, well,” Rachel says, flicking at Mark’s hair, “so are you. Come inside! Amy’s still getting ready upstairs.”

‘Upstairs’ means Rachel’s second bedroom. Technically her first, but she colonised the guest bedroom in the downstairs extension as soon as Tom, her older brother, moved out. He’d been rather annoyed to return from university to find all his things crammed into the comparatively small spare bedroom; even more annoyed to find his sister had stolen his treadmill and free weights. ‘But look at these guns,’ was not, he insisted, adequate justification for theft.

“Birthday boy!” Amy squeals, when they bundle through the door into Rachel’s second bedroom. Mark’s spared a hug because she’s still finalising her makeup, perched on a plush little stool at Rachel’s vanity, and it’s probably a good thing, because every time Shahida looks at him he seems more overwhelmed. He suffers through a little more enthusiasm from Rachel and Amy before Shahida takes him by the sleeve back out into the hall.

“How are you doing?” she asks. “I know I dragged you here, and I want you to have fun, but say the word and we go. Back to mine. Or back to yours. Or anywhere.”

He shakes his head, pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m okay,” he says, with more confidence than Shahida expected. “It’s a nice change, you know? And I haven’t seen much of you — any of you — in a while.” He smiles, and relaxes his shoulders. “I’ve missed you. I’m glad to be here. It’s good. It’s fine.”

“Good,” Shahida says, and before she can talk herself out of it she leans over and kisses him quickly on the cheek. He doesn’t seem put out, he doesn’t stiffen up and he doesn’t recoil; and why would he? It was just the sort of kiss she might give Amy or Rach. Just a kiss between friends. “Love you.”

* * *

There are more people here than just Rach’s younger brother’s friends, Shahida knows that much, and she wonders if word got around at the kid’s school. But it’s nice; it lends the party a more anonymous feel. Amy and Rach are leading them both down the stairs and straight to the kitchen; Rach’s losing her buzz and Amy’s looking to find one.

“We have lager,” Rachel says, walking backwards and counting on her fingers, “and cocktail tins—” she makes a face; not her favourite, “—and a whole load of different types of chemically fruity things. All alcoholic, naturally. Shy? Ems? Better make your choice now, because we’re going to jump the queue.”

“I could drink a chemical fruit thing,” Mark says.

“Boom,” Rachel says. “Done. Good. Shy? Amy?”

“Fruit thing,” Amy says.

“She’s more drunk already than I thought,” Shahida whispers to Mark, and he nudges her with an elbow in response.

Well. *That’s* more voluntary physical contact than she usually gets out of him!

Rach leads them past a queue of younger teenagers — some of whom complain until she points out that she lives here, she’s bigger than them and she’s probably much meaner, too — and up to her older brother, Tom, who is leaning against the counter while one of his friends guards the fridge.

“Hey, Tommy,” Amy says, stepping in front of Rachel with a grin. “What are the rules?”

“Four for you.”

She puts a hand on his, linking their fingers. Amy’s always had a thing for Tom; Shahida’s never seen the appeal. “How about an extra drink or two? You’d look the other way, just once, for an old flame, right?”

Tom pushes her hand away. “We kissed once,” he says flatly.

“But it was *so* good,” she insists, pressing herself against him. “I still think about it.”

“*Once*,” he repeats. “And then,” he adds loudly, for the benefit of the watching teenagers, “someone told me how old she *really* was.”

Amy plays this game with him every time, dancing around his discomfort. Shahida privately thinks it's in bad taste, but Tom seems to handle her well enough. Perhaps he knows she and Rach will step in if Amy ever tries to take it beyond a joke. Perhaps he knows he could pick her up and without much issue carry her bodily to somewhere she can take a cold shower.

"I'm old enough!" Amy insists, attempting a sultry expression. "Three years is nothing."

Tom brings their hands together so he can unpick her fingers from his, one at a time. "It's more like four years, and it was a lot when I was almost nineteen and you were fifteen —" Amy's smile widens as he pauses, "—and it's *just* as much now."

"If you're not careful," Amy stage-whispers, standing on tiptoes to be closer to his face, "you'll lose your chance with me."

Tom pushes her back down onto her heels, hands on her shoulders. "I'll find a way to live with it."

"Well, fine," Amy play-pouts. "I have a boyfriend now, anyway." It's a lie; Amy barely knows any boys except Mark and that dickhead Charles Carstairs. The perils of attending a girls-only school. Not that Shahida minds, particularly.

Tom's smile broadens. "Good for you! Now you *definitely* get only four drinks."

"Bastard!" Amy laughs.

"Give Greg over there your wrist so he can stamp it, and take your pick." He points to where his friend is guarding the fridge. "And *don't* flirt with him," he adds.

Amy wiggles her bottom at him as she walks away. "No promises!" she calls.

"Amy," Shahida says, as they link up again, "that was just sad."

"Yeah, mate," Rachel says, "have some dignity."

“Oh, lighten up,” Amy says, and presents her forearm to Greg. She waves her other hand, and, eventually getting the message, Shahida, Rachel and Mark raise their wrists. Shahida checks, and finds Mark’s got his other wrist, the one with the ribbon still wrapped around it, worse for wear but carefully washed, held behind his back.

“Hi, girls,” Greg says, and then stands up straighter to yell over their heads. “Hey, Tom! How old are they?”

Tom points at each of them in turn. “Seventeen. Seventeen. Seventeen. But her, I don’t know.”

There’s a moment’s confusion and then Shahida, not entirely sure she’s thought this through thoroughly enough but convinced she has a better response ready than anyone else, puts a hand on Mark’s shoulder and says, “Seventeen tomorrow. It’s why we’re crashing; her *actual* birthday’s going to be boring.”

Mark shoots her a look; Shahida rolls her eyes, hoping the message gets across: *Just go along with it*. Better to be mistaken for a girl in front of two guys he’ll probably never see again than make a scene in front of a kitchen full of people.

He shrugs.

“Okay,” Greg says. “That’s fair. Four all round.” He picks up a white stamp from the sideboard, presses it once against each of their wrists, and opens the fridge. Amy lunges inside, grabs four bottles in assorted colours, and leads Amy, Shahida and Mark out of the kitchen, pausing to make a kissy face at Tom, who pretends to dodge it.

“You girls keep an eye on Amy!” he says.

“We will!” Rachel shouts, as they exit through the double doors into the garden.

* * *

A wall of heat hits them as they step out into the garden, and it's briefly confusing until Mark spots the bonfire someone's been building out at the end of the garden. He remembers Rachel saying something about there being a large shed full of timber, garden trash and debris from the orchard, all of which build up and need periodically to be burned. He looks down the length of the garden, which meanders off into the dusk and terminates in a fence dotted with gates. It certainly *looks* like a garden that could plausibly connect to an orchard.

"Hey," Shahida says, as they walk in formation down the garden, past where someone's setting up a pair of speakers on a wooden table, "Em, are you okay?"

"Um, yes?" he says. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"He thought you were a girl!" Rachel whispers.

"And Shahida covered for you!" Amy says.

He shrugs. "It happens. Why do you think I tie my hair up?"

It's not the reason, actually, and it doesn't happen all that often, not any more, as a genuine mistake and not just Owen from Automotive being an arsehole, not since the growth spurt made him almost one-seventy-one centimetres. Besides, he's generally bundled up in hoodies and padded with extra t-shirts, with his hair tied up at the nape of his neck; for someone of such indeterminate shape, gender is uncertain, and thus defaults in most people's minds to *man*.

"You don't mind?" Shahida says.

"Not really?" Not entirely true. It makes him feel obscurely ugly whenever it happens, which is why he tries to avoid it, but it doesn't insult him, which is what she's probably getting at. "I have my hair down and it's not exactly lit up in that kitchen; I'm also dressed *exactly* like Rachel. I wasn't

surprised. In those situations I mostly just try not to say anything.”

“Jesus, Em,” Amy says.

“You *really* don’t mind?” Rachel asks. As one, they’ve stopped by one of the benches, close enough to the fire to feel the warmth but not choke on the smoke, close enough to the speakers to hear the music but not be deafened.

Their insistence on talking about it is starting to make him feel uncomfortable, and he’s about to say something when Shahida catches his eye and takes over the conversation, deflecting onto the story of how Amy first met Rachel’s older brother, how she added years to her age with makeup and low lights and a lot of lying, how when he found out he simply got up and walked away from her, returning to his friends.

“It was only one kiss,” Amy whines.

“Friends don’t make friends’ brothers into cradle snatchers,” Rachel says. “And if you didn’t keep flirting with him whenever he comes home, we wouldn’t bug you about it.”

“Whatever. I’ll get him sooner or later. When does a three-year age gap—”

“—it’s four years, Amy—”

“—become not weird any more? When I’m eighteen?”

“Twenty,” Rachel says. “At least.”

“Twenty?” Amy fake gasps. “I can’t wait that long, Rach! He might find someone!”

“Which is a *good* thing,” Shahida says. “You want him to sit around lonely for four years, waiting for you? Anyway, by then you’ll have realised it’s just a little baby crush on someone you barely know.”

Amy pokes at her. “Hey! I know him fine.”

“Oh yeah?” Rachel says. “What’s his favourite food?”

“Me!”

Mark laughs. The alcohol's settling in his belly, warming him, and as the mild evening sets in he welcomes it. He even agrees to go back to the kitchen with Shahida and Amy for more rounds of drinks, and doesn't complain when Amy insists on calling him 'Emily' in front of Rachel's brother and his friend. Shahida teases his hair out even more, tries to give it volume, and sprays it to hold it in place. He draws the line, though, at letting them put makeup on him and having him try to seduce Greg, but by that point he's drunk enough to find anything funny — three colourful bottles on a near-empty stomach — and he, Shahida and Amy collapse in giggles at the thought of it when they get back to the table Rachel's grudgingly holding for them.

A few more of Tom's friends have started to trickle in by this point, and the music's been turned up, and Mark's had enough to drink that when Shahida takes him carefully by the hand and leads him shyly farther up the garden, closer to the music, he leans into her and they dance, lazily and hopelessly out of time with the music, lost in their own world together.

* * *

The stamp system breaks down, as it was always going to, and no amount of preparation — stocking the fridge with $(X \text{ multiplied by } Y) \text{ plus } Z$ bottles and no more, where X is the anticipated number of attendees, Y is the anticipated average permitted consumption (Shahida would guess at a value of no more than 3.4, given that the age spread at the party is heavily biased in favour of Rach's little brother's friends) and Z is an amount sufficient to guarantee enough slack to account for unplanned guests, such as Shahida and Mark; say, forty — could have prevented *all* the little squirts from drinking more than they were supposed to. Rachel, spotting with a practised

eye the exact moment her older brother's vigilance breaks down, recruits Amy to help her liberate another three bottles each before anarchy seriously ensues, spiriting them away to the mini fridge in Rach's downstairs kitchenette and relocking the door.

Anarchy, it turns out, consists mostly of the handful of boys who drank more than their tolerance throwing up in bushes, on benches, and into the dying embers of the bonfire, Amy jeering at the lightweight kids from her vantage point behind the CD player she's taken over, and Mark lying on his back on a nearby picnic table, singing along to the music in a voice Shahida could listen to for as long as he has breath.

Eventually the party empties out, with most of the boys setting up camp in a forest of sleeping bags in the rec room on the other side of the house. Rachel, who out of all the people who live here is definitely the most together, organises a few of them to stamp on the embers before they retire, and hauls a tarp out from the shed to cover the music system. And then the four of them are dragging each other sleepily into Rach's downstairs bedroom and cracking open a bottle each from the supply stashed barely an hour earlier.

Shahida's been here before, many times, but Mark hasn't, and Rachel shows him her treasures: not just the exercise equipment she liberated from her brother, but a huge DVD and VHS library, two televisions — a modern kind with a flat screen and an old and terrifyingly heavy tube TV — and a handful of old game consoles.

“Before it was Tom's room it was Dad's playroom,” she says, “and I kept *everything*.” She shuffles through NES cartridges and selects one, holding it out to Mark. “Here; blow.”

“Why?”

“Have you never used an old game cart?” she asks. He shakes his head, frowning, and she giggles. “You have to blow on the contacts before you play.”

“It’s lucky,” Amy says. She’s pulling the couch at the end of the room apart and arranging cushions on the floor.

“It’s to *clean* it.”

“It’s a myth,” Shahida says, “and it’s bad for the cartridge. I looked it up.”

Rachel ignores her. “Blow!” she insists, and Mark complies, still confused, blowing on the cartridge like it’s a birthday cake. She performs the best version of a chivalric bow she can while crouching on the carpet, and rams the cart into the NES; a Kirby game boots up on the old TV, bathing the four of them in flickering light.

Shahida, sitting heavily on one of the couch cushions and shuffling closer to Mark, ignores the game, ignores Rachel and Amy teaching it to him — “It’s the perfect introduction to platform games; you can’t die! You just float over everything!” — and watches him instead, watches his careful fingers find a comfortable way to hold the angular NES controller, watches, fascinated, as the tendons in his wrists react to his button presses. The borrowed shirt’s been falling off his shoulders all night, and in response he’s pushed up the sleeves, which hasn’t helped, and now she can see his forearms almost up to the elbow and his shoulder where it’s loose. She smothers a laugh, feeling like a prudish Victorian, obsessed with a few visible inches of ankle, but she can’t stop looking. At some point he borrowed a hair tie from someone and put his hair up, but it’s not in the messy, deliberately unshowy ponytail he usually wears; it’s high up, pulling most of his hair back from his face but leaving a few locks loose. She wonders who did that. Not him, surely? Amy, almost definitely.

He’s beautiful. It’s struck her before, repeatedly over the years, but never so powerfully. He’s *so* fucking beautiful. Maybe the most beautiful person she’s ever seen.

His Kirby falls out of the level.

“How are you bad at Kirby?” Amy demands. “How is anyone?” She attacks him with a pillow and he acts to rescue his half-finished bottle before it spills and the moment’s gone, and yet Shahida can’t stop thinking about it, not even after Rach hands her the controller and Mark settles down with his head by her feet and his legs all curled up and she can feel his breath on her calves, and she turns out to be terrible at Kirby, too.

Amy calls him Emily a couple of times, like she did in the kitchen, to get a reaction, but she stops when he doesn’t give it to her, and Shahida wonders why he doesn’t protest until he needs help to stand and get to the ensuite so he can pee and she realises just how drunk he is. She turns her back while he sits on the toilet and berates herself for missing the obvious: yes, he’s at least a bottle behind the rest of them, but it’s not like he’s had much to eat at all *and* he’s probably unused to alcohol. She, Amy and Rach are always around each other’s places, always sneaking bottles out of various pantries and spending cold suburban nights giggling drunkenly in front of terrible movies, and Amy’s family in particular crack open a bottle of wine with practically every meal, but Mark’s not only a year behind them at school, despite being only six months younger than Shahida — your school year, she’s noticed, has more influence on the perception of your maturity than your *age* — he also spends most of his time busy: running what remains of his family, keeping the house clean, doing the laundry; working or babysitting or studying or attending school; squeezing in time with Shahida and Stef in the hours he has free. He simply hasn’t had the opportunity to get acclimated to alcohol.

She helps him up off the toilet and they wash up together.

Rach gets the message with one look at him and starts pulling ingredients out of cupboards in the kitchenette, and before long they’re all — peer pressure — eating soft cheese sandwiches. Bread’s good; it’ll help soak up the alcohol. He rather spoils it by cracking open another bottle straight after, but at least he has something more in his stomach now.

When they're flagging badly and no longer able to play even the simplest games, Rach and Amy unpack extra sheets and pillows and rearrange the floor cushions into a makeshift mattress for the two of them. Shahida and Mark take the bed, Shahida with her back to the wall, and Rach puts on a DVD, something dumb, at an almost inaudible volume.

The girls murmur to each other while Mark sleeps.

Later, when Amy and Rach are both snoring quietly, wrapped around each other the way they have at sleepovers since they were kids, and Shahida's reading a book on her phone, Mark snorts, wakes himself, and rolls over in the bed.

He's so close to her.

"I forgot to say," she whispers. "Happy birthday."

"Hmm?"

"It was midnight hours ago. Welcome to being seventeen."

He smiles the loose smile of the still drunk and presses a hand to his mouth a moment later to cover his laugh so he doesn't wake the girls, and the proximity of him, his levity, his openness, it's all so overwhelming. He catches her eye and looks away, blushing, still quietly laughing. She's never seen him like this, and she wants nothing more than to give him this calm, this joy, this freedom every night of his life from now on.

She was wrong before. *Now*, with his hair loose and messy from the pillow, with the soft light from the lamp playing across his face, and with just the tank top on and with one of its shoulder straps escaping to the side, he's the most beautiful person she's ever seen.

She kisses him.

And wonders for a moment, a horrifying, endless moment, if she's just screwed everything up, but then he returns her kiss and it's sloppy but it's wonderful. She finds the small of his back under the covers and pulls him closer, presses their bodies together, and he responds with a hand on her cheek and

another kiss, one that he initiates this time, showing her that, yes, he chooses this, too. His other hand on her back; her other hand under his top, moving upwards, tracing his taut belly, suddenly still, and his smooth chest—

Mark lunges away from her. Falls out of bed. Barely misses landing on Amy, who jerks up and pulls away from him. She's looking at him, betrayed, like he's *done something*, and Shahida wants to say he hasn't, he's fine, they were just kissing, but his eyes are wide and his lip is bleeding and she replays the last few moments and realises that when she put her hand under his top he froze, froze the way he used to when she hugged him, when she got too close.

He's scared. No, not scared. He's hurting, and not from when he bit through his lip; it's like he's hurting all over, like every old wound opened up at once. He turns away, wraps himself in the shirt, covers himself. He can't look at her, and foolishly she reaches out for him.

He recoils, bolts for the door, and by the time she's disentangled herself from the sheets, he's gone.

2012

Almost six months. That's how long it's been since the party, since he ran away from her, since her horrible, stupid mistake. She showed up at his front door the next day, to return the phone he left at Rachel's, to apologise, to see him, and his little brother turned her away.

“Sorry,” Russ had said, suddenly grown up and serious, “but he's upset. Really bad. And Mum says, when someone's so upset they can barely talk, you drop everything and you keep them safe.”

“But—”

“He's been like this before.”

“Russ—”

“He'll let you know when he's ready to talk.”

He never did.

Amy and Rachel have both been by a couple of times to talk to him, and either they've missed him or he's pretended not to be home because they came up empty. So here she is, against his wishes — or his wishes as expressed by his little brother — to try again.

She doesn't even know if he's going to be home. But it's the start of the summer holidays; his dad will be at work and Russ will still be at school. He probably won't have got his summer hours at work yet; he *should* be home.

Shahida worries at her lip, and then stops, wipes her mouth dry. He bit through his lip that night, trying to control himself. Trying not to react. Because she *touched* him. The image won't leave her.

She rings the bell. Same old tune. But when Mark opens the door she can't control her reaction. He's thin again. Really thin, like he used to be. The dark circles are back under his eyes, his cheeks are too sharp, his knuckles are too taut, and his belly's visibly emaciated even under the loose shirt he wears.

“Hi, Shahida,” he says. He sounds so tired.

“Hi, Em.”

He stands aside to let her in. “Mark is fine.”

Inside the house is the same as it was when she last saw it, and that feels perversely like a violation; it should be a wreck, it should reflect his deterioration! But she sees why when he leads her into the kitchen: there's a pair of yellow gloves on the edge of the sink, and dishes soaking. He's still cleaning. He's wasting away and he's still fucking cleaning.

“Tea?” he says.

“Um. What? Oh. Shit. Yes, please.”

She's silent while he runs through the tea ritual, passing him a pair of mugs from the cupboard over the kettle, pointing

when he holds up the box of breakfast tea and the box of Earl Grey.

Her mug gets milk, his doesn't.

"You didn't reply to my texts," she says, walking into the main room and expecting him to follow.

"No. Sorry."

She sits down on the armchair, the one facing the biggest couch, so he doesn't feel like he has to sit next to her. Again, from this vantage, the place is unchanged, like the whole house has been excavated from her dreams; except for Mark, gaunt, enervated, no longer himself, taken from her nightmares.

"*I'm* sorry," she says, concentrating very hard on the ugly carpet. "I made you come to that party, I made you wear different clothes, I kissed you—"

"Shahida," he says sharply. He breathes deeply, closes his eyes, puts his mug down on the table, clasps his hands together. When he speaks again, it's in the same monotone as before. Shahida would prefer he yell at her. "You did nothing wrong. You gave me a wonderful night. It was me who wrecked it. Because I wasn't in control of my shit."

"And you are now?"

"Yes."

"Does that mean you'll start talking to me again?"

"No," he says. "Sorry." It could be a recording of the same words he said earlier; he's on a loop. How can she break through to him?

"Em—"

"It's Mark."

"*Whatever!*" she snaps, and takes it back with a gasp. "Shit. Sorry. I'm just... You're purging again, aren't you?"

"I've got it under control."

“Will you *ever* talk to me again?”

“Maybe.” He reaches for his mug, sips at his black tea.

“I’m *worried* about you,” she says.

“You don’t need to. Really. I promise. You don’t need to worry. I just need time.”

“Time,” Shahida says, but she can’t remember what she was going to say next, because he’s drinking his tea again, and raising the mug pulls back the sleeves of his shirt, exposes his forearms, and even if he still wore the ribbon it wouldn’t have been able to hide the second scar on his wrist, slashed scarlet through the first, a crucifix in torn skin.

It has a twin on his other wrist.

She has to get out. She has to get *out*. Just looking at him is painful now, and in his automaton movements and controlled speech there’s nothing left of the boy she loves. Nothing left of the boy she hurt, over and over again, with her idiot insistence on helping him *her* way, bringing him into *her* world, when she should have tried harder to step into his, tried to understand him on *his* terms.

She kissed him and she ended him.

She’s stammering, she realises, and he’s watching her blankly.

“Em— Mark,” she says, swallowing to take control of her voice, “I should go. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have disturbed you. I should go. Just. Call me. Or text me. Or email me or whatever. When you’re ready. When you want to talk. I’ll be there. I promise.” She’s at the front door and he’s halfway out of his seat, paused, waiting to see what she’ll do, if she’s really going to go, if she’s really going to hurt him and run from him.

What’s left of him in there? Is there *anything*?

“Forgive me,” he says, sounding like a shadow of himself, and she almost runs from the house, with its awful stippled cream walls and its threadbare carpet and the injured boy she failed to help. She ducks into the alleyway he showed her

once, a place overlooked by no-one, the only place she can be properly alone until she gets back to her room, and kicks at the wooden fence until her feet hurt.

2012 NOVEMBER 4 — SUNDAY

It's all too much.

He didn't mean to push that girl.

Didn't even know she was there.

Rushing like always.

Staying up too late and rising too early and drinking too much and showing up late to lectures.

Like always.

And she looked at him like he meant to do it.

And she shouted at him and for the briefest moment he wanted to tell her it wasn't fair.

Bullshit.

You know what wouldn't have been fair?

If she'd fallen.

If she'd died because of his carelessness.

He deserved every word of her anger.

He should have looked where he was going.

Should have *thought*.

But he doesn't think.

Never does.

Never thinks; still makes it all about him, all the time.

She was just the latest to get hurt.

Well.

She'll be the last.

He hurt Shahida.

Amy.

Rachel.

Stopped talking to Stef.

And then it was just him and Russ until Russ stopped talking to *him*.

Shouldn't have screamed at him that Mum died years ago.

Shouldn't have begged him to stop talking about her like she's alive.

Shouldn't have shouldn't have *shouldn't have*.

His little brother.

Wounded and still walking for so many years.

And he didn't even see it.

So self-absorbed.

So self-obsessed.

So broken.

Selfish, stupid, short-sighted *Mark*.

Yeah.

The name's a fucking bomb.

The name and everything that goes with it.

It's a bomb and tonight it goes off.

No.

Not a bomb.

Never again a bomb.

Tonight he goes, but he goes quietly.

Too late.

Too late not to have hurt so many people.

But better now.

So he can't hurt anyone else.
Should have walked onto the railway tracks.
Should have cut deeper.
Should have swallowed those pills and not spat them out.
Should have pitched over the railings.
Can't hurt people if you're not around.
Stupid.
Always a reason.
Always a *reason* to delay the inevitable.
No such thing as a clean death.
Too many people to hurt.
Well.
No-one left now.
Just him.
Just Mark.

* * *

The girl's been there all night. The same one who's been in the corner of his vision for weeks. The same one who interviewed him when he first started at Saints, who seemed interested. He shut her down, of course; the last thing anyone needed was to be interested in him.

His new start hadn't been going all that well.

Abigail. That's her name. She's around campus a lot, and he goes out to this shitty club in town and there she is again,

like she's following him, but when he decides to confront her she's gone.

Doesn't matter. It'll all be academic soon.

He doesn't bother collecting his coat — why would he need it, where he's going? — but when he leaves the club she's there, on the pavement, waiting for him, wrapped up in a parka and with his coat folded over her forearms. She holds it out for him and he puts it on.

“Are you drunk?” she asks.

“Not really.”

“High?”

“No.”

“Would you like to come with me?”

“Why?”

“Because, Mark, I think I can help you.”

He considers just walking away, going to the river like he planned, but what can possibly happen? If she thinks she can help him, she's welcome to try; Shahida couldn't, and he certainly couldn't help himself, but he's the very definition of someone with nothing to lose. Even if this is a kidnapping, even if she's taking him somewhere to kill him, at least he won't die alone.

He follows her up the hill, to the grounds of Almsworth cathedral. It's some ridiculous hour of the morning so obviously the gates are locked, but she knows a place where the trees have warped the fence enough that if you bend the branches aside you can get through. She holds them up for him; he shrugs and ducks through the hole. She takes him to a bench at the back of the grounds which overlooks another part of the city, away from the major built-up areas, where terraced houses describe interlocking semicircles, like a chain made from brick and pottery and thrown at the hillside. It's almost like looking at home.

“It’s pretty up here,” she says.

“Cold, too.” He’s shivering inside his coat.

“Do you remember me?”

He nods. She’d be memorable even if he hadn’t kept seeing her lately; she’s beautiful. “Abigail,” he says.

“Abby,” she says. “Abby Meyer.”

He watches their breath mist and combine in front of them, watches it temporarily haze out the view of the city. “Why are we here, Abby?”

“I can help you. Like I said. I’ve been keeping half an eye on you, Mark, since we met; since the interview. Because I have connections to an organisation that helps people, and you... you seem very much like you need help.”

“What kind of organisation? What kind of help?”

She doesn’t answer straight away. She leans back on the bench instead, smiles at him. “They helped me,” she says. “I was a lot like you. Angry. Lost. Alone. And alone because I’d *made* myself alone, because I’d made mistakes and dealt with them poorly. No friends left, and I didn’t feel like I could ever face my family again. I was just marking off time on the calendar, waiting for the day it all got too much and I either took myself out, or did something stupid enough that someone else did it for me.”

“What changed?” he asks.

“The sisters found me.”

“The sisters? Are you a nun?”

She laughs. “Emphatically not.”

“Then what are you? What’s this organisation? Who are the sisters?”

She reaches out for his hand, and he lets her take it. “I can take you to a place,” she says, “where you can change. Grow. The same way I did. All the holes in you, Mark, all the

missing pieces you see when you look at yourself, we can help you fill them in. We can show you a new life.”

“Are you from a cult?”

She pauses for much longer than he likes. “No. We’re not organised around a god, and we don’t have an absolute leader or anything like that. But we do have rules, and we do have secrets. If you come with me you’ll be committing to abide by them and keep them.”

He waits for her explanation to continue; it doesn’t. “That’s all you can give me?”

She looks at him for a long time, the suggestion of a smile on her face. She’s thinking, he can tell, trying to work out what she can say, and he has all night — it makes no real difference if he dies tonight or tomorrow or next week — so he waits quietly for her decision. He watches her in return: she’s beautiful, and the way her jaw moves when she thinks is charming.

“If you come with me,” she says eventually, “you’ll be committing to changing yourself entirely. To becoming someone new. You’ll still be you — we’re not talking brainwashing or anything! — but it’s like you’d be... another version of you. A you with the broken bits mended, or mending.”

“What if I don’t come?” he asks. He doesn’t really mean it, but he wants to test her.

She breathes out heavily. “Some of my sisters — most of them, actually — would force you to come. I don’t want to be like them, even though I understand why they do the things they do. If you say no, I’ll walk away. I’ll leave you up here on this cold bloody bench, even though I’m pretty sure if I do that I’ll never see you again. Except as a face in a newspaper, maybe.”

He nods. What would be the point of denying it?

“You should know,” she says, her voice firming, “that if you decide to come with me, we’ll *make* you change. It’ll be

hard, and sometimes you'll hate it, and sometimes you'll hate me, the way I hated *my* sponsor sometimes."

"But it works?"

"It worked on me. It worked on my sisters. It works."

He nods again. She's still holding his hand, so he stands up, tugs on it. "Where do we go?" he asks.

He has nothing to lose. And if it's awful, if it doesn't work, if it's just more misery upon misery, he can always leave.

2019 DECEMBER 11 — WEDNESDAY

If she didn't have the scars on her arms, faded almost to nothing but still visible, still perceptible as the slightest of bumps on her skin, if the fingers interlocked with his weren't almost exactly the same size and shape, if she didn't speak with absolute conviction, if she hadn't cried when she described the things that were done to her, Aaron wouldn't have believed her. Even with everything that's happened, even with what he's seen happening to Steph, to himself, to Adam and the others, he wouldn't have believed her.

But she's so certain, and she tells him her story in such detail and with such sorrow, that he can't maintain his scepticism.

Kept in a dungeon, ancestor to this place, and tortured for fun.

They took her from outside her home. On her way back from the fucking shops. Small family, struggling to make ends meet. No bother to anyone. But the police got the son on some petty theft charges, *really* petty, and he got six weeks in jail after a guilty plea, and he was barely home a week when they took him. When they took *her*.

They took her and they kept her in the dark and they changed her.

They took her and when she refused to be what they wanted they *killed her family*.

They took her and she told him everything and he held her as she did, feeling his comfort and company entirely inadequate but all he had to offer. And she smiled and wiped her eyes and thanked him for listening, and he nodded in silence and tried to return her smile, and she kissed him on the cheek. It's still warm there, he thinks.

She'd been a man, and they took her and changed her and she fought back by choosing to accept it, embracing a womanhood as radical to them as any violence could ever have been.

Who would do something like that to her?

"This is where the lies end, Aaron," she says. "All of them. And this is where trust starts. Now my secret's yours to keep."

It takes him a while to find his voice; he hasn't spoken in what feels like hours. "I can't tell anyone?"

She squeezes his hand, lets go, takes a long drink from the bottle of water by the bed. "I can't stop you. I won't stop you. But it's best the other boys learn the truth at their own pace; your timetable is not everyone's timetable."

"Does *Steph* know the truth?" he asks, and she laughs and he wants desperately to disbelieve her story because no-one who laughs like that should be so hurt.

"I said 'the other boys', Aaron," she says. "Unless you think she's—"

"No." Maria, Pippa, Monica, Tabby, all of them... And now Steph, too. "No," he repeats, shaking his head. "She's... not a boy. Not any more."

"Are you?"

He snorts at that, holds out his arm as if to inspect it, as if he can find something of use there, not just the afterimages of his imagination, the echoes of the cuts inflicted on Maria by some grinning sadist. And then it hits him; the absurdity.

“What kind of a question is that?”

“The kind you’ll have to answer for yourself,” she says, closing her fingers around his forearm, pressing it down into his lap. She’s being so fucking gentle with him and once again the desire rises to throw it all back at her, to mock her kindness, but such impulses have never helped him.

Wait... Does Maria mean that Steph *knows*...? “How long has Steph known what I know now?”

Maria nods to herself, like he just passed or failed some test. “She’s being briefed right now,” she says. “Pippa’s with her. By the time you see her next, she’ll know everything you know.”

“Is that because you’ve judged her ready? Or is it because I am, or you think I am, and you know I’ll tell her, no matter what promises I make to you now?” Careful, Aaron; that was a little too honest.

She leans against the wall and he follows her, both of them nesting in the pillows she put in place. “Loneliness kills, Aaron. It’s as true down here as it is up there. So we like to see people form bonds. You and Steph. Will and Adam. Ollie and Raph, sort of, although we’re having to encourage that a bit. Sometimes it’s groups of three or four. Occasionally it’s the whole bloody basement. But mostly it’s twos. So, mostly, you’re briefed in twos.”

“What about Martin?”

“Pamela’s getting close to him at the moment.” She shrugs. “Sometimes it has to be the sponsor; sometimes bonds just don’t form, otherwise.”

“Pamela?”

“His sponsor. Ella.”

“Oh. By bonds, you mean—?”

“Friendships.”

“Right. Friendships.” He kissed her. He fucking *kissed* her. Yeah, it was intended to be the last action of a dead man, but

He bursts suddenly into laughter, has to clutch himself to keep from hurting, because it squeezes the breath out of him and pinches at the small of his back, in the sore spot.

It really had been the last action of a *man*.

“Aaron?” Maria asks, a hand on his knee.

Everything he knows tells him she *has* to be lying. Everything he knows about *her* tells him she’s telling the truth.

“You promise you’re not shitting me with this?” he asks.

“I promise. I was like you. Not entirely like you — different selection criteria — but I didn’t choose to be a woman. I, too, had womanhood thrust upon me. Hormonally. Surgically. And... via other methods. Methods we will *not* be employing.”

There’s only one reasonable question to ask. “Why? If it was such torture, then why continue? Why not just pack up the whole place after you ran this Grandmother bitch out of town? Why do this to Steph? To *me*?”

“Because it *works*, Aaron. I was a product of the old regime, yes, but all the other women here, *all of them*, transitioned under my supervision. All of them were men on destructive paths, all of them too twisted up to change without radical action. All of them happier now than they ever were before.”

“You are absolutely positively *definitely* shitting me, Maria.” Steph was quite pretty when she got here, now that he looks back with an appropriate eye, and she’s looking better all the time, and from what Maria says they have access to the kinds of surgeries needed to smooth out the little bumps and things that mark her out as someone who spent twenty-one years on the other side of the gender divide. But he’s... him. What seems feasible for Steph is ridiculous the moment he tries to apply it to himself. He is what he’s seen in the mirror,

when he cares to look: a boy/man/whatever. No matter what else changes, it's stamped all the way through him. Indelible. Like a stain.

"I'm not. Ask Pippa."

"I'm a fucking *man*. That's not going away, no matter how many injections you give me, how much you cut off—"

"I'll help you. Every step, I'll be here. For the next three years, I'll be here. I'll teach you how to walk; I'll teach you how to talk; I'll teach you how to dress; I'll teach you how to *live*, Aaron. Being a man, in the way you've been taught, has done you terrible harm. You can just... leave it behind. Like old clothes."

"I'm not a girl. I can't be a girl. Maria, I'm *me*." Barely a breath left in him. "I don't understand how that can change."

"I'll look after you. And so will Steph; you *know* she'll help you. You *can* change, Aaron. You can be someone new. We don't take in people who can't do it. We don't."

"But—"

"The voice inside you," Maria says, leaning closer, "the one that says you can't do this, that you're a man, and men can't change, men *don't* change, that it's weak and pathetic even to consider it, the voice that's been telling you that you're better off *dead* than as a woman... It's the same voice that tells you to hit back when you're hurt, to cause pain to stop feeling it, to isolate yourself instead of seeking help. Has it ever, in your life, been right? Or has it just brought you more misery?"

Well?

Has it?

"Uh..." he says, but he has nothing.

There's a knock at the door and it swings open almost immediately, and he's going to protest but it's just Steph, with Pippa's thumb on the lock, letting her in. On her face is nothing but concern and, shit, the red cheeks and bloodshot eyes of someone who's been crying, and he wonders if they've

told her *everything*, everything including what he asked of Maria, and he's afraid she'll hate him, despise him for almost leaving her alone down here, but she crosses the tiny room with quick steps and before he knows it he's standing, locked in her embrace, arms all around, and she's crying again and so's he, and he knows now that he *can't* leave, that he's missed his chance to end himself, because this girl — yes, this *girl* — is someone he can't bear to hurt like that, and damn him for ever considering it.

Maria quietly closes the door on her way out.

2019 DECEMBER 12 — THURSDAY

It's long after midnight and she has work in the morning but she can't sleep. Everything's running together in her head: from Zach's breezy attitude at work — and the way he 'educated' her about trans issues; the way she had to pretend to know nothing — to the calls from the sponsors and, finally, to Abby. Always Abby.

And before, when she was still Mark, or Em, or Emily, or Stef's best friend, or Russ' absent brother, or his mother's son. When he ran from Shahida after she touched his chest and he felt a new and even more bitter revulsion for his body than he'd ever felt before and couldn't *stop* feeling afterwards no matter how much he starved himself, no matter how much he hurt himself. When he lay on his mother's bed and couldn't cry as she lay dying. A hundred nights when he walked into the woods or up by the railway tracks or out into the wilderness or along the back roads, most of the time not willing to take into his own hands the responsibility of ending it, but not exactly bothered if he might happen to slip on a log crossing a river or get stuck on the railway tracks or get hit by a car without its lights on.

Abby leading him back down the hill from the cathedral, back to the university. All the way through campus, past the Student Union Bar to that girls' dorm, the one rumoured to give out the special grants. Through the front doors, through

the kitchen and down into the dark while she whispered reassurances and promises that things would get better, as if he wasn't numb to it all, as if he'd been capable of feeling *anything*.

She's got her phone awake with the last call screen open. Abby's name, Abby's number. It's past two in the morning but she could call and Abby would be there for her, the way she always promised. Hers for life, she said.

The first two weeks at Dorley had been bewildering. He came to understand quite quickly what the place was, what it did, and the types of boys it brought in, and he was angry with Abby for days. The boys were hateful and stupid and he dedicated himself to avoiding them.

But then they put him on the estradiol and everything changed.

It was as if a screeching noise he'd been hearing all his life had ceased. As if dust occluding his vision had been washed away. As if limbs made heavy and clumsy by fatigue were suddenly energised and capable. He asked Abby what exactly it was she'd injected him with, and she made him promise secrecy, made him swear on his life, and then she sat him down and explained what it was, what it did, and what effects he could expect.

And Melissa understood.

God, she understood, suddenly and completely.

The anger didn't go away. It intensified. The idea that this simple chemical was all she'd been missing her entire life, that none of the so-called doctors or mental health professionals or even her friends had ever raised it as so much as a possibility... it was almost too big a failure to comprehend. And the idea that this sudden peace, this ease, was what normal people felt like all the time had been truly staggering.

She'd known a little about trans people. Everyone did. You saw them on TV occasionally; glamorous girls on talk shows having their pasts revealed to titillate the audience. But they

never felt real. They never felt like someone you could turn a corner on the street and bump into. Never felt like something she could be.

She turned her anger inward, the way she has since Dad hit her, since she learned never to speak her mind, never to admit her thoughts. The others of her intake decided she was unjustifiably aloof and intensified their verbal attacks on her; the pussy, the emaciated boy who wouldn't look them in the eye, became the snob, the little prince who thought himself too good for them. The boy who was to become Nell cornered her a few times, never physically hurting her but threatening it, making her aware that he was capable of it, that her every step should be taken with the knowledge that it could end abruptly and in pain. It took until disclosure, until their understanding caught up with hers, for the insults to stop. One of them, months later, even apologised, although most didn't properly come around until the second year. She remembers Nell waiting for her outside her room, a lengthy apology written on notepaper, and the frustration the new girl had difficulty controlling when Melissa closed the door in her face.

Only Abby came close to understanding her, and even then Melissa kept from her the depths of her relief and the exhilarating highs of the vicious rage that still took her from time to time, made her silent and unmoving. Lying to the people who cared about her was second nature, a habit impossible to break, especially in such an environment. But she was a friend, a confidante, and a lover of terrible old movies. They said they would tell each other everything.

Abby told Melissa everything; Melissa, as was her habit, lied.

The sponsors and the other boys-become-girls read her refusal to engage with the rest of her intake as quiet compliance, which was for a while privately amusing, especially considering the way the others fought amongst themselves. Even after disclosure, even after some of them had been significantly reshaped, still occasionally they would fight and be punished, separated, put in cells or sent to their rooms,

and Melissa would return to her own room, to an environment she could control.

Stuck up, snobby little prince.

But she didn't need them. She didn't need the other sponsors, either, or the other Sisters. It was deliberate, and better that way: she would keep her head down, learn everything from Dorley there was to learn, and get the hell out. Friends? She could make friends after graduation, back in the real world, away from the madness.

And then she fell in love with Abby.

Abby...

They should never have done anything. But Melissa found herself in the role she finally understood had been Shahida's, that of the infatuated girl denying her crush. And she resolved it in much the same way: in her second year, in a nicely decorated room on the first floor that was starting to feel almost like home, after an evening spent watching movies and hitting the wine, after shutting the door in Nell's face and then seeking her out to accept her apology, her hug, her meek little cheek kiss, after the whole damn place seemed to soften around her, she leaned in and kissed her sponsor.

Abby pushed her away. Asked if she was sure. And Melissa, never sure, didn't answer, leaned in again, kissed her again, took Abby's hands and placed them on her developing body, writhed under them, kissed her again and again, testing her final hypothesis, waiting for the disgust and the revulsion to take her away from Abby the way they took her from Shahida; they never came. Undeniable confirmation that, yes, this was what she'd been missing. This was who she was.

All her life she'd been a girl and no-one told her. No-one even thought to raise it as a possibility. Sometimes a joke, sometimes a mistake, occasionally an insult; never real. Until Dorley fucking Hall.

Abby tried to put a stop to their relationship the next day, but Melissa pushed. What they had was important, she

insisted. Abby said to her one day that she, the older girl, the sponsor, should have said no, and Melissa agreed that she, the younger girl, still becoming a woman, shouldn't have asked, but neither of them had been strong enough to walk away.

Until Melissa, one day, did.

She moved to Manchester, she got a job. They still saw each other. They were still together, sort of. They were still happy, mostly. And so, obviously, like with everything else, Melissa had to break it. Her obsession, growing in the time they spent apart, that she could have a life completely disconnected from Dorley, that she could be absolutely free, and her suspicion that despite her feelings her love for Abby might have been misplaced, encouraged by the programme, unreal after all, made her tear herself away. First she started seeing other people. Not enough. So, then, disturbed anew by how happy she'd been when Abby last visited, she cut off contact altogether.

Stupid, selfish, short-sighted. Always.

And the other girls she's dated? Disasters. Mistakes. Always wary of getting close. Too scared of doing something wrong, of being revealed as an unreal girl, a construct. The scars on her labia are so faint now as to be almost invisible but they're there, and if you know what you're looking for you might recognise them. Abby's always insisted they'll fade to nothingness, like hers, but Melissa's long since stopped betting on the best outcome.

Fuck.

She turns her phone over and over in her hands, thumb hovering over the call icon.

No, Liss. Leave her be. Haven't you hurt her enough?

She locks the phone, yanks her laptop's charging cable out, dumps it onto the bed and logs onto the Dorley intranet. She gets only the graduate version up here, heavily disguised and with very little actual information, but it's enough. She calls up her intake and laughs when Nell's first on the list. She's

prettier than she used to be, more put together, and it's kind of nice to see. It took the girl a *long* time to get her anger under control.

Melissa used to envy her ability to turn her rage outward, to not have it fester inside.

There's Autumn, pictured in a formal dress, holding hands with some tuxedoed man and surrounded by beautiful people in beautiful clothes. A charity fundraiser, according to the caption, hosted by someone credited only as 'Elle'.

And here's Tash. Name officially shortened from Natasha, pronouns updated to they/them. Like Autumn, they're pictured with a partner, but the event looks much less reputable; much more fun. Tash had been another quiet one when they'd all been together in the first year, but integrated themselves into the group better than Melissa ever could. Another one to envy.

Ah, she's next. Melissa. She snorts at the surname 'Haverford' the way she always does; it might be hers, officially, but it's never felt all that comfortable. Mind you, neither did 'Vogel' when *that* was her name. Doomed to fail to fit in wherever she goes.

She scrolls her profile, amused to note that it's been kept relatively up to date, probably by some duty sponsor doing file maintenance to stave off boredom on the graveyard shift. Her job is noted, but the picture is one from before she left Dorley. Strange that Abby didn't give them something more recent.

She wonders, suddenly, how Russ and her father are doing, how Stef and Shahida and Amy and Rach are doing, but there's no way to find that on here; she'd have to call up and get a new secure password — unfeasible for this time in the early morning, or at the very least deeply embarrassing, depending on who's on duty — or go digging through the packets they still send her, the ones she files straight under the bed.

Never mind. She can satisfy her curiosity in the morning. She scrolls down, finds their names under 'Pre-Transition

Associates'. Shahida and Amy are there, unchanged; Rachel's got a double-barrelled name now; Russ and Dad, still there. Stef—

Stephanie R. [placeholder surname]

Oh no. Oh fucking no.

It *can't* be.

There has to be another explanation!

Would the Stef she knew transition of his own free will? Possibly. But, she realises, 'placeholder surname' can mean only one thing: Dorley Hall has him. No-one else has placeholder surnames. No-one else spends three years minimum in limbo, unnamed, unmanned, legally dead.

A quick search doesn't find any notices of his death or disappearance, so she expands the search parameters, plugs in everything she can think of, every gambit she saw employed in the service of invisibly kidnapping people, and eventually she finds a tweet from someone dated just two months ago, complaining about his roommate leaving suddenly to 'find himself'. Scrolling up, she finds another tweet from the same man mentioning a Stef, and another, praising his new roommate Stefan for bringing home free cake from work.

They have him.

They have him, they've renamed him, and they're not done with him.

Why didn't Abby tell her? Probably not her fault. Probably ordered not to. Beatrice can be scary as hell when she wants to be, and the ever-present hints about powerful backers — not to mention the way the washouts just disappear — always made it clear that if Bea asks something of you, you don't say no.

Shit. Abby. What did she say when Melissa asked how she was? She said she had things to tell her but most of it was

classified. Shit. Shit! Was *that* Abby trying to tell her something? Was it a warning?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Okay.

December. It's only December, and this is his first year in the programme. That's, what, a couple of months on estradiol? And no orchi yet. There's still time.

Still time for her to go back down there and get him out.

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TEN

LIKE AN ANGEL

2019 DECEMBER 12 — THURSDAY

She's such an idiot. She should have known!

For as long as she's been down here with him, Aaron's been practically a force of nature, rarely stilled, even more rarely silent. A creature of energy, always needing to talk or move his hands or pace, and when she thinks of him — and she thinks of him often, more often than she would ever have thought likely — he's in motion.

And yesterday he was almost calm. When they talked, when they showered together, even when he darted back to kiss her. Too still. Too controlled. Too much like something vital inside him had simply faded away.

She should have *known*.

How long have they stood there, with him in her arms? Minutes or hours; Stef could believe either. Pippa held her back as long as she could, explained that the thing with Maria was a process, that this was a point a girl sometimes hits — and Stef had pulled snarling out of her grip at that; 'a girl'! — before she can truly start to organise herself into something new.

If Stef hadn't been so weak with tears she would have pushed right past her.

“You mustn’t interfere!”

That was what stopped her. That was what put her right back in her seat and wrapped her arms around her legs and buried her head in her thighs. *You mustn’t interfere.*

Implicit: she already has.

Pippa didn’t say it. She didn’t have to.

If this is all going to happen, and it will — it has to; it’s unstoppable; there are too many women all willing to look in and say everything’s perfectly fine because *they* were abused to within an inch of their lives and *they* turned out fine — then she’s making it worse by interfering.

But how can she not?

Eventually Pippa let her go. Decided the time was right. And she didn’t think of it before but maybe this is *all* part of it. Maybe this is her role. Maybe this is how Aaron becomes a girl, from her intervention. *And what would Melissa think of you?*

Some intervention. She burst in and Maria cleared out, and now here she is, and here *he* is, in her embrace at last, and he’s all cried out but she sure isn’t, and he moves only to breathe while she squeezes him tighter, unable to stop and unable to let go, whispering his name in tight and sore breaths so quietly he might not hear.

He gave her one last good day, and he kissed her, and he asked Maria to help him die.

Her belly lurches and her throat constricts and she says his name again, louder and clearer this time, and he sniffs loudly, shifts in her grip as much as he can, and looks up at her. He’s smaller, or he seems that way. Reduced. Like he found a way to miss a fortnight of meals in the hours between the kiss in the lunch room and now.

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“No.” She pulls him back in. “I’m not accepting any apologies from you. You’re... you’re a fucking innocent in all

this.” She knew this was happening; she’s known since the start; she remembers thinking maybe they all deserved it...

He shivers, and it takes her a moment to realise he’s laughing. It’s an ugly laugh, wet and painful, and she wants to silence it before it somehow injures him, but it doesn’t last long. He goes limp in her arms, weaker even than before. Nothing left of him.

She’s all that’s holding him up, and she’s not doing that well herself. She loosens her grip, reluctantly lets him go, and he takes two steps back to lean against the wardrobe.

He won’t look at her.

Aaron says, “I’m not an *innocent*,” and Stef doesn’t care that it’s true, that he wouldn’t be here if it weren’t, because she wants to burn anything and everything she has to, to get him out and away from the place that made him ask Maria to help him die.

It happens to a lot of them. It happened to Pippa. She was okay. He’ll be okay. Don’t interfere. Don’t interfere. Don’t interfere.

She wants to hit herself. Nothing justifies this.

“Aaron—”

“Don’t,” he says. “You can’t tell me I’m innocent. It’s—” he coughs, and it almost sounds like he’s laughing again, “—it’s a bad fucking joke. I know what I’ve done.”

Stef looks around at the concrete walls. “None of it warrants what they’re doing to you.”

He shrugs. Actually fucking shrugs, like none of this matters! Or like he doesn’t care any more. But then he flaps his hands at his sides, unable to find anything to do with them. He looks around. He even smiles at her. Little discharges of energy. Signs he’s still in there, despite appearances, despite the way he’s put all his weight against the wardrobe, absolutely drained, useless, used up.

Is this what Pippa meant? Does he see a future, even slightly? Is this the start of it?

“What are you thinking?” he asks, like he’s curious.

Stef laughs. “Fucked if I know.”

The effort of laughing exhausts her in a way no tears could, and she walks quickly over to the bed before she loses her balance. Wouldn’t it be nice if he were to follow her, if he were to show her that the affection he showed her yesterday wasn’t just inspired by his guilt, wasn’t just put on to make her feel good?

How long has she known him? Mere months. And she can’t imagine the world without him.

She chokes through fresh tears because it almost happened. He came close enough that he asked Maria for death and Maria refused him and promised him there’d be no more lies.

No more *lies*.

“Aaron,” she whispers, in a voice made harsh as she remembers Maria talking around her, lying for her, making the promise and then *lying to his face* because of *her*.

Christ, she’s a weight on this fucking place. She’s a black hole, distorting everything around her. She should have let Christine get her out, accepted her offers of help, found a way to transition on the outside. But her weakness, her cowardice, her self-centred stubbornness forced Christine’s hand, and now she’s *here* and the sponsors are helping her and just by her presence she’s hurting the boys... She’s hurting Aaron.

Stupid boy! she admonishes herself, in the voice of her father. She came here, inserted herself into a process that’s run smoothly for years, and she meddled and she put herself first and she didn’t even consider that the others might have needs that matter because they’re *bad men* and then she fell in love.

And now he’s asking to die. And Maria’s still lying to him. Lies of omission, sure, but lies are lies, even if it’s Aaron telling them to himself, on her behalf.

She coughs on her tears, but before she can wipe her face, before she can look at him again, he's sat down next to her, right up against her, arm around her waist, pulling her in, offering his shoulder for her head, placing a tentative hand on her thigh. Comforting her.

"Aaron," she says again.

"Stephanie," he says back. His voice is kind, and shaking only a little.

"This is wrong," she whispers. "This is fucked up. It shouldn't be *you* comforting *me*."

"Why not?" he asks, and the question's enough to silence her. "If there's one thing this place has shown me," he continues, emboldened, "it's that the one whose needs are most urgent can change on a fucking dime." He squeezes her thigh, and his continued comfort forces out of her a bitter breath. "I'm actually kind of calm right now. And *you*... you're not." She leans on him and he smirks. "If there's *two* things this place has shown me, the other's how to jerk off without being seen by the cameras. Now, amateurs, posers, they might say, 'Just do it under the duvet,' but to them I say, what if the urge takes me while I'm having a shower? Or watching TV in the common room? Or pacifying myself with inedible breakfast cereal? And what about our changing sensitivities? Sure, I might have got some of the old downstairs magic back — and I have, by the way; you'll have to tell me how you're doing in that regard — but honestly I'm bored by the one-dimensional wanks of old, like, I need a *challenge*, and simply yanking one out with your right hand under the covers while browsing on your phone with your left is fucking *easy mode*, and doesn't take into account the additional—"

"Aaron," she says once more. He's trying. It's sweet.

"Yes?"

"You really wank in the lunch room?"

“No,” he admits, “but I have a plan for it. Always Be Prepared; isn’t that what the boy scouts say?”

She laughs, and he lets go of her thigh, but he doesn’t push her away. Bodies touching, they sit together on his bed. He’s smiling at her, and despite what he says and despite what she knows he looks too damn sweet, too damn innocent.

“I have to tell you something,” she says, “and you’re going to hate me for it.”

“Steph,” he says, “I don’t want to know what you did to get chucked in here. I don’t care. Not any more.”

“That’s not—”

“And I know Pippa shows you stuff, too. On her phone.” It’s like he’s going down a list. “It’s why you’re here at all tonight. You’ve been close with her for ages and she’s been letting you in on stuff. Showing you the cameras. It’s fine. I mean—” he shudders for a second, and Stef forces flexibility into her arm so she can hug him loosely, “—it’s not like I *like* that you’ve probably seen the footage of me apologising to Maria for her helping me up, or me asking her for... for what I asked for.” He laughs again. “Jesus, though, this is so fucking embarrassing. Like, we’re always recorded here, I *know* that, but the whole point of wanting to fucking *die* is that you don’t have to deal with the aftermath!” He’s talking louder now, but before Stef can intervene he calms himself, and continues softly, “Especially the way I wanted to do it. I wanted to just fade away. But now I’m still here and so’s that fucking aftermath and, Steph, I feel like a complete idiot. How do you move on from wanting to die without, you know, having to ever think about it or talk to anyone about it ever again?”

“Aaron—”

“All anyone’s going to think when they look at me is, oh, there goes suicidal ideation boy, what’s the matter, gonna—?”

“*Aaron!*” Stef interrupts, more sharply than she intended. “I know what else Maria told you tonight. That everyone here was once like you. Like *us*. I think maybe a lot of them have

been where you are. I think it's actually quite normal." *Thank you, Pippa, for putting the words in my mouth.* She'll have to apologise later for not accepting her advice with grace.

"Yeah," Aaron says, frowning, "fuck. Yeah. I keep forgetting. It's like my brain doesn't want to hold on to the information. It's *all* of them, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Stef says, "it really seems like it is."

And there she goes, reflexively prevaricating again. Did you *ever* think you'd become such a persistent liar, *Stefan*?

"What?" Aaron says quickly, his hand on Stef's shoulder so quickly she doesn't notice it's there until he squeezes it. "Steph, what is it?"

"Hm? Oh. Nothing."

"Steph," he says, using his free hand to cup her cheek and turn her to face him; the action is strangely intimate and, with only the weakest control over her body right now, she shivers. "Steph, you *froze*."

She looks down; her hands are balled into fists, and as she carefully unsticks them she finds the imprints of nails in her palms. Any harder and she would have broken the skin. "Shit," she says. "Sorry." Deadnaming herself in her own head; unhealthy, probably. "Stupid stuff."

"Nothing down here is stupid stuff," Aaron says. "Or everything is. Come on." He drags on her shoulder. He has no chance of moving her without her permission, so she grants it, and he lays them both down on the bed, pulling the covers up partway. He's got his back to the wall and she's facing him, although there's a good amount of mattress between them. "Tell me."

"I— I can't, Aaron."

"Stephanie," he says again, in his sternest voice. "You don't have to keep secrets from me. Who am I going to tell?"

"It's not that."

“I know you’re trans, Steph,” he says, and that brings her up short. It shouldn’t, because it was part of his confession to Maria, part of his request, that he saw her adapting in ways he never could, and that’s why he wanted to *die*—

“Oh God...” she whispers.

“No, seriously,” he says, as she wraps an arm around herself, “I know you’re trans, or something like it, or whatever. I mean, it’s obvious, right? I feel stupid for not seeing it before. It’s really fine. I’m not, like, bothered, or anything.”

He’s too close to it, he’s too close to me...

“No,” she says, because she has to say *something* before his train of thought leads him around to the lie, the big one, the one she tells every day, the one she makes even Maria participate in, but she doesn’t know what she’s going to say and it’s dangerous to let her mouth just fucking run on like it wants to, “I shouldn’t be here, I should go...”

“I don’t care,” Aaron says, reaching out a hand towards her and pausing it when she shuffles back. “Really.”

She rolls farther back anyway, almost falls out of the bed. She disentangles herself from the sheets and stands up, puts distance between them.

Aaron hasn’t moved.

“I’m hurting you, Aaron,” she says, and there’s no stopping it all from coming out now. “I’m hurting you just by being around you and that’s *exactly* what I was trying to stop from happening but I’m *fucking it up* and I’m sorry, fuck, Aaron, I’m so sorry...”

“You’re not hurting me.”

“You said it yourself! To Maria! You saw me... *changing*, and it made you realise you never could, which is *stupid*, Aaron, because you can, because *all of them did it*, and I’m making everything happen too soon, I’m pushing you into shit

before you're ready, maybe *all* of you, because I'm stupid and selfish and—”

“Steph!” he says. She looks back and he's sitting up, both hands on the mattress. “You're babbling. You're not making any sense.”

He looks so innocent. He looks so *fucking innocent*. And she's lied and she's lied and she's lied. She wants to break her chest open, she wants to scald herself with the shower water good and fucking proper this time, she wants to get away from him get away from *get away from him* before she makes things worse the way she has over and over and over.

“I *knew!*” she shrieks.

It's his turn to freeze. “What do you mean?”

She can never take this back, but she doesn't want to. He deserves the truth. Even if it hurts. Even if he never speaks to her again. He deserves it.

More than she deserves him.

“I knew,” she says, quieted and cold. “All along. About what happens here. About what was going to happen to you. That's why I came here. I *wanted* what they're forcing on you. I wanted it for me. So I knew. And I kept the secret. I lied and I pretended to be something I'm not and I'm—”

She can't even tell him she's sorry. It's too big for that.

It's the work of a moment to escape his room, and then she's alone in the corridor, considering her options. She could go upstairs, to her other room, but she doesn't want to see it right now, doesn't even want to think about it, because it's something *she* has that *he* doesn't and nothing could be more representative of the unjustified and ugly way she's elevated herself above him; and, besides, she's exhausted, has almost no control over herself. Imagine climbing the stairs on these legs! She'd fall and hurt herself.

Maybe she should, then.

No. No, and don't be so fucking stupid.

She lets herself back into her room, across the way from his, and lets the door close slowly on its own as she throws off her outer clothes and falls onto the bed. She keeps expecting a hand to stop the door, for Aaron to have chased after her, but eventually it finishes closing and the lock engages with a muted thump.

Stef presses her face into the pillow and screams.

* * *

Melissa jolts awake to the sound of some bloody Taylor song on the radio and she wants so badly to pick up the cheap alarm clock and dump it out the window that she can visualise the arc it describes on its way down to the pavement and thus she's surprised, seconds later, to find herself still face down in her pillow, still sore where she slept on her chest, still surrounded by printouts and half-wrapped in the charger cables for her phone and laptop, with her clock radio untouched and still playing *Back to December*. It makes her think of that time in her first year when Abby discovered the theory that Taylor Swift's had multiple relationships with women that she's had to keep secret for the sake of her career, and woke Melissa early on a Saturday to tell her about it.

Barely two hours sleep. It'll have to be enough.

Stefan — and she won't use *Stephanie*, because that's a coerced name if ever she's seen one; the kid's sponsor probably suggested a name similar to his real one as a way to get him used to the idea of being a girl — barely has an internet presence, and hours of searching hasn't turned up much more than memories of growing up in Almsworth that Melissa would prefer to forget. Friends she let down; places she never wants to think about ever again. Certainly she's

found nothing to suggest that ‘Stephanie R.’ exists anywhere except inside — under — Dorley Hall.

The radio rolls on to something more recent, and finally she finds the motivation to slap the silence button and roll out of bed. She’s got a full-length mirror set up by the wardrobe in the corner and she’s not surprised to find she looks like complete shit. And while she’d love to say that it doesn’t matter, that what she has to do today doesn’t require her to look her best, the early days of the second year, which instilled almost at the instinctive level the need to make herself up so she won’t be read as male, have never entirely left her. She shuffles off to the bathroom for a shower, remembering with a snort that all the makeup in the world didn’t protect her from Stef’s recognition, outside the Tesco that time.

Under the hot water she grimaces, because that was the other thing that kept her up most of the night: what if Dorley taking Stef was her fault? Vanishing without a trace is one thing, and she knows from the old information packs, from when she still opened them, that the kid took it hard. But he had his family, and even if he lost touch with Russ he still had his education, which by all accounts he worked hard on.

He still *recognised* her, though. Saw a dead man in a woman’s face. And who knows what that does to someone? The reports from his time at Saints said he was quiet, working diligently towards getting his degree and having some academic difficulties; they hadn’t gone into any more detail because there was no more detail to provide. They didn’t have anyone tailing him or collecting any specific information and they didn’t dedicate more than a line or two to him in the monthly update packs, because he was exactly what he appeared to be. There weren’t even any surveillance photos.

But he’d always been a quiet boy, and he’d always turned things over in his head before acting on them. Just like her. Whatever he did to get on Dorley’s radar must have happened suddenly but built up inside him for a while.

The causal chain leads inexorably back to her.

How *dare* they take him!

Routine carries her through the rest of her morning, but although she loads up her bag with her usual makeup she goes as light as she dares on her face, because she can't keep herself from crying for more than a few minutes at a time and she has, unfortunately, shit to do.

It's raining. Perfect. She pulls down her hood, lets the light spatter coat her face and hair; easier to hide that she's upset. She just got caught in the rain, that's all.

Zach, her boss, is early as always. He lives at the other end of a tram journey and prefers to avoid the crush. Good for her, today. No-one else around to see her humiliate herself.

She dumps her stuff — clothes, money and supplies, in a wheeled suitcase and the largest of her shoulder bags — by her desk, and avoids his eyes as she walks towards his office. The door's open, like usual, and he saw her come in, laden down. The question's clear on his face. She answers it before he has a chance to ask.

"I have to quit, Zach," she says. "I'm sorry."

"Okay," he says, standing up from his chair and walking towards her. He pauses when she freezes, and makes it look like all he wanted to do was stand on the other side of his desk and lean on the wood. "What's up?"

"I have a... a..." Melissa waves a hand. She couldn't come up with a story that sounded good, no matter how many times she rehearsed this moment on her way over. "A family emergency," she tries. Never mind that she's never spoken of her family with him; maybe that'll make it seem more authentic.

"Liss," Zach says, "you've been crying."

"It's just the rain."

"Don't tell me stories, kid."

She concentrates on the floor. He's been good to her and the job's been better than she expected to get, given that her

qualifications stop at A-level. Horrible to have to tear everything up because of Dorley.

“There’s something going on,” she says, slow enough to think through her words, “back home. I have to go deal with it? Find out what’s going on?” Damn. Her intonation isn’t exactly convincing.

“Is that what all those calls were about yesterday?” he asks, and she jumps guiltily. “I’m not *that* unobservant, you know.”

“Sorry.”

“Melissa, if there’s something going on—”

“I just need to leave, Zach. I don’t want to, but...” She leaves it there. This is harder than she expected.

Zach nods, frowns at her for a moment. “Okay. For starters, you’re *not* quitting. I’m signing off—” he leans back, pulls Melissa’s holiday card out of his desk drawer and starts scribbling in the appropriate boxes, “—on all your remaining days of holiday, and you’re taking your time in lieu as well, and...” He bobs his head from side to side as he thinks, and Melissa has to smile: he always does that when he counts under his breath. After a moment he leans back again and pulls out another card, this one yellow and quite a lot larger, with more boxes to fill in. “And today and tomorrow, you’re sick. Very sick. It might last all weekend. I *do* hope it doesn’t ruin your Christmas holiday, which starts Monday, in case you forgot.” He shuffles the holiday card back out from under the sick leave card and waves it at her.

“Zach—”

“Speaking of,” he continues, interrupting her with a grin, “silly me; I forgot to pass all this up the chain. I’m *supposed* to have all holiday cleared a week in advance, but...” He shrugs. “My bad. I’ll get it all processed today.”

“Zach,” she says, “you don’t need to do that.” The admin office will, at the very least, be irritated with him; someone might yell. Someone might send a passive-aggressive email.

“Melissa, whatever’s going on, it’s clearly important, and you need to deal with it. And everything’s winding down now, anyway. You’re ahead on your work, and you *know* classes are over soon. We’ll fudge it until January. I can manage *one* mit circs meeting without you. Just make sure you’re back for the start of the semester.” He drops both cards on his desk and stands up, hugs her before she can get away. “Go sort things out, drop me an email to let me know you’re okay every so often, and I’ll see you on the sixth, all right?”

“Thank you,” she mumbles.

“Safe journey, Liss.” He releases her and gives her a gentle flick on the cheek. “And you might want to cough a bit on the way out. Just to sell the ‘being sick’ thing.”

He would have let her leave right there, but she’s overcome and simply *must* hug him, so it’s almost five minutes later before she’s walking back out into the rain, coughing occasionally as she goes, and heading for Manchester Piccadilly. She doesn’t get the train; she’s never known exactly how extensive the Dorley panopticon is, whether anyone’s really watching her even now, but on the off-chance she has eyes on her she hires a car with cash, throws her bags in the back, syncs her burner phone to the Bluetooth, and takes the little Ford Fiesta out of the city, heading down to Almsworth via Sheffield. It’s less direct than taking the motorway, but a little extra caution never hurt anyone, and if she *is* being watched, they’d probably expect her to take the M6.

She spent a long time a few years ago recreating her mother’s playlists as best as she could remember them. She puts one on now, turns the music up, and she sings, and swallows hard when she thinks she might cry again.

She’s going home.

* * *

The Student Union Bar at The Royal College of Saint Almsworth is tacky, ugly, and closed; an outrage, considering the opening times posted on the pub-effect entryway *clearly* say they should have opened five minutes ago! And it's raining, and it's cold, and she's tired.

Everything links back to Dorley Hall. Everything! She'd had no bites on her missing posters, had nothing but shrugs and condolences from the people she'd spoken to, until she put a poster up on the corkboard in the entrance to Dorley Hall. Then, all of a bloody sudden, two girls — one probably cis but one definitely trans, which is an interesting data point — come bursting out of the place, only barely not panicking, and start asking questions about Mark. They promise to put the word around at the dorm and then *later the very same day* Shahida's talking to two more girls from Dorley Hall, both of them (probably?) cis but very keen to let her know that Mark's disappearance was a terrible tragedy, absolutely awful, and that he unambiguously walked off into the night on the very date the police say he did, and whoops let's accidentally misgender him and very poorly pretend like it wasn't incredibly revealing to do so.

Not *misgender*, though. Not if she's right.

It kept her up all night: if he— if *she* transitioned, why didn't she get in touch? Why did she let everyone think she died?

“Because,” she mutters to herself for the fiftieth time, “Shahida, you bloody idiot, his dad hit him and his brother was practically a stranger even before he left and you... you basically forced yourself on him.”

There was nothing left for him back home. Except Stef, maybe, and that, too, is suggestive. Didn't Russ break off that friendship because Stef kept insisting Mark was alive? There's

got to be *something* there. Only now, quite conveniently, Stef's out of the picture, off 'finding himself'.

Yeah, right.

A flustered girl opens one of the heavy wooden doors with her backside and apologises for keeping her waiting, and Shahida smiles at her like she's not in a mood at all and hurries inside, depositing her raincoat on the back of a chair and her bag on the wood-effect table. She's claimed one of the handful of seats that look directly out of the front windows, partly for the light — cut into diamonds by the plastic leading; pretentious and tragic at the same time — but mainly because the Student Union Bar's out on the edge of campus, right on the path, and anyone leaving Dorley Hall for their morning classes will almost definitely walk right past her.

Maybe she can spot one of the women from yesterday again.

The girl takes her order and quickly returns with coffee, a rather dry bagel and another apology, and Shahida unpacks her things: laptop, phone, notepad and pens. There's a pair of outlets on the wall by her feet, which will likely come in handy later, and the password to the university's guest wifi on the chalkboard above the specials, which she will not be using; she prefers her internet in megabytes per second, not kilobytes, and unmonitored. She shares her phone's connection to her laptop instead, boots it up, and hops into the old shared chat server for the first time in what's likely years, to leave a quick message.

Shahida

Sorry to just pop up unexpectedly, but I'm back!

Wow. They really updated the interface, didn't they?

Anyway, hi.

She doesn't have to ignore her unpleasant coffee for long before Rachel replies.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

oh my goodness Shy!!!

where have you BEEN?

yes I know, America, but still, where have you BEEN?

don't scroll up, you'll see Amy being rude about you

Shahida

Too late.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

yeah she's pissed off with you

or do you say 'pissed at you' now, ever since you buggered off to America for years?

that's why she's pissed off by the way

Shahida

Sorry. Work was intense. And other things were pretty intense, too.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

Shahida Mohsin, did you IN FACT get a PERSONAL LIFE?

Shahida

Just a little one. For a little while. It didn't work out.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

we should meet up

not today but soon

I'm at a conference rn so I probably should stop fiddling with my phone under my coat and start paying attention to this INCREDIBLY BORING MAN

he's been speaking for less than ten minutes and already I've had six out of body experiences

thinking of changing my hair, it looks weird from above

Shahida

We should definitely meet up. And grab Amy, too, if I can persuade her to be less pissed off with me.

My calendar's pretty open until new year, so let me know.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

f yeah

oh yes and check it out we're double barrelled name buddies now

Shahida

Rach, you know I only use the full shebang on job applications

Rachel Gray-Wallace

check it out we're double barrelled name buddies now

Shahida

Yes.

Yes we are.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

yay!

you should meet the hell out of my wife

I've been talking you up to Belinda for three years

Shahida

Bring her when you bring Amy. I'd love to meet her.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

yesssss

so what are you doing rn?

Shahida

Right now?

I'm at Saints.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

the university?

MARK'S UNIVERSITY???

Shy no

you need to let him go

seriously I can duck out of this conference and come drag you away from there if all you're doing is moping on Mark's old campus

it's not healthy babe

unless you're there for work or something, in which case I'm sorry for meddling

(I'm not sorry for meddling)

Shahida

I'm not moping. I'm on to something.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

really?

sorry that actually seems really insincere looking at it

it wasn't

please imagine more questions marks and some emoji

but by 'on to something' you mean..... something about
MARK?

Shahida

Yes.

I really think I have something.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

you think he's alive?

Shahida

Maybe.

I'm chasing leads.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

okay babe I want you to know I have your beautiful brain in
my hands and I'm kissing it because if you have something
that's AMAZING

just

don't get hurt okay?

I couldn't bear for you to hurt like that again

Shahida

I'll be careful.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

okay

shit I gotta go

team building time

wish me luck

and teams! and the building thereof!

and keep me in the loop

Shahida

Good luck!

And I will.

Shahida lingers on the screen for a moment, running two fingers idly up and down on the touchpad, scrolling through Rachel's messages and back up into conversations Rachel and Amy had without her. Years of them.

It's good that she's home. She can find work around here easily, and reconnect with more people than just those in her family. Re-establish the life she ran from.

She checks the time again — closing in on half nine — and calls her mother.

“Shahida!”

“Hi, Mum.”

“Shahida, you’re spoiling me! We saw you just a few days ago—”

“You saw me *this morning*—”

“Yes, darling, but *briefly*, as one observes a raindrop or a bird in flight or a ready meal with a yellow sticker. You might even have blurred as you ran past me on your way out, you were so fast—”

“*Mum*—”

“It’s probably for the best. I might perhaps be overstimulated! After years and years of my only daughter being in the States I’ve become accustomed to infrequent and indifferent communication. You *must* give me more time to acclimate.”

“You’re so funny.”

“I like to think so,” her mother says. “Now, tell me: nothing’s wrong, I hope.”

“No,” Shahida says, leaning back on the fake-wooden bench and finding the padding surprisingly comfortable. “Remember I said I was going to see if anyone at the university knew anything about Mark’s disappearance?”

“I do, and Shahida, you know what I think about chasing him after so long. You’re only going to create more heartache for yourself. I remember when he disappeared, you were inconsolable for—”

“Mum?” Shahida interrupts. “I do actually have something specific I’ve called for?”

“Ah. Sorry, sweetheart. Don’t let your poor, lonely old mother babble away, just because the echoes are all I have to listen to in this cold, empty house.”

“Mother...”

“*Do* go on, darling.”

“I thought you were used to infrequent communication?”

“Can one ever get used to abject loneliness?”

“Where’s Edward, anyway?”

“Making breakfast.”

Shahida can picture the grin on her mother’s face, and rolls her eyes at it. When she’s in a playful mood, simple conversations can take forever. “Mum,” she says firmly, “I need more pictures of Mark. I only have the one with me, the one from my phone, and I found someone yesterday who might know something, but he needs a few more photos to jog his memory.” She delivers the prepared lie smoothly. It’s true that she has only the one photo — it became too painful to carry more around with her, and even then she’s lost the occasional evening to it, staring at it on her phone screen, wondering what might have become of him — and she needs a wider selection for what she has planned.

“What can I do, dear?”

“Go to my room and look in the left desk drawer. There should be a USB hard drive in there. I’d like you to email me the folder labelled ‘Mark’.”

Her mother was out of her chair as soon as Shahida mentioned her room, judging by the sounds coming down the line, and it’s not long before she’s sitting heavily back down in her seat and plugging the hard drive into the nest of adaptor cables coming out of the single free USB port on her terribly impractical laptop.

“Mark...” her mother mutters to herself while she looks through the drive. There’s years and years of files on there.

“Mark... I don’t see a folder labelled ‘Mark’.”

Oh shit. Did she delete it after he disappeared? “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. There *is* a folder here that’s called ‘Mark’ but there’s also a less-than sign and a—”

“Yes, Mum,” Shahida says, sighing and massaging her chest and wishing she’d remembered to pick up the bloody USB drive on her way out this morning. “That’s the one.”

“Okay, dear. Just give me a second. Aaaaaand... sent!”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“Shahida, dear, what’s the password for this folder called ‘Work files’?”

“Mum, actually, I’ve forgotten.”

“Are you sure? The computer says it’s *very* large. Could be important.”

“No, Mum, it’s fine.”

“I’m going to image this drive—”

“No, Mum, you don’t have to do that—”

“You can’t have a single-source backup, Shahida; you *know* that. I’m going to image this drive and then I’ll put it all on the cloud and *then*, well, do you remember young Kripesh? He works for a data recovery firm now — I’ve been doing their taxes — and he can have that folder open for you in a jiffy.”

“Mum, really, it’s okay. I think I have the password written down somewhere. And don’t image the drive, please? I’ll do it this weekend, I promise.”

“It’s no trouble.”

“*Mum.*”

“Well, you know best, I’m sure.”

As soon as Shahida’s managed delicately to reverse out of the conversation with her mother she drops into her emails and extracts the photos of Mark to the desktop. And, goodness, there *really* aren’t as many as one might expect from such a long friendship. She’s got Mark bundled up in his hoodie; Mark lying on the grass in his boxers; Mark sheepish in his shirt and tank top at that final party. More group shots than

pictures of him on his own. There are enough of the sort she needs, though — standing or sitting more or less upright, looking at the camera — and she drops the appropriate ones over the wifi to her phone.

If Mark really has transitioned, well, there's an app for that...

Shahida fiddles with the results for the duration of her coffee, lightening the hair to account for the way the sun always used to bleach it, throwing on a few age filters to account for the fact that he/she will be twenty-five. When she's finally happy she transfers them back to the laptop and arranges them on the screen, alongside the most recent untouched photo of Mark she has: him holding the NES controller in Rachel's room, happily drunk and so pretty and carefree in his loose shirt and tank top he almost doesn't look different *enough* from the manipulated pictures that surround him.

“Huh,” the girl from earlier says, as she deposits a fresh cup of coffee and collects the empty one, “she's pretty. Girlfriend?”

“No,” Shahida says absently, “just a friend.”

She's right, though; Mark's beautiful. Just as he always was.

* * *

“Jesus, I look awful.”

The dingy bathroom of a chain burger joint on the A1 isn't the best place to fix her makeup, so Melissa doesn't bother, resolving instead to sort out her face when she gets back to the car and has access to both natural light and surfaces she can probably sterilise without overwhelming the antiseptic wipe. It explains why the girl behind the counter frowned at her when she bought her black coffee and bacon butty — absurdly, the lowest-calorie offering on the breakfast menu — and why she hasn't attracted the unwelcome attention she usually does when she dines alone in places with lots of people coming and going; she's pale, sickly, and the dark circles under her eyes look almost like bruises.

Just like the vampires in Shahida's bloody video game, she remembers. Shahida spent about six months obsessed with *Vampire Queens: The Seven Great Houses*. She bought a 3DS just to play it; she got in trouble for levelling side characters in class; she explained the lore to her and Amy and Rachel in great detail multiple times, online, via text message and in person. She got every ending, romanced every possible character, played all the DLC. Melissa's never touched the game herself, but she thinks that if asked she could name the heads of each house, their special moves and which gifts are key to their black and rotten hearts, just from association with Shahida.

She leans on the sink and pushes away the indulgent memory. Just another piece of her past; another thing she can never get back, and not just because of the rules of Dorley Hall.

What would Shahida think of her now?

Damn it! She thought she'd stopped crying!

Quickly she washes her hands again, wipes her face, and makes it out of the restaurant without anyone stopping her to ask if she's okay. She knows she could swallow this if she really needed to, could find that broken piece of her that just about got her through her teenage years and that's never quite gone away, let it harden her and take her over for the rest of

the journey down to Almsworth, but Abby was right when she said not all coping mechanisms are healthy. Many of them hinder more than they help, and more still merely delay the pain, cause it to curdle and spoil inside.

Melissa locks herself in her rental car, puts on another playlist, and indulges in the memories until they recede on their own and leave her spent, dehydrated, and late.

* * *

He doesn't know how he fell asleep. It was like someone reached into his brain and pulled out the power cord and left him to flop back onto his bed. He should have chased her! He should have demanded to know what she meant!

Except it's obvious, isn't it?

There's no other possible interpretation, is there?

Fuck.

She *knew*. She really knew, right from the start, and pretended not to.

No, *he* knew. He's *not* going to grant him the courtesy of the gender he claims.

Is he?

Lashing out because you're feeling angry and isolated *again*, Aaron?

Fuck it. Who's he kidding? Steph's Steph, and no revelation, no matter how appalling, can change that. Steph's Steph, and she's a *fucking liar*.

Oh, she's a liar, is she? Maybe she can join the club!

Poor Aaron. You're not pissed off because she did a bad thing, are you? You've always assumed she did something awful to end up here, same as the rest of you, and you already decided you didn't care. No, you're pissed off because she did something bad *to you*, a man — hah; a *person* — who's done enough bad things to fill a fucking spreadsheet.

Weigh the balance, *boy*. Sins in each palm. Weigh her shit against yours. Watch *your* hand fucking plummet.

"It's not like I can just make myself okay with it," he mutters, carefully feeling at his sore chest, stretching his aching back, all evidence of the things done to him, things she knew about all along.

He needs to talk to her, at the very least.

Yeah.

He'll talk to her and she'll have a reason. A good one. Even if it's just that he, as someone bad enough to warrant erasing from the fucking world, never deserved the truth! That's fine! She can explain and they can laugh about it and it'll be back to how it always was, before he knew all the girls here used to be just like him; before he knew his best friend spent months lying to him; before he asked to die.

She'll have a reason.

At least he was right that she's trans, though. Or close enough. He's not *completely* imperceptive. Which is... good? For him. Because she was too damn adaptable, too damn good at this too quickly, and yeah, actually, thinking about it, maybe she *is* partially to blame for his—

"Shut *up*, Aaron."

Scolding himself. Whoever's watching the camera feed will love that. He flips her the bird, whoever she is, and jumps out of bed to rummage through his wardrobe. The shirt around his chest came loose while he was sleeping and he can't be bothered fixing it; he dumps it on the floor instead and selects his loosest hoodie.

Even with it zipped up he can see the tiny bumps on his chest in the mirror.

He meant what he said: he's happy for her, that she's going to be a girl; that she *is* a girl, really, and that this place is making it happen. She's already wider than he is around the hip — he runs a hand down his side, pressing into flesh that's thicker there than it was a month ago, and wincing again at the pain in his lower back — but her waist is just as narrow as it always was. He had his arm around her, earlier, and she concaved pleasingly under his hand. She'll keep developing that way, and they'll burn away all the wispy ginger hair on her chin and cheeks and...

And they're going to rip her open and grind away the excess bone on her face.

He shudders.

“She wants it, you idiot; she fucking wants it.” And isn't he supposed to be pissed off with her, anyway?

They're going to take a scalpel to her...

They're going to cut her open.

He's out of his room and banging on Steph's door moments later.

“He's not in.”

“Fuck off, Martin,” he says automatically. Then, “What? Who?”

“Stefan. Pippa took him away.”

Aaron steps back from Steph's door, looks Martin up and down. Another shock: he's wet from the shower and wearing a robe open around a towel, and it makes it horrifyingly clear how much he's changing, just like the rest of them, and that seems fundamentally fucking *wrong* somehow; Martin should always and forever look the way he shows up in Aaron's memory, like someone crossed a minor, disgraced and reasonably inbred royal nephew with Snoopy.

“Okay,” Aaron says, “where did she take... him?”

The man just shrugs. It would be so, so easy to kick him in the balls, really hard. And super satisfying. *And* it’d probably save the girls upstairs a bit of surgery money later on, if he aims carefully enough.

“When?” Aaron asks instead.

“About ten minutes ago. Excuse me.”

It’s the work of a couple of minutes to search everywhere Aaron has access to — the bathroom, the common room, the lunch room, both corridors; the bathroom again, because he forgot to check the shower annexe the first time — and unless Steph’s hiding in the locked storeroom or Martin’s full of shit and she’s just holed up in her bedroom, ignoring him, then she’s fucking *gone*.

That’s it, then?

She’s just gone?

For want of anything else to do — what, like he’s willingly going to talk to Martin? like Adam has anything of interest to say? — he heads back to his room to find Maria waiting outside with a plastic cooler.

“Hi, Aaron,” she says.

“What the fuck is going on, Maria? Where’s Steph? And did you *know* she knew all along?”

She thumbs the pad by his door, nudges it open and walks inside, expecting him to follow. He does, and she’s already unpacking cellophane-wrapped sandwiches and bottles of water.

“I’m not hungry,” he says, kicking the door shut, once again irritated that the safety mechanism makes it impossible to slam.

“It’s after midday,” she says. “You slept in quite late.”

“I’m not hungry.”

Maria shrugs. “Fair enough.” She drops the sandwiches back into the cooler, closes it up and passes him a bottle of water.

“If you’re here for a lecture,” he says, “I’m not in the mood.”

She’s sitting on the chair, and when he drops dismissively onto the bed she rolls a little closer and cracks open her water. “I’m not here for a lecture. Just to talk. And, here, so you know I’m serious...” She swivels around on the chair, taps a key on his computer to wake it up, logs in with some key combination he doesn’t quite see, and brings up what are apparently the live feeds from all the cameras in the basement. She flips through, one by one: lunch room; common room; cell corridor, with Will just about visible, reading or watching TV on a tablet. “And here’s your room. Camera one—” the view of his bedroom disappears, replaced by a blank blue screen, “—and camera two.”

“You’ve turned off the cameras?” he says. She nods. “Okay, Maria, look, you *keep* taking these risks with me—”

“Am I in danger?” she asks, turning around to look at him with a raised eyebrow.

“...No.”

“Well then.”

“What are you here to talk about?”

“Stephanie. I know what she told you.”

“Yeah,” he growls with renewed bitterness, “that she’s a fucking traitor.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because!” He throws his bottle, unopened, onto the bed. “Because I thought she was my friend. Because I thought she *liked* me! Because I...”

Going to say you deserve the truth? Fuck. No. Isn’t that the *point*, Aaron? That you don’t deserve anything?

“Stephanie’s motivations have always been... complex,” Maria says. “More so since she got to know you. And the requirement she keep the secret has weighed heavily on her.”

“Boo hoo,” he says, but without much feeling.

“Does she strike you as someone who would *intentionally* harm you?”

He doesn’t feel he can answer that without jeopardising his rhetorical position.

“I can tell you about her,” Maria says. “Everything, from how she came to find us, to the deal Aunt Bea struck with her so we wouldn’t take punitive action; everything.”

“‘Punitive action’?”

“Do you want to know or not?” Maria asks. He nods and she continues, “Okay. Don’t be afraid to ask for a break. Not all of this is going to be fun for you to hear.”

* * *

Pippa had to practically *drag* her out of her room, make promises that Aaron would be taken care of, talk her through every step up the stairs from the basement, but it’s all going to be worth it. Steph’s been stuck down there too long, and it’s not good for her to be surrounded by all that concrete, nor does she benefit from spending all her time around boys who seem, frankly, considerably weirder than the usual cohort. And that’s even taking the current crop of second years into account!

Steph’s safely out of the basement for now, away from Aaron and any consequences, external or self-inflicted, and that’s good and that’s fine; and if Steph’s talking to herself loud enough for Pippa to hear it from the bedroom, over the noise of the shower, that’s probably okay too. The girl’s not

had enough sleep — not had *any* sleep, as far as Pippa can tell, fast-winding through surveillance footage of a night spent tossing, turning, crying and staring at nothing — and she’s just made rather an idiot of herself, in her own eyes; in the eyes of the boy she cares about. So she can talk to herself, she can get it all out, and when she’s done she can have a nice, calm day with the girls. No basement; no boys; no Aaron.

Christine and Paige are up for it. It’ll be just the four of them.

Ultimately, it’s good that Aaron knows at last. It’s been killing Steph to keep it from him, and Maria can deal with Aaron. She’ll give him the *real* story, the one she, Pippa, Christine and Abby spent a good few hours getting right a couple of weeks ago. And it’s good that Aaron hears it from Maria and not from Steph, too, because goodness knows if Stephanie had to convince her flipping *breakfast* of her value, be an honest advocate for her own hunger before it would let her eat it, she’d starve.

She can hear snatches through the open bathroom door:

“Stupid. Stupid. So, so stupid. You should have kept the secret, shouldn’t you? Should have protected him like you said you would. Like you promised yourself!” These last two words are punctuated by what sounded an awful lot like Stephanie stamping her foot on the tile. “But that was all vainglorious nonsense, wasn’t it? You were protecting yourself. You were afraid to get hurt. So you hurt him instead, didn’t you? You just blurted it out! Where’s your self-control? Idiot! Stupid, stupid boy!”

Okay. Perhaps that’s enough.

“Steph?” Pippa calls. “Stephanie? Are you done in the shower?”

There’s a wet slapping sound, as if Steph suddenly realises where she is and what she’s supposed to be doing, and stumbles.

“Um, maybe. Oh. Oh *fuck*, I’m a prune!”

“Come on out. I’ve got tea waiting, and I’ll do your face.”

She emerges a minute or so later, towel wrapped around her chest, hair wild and wet, legs still hairy. Pippa doesn’t comment; she left the shaving kit in the cubicle, but if Steph doesn’t want to shave her legs — or if she was too distracted to notice it — then all that does is slightly limit her choice of outfit.

Stephanie sets the pace, always.

“Feeling any better?” Pippa asks, pushing the little plush stool over with her foot. She’s been populating Steph’s room with nice things, dipping into her own funds when she can’t requisition something from storage; she wants it to feel homely up here. She’s already secured a promise from Aunt Bea that Stephanie won’t be required to move out into one of the smaller first-floor rooms, the ones that lack their own bathrooms, when the rest of her intake move up, so it’s worth the time and expense. The other new girls can be jealous if they want.

“A little,” Steph says, perching on the stool and dredging up a smile from someplace particularly deep inside. “Do you really think Aaron’s going to be okay?”

“Maria’s with him. She’ll take care of him. He’s started to really care about her, have you noticed?”

Steph nods, despondent. “Good,” she says quietly. “Because he won’t ever talk to me again.”

“He will.” Pippa leans over, takes one of Steph’s hands and rubs her palm. “He’ll come around. Maria knows what to say.”

“You mean, she’ll gaslight him until he comes around? That’s not better, Pip!”

Pippa bounces herself along the edge of the mattress, careful to avoid the ends of the outfits she’s laid out. “She’ll tell him the truth and nothing more,” she says.

“How can you know?” Steph protests. “She’s turned the cameras off!”

With a finger under Steph's chin, Pippa raises her face. "Stephanie Middlename Riley," she says, invoking their in-joke to lighten the mood, hoping for and getting the slightest of smiles, "would you say you are a particularly *good* liar? On today's evidence?" Steph shakes her head. "Even if she *were* inclined to lie, Maria knows it's better for both of you if *you* don't have to pretend any more. She's not going to embellish the truth and she's not going to leave out anything big. From here on out, whether *he* wants to talk to you or not, you can be completely unguarded around him. No more editing. No more worrying if he's going to see through the latest story you've cooked up."

Steph's mouth twitches. "That *would* be nice."

"And don't forget," Pippa says, removing her finger from under Steph's chin so she can wag it at her, "we share the blame. You're the first completely self-aware trans woman we've ever had — self-aware from the very start, I mean — *and* you've become... fond of one of the boys. We're all paddling in uncharted waters here, and we're drawing the map and refining the, um, the design of the boat as we go."

"You don't think I've fucked it up?"

"No. Aaron's ahead on his timeline, for sure. Normally we wouldn't expect this level of, um, self-disgust for quite some time. The orchi was the trigger for most of us," she adds quietly, lost momentarily in the vivid memory of Ellie, her sponsor, coming to her the morning after her operation, helping her dry the tears and handing over her morning tea in a mug inscribed with *Let It Go* and decorated all over with the two cherries emoji. Step one of recovery, Ellie claimed, was learning to laugh about it.

It didn't surprise Pippa to discover she was Ellie's first and only subject. She's off doing something or other in New England at the moment, and Pippa's happy for her; happier still there's an ocean between them.

"He's ahead on his timeline," she recovers, "but that's not really good or bad. And also not entirely down to you."

Remember, he had a very strong reaction to Maria's injury, once he had a chance to think about it. It was a powerful motivation for him to reconsider his attitude."

Steph nods slowly, frowning. She's getting through!

"He's a very empathetic and caring person," Pippa continues, "even though he was forced to bury it deep down. With his core exposed, with all his old excuses stripped away, he'll find himself." She pats Steph's hand. "You'll see."

"I hope so."

* * *

The inside of the rental car is stuffy and claustrophobic and, with the engine shut off and the near-constant rain still battering on the roof and the windscreen, rapidly becoming cold, but Melissa can't bring herself to get out. Not yet. Because the parking lot at the far end of campus is the closest she's been to Saints and to Dorley Hall in a long time, and the thought of opening the car door and setting foot on the pavement here again is one that's dominated her dreams.

The path into campus from here is the one taken when you come in by bus or on foot. It's the one Abby walked her down on her last night as Mark; it's the one Mark walked up on his way to the city to die, music roaring in his ears.

Melissa shakes her head. That stupid, stupid boy.

It's difficult to remember how it felt to want to die. When she tries she finds nothing but rage in her memories; rage, followed swiftly by guilt, both of them obliterating the suffocating silence with their all-consuming intensity. Rage at her mother, for not sticking around to protect her, for dying and leaving her with Dad, for labelling her the man of the

house and thrusting unwanted responsibility into the lap of a bewildered kid who barely knew who he was. And guilt, born from her rage, for daring to exorcise her decaying spirit on the memory of her mother. The woman she carried with her always, in her last gift.

She ruined that, too. She stamped on her mother's iPod as soon as she got off the bus, glad to be rid of the memories, convinced she was walking out into the last night of her life.

In the end, it was just the last night of *his* life.

Melissa laughs bitterly; that's a very *Dorley* framing.

She knows how few Dorley girls conceptualise themselves as trans, and fewer still as having been girls all their lives. Just another way for her to be different, alone. The others were discovering someone new inside them, a vast store of potential, waiting to be explored; Melissa, by contrast, found someone who'd been buried, who'd had the life near crushed out of her. It never felt fair.

They'd thought her stuck up, but in the end she envied their joy.

At least the rain's letting up.

She's already redistributed the things she needs: most of her makeup kit and her burner phone are now in a pocket of her luggage, and in her shoulder bag she now carries a taser. It's a Dorley model; Abby's, from back when she was still a sponsor, set to Melissa's thumbprint and couriered to her shortly after she moved up to Manchester, for protection.

She won't need it.

She'll just walk in and make her case. Stef doesn't deserve this, and if they let him go he won't tell anyone because it'd blow back on *her*. And, by the way, she's left a letter for her boss, which he'll find if she never comes back. So it's best for everyone that she's allowed to leave. With Stef.

She thumbs the taser into life, checks the charge level, turns it off and drops it back into her bag.

She *won't* need it, but it's best to be prepared.

She doesn't start shaking until she's past Café One and taking her first step onto the path that leads to Dorley Hall. Memory impedes her vision, and the night Abby brought her here seems clearer than the overcast skies of the early afternoon. Past the Student Union Bar (Mark stumbled, tired, overwhelmed, and so hungry he'd almost forgotten how it felt to be full; Abby caught him and supported him the rest of the way) and over the slight bump in the paving that marks the crossover from land owned by Saints to land owned by the benefactors of Dorley Hall (Mark paused, still confused, still asking questions and receiving evasive but reassuring answers) and up to the double doors.

Deep breath.

Here we go.

* * *

“You really think I look okay?”

“You really do.”

“I feel silly. And male. And stupid. And ugly and clumsy and—”

“*Steph*,” Pippa says, taking her hand again, “you look lovely.”

They finally settled on a simple outfit: a long skirt with pleats over a pair of plain leggings; a wide belt, one of several Pippa's stocked Steph's wardrobe with, to help define her waist; and a rather nice patterned top with a sensible neckline, which exposes Steph's shoulders and her slender, graceful arms while flattering her underdeveloped chest.

Stephanie looks beautiful. Not that Pippa's biased or anything, but occasionally she imagines what it would be like if they threw an end-of-basement event for all the first years, had a fancy dinner, dressed them all up, had a pageant and so on; in her imagination, even with nine months more development for the boys, Steph wins by a mile.

"Sorry," Steph says. "No sleep. Stressed. It makes me jittery."

"No-one can tell," Paige says from across the table, as Pippa pats Steph's hand. Once Steph had got herself dressed, Pippa took one look at the state of the girl's skin and enlisted Paige to help with her makeup. She looks impeccable now — Paige even managed somehow to de-emphasise the brow bumps Stephanie hates so much — and not at all tired, except for the occasional moments when her eyes close and her head slumps forward.

Just as long as she doesn't do it in the lasagne Christine's fetching them.

"I really look okay?" Steph asks again.

"You're beautiful," Pippa whispers.

* * *

Christine's waiting for the microwave to ping on the last of the meals she's warming up for herself, Paige, Pippa and Steph, when a woman with a face straight out of the archives barges through the front doors, spares her a single glance and marches on through the kitchen, looking around with an expression that could be determination and could be fear.

Shit!

With a grunt of irritation Christine abandons the lunches, logs on to a laptop someone's abandoned on the kitchen table, sets the building-wide biometric clearance to sponsors only, and starts writing the messages that will summon Abby and the other girls back from voting and the sponsors who are still around back from other parts of the building.

What a day for a general election!

* * *

Maria's phone vibrates on the bedside table, an obnoxious enough noise even if it weren't bumping against Aaron's phone — and Steph's; she left it behind in her rush to escape the room last night — that she picks it up straight away, apologising to Aaron as she swipes over the notification.

“S'okay,” Aaron says quietly. He's sitting on the bed next to her in a sea of pillows and sandwich crumbs, and she reaches for him, to make sure he doesn't think she's abandoned him even for a moment. He takes her hand with trembling fingers and curls them desperately into hers.

He's holding up okay. He's going to make it, and she's so, so proud of him.

Turning her attention back to the phone she reads the message, bites down on her annoyance, and taps the name at the top of the sponsor list.

Tabby picks up. “I just got the alert,” she says, all business.

“Can you take the lead on this?” Maria asks.

“Done,” Tabby says, and the line clicks off. Thank goodness for her.

Melissa's back! What wonderful timing! At least there's a limited amount of havoc one woman can cause. Tabitha can handle it; Maria has more important things to attend to.

"Sorry, Aaron," she says, and he nods at her, eyes shining wetly in the low light.

* * *

"Bloody Melissa," Tabby mutters, taking the stairs two at a time. She couldn't have picked a more convenient time to visit? She *knows* that Shahida girl's been poking around, doesn't she? Abby claimed she told her! Said she agreed to stay up in Manchester, safe in her extended sulk! And now *here she is!* "Bloody Melissa. Bloody Abby. Bloody *everyone!*"

She's *supposed* to be calling Levi tonight!

* * *

Shahida's watched and restarted this three-second video a dozen times at least, and the more she watches, the more certain she becomes.

She's lucky she got the video in the first place. She'd only recently gotten uncomfortable on the other seat and switched to the one that faces into campus, and she just happened to be mucking around with the face-morphing app again when the girl came striding into view. Flipping her phone into camera mode took less than a second.

Blonde hair. The right height. And very, very familiar.

Mark?

Why would she be here? It can't be coincidence. Abby and the other girl, Christine, they must have tipped her off that someone from her past was poking around and now Mark — or *whoever* — has come back from wherever she's been to do... what?

That can't be him. Can it?

Shahida restarts the video again, pauses it at the clearest frame, a three-quarter profile which is only a little blurry, screenshots it and dumps it over to the laptop. She lines the picture up with the others that she made and some of the untouched originals.

It's Mark.

* * *

When the emergency notification goes off and isn't immediately picked up, Dorley-issued phones get increasingly obnoxious until their owner pays attention to them. Not usually a problem, but Rabia's with a patient and the persistent vibration in her pocket is monumentally distracting.

She finishes up, smiles at the elderly man and exits as quickly and quietly as possible, to find a private place to tell the notification that she is *busy*, that they have way more people than just her on call today, and that they can bother Bella if they really want to.

Rabia makes a mental note to ask Maria to take her off the emergency rota and put her on the *real* emergency rota — do not call unless the Hall is sinking into the Abyss — and turns off her phone. Goes back to work.

Just lucky the emergency hadn't kicked off an hour ago, when she was literally wrist-deep in crap. That would have been *really* annoying.

* * *

Stef's a little more awake now — being on the receiving end of a well-meant lecture from Paige on how to dress a body that doesn't yet have its full complement of curves is unsurprisingly invigorating — so she notices as soon as Paige's eyes widen. She's facing the kitchen and Stef isn't, and when Pippa starts making a commotion next to her she's almost afraid to turn around.

When Charlie, the sponsor escorting the second years at the table opposite, stands up out of her chair, though, it's impossible not to look.

Bearing down on her table and looking about ready to strangle someone is the woman she's seen almost every night on her phone screen, the woman she dreams of outside the Tesco at the retail park, the woman who is functionally her older sister, from way before she acquired a whole building of them.

Melissa.

She's here!

Right fucking now!

Melissa's frowning at her, obviously taking a second to recognise her because, sure, she looks kind of different, and then Stef realises that Melissa's fucking *looking at her* and she's looking at her when she's *like this*: two months on hormones, shapeless, masculine, ugly, and stuffed into beautiful clothes made comical on her horrific, angular body.

It's hard to move.

It's hard to breathe.

She barely feels Pippa's hand on hers.

All she can do is look up at Melissa.

* * *

What have they *done* to him? Stefan's wearing *their* clothes, they've done something to his hair, and they've put makeup on him... And what the hell is he doing up in the dining hall?

Oh *fuck*.

She's been away from Dorley too long, and she always stops Abby when she tries to talk shop, and they haven't talked in months, anyway; Melissa's just *assumed* the programme still functions the way it used to. Maybe they take them at some other time of year now, instead of at the start of the autumn semester. Maybe they have some kind of accelerated programme for cooperative boys. Maybe she misread the website and he's been here a lot longer than she thought.

Maybe they've already operated on him.

Maybe they've already *mutilated* him.

Stefan's standing, backing up, eyes wide and breath uncertain, and the skinny girl with the short bleached hair is supporting him, and all Melissa knows right now is that she needs to get him out of here, so she darts forward, grabs him by an unresisting forearm and drags him out of the dining hall into the maze of rooms at the back of the building, pointing her taser behind her so no-one can follow.

* * *

Christine finishes sending the last of the alerts, drops out of the secure session, closes the laptop, and near-runs into the dining hall. She skids on a wet patch of kitchen floor and has to grab the doorjamb to stay upright, and as a result enters the dining hall staggering and out of breath just in time to see Melissa bloody Haverford yanking Steph out of Pippa's confused hands and away to the back rooms, waving a taser around as she goes. In the suddenly quiet room her breathing is the loudest noise, so all heads turn to her, Paige's and Pippa's and even bloody Charlie's included, and she has a moment to thoroughly despise how everyone seems to bloody well delegate to her, even when there are actual sponsors present.

Shit! Shit shit *shit*.

She holds up a hand and tries to say something but it comes out as a wheeze, so she gives herself a second to get her breath back.

At a table on the other side of the room, Mia throws out a hand and yells, "Who the fuck was *that*?"

* * *

Abby *knew* they should have left earlier. The university's sports centre has been commandeered as a polling station for Saints and all the nearby postcodes, and she and a dozen other Dorley denizens have been queueing for almost an hour now. At least the stewards look equally miserable, having spent the

entire morning hiding under umbrellas or clipboards, without access to the extended veranda that plays host to bake and book sales in the summer and exclusively to a cold and miserable queue on voting day.

“Mankind was not meant to queue,” Bella says. She’s the only one of them to have had the presence of mind to bring a small folding chair along, and the group’s been moving around her as the queue moves up, shuffling her from the start to the end of their little gang of sponsors and graduates, so she doesn’t have to get up every time someone votes.

“Who are you calling ‘mankind’?” Donna says, poking at her and making her drop her phone in her lap. “We’re womankind; we’re the ones who inherit the Earth, remember? What? It’s true. I saw it in an old movie. With dinosaurs. And that guy from *Thor: Ragnarok*.”

“Donna,” Edy says, “either shut up or stop making me feel old.”

“Ede’s feeling the cold, dark embrace of her mid-thirties,” Bella says.

“Don’t worry, Edith,” Monica says, “we’ll never put you in a home.”

“I hate you all,” Edy says. “Not you, Abby; you’re fine.”

“Thanks,” Abby says absently.

The queue shuffles along another few people and Bella, with an irritated sigh, uproots herself and drags her chair noisily over to Abby’s position at the front of the group.

“Hi, Ab,” she says, but before she can move on to whatever she was going to say next the phone in Abby’s bag vibrates, and it takes Abby a moment to realise why it sounds so loud: all their phones are going off at once.

“Drat,” Donna mutters, quickest to check hers.

“All right, ladies,” Monica says, “that’s our cue.”

“I wanted to *vote*,” Bella protests.

Edy, already walking away, shrugs as she turns around. “It’s not like Almsworth was ever *not* going to vote for the fucking Tories. Come on.”

* * *

It’s been almost five minutes but she’s finally happy with the wording of the email: it has to seem innocent if accidentally opened early, but still suggestive enough to inspire action. Shahida reads it through one more time, nods to herself, and calls Rachel.

Voicemail. Probably better, actually. The poor girl’s likely stuck in some interminable group activity.

“Rach,” she says, balancing the phone on her shoulder as she starts packing up her things, “it’s Shahida. This might sound like I’m mucking about, but I’m not. I said I might have a lead on Mark; well, I do. I *really* do. I’m going to go check it out. If I don’t call again by the end of the day, open the email I’m about to send you. Otherwise, delete it without looking. Okay? Okay. It’s... twenty-five past one, December twelfth, and, shit, I forgot to vote. Never mind. I forgot to register, anyway. Open the email if I don’t call; ignore it if I do.”

* * *

Stefan offers no resistance as she drags him through the back rooms. She’s not been through here in years, but nothing’s changed — just like on the first and second floors there’s at

least a dozen unused rooms and several more filled with nothing but old crap no-one could ever want. Actually, *something's* changed; one of the rooms is now a mini-gym.

She keeps looking back at him. They've dressed him up! How dare they! He's not wearing anything especially showy, not like the stuff *she* was shoved into when they first left the basement, but the long skirt and the top are unambiguously women's clothes. Probably one of their humiliation rituals, one of the ones Abby only pretended to do with her; dress him up, note how he no longer looks like the man he claims still to be, all that crap.

They're doing a bad job, though, because as much as she hates to admit it, he looks good.

“Wh—” Stefan says, and the effort of even that seems to overwhelm him, causes him to trip and nearly fall, and when she catches him he winces as his chest collides with her forearm. God; he's sensitive there, and he's sensitive there because they're making him grow fucking tits! It takes all her willpower not to turn around, find out which one of those bitches back there is Stefan's sponsor and slap her full in the face.

They reach the conservatory together, Melissa walking for both of them, and she deposits him on a sheet-covered chaise longue that's seen better centuries while she looks around for an exit. She slips the taser back in her bag, keeping the grip sticking out in case she needs it in a hurry, and tries the fingerprint reader by the expansive double-glazed doors that lead out into the courtyard; it flashes red. Unsurprising. She was probably purged from the system the second she let herself in unannounced.

Still, the doors themselves look like plastic over a wooden frame. Maybe if she kicks at the lock...

She turns around to check on Stefan and can't immediately find him because he's no longer where she left him. Instead he's crouched behind an old armchair, arms over his head, whimpering.

Jesus. When she's done getting him out she's coming back to burn this place to the fucking ground. Whatever it takes.

* * *

Tabby's just finishing up checking the outer perimeter when Shahida, the girl who put yesterday's cat amongst yesterday's pigeons, comes striding up the path from campus, too fast for Tabby to duck inside and pretend not to have seen her. She tries the casual approach anyway, just in case.

"Hi," she says, waving and holding open the main doors.

"You live here, right?" Shahida says, still approaching and talking too loud for Tabitha's taste.

"I do. Grad student."

"I just saw Mark Vogel walk past, on his way here. You know him?"

Yeah. *Way* too loud. "I do," Tabby admits.

"Tell me about him."

Shahida Mohsin-Carpenter's standing off a metre or so outside the Hall, arms folded, glaring. Tabby runs through all the standard scenarios in her head, circles all that apply and discards the rest. She reread Melissa's file last night, after everything, and she's fairly certain the girl would take a dim view of her childhood friend being, for example, thrown in a cell, if the option's there simply to make her a cup of coffee.

The level of disclosure's up to Melissa, though. Unless Ms Mohsin-Carpenter does something extremely stupid. Or Melissa does.

"I can tell you about him," Tabby says quietly, "but not out here."

“Why not?”

“Would *you* want your private life discussed out in the open like this?”

The girl hesitates. “You should know,” she says, “I’ve left a message with a friend to raise hell if I don’t contact her again today.”

Stupid god damn sensible precautions. “Understood,” Tabby says, and pointedly doesn’t scream in frustration, turning instead her most placid look on the girl.

Shahida nods hesitantly, looks around — for what, Tabby doesn’t know — and consents to be led through into the kitchen. Tabby closes the doors behind them and is relieved to hear the double locks engage. Shahida hears them too, and her head whips around to glare. Tabby merely smiles in response.

* * *

Yes, she’s *probably* dragged Steph through to the conservatory, since it’s the room farthest from everywhere else — although what she plans to do in there is a mystery — but Christine kicks open every door she finds anyway, to check for Melissa. The job goes quicker when she realises she can deputise the gaggle of second years who are following her like a line of lost ducklings, and assigns them in twos to check all the rooms, leaving behind Charlie, the sponsor who’s been escorting them today, to keep an eye on them and liaise with anyone higher up the chain of command who might happen to pop by.

She’d love to have Paige with her, or Pippa, but Tabby already borrowed the two of them to help her manually confirm the lockdown’s in place and Christine’s the only one of the three of them who can play Dorley Hall’s security system like a grand piano. She’s already found a missing taser

in the system which is almost definitely the one Melissa's been pointing at people — it's registered to Abby, naturally — and she's remotely deactivated it, so Christine's martially unimpressive physique and lack of natural fighting skills aren't the disadvantage they might normally be in such a situation; from what she remembers from the files there's little Melissa Haverford can do to her except be aggressively blonde at her.

She checks another door: nothing. On to the next...

* * *

It's like he's not even *there*. Stef's shaking, he's whiter than the dust sheets surrounding them, and he's chewing on the inside of his cheek. But when Melissa crouches down in front of him and reaches out a hand, he jerks away in a manner that forces images into her head of the party she went to with Shahida, of the way it ended.

They must have hurt him *bad* if he can't even stand to be touched.

“Stef,” she whispers, as gently as she can, “I'm here to get you out. I'm sorry they found you. I don't know why they took you, but I think it was my fault, and I can't let them keep you. I can't let them do to you what I saw them do to everyone else. I just *can't*. So give me your hand and together we can kick through this bloody lock before anyone comes and drags you away from me and back to—”

“I want to stay.”

It escapes from him like a curse, the hissed sibilant stretched to breaking point, and he's looking at her for the first time since their eyes met back in the dining room, focused and

sharp. She has to replay what he said a few times in her head before she gets it.

And still it doesn't make sense.

“You want to *what?*”

* * *

The kitchen's nicer than it seemed yesterday, when she took a peek through the double doors while she was putting up Mark's poster. It's larger, too; it can probably comfortably fit more than a dozen people around the main table, and with the chairs stacked at one end, more up against another wall, and room to stand as well as room to cook she wouldn't be surprised if you could fit thirty or even forty people in here, in a pinch.

It'd probably get really hot, though, with the AGA going.

The Black woman, who introduced herself as Tabitha and tapped out a quick message on her phone before bustling around the room putting on the kettle and extracting mugs from a cupboard, leans on the sideboard next to the AGA and regards her with a neutral expression Shahida bets has been practised for hours in the mirror.

“That sound was the door locking, wasn't it?” Shahida asks. Tabitha nods. So, her earlier worst-case estimation of the possible level of security implied by the effectively instant mobilisation of four different people to throw her off the trail *wasn't* just paranoia, after all. “I can't leave?”

“Not yet.”

“Can I have my things back?” she says, shifting her gaze pointedly to her bag, taken from her arm as she entered with a

smooth motion she almost hadn't noticed, and now hanging on a coat hook by the door.

"Later. Would you like a drink?"

"That depends on how safe it's likely to be."

The woman's expression cracks for a moment, and Shahida marks a single victory point on her side of the board in her head, which admittedly puts her quite a way behind Tabitha, who in less than two minutes has both successfully locked her inside Dorley Hall and confiscated all her stuff.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, I'm not going to *poison* you. But there's a whole other very dramatic thing happening on the other side of the building right now, and we have to deal with that before we can deal with you. We're not the most fully staffed organisation in the world."

"Ah, so you *are* an organisation of some sort!"

"We're a privately run women's dormitory," Tabitha says from behind a poker face. "I'd say that qualifies as an organisation, wouldn't you?"

"Fine."

"Don't go looking for ulterior motives."

"Can I leave, then?"

"I said don't go looking, not that there aren't any."

"Who *are* you?"

"Tabitha Forbes, thirty-two, born and raised in Southampton."

"I'm looking you up, you know. When I get my stuff back."

"By all means. So, drink?"

"Fine."

"Tea? Coffee?"

"Tea."

“Croissant?”

Shahida sighs, and the woman offers her a self-satisfied smile. “Yeah,” Shahida says, “sure. I’ll have a bloody croissant.”

* * *

“Stefan? What do you *mean*, you want to stay? Why would you *possibly*—”

Christine interrupts Melissa via the simple expedient of rushing into the conservatory with six second years and a sponsor in tow, all of whom take up positions to block the exit back into the rest of the building (Charlie) and more efficiently observe whatever the hell’s going on (all the second years apart from Faye, who steps up to stand protectively by her side; cute). As ever, despite the presence of an actual sponsor, Christine appears to be in charge; she ignores the impulse to groan.

“Melissa,” she says, holding up her hands to show she has no weapons, only a phone, “this is all just a big misunderstanding.”

Wrong choice of words. Melissa stands from where she’s been crouched in front of Steph and practically shrieks, “*Misunderstanding?* You *took* him—!”

“We *didn’t*,” Christine insists. “You just need to calm down, and—”

Melissa glares at her, reaches into her bag for something; Christine can guess what. “You’re his sponsor, aren’t you? You’re the one doing all this to him.”

Christine takes a step forward, aiming to put herself between Melissa and Steph. “I’m no-one’s sponsor,” she says.

“I’m just a third year—” another step, “—and I’m her friend —” and another, “—and I think you’re scaring her.”

Melissa’s reply is low and quiet. “Don’t call him *her*.”

Steph’s loud sniff is a warning sign, and Christine quickly covers the rest of the ground needed to stand in front of her. There’s probably no need to physically protect her from Melissa — the two of them were supposedly as close as siblings, growing up — but it seems best to take the precaution, at least until everyone involved calms down.

“Melissa,” Christine says, “Steph is *trans*. She’s not like anyone else here, okay? She’s different. She’s different and we *all* know it. She’s not a prisoner. If she wanted, she could *leave*.”

“You’re lying,” Melissa says. “He’s innocent, he’s just a *kid*, he shouldn’t *be* here, it’s all my fault... *Look at him!*”

Melissa’s obviously expecting everyone to turn their heads towards Steph, because she takes advantage of the distraction to pull the taser from her bag, and even though it’s useless — assuming it is, in fact, the one Christine deactivated — it’s still a mildly intimidating thing to have pointed at her face.

And then she can’t see it, because Faye’s suddenly put herself in the way.

“Whoever you are,” Faye says evenly, “you need to calm down.”

“Yeah,” Mia says from the back of the room, barely audible, obviously talking to the girl next to her, “who the hell *is* she?”

“Look at him,” Melissa says again. “He’s just a boy. He doesn’t belong here. You’ve taken him in and— and— and dressed him up like a fucking—”

Steph interrupts her, interrupts what Christine was going to say, stuns the whole room into shocked silence. “Please don’t,” she says, quietly, insistently, in a voice with the pressure of

intense pain behind it. “Please don’t. Please don’t. Please don’t.”

“Look what you’ve *done* to him!” Melissa shouts, waving the taser in time with her words. “I need to get him *away from you!*”

Fine.

Christine turns to the second years, mostly gathered around what looks like it might be, under the dust sheet, an ancient harp. “If *any* of you take this opportunity to run away,” she says in her best approximation of a sponsor’s voice, “I will be *really* fucking cross.”

“We won’t,” most of them chorus. In front of her, Faye shakes her head.

Christine holds up her phone where everyone can see it — still not a weapon — and taps through until she finds what she’s looking for.

Behind Melissa, incredibly loud in the almost silent room, the conservatory doors unlock and swing open.

* * *

“Just so you know,” Bella’s saying as they walk up to the Hall, “if the Tories get in tomorrow, I’m going to ask for a do-over.”

“Face it, Izzy,” Monica says, holding the main doors open for the rest of them, “the last general election was terrible for the Tories and our local dickhead *still* got sixty-two percent. Our votes are ceremonial at best.”

“Oh my God, *whatever*,” Bella says sourly, buzzing open the kitchen doors.

Inside, Tabby's got Shahida Mohsin-Carpenter sat at the kitchen table, and she moves to stand behind her and block her in when everyone approaches. It seems like an unnecessary precaution; Shahida's calmly sipping at a mug of tea and there's a half-demolished croissant on a plate in front of her. She has the air, Abby decides, of someone who will wait all day for answers, so long as she eventually will receive them, and thus she doesn't feel too bad when the kitchen doors double lock behind her, sealing the girl in with the rest of them.

"Disclosure?" Monica says to Tabby.

Tabby shakes her head. "Not yet. It depends on what Melissa wants."

"Yes," Shahida says, "who *is* Melissa, and what does she want?"

"Right now?" Tabby says. "To make a big bloody mess."

* * *

The last few minutes have been tense. They always are these days, when something involving Dorley Hall comes up, but the difference from before is that the tension seems more on Vicky's side than on Lorna's. It makes sense: Vicky has a whole year of bad memories there and another of merely tepid ones, whereas Lorna has integrated the Hall and the programme and the histories of some of her new friends into her worldview quite quickly.

Alarmingly quickly, Vicky said last night. Lorna responded with something like, if you can't beat them, join them, and they had a minor argument, resolved by kissing.

But now Lorna's phone is buzzing again, and she picks it up, dropping her half-finished sandwich back on the plate.

"It's Tabby, this time," Lorna says, reading from the notification and tapping to open it up.

"What does she need now?" Vicky says, frowning at her. They'd had another small fight about Lorna asking Christine to put her on the alert list, but as Lorna explained, patiently and at length, she feels obligated to help protect the Hall, the girls, and Vicky. Besides, if Dorley goes down, who'll pay for her bottom surgery?

Vicky hadn't found that funny. Lorna had insisted she wasn't joking.

"Shahida's back. And in the kitchen. Demanding answers. I think we should go."

"You really want to?"

Lorna shrugs. "Not especially? But we *do* bring a genuinely outside perspective. We might be useful."

Vicky gathers up their trash onto a lunch tray and stands, pausing beside Lorna to kiss the top of her head. "How are you already so Dorleypilled?" she whispers.

"They put drugs in the coffee," Lorna says. "It distracts from the mugs."

* * *

The back doors are open. Wide open. It's an almost offensive sight, one she knows half her cohort would have done terrible things to see when they were still in Stef's position. Even into the start of their second year, some of them, probably. She glances over; all the current second-year lot — they've *got* to

be second years, considering they were eating together under supervision, and a couple still look swollen from FFS — are focused on Stef, with the exception of the loyal one, the one who put herself between Melissa and—

Oh, *shit*. She finally recognises the girl who's been trying to intervene: Christine Hale. Abby's friend! They've even met before, once or twice; she really is just a third year as she claimed, and one who was, the last time she and Abby talked about her, struggling a little.

And Melissa's pointing a taser at her. More accurately, she's pointing a taser at a bloody *second year* who has inserted herself into the space between them. A second year!

Well done, Melissa.

A panting, wheezing sound impinges on her consciousness, and finally she registers that Stef, still crouching down, is breathing shallow and quick and might well be hyperventilating. Christine's comforting him, but as she looks down and he looks up she lets herself properly examine him for the first time and something in his gaze is different. He's been running on pure panic since she saw him, and now he's coming down.

“Stef?” she says.

“Hi, Melissa,” Stef says.

“Are you okay?”

“... Yeah. Kinda.”

“Were you serious when you said you wouldn't leave?”

“Yeah,” Stef says. He sounds winded and he realises it, so he closes his eyes, forces a stronger, steadier breath — Christine's careful hand on his back raises and lowers in time, and Melissa feels suddenly jealous of such sisterly intimacy — and then looks back up at her and, in a stronger voice with clear hints of resonance training, says, “I won't run. We can go outside if you like, but I'm coming back if we do. This is my home now.”

The hissing in her ears is back, threatens to shut out the world, but she swallows, reaches out for a random bit of covered furniture on which to steady herself. She's vaguely aware of another body piling into the room, and that's *way* too many people; she'll never get Stef away now, not without cooperation, and that's never going to happen, not now, not after she saw her friend in girls' clothes and just fucking lost it.

And Stef doesn't want to leave anyway.

"Is it true? You're trans?"

Stef blushes but doesn't look away. "Yeah."

"Fuck." Stupid. Stupid stupid stupid. "Fuck, Stef. I'm sorry. I'm so... sorry..."

Colours fade and hiss obliterates sound as her knees weaken and her head sways and she drops the awful little taser and she might have fainted, might have fallen and badly hurt herself, if not for the tall blonde girl who walks smartly up behind her and steadies her, loops a lithe arm around her waist.

"Got you," the girl says.

"I'm sorry," Melissa says again, shaking her head, consciousness slipping from her grasp, and she's grateful to the girl holding her up because Melissa fucking Haverford or Mark fucking Vogel or whoever the fuck she is has just made another stupid, destructive and absolutely avoidable mistake, and all she wants to do is collapse.

As the blonde girl lowers her carefully to the floor one of the second years, a girl in a cat-ear hoodie, says, "No, seriously, who *is* she?"

* * *

The tall white girl with the dark blonde hair, the impeccable makeup and the interesting style choices returns to the kitchen and leans against the door frame. She glances quickly at Shahida, acknowledges her with a nod — Shahida finds herself nodding in return — and raises her eyebrow at the crowds of women who have been pouring into the room from all directions over the last few minutes and who have arranged themselves in a protective huddle around the exit door.

The girl catches Tabitha's attention with a discreet cough.

"Under control?" Tabitha asks.

The tall girl nods. "Christine's with them. Steph's in a bad way—" she pauses as Tabitha jerks her head at another girl, shorter and bleach-blonde, who immediately exits wordlessly into the massive dining hall, "—and Melissa's freaking out. She almost fainted. I caught her."

"A religious experience for Melissa, I'm sure," one of the other women calls out. Tabby waves her into silence.

"Christine?" Shahida says. "From yesterday? *Her* friend?" She points at Abigail, who's been trying to hide in the crowd.

"Yes," the tall girl says to her, before turning back to Tabitha. "Look, Tab, Christine responded as soon as Melissa arrived, alerted everyone, disabled her taser—"

"—her *taser*—?"

"—and calmed her quickly and effectively. And now she's taking care of Steph. *Despite* Charlie being present."

"Charlie's priority is the safety of the second years," Tabitha says. "I won't fault her for it."

"Not my point. If you're going to have Christine constantly go above and beyond, you need to pay her more."

"She's still a third year. Still unreleased. She's lucky we pay her at all." The tall girl snorts at that, and Tabitha smiles. "That's the official line. And it's not our fault she keeps taking responsibility for things."

“You keep leaving responsibilities in front of her. What’s she supposed to do, just *watch* as this place falls apart?”

“Excuse me,” Shahida says, leaning forward and glaring at the tall girl, “but what’s going on?”

“Tabby, have we not told her yet?” the tall girl asks.

“We have to ask Melissa what she wants,” Tabitha says.

“Right now she’s incapable of articulating anything useful.”

“Who’s Melissa?” Shahida demands. “Is that Mark? Is that his— is that her name now?”

Tabitha closes her eyes and pinches the bridge of her nose. She mutters something inaudible and then says, “Right. Fine. Okay. Everybody *out!* Everyone except Paige and Abby. Go on; get moving!”

She makes shooing gestures at the assembled women, who disperse, talking animatedly amongst themselves and collecting mugs, computers, phones, and other accessories on their way, leaving Tabitha, Abigail and the tall girl; Paige, presumably.

“Abby,” Tabitha says, “go find your girl. Sort her out. And keep her out of here until we’re done. Stephanie is Pippa’s responsibility; Melissa’s yours. Christine can stay or go as she pleases, but I suspect she’ll want to stay, at least until Steph is feeling better.” Abigail nods and follows the other women out, with an apologetic shrug for Shahida as she passes. “Paige? You and me, we’re doing disclosure. Right now. I’m not waiting for Melissa to get her shit together.”

Paige pushes off from the door frame and lands in a chair at the end of the table in a single, enviably easy step. She arranges herself gracefully, leaning back in the chair, hands in her lap. “I’m not happy about this,” she says to Shahida.

“Um,” Shahida says, “I’m sorry?”

“My past is *my past*.”

“Okay?”

“Paige,” Tabitha says, “I know you don’t have a sponsor any more and you’re only technically still in the programme, but you’re quick-witted and level-headed and you’re generally actually *present*, so occasionally you’ll just have to do something you don’t want to do.”

“Because you want me to consider being a sponsor next year,” Paige says.

“Nope. You’d never do it. We know.”

“Good. Pay me for doing this then.”

“Okay.”

“*Ahem*,” Shahida says.

Paige rolls her eyes, leans forward and holds out a hand for Shahida to shake. “I’m Paige,” she says. “Apparently I’m helping her talk you through our operation.”

“Shahida,” Shahida says, taking her hand. “I just want to know where Mark is.”

“That’s a question with a very long and complicated answer,” Tabitha says. She’s been rummaging in a bag and she pulls out a tablet. A few taps and she’s sliding it over the desk for Shahida to read.

It’s a contract, or something similar, and it’s *long*.

“Read it,” Tabitha suggests.

“My parents are accountants,” Shahida says, tapping at the glass. “That means they’re very nearly lawyers. If they read this, what holes will they find?”

“None. Because they won’t read it.”

Paige says in a bored voice, “You’ll find telling anyone about this is one of the things you’re about to agree *not* to do.”

There’s knocking on the kitchen doors as she reads, and two women are waiting out in the entryway, waving at Tabitha. They’re women she recognises; they’re the ones who came out

of the dorm yesterday to ask about the flyer, the ones who started this whole mess. Or this latest phase of it, anyway. One of them's holding up a thumb, visible through the window, and pointing at it, questioning Tabitha with her frown.

It takes a moment for Tabitha to pull out a phone from somewhere and tap away at it, and then the girls are letting themselves in.

"Hi," the trans-looking girl says. Lorna, Shahida remembers.

"Disclosure?" the other one says, whose name Shahida has completely forgotten. She's looking at the tablet and frowning.

"Yes," Paige says.

"My sympathies," Lorna says, and then walks over to Tabby, leans on the table next to her. "Can we help?"

"Actually," Tabitha says, "yes. I'm parched, and I bet Shahida and Paige could use a drink. Milk and sugar, if you would."

Shahida, caught even in this situation in the trap of politeness, reaches for her mug from earlier and finds it gone; swept up by the sea of women when they left for other parts of the building, presumably. She shrugs, names her tea preference, and carries on scrolling.

"I meant more like, with disclosure," Lorna says, although she starts filling the kettle anyway. "I do have relevant experience."

"Would you be happy with that, Victoria?" Tabitha asks. The other girl, Victoria, shrugs. "Then, yes, please, stay and help us out."

"I don't especially enjoy being the *only* exhibition," Paige says drily, and that's such a mysterious comment that Shahida returns to reading the document. Most of it's concerned with keeping secrets and the consequences of failing to do so. Some of it is rather ominous. She barely notices when Lorna sets her tea down in front of her.

“Sorry about the mug,” Lorna says. “It’s the least appalling one I could find. Tabby, where do you even keep the normal ones? I know you have some.”

“Cabinet on the other side of the fridge,” Tabitha says.

Shahida looks up from the tablet again, to inspect the mug. It says, in cursive and surrounded by lipstick kisses, *Be the Girl You Want To See in the World (or Else!)*.

Strange, strange place.

* * *

“What’s going on up there?”

He doesn’t mean to just blurt it out. He’s been trying to listen as quietly as he can, because the story of Steph’s life, as assembled by the sponsors, hasn’t seemed like something he has any right to comment on. His anger, already a sputtering flame, went out when she played him the surveillance from Steph’s cell, from one of her first nights here, showing Pippa giving what he now realises is a standard introductory spiel on the evils of masculinity and the generically awful things he was assumed to have done with his privilege and his body.

When it had been his turn, Aaron received the lecture with jovial confusion, with the same shield of passive-aggressive bullshittery he always puts up — that he always *used* to put up — when he’s in a situation he can’t control. Maria’s words had been water off a duck’s back; he remembers assuming this was all for the Psychology department or something, and he’d be getting a cheque and a glare and some grudging thanks for doing his part to portray the incorruptibility of the male ego.

Steph, in the video, takes it like an attack. She doesn’t cry, like he assumed she would, like he expected she would, given

Maria was showing him the footage as the opener in her attempt to mollify him; she seized up, and that was much worse. Maria narrated, made it clear to him that this wasn't simply the reaction of an innocent to an accusation of guilt; this was someone for whom masculinity had been a suffocating chain around her neck being casually and cruelly informed that she had in fact wielded it with pleasure and satisfaction as a weapon; someone whose body had for her whole life betrayed her having her body used against her. Aaron was unavoidably reminded of the morning she turned the shower water up too high, tried intentionally to hurt herself, and he had to ask Maria to pause the playback so he could get himself under control. Back then, helplessly reaching for her in the showers, he hadn't known what he was seeing.

He should have.

He used to follow a few trans women on social media. He followed a lot of women on social media! Mostly women who posted porn! He was — past tense — a growing boy, and growing boys have needs! And while none of the trans women he followed ever posted videos discussing dysphoria, they wrote about it occasionally, had discussions with other women that he happened to see. He wondered at the time what it felt like, and since he found out what the programme was about, he's been idly waiting to feel it for himself. But he'd never really recognised it until today, when he watched Steph react to Pippa's lecture like an insect under a blowtorch, when he remembered how she tried to hurt herself.

So, no, he doesn't feel like he has a right to talk back. But Maria's called for a break and she's checking her phone again and if he doesn't fill the silence with something he'll fucking lose it because he can't stop thinking about all the times he treated Steph like a guy, and all the times she played up to it; how much did it cost her?

At school, he was targeted a lot. Not every day, but constantly and consistently, and in his experience the banality of repetition dulls the senses. By the time he left that school it

felt like he'd protected himself so well he barely felt the pain; he barely felt anything. It took until Maria, Steph and Indira to open him back up again.

He sees that in Steph. In the video. And in the other videos from earlier in the year, where she's reduced. She's *less*. She's a creature of survival. And he understands that the woman he's met just recently, the one absurdly full of life despite the dingy fucking basement they find themselves in, the one who seems inexplicably to *like* him, is the woman who was always there. Hiding. Protected. Unable to be herself.

He'd go to her right away, had he the ability. He needs to talk to her.

"What's going on, Maria?" he says again.

She sighs, but looks up from her phone, meets his eyes, and that same compassionate smile, the one he's become used to and almost dependent on, lights her face. She reaches out a hand for him and he takes it, thinking there was perhaps a time when he would have felt ashamed to be so nakedly needy, and deciding that such shame is *obviously* incredibly fucking stupid.

"It's a crazy day," she says. "That, in itself, is not unusual. When you run a place like this, you get used to crazy days."

"How crazy?"

"Today, on a scale of one to ten, is perhaps a six. Maybe a seven."

"What's happening?" When she doesn't immediately answer, he continues, not entirely sure that he should but feeling obliged to ask and even a little freed by the concept that he *can* ask, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Her smile deepens. "What you can do," she says, "is finish your water and have another sandwich. Upstairs can take care of itself; *you're* what's important to me, and you've barely eaten."

He nods, and tries his best to feel important, and she passes him another cellophane-wrapped package from the cooler.

* * *

The second-year sponsor, Charlie, finishes clearing out her charges from the conservatory — with Christine exchanging hugs with her defender, a girl called Faye, who glares at Melissa on her way out — and promises no interruptions for the time being.

“Just close the bloody doors, would you, Christine?” Charlie says, lingering in the doorway. “It’s December. Nice to see you again, Melissa.”

Is Melissa supposed to know her? Was she a sponsor while she was here? Year above? Year below? This is what happens when you isolate yourself. She waves anyway, and tries not to look as embarrassed as she feels; Charlie smiles and follows the second years out.

“Fuck,” Melissa says, and leans back on the unidentifiable antique furniture that’s supporting her.

“Yeah,” Christine says. She’s squatting next to Stefan. Next to *Stephanie*. And holding her hand. Something Melissa should probably be doing, if she hadn’t created the whole situation in the first place. “Agreed. What *happened*? Why’d you come barrelling in here with a bloody taser?”

“Oh God. I’m sorry about that.”

“Melissa, you are *far* from the first girl to point a taser at me. You wouldn’t have cracked my top fifty most traumatic memories even if I *hadn’t* remotely disabled it.”

“I’m still— Wait. What?”

“Try it.” Christine fishes Abby’s taser out of her pocket and slides it across the wooden floor. The conservatory’s not been cleaned much and definitely hasn’t been polished for a while, so Melissa has to get up and take a few unsteady steps in order to pick it up. She notes, with a little relief, that Stephanie doesn’t flinch when she comes closer this time. Not like earlier.

She thumbs the biometric sensor; it flashes red. “Huh. You did that?”

“Remember how I opened the back door with my phone? I’m running security around here.”

“Ah.”

“She could do that even before they gave her the job,” Stephanie says, and she sounds unsteady, uncertain, and her voice — which she’s clearly still training — cracks on the last word. “She’s really good.”

Christine hugs Stephanie, kisses her briefly on the temple. “Just rest, sweetie,” she whispers. “You can talk me up to the older girls later.”

Stephanie nods, closes her eyes.

“She had a hard night,” Christine explains. “No sleep.” She looks up as the skinny bleached girl enters the room. “Hey, Pip; how’re things out there?”

“Insane,” the girl says. “Same as always. Steph, are you okay?”

“I would like to sleep for a million years, please,” Stephanie groans.

“Will you, actually, if I put you to bed?”

“Probably not.”

Christine mouths, *She’s really wired.*

“Well—” the girl crouches down next to Stephanie and offers her arms; Stephanie supports herself on the girl and on

Christine, who mirrors the action on the other side, “—let’s at least get some food in you.”

Between them they lift her up onto her feet, and Melissa’s just wondering if there’s anyone around who can do the same for her when Abby rounds the corner and stops dead in the entrance, locking eyes with her.

“Hi, Abs,” Melissa says, mouth dry.

Abby shakes herself. “Hi. How are you?”

“Fucking things up. You?”

“I’m okay.”

“Pip,” Stephanie says, yanking Melissa’s attention back to her again, “I don’t want to eat in the dining hall.”

The skinny girl, Pip, exchanges looks with Christine and says, “What about the kitchen on the second floor? It’s quiet, especially at this time of day, and we can send Melissa up in a little bit.”

Stephanie nods and Pip helps her out of the room. She smiles at Melissa on her way past, embarrassed, and Melissa does her best to smile back, still scarcely able to believe that Stef’s *here*. And that she *wants* to be.

Christine follows them, and then Abby and Melissa are alone.

“Oh, Liss,” Abby says, sitting down next to her and coaxing her into a hug, “what are you doing?”

She wants to say, she panicked. She wants to say, she spent all day yesterday anxious about Dorley Hall, she’s spent months trying and failing to find a life after severing her last remaining connection to the place, she’s spent years trying to decide who she really is and what she really wants and failing at both. She wants to say, she let paranoia and anxiety and trauma lead her into a stupid decision. She wants to say, she should have called, she should have known Aunt Bea wouldn’t really have done the things she feared, she should have remembered how much of it’s an act, how much lenience and

goodwill the programme extends towards its graduates. She wants to say, she's overwhelmed and tired and scared of what it means to be back here. She wants to say, she doesn't know whether she's terrified for Stephanie or terrified of what it means that she, a supposed trans girl, absolutely hated a good third of her time here while Stephanie's already lunching with sponsors and third years and dressing nicely and calling the fucking place her *home*.

She wants to tell Abby how good it is to see her again, how she feels almost whole again with her in the room, how all her efforts to rip out the parts of her that belong to Abby were always doomed, always futile, always stupid.

She wants to do anything but fall into the embrace of her former sponsor, former lover, former best friend, and cry, but that's the thing she needs most right now and it's the only thing she's really capable of, and as Abby's arms protect her, as her adoring whispers soothe her, she forgets everything else for a little while, and wonders why she ever left her in the first place.

* * *

“You have to stop interrupting, or we're never going to get anywhere.”

“I'm not interrupting, I'm just — does anyone have another colour of pen? thanks — I'm just making sure I have everything straight.”

“You know we can't let you take that pad out of here, right?”

“Yes, but writing things down as we go helps me focus, it helps me remember. So, Tabitha, you were saying?”

This is turning out to be one of those days that feels like it's never going to end, and considering tomorrow's likely to deliver a Tory majority *and* probably a third consecutive minor disaster for the Hall, Tabby's seriously considering doing a Melissa and moving halfway up the country and pretending to be a cis girl with a large and completely unsuspecting gap in her resume and a nice innocent hobby, like collecting bobblehead dolls or raising chickens or something.

"I was giving you the long version," she says, "and you kept interrupting, so here's the short version: we take young men, generally between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five but occasionally down to eighteen if we feel it's justified, who are on highly destructive paths and who are unlikely to reform, and we..." She waves a hand. "We make women out of them."

"And that helps, does it?"

Shahida's taking it in stride, which Tabby might have been surprised by, but then she's already seen off Abigail's ham-fisted attempt at placating her, she's literally seen Melissa's face — she made Tabby unlock her phone and watch the video she took — and she's just recently watched a houseful of busybody weirdos close ranks around her. Not much of a leap, really.

"It's not just any bad boys," Paige says. "We don't bring in shoplifters or bank robbers or art forgers—" Tabby controls a smirk as, across the table and behind Shahida's back, Vicky mouths *Art forgers?* to Lorna, "—because such things are rarely motivated by toxic masculinity."

"Toxic masculinity?" Shahida says, pausing in her note-taking to look quizzically at Paige, who looks quizzically right back and thus at least partially defeats her. "That's your excuse? Do you kidnap men for explaining women's jobs to them on Twitter?"

"Violently destructive masculinity, then," Paige says. "It manifests differently in different boys, so if you're looking at all of us and picturing rapists, don't."

“We don’t bring in unrepentant rapists,” Tabby says, “as a rule.”

“But,” Shahida says, “to be clear, you—” she points at Paige, “—are a former bad boy?”

“I am,” Paige says, “but, again, be careful what you are picturing.”

Shahida frowns at her. “I’m not picturing anything, particularly.”

“Good.”

“So everyone here is a, uh, a bad boy turned good girl?” Shahida looks around the table, her gaze landing on Lorna.

“No,” Lorna says. “I’m a good girl turned very annoyed girl. And, look, Shahida, Dorley doesn’t take in monsters and it doesn’t take in angels. It mostly selects for young men who have been, frankly, damaged by hegemonic masculinity and the dangerous and often contradictory demands it makes on the growing psyche. Now, I’m not a man — I was *never* a man, and I’ll thank you to remember that — but as someone who had to pretend to be one until I escaped my godawful mother I understand what it’s like to be profoundly unsuited to the roles made available to ‘young men’—” she finger quotes and Tabby swallows to keep from laughing at her pomposity, which would be terribly rude considering how helpful she’s being, both in lecture *and* affront, “—and how violent and coercive an experience it can be attempting to conform to them, even if only as a disguise. One I wore exceptionally poorly, by the way. It’s like putting a mouse in a maze and rewarding it with food only when it finally consents to bite the other mice. After a while, after enough behavioural reinforcement, the only way to fix it is to—” she mimes picking up a struggling animal, “—lift it out of the maze altogether. Radically change its whole context.”

“We should talk more, Lorna,” Paige says.

“This is ridiculous,” Shahida says, dropping her pen on the table in frustration. Huh; maybe not *entirely* in stride, then.

“You know what?” Lorna says. “I said exactly the same thing. I found out about this place, shit, how long ago?”

“Last Monday,” Vicky says.

“Seems longer. I found out about this place *really* recently, and I thought it was completely and totally fucking *bananas*. And I was ready to burn it down, I really was. Even after the NDA and the legal threats and all that crap. Because my girlfriend comes from here, and she’s the sweetest, kindest, most generous-hearted person I know, and the idea, the *very idea* that she could have been what they were telling me she once was? I didn’t just find it offensive; it was a— a— a fucking *violation*. But you know what? The people who are brought here are often as much victims as they are victimisers, only they need the kind of help no-one else can provide and, God fucking damn it, I had to face up to the fact that it *works*. Yeah, sure, it wouldn’t work for everyone, and yeah, the process can be—” she leans against Vicky, and the two of them exchange a glance Tabby looks away from, “—difficult, but it works. It takes boys who’ve been hurt, really badly hurt, and who are turning that hurt out on other people, who are potentially building up to something really, really awful, and it saves them. First it saves other people from *them*, but then it saves them from themselves.”

Vicky holds up a hand to attract Shahida’s attention. “I don’t like to talk about this,” she says, in a voice so quiet everyone else at the table leans forward to hear it better, “but that was *me*. I was the boy who was going to go off. A lot of us were. My best friend, Christine, she was lashing out, too. Differently to me, but she was. And she was saved.”

“Me too,” Paige says.

Tabby’s about to try to bring the conversation back on topic — drifting into justifications is a temptation she can understand, but collectively they have enough that they could spend all day on them — when Christine enters from the dining hall, walks up behind Paige and leans down to kiss her girlfriend on the top of her head.

“My ears are burning,” Christine says.

“Oh, it’s you,” Shahida says. “From Egg Nation. Does that mean Abigail is a former boy, too?”

“Most of us are. It’s just a thing you have to get used to around here.” Christine directs her attention back down towards Paige, kissing her again, and that’s good, no, that’s *great*. Vicky and Lorna are, understandably, still a little highly strung, but Christine and Paige are a picture-perfect couple, beautiful and caring and reasonably normal-seeming; the ideal advertisement for the programme. She glances over at Shahida and is pleased to see her watching with interest and... envy?

“Hi,” Paige says, leaning to the side so she can kiss Christine on the cheek.

“You okay?”

“Been better. I don’t like talking about it.”

“I know. I have to take some meals upstairs, okay? And then I’ll be right back down.”

Paige mumbles something which makes Christine giggle and nuzzle her nose in Paige’s hair, and Tabby hides her smirk behind her coffee mug — rather unfortunately printed, in the style of the logo for the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, with the phrase *Feminising Torture Basement*, and she subtly checks to make sure the logo’s on one side only; it is, thank goodness — because the two of them are behaving so much like she would wish them to, she almost wonders if it’s deliberate.

Christine props her head on top of Paige’s for a moment, and says, “By the way, Shahida, a lot of us are quite sensitive about our pasts, so I’d be careful throwing around phrases like ‘former boy’. We’re making ourselves extremely vulnerable for you; please try to remember that.”

It’s fortunate Paige picked the seat she did; only Tabby can see Christine’s hand clenched into a fist under the table. Being so open about her status is costing her. It’s costing all of them. They’re all still so *new*, she remembers; they don’t have

Tabby's long years of cynicism shielding them. Fuck it; everyone's getting a bonus for this. Well, all the ones on Dorley's books, anyway. Lorna can get an extra operation or something. Maybe she'd like perkier tits.

"Anyway," Christine says, and kisses Paige one final time before pushing up and heading for the fridge, "it was lovely to meet you, Shahida. Didn't mean to interrupt." She rummages in the fridge for a moment, extracts some tupperware, and carries a wobbly pile of the stuff carefully back out into the dining hall, presumably planning to microwave it all upstairs.

"Where were we?" Tabby says, before anyone else can say anything. "Yes, our intake procedures. Now, Shahida, I'll let Melissa tell you her story in detail if she so chooses, but she was enrolled on November fourth, twenty-twelve. A very late admission, but it was the judgement of her sponsor that she constituted an urgent case. She would very likely have died by her own hand if not for our intervention."

To her surprise, Shahida nods, but then they knew each other reasonably well, didn't they?

"Should I be thanking you, then?" Shahida asks.

"That," Tabby says, "is another question you should ask Melissa."

* * *

"I'm all wet. 'How do you know you're back at Dorley, Melissa?' Oh, because I'm hiding in a dark corner, crying. It's a clue."

"Tissues," Abby says, passing over a handful. "Blow."

"Be honest: how fucked up is my face right now?"

“*Blow*. We’ll unfuck your face in a minute.”

Melissa makes a noise that echoes unpleasantly off the glass conservatory doors, and drops the used tissue into a plastic bag Abby’s silently holding out. She takes another, wipes down her eyes and cheeks, and disposes of it.

“Thanks,” she says.

“Thank me later,” Abby says, dabbing at still-damp spots on Melissa’s face. “You’ve got people to see. You want to get ready? Christine’s left the back stairs unlocked; we can go all the way up to my room without seeing anyone.”

Melissa nods, and accepts Abby’s help to stand.

She confessed, wetly, to the chain of logic that brought her to this point, and Abby, charitably, didn’t point out how incredibly stupid it was; it sounded even worse when she came to say it aloud. Instead Abby gave Melissa the rundown on exactly how much she messed everything up: Stephanie’s upstairs, being calmed down by her sponsor — “She’s sort of her sponsor, anyway; it’s a long story, and I’ll let her tell it.” — and, worse, Shahida’s in the kitchen. Abby overheard Tabby announcing that she and Paige were going to do disclosure, so by the time Melissa sees her again, she’ll know the whole sordid truth.

At least *she* doesn’t have to tell it.

On the way upstairs she gets a summary of how Stephanie ended up here, and it’s almost too much to hear until Abby reminds her: Stephanie’s trans, she *wants* this, and it’s both Christine and Pippa’s opinion that stumbling into Dorley’s only slightly spiky embrace, despite her initially incorrect assumptions, probably saved her from something much, much worse.

She really was a lot like me, then.

Up in Abby’s room she cleans up and borrows some fresh clothes. She doesn’t put on makeup, despite Abby’s urging; her hands are still shaking a little too much.

“Food,” Abby diagnoses, and leads her down to the kitchen on the second floor, where Christine’s left a lunch for her in the fridge.

Before they turn the corner Melissa halts them both, gathers both of Abby’s hands in hers and holds them in front of her chest. “Thank you,” she whispers. “Thank you for always putting me back together.”

“Always,” Abby says, and they kiss, awkwardly, both of them going for the lips and then reconsidering, but it’s fine, it’s sweet, and they laugh and hug and then Abby pulls her by her clasped hands around the corner to the place where Stephanie’s eating something that smells absolutely delicious.

Melissa lingers in the doorway. “Hi,” she says, nerves still piling up, aware that of all the reintroductions she could have made, she picked perhaps the worst in the history of the Hall. Certainly she’s never heard of anyone else charging back in, years after graduation, and trying to steal a first year.

Stephanie, to her relief, has a smile for her, and nods at one of the chairs. Melissa sits while Abby starts the microwave going.

“Let it stand for two minutes when it’s done,” Abby says quietly, though neither Melissa nor Stephanie is actually talking, just watching each other. “I’ll be around the corner with Christine, in her room, if you need either of us.”

“Hi, Melissa,” Stephanie says, when they’re alone. Her voice sounds less strained than it had downstairs. “I’m sorry for how I reacted.”

Melissa’s grateful she doesn’t have her lasagne already, or she would have choked. “How *you* reacted? Stef— Stephanie —”

“Just Steph is fine,” she says, interrupting. “I’m not sold on Stephanie yet? Although,” she adds, grumbling, “I think everyone else is. I was just trying it out!” she protests, to the air.

“Just Steph,” Melissa says. “Gotcha. Look, Steph, can we do something? Can you just put your fork down for a minute?”

Stephanie complies, frowning, but doesn't comment when Melissa stands up out of her chair. She gets it when Melissa tugs on her sleeve, and pushes her own chair back, standing — still a little unsteadily — to accept the hug.

It's like going back seven years. More. It's all the things they never said, all the times they never held each other like sisters would; it's all the moments of affection that made them both ashamed, because boys weren't supposed to behave that way, and because Steph's mum would scold them if she caught them hugging.

“I've missed you so much,” Melissa whispers, and Steph's grip on her tightens. She hears her wince, just a little, but the girl — and, God, doesn't that feel good; the *girl* — just giggles at it this time. Still getting used to being sensitive up there.

“I've missed you too,” Steph says.

They're well-matched in height, with Steph a little taller — she must have grown quite a lot since Melissa left — and that just makes it more like hugging a sister.

“Seven years I missed,” Melissa says. “You'll have to tell me all about them.”

“They weren't all super fun.”

“Just the good bits, then.”

“Deal.”

She can almost feel Steph's pulse through her thin clothes, and it's magical. The sweet little boy she used to tutor. The girl she's excited to get to know. A piece of her past she never thought she'd get back, right here in her arms, vibrant and smiling and *alive*, and healing in all the ways she needs to. And if today could have gone better, well, it could have gone a whole lot worse, and Melissa's doing nothing but counting all the blessings that have returned to her.

And then her lasagne's done, and the ping of the microwave breaks the moment.

* * *

There's a knuckle stroking his wet cheek and a palm cupping his jaw and he's not ever felt so vulnerable, not even with Steph. But he's safe with Maria, and whatever else she might do to him, she really does want what's best for him, and even if it conflicts absolutely with what he always thought he wanted out of life there's a relief in letting go, a freedom in giving your life over to someone who has a plan for it, and if she's going to love him like a sister, then so be it.

He knows about Steph now. *All* about her. And while it doesn't change the fact that she lied to him, Maria's point is and was completely clear: what, ultimately, would have changed?

And he'll accept comfort from Maria, who put him here.

He swore at Maria a few times when she pointed that out, and she pushed his head back down into her lap. Made him silent again, and asked him if he'd have done anything different if he'd known she was keeping the secret. Would he have let Declan attack her? Would he have left her on the floor of the shower room, scalded and shaking?

No.

No. Obviously not.

Well then.

He swore at her again.

And she pushed him back down again and they spoke of boundaries. And initially he was dismissive: they've talked

about this before; he's read extensively on the subject in the books she gave him; as an experienced boundary violator (retired) he's an expert. But she *kept* talking. And eventually she posed the question that unravelled him.

What does it mean to have your boundaries violated?

She talked about them like they're the walls and locked doors of your house, how everyone to a greater or lesser extent lives inside an illusion of comfort and safety, how especially women and *most* especially marginalised women — women of colour such as her; trans women such as her, effectively; disabled women and gay women and immigrant women and traveller women — are more aware of the transitory nature of the illusion than men generally are, but that the truth is that anyone can smash a window or break down your door or drive a vehicle through your wall and expose you, blow your fucking house down, little pig, leaving you alone and without even the fragments of illusionary protection remaining.

And she didn't have to tell him the rest because it was suddenly so obvious and so inescapable what he did to those women, what he *took* from them, and more importantly what he left them with; in their lives, on their campus, in their lectures was a man prepared repeatedly and without apparent shame to violate their boundaries. And why wouldn't you fear such a man? Why wouldn't you watch for him around every corner? Why wouldn't you change your life to avoid him? Because here is a man who knew who they were, who hurt them for no more reason than his own satisfaction, and who might on any random night decide harassment isn't enough for him any more.

All those women, waiting for him to escalate.

Blow your fucking house down.

He doesn't *know* this. He can't know that, say, Paula Conrad stopped leaving her flat because she was scared he might come looking for her. But she might have done. Any of them might have done! Any of them might have stayed home or dropped classes or dropped *out* or put their whole lives on

pause for fear of him. And even if none of them did, even if all of them tried to put him to the backs of their minds and continued about their lives as normal, he'd still invaded them in a manner more repulsive than he ever realised, than he ever considered, even after he came to Dorley.

He thought he knew what he'd done. He thought he knew why he was here. He thought he knew the man he'd become, the thing they're trying to excise. But he hadn't even the slightest idea until today.

"It's okay," Maria says, stroking his cheek. She's still sitting cross-legged on his bed; he's still lying lengthways, his head in her lap. "It's okay."

He'd tell her it's not, that it never will be, that these will always be *the things he's done*, that to set himself up as someone who can judge *anyone* for *anything* is ludicrous, but his breaths are coming out in gulps and hiccups and every time he thinks back to something he did, something he laughed about, something he joked about, he wants to just fucking—

Her hand stills on his jaw as if she can tell what he's thinking, and he knows without her having to tell him that she wants him to get through this, that she needs him to, that what he asked for last night and what he desperately wants to ask her for now is not something she's ever going to provide for him, because she wants him to live, she wants him to change and grow and, yes, germinating inside him is the faintest hint of determination that he just fucking *might*, because if the man who came here is someone who could do that to people, over and over, then he's not content to wait for Maria to take his hand and drag him away from his past; he's going to take those steps himself. Cautiously and reluctantly because he still doesn't know how he's going to do it, how he's going to become someone he can survive, but he's going to do it. Because *fuck that guy*.

And Maria's going to love him like a sister.

As she whispers reassurances to him, as he gasps for air through the heaving of his chest, as he looks back on his life

with disgust, he understands finally that last night wasn't the end, wasn't the point of no return; this is.

He doesn't know how long he lies in her lap, her hands surrounding him, creating a cradle for him, but she knows when it's over before he does. She releases him with a final, gentle caress of his cheek and he sits up, skin stretched dry and salty, lungs aching, head almost clear.

She smiles and opens her arms to him and he shuffles along the bed and accepts her, wraps his arms around her shoulders, returns her affection as someone who might one day be considered her equal.

“Maria...” he whispers. It's all he has.

Not a bad place to start.

* * *

Stef knew Melissa would be beautiful. She didn't expect her to be so *sad*, and when first she saw her again she really was as miserable as she's ever seen anyone, but when they come up from one of the longest hugs she's ever had and Melissa's face is shining with tears but smiling — and giggling at how inappropriate it is that their reunion's been interrupted by her bloody dinner — her joy is infectious and Stef can't stop herself from kissing her quickly on the cheek before she finishes untangling herself and sits down again.

After all this time. There she is. Giddy and graceful and nervous and shy and blowing delicately on the lasagne on her fork. And it's actually reassuring that she came charging back into her life on the wings of a huge misunderstanding, knocking from its pedestal the unrealistically serene image of her that Stef's been nurturing for so many years. Better that Melissa's a disaster, like her.

But people do keep interrupting them, and while it's sort of fun to see Melissa exposed to Jodie's bubbly stream of consciousness, Stef would rather have her to herself for a little while longer.

"I can't believe you just... *go places*," Melissa says, as Stef thumbs them out onto the stairway. "I couldn't get out here on my own until my third year."

"What about when I saw you outside Tesco that one time?"

"When was that? January? That might have been my first time out alone. Well, almost alone. And Abby was waiting for me. *And* I was only allowed because I'd been—" her voice becomes bitter, "—so good."

They climb in silence for a moment.

"I'm sorry it was so hard for you here," Stef says, buzzing them out onto the top floor so they can cross over the hall to the roof stairs. She walks them quickly, hoping they won't run into anyone she knows.

"I made it hard for myself, honestly," Melissa says, after the metal fire door leading to the roof stairs closes behind them. "I sort of did what you did, but the stupid version."

Stef pushes open the roof door and checks they're alone — they are — before continuing. "You knew about this place before you came here?"

"No, but it didn't take me long to work it out. I hid it, though. From everyone, including Abby, as much as I could. Not recommended."

Someone's been hard at work prepping the roof of Dorley Hall for winter: the plastic-covered couches that have for a while been squatting on a tarp in the middle have acquired another tarp above, spread out over the brick pillars that mark the edges of the gravel square, the one Christine's described to Stef as being 'fake zen'. A few smaller waterproofed areas have been set up around some of the benches at the edges of the roof, with tarps hung from light fittings and rocks sewn into one end, so today's ever-present rain has somewhere to

go, and it's to one of these that they hurry, their steps lit more by the dim roof lamps and the tacky neon sign on top of the Student Union Bar more than by the dark and overcast sky.

"You want to talk about it?" Stef asks, brushing off the bench and sitting down.

Melissa joins her, shaking her head. "Nah. Maybe some other time? I still need to get myself situated, sort out where I'm staying tonight, move my rental car to the parking lot near the lake, grab my stuff, email my boss, all that kind of stuff. And I need to set aside a good half-hour to really freak out over how much I embarrassed myself today."

Stef leans over, finds Melissa already leaning into her, and they rearrange themselves on the bench so they can stay in contact. Neither of them has a jacket; they'll need each other's body heat to stay warm.

"You can stay in my room," Stef says.

Melissa snorts. "No offence, Steph, but I don't want to spend the night in the bloody basement."

"No, no no," Stef says, waving her free hand, "I mean my *other* room."

"Your other room?"

"I have one on the first floor, with the second years. It's got its own bathroom and you can access the kitchen and dining hall and everywhere."

Melissa doesn't say anything for a second, and when Stef looks over she's biting her lip, her cheeks are going red, and she's clearly trying to keep herself from laughing. "You have your own first-floor room? And you've been here *two months*?" Stef nods. "God. I made the *wrong* decision. I should have come out to Abby. Think of the perks I missed out on!"

"I mean, there's a little more to it than that. Beatrice was kinda scary when they first found me out."

“Hah. Yeah. She does that. It’s an act. Mostly an act.”
Melissa frowns. “It’s an act until it’s not. But she never really turned that shit on me, and she’ll likely never turn it on you.”
She shakes her head a couple of times and then leans on Stef’s shoulder. “I was so fucked up about her for the longest time.”

Stef nods, carefully, so as not to disturb her. It’s more intimate here, despite the cold, despite the openness; there’s a curtain of rain around them, there’s soft light from the lamps, and there’s their little circle of warmth. Seven years vanishing in a heartbeat. Mark and Stefan; Melissa and Stephanie. The way it was always supposed to be.

The way it’s going to be forever.

“I never actually came up here before,” Melissa says softly. “It’s nice.”

“This is my first time,” Stef confesses. “Christine likes it up here, though. She comes up here to *not* smoke. She says it’s like a bigger, bougier version of somewhere she used to hang out when she was a— ugh, you know, when she was a teenager.”

Melissa smirks. Stef can feel her cheeks round out against her neck. “You get hung up on it, too? How to talk about the other girls’ former lives?”

“Mostly I don’t talk about it,” Stef says. “Pippa, my sponsor, she’s told me about her past, but only the once. It doesn’t seem important, you know? It’s like fixating on what subjects someone did at GCSE when they’re an adult.”

“It’s still weird that you say stuff like ‘sponsor’. That you know Dorley terminology. I’ve always thought of this place as drawing a hard line between my old life and my new one, and now here you are, talking about sponsors and having bloody roof access. I’m actually really proud of you, Stephanie.”

“I didn’t want you to see me, you know,” Stef says suddenly. “Not yet. I didn’t think I was ready. And I was worried what you’d think of me.”

Melissa leans away, looks at her. “What did you think I would think of you?”

A shrug. “I don’t know. That I’m a bad person for cooperating with the programme? That I’m weak for choosing the cheery concrete girlboss torture box instead of transitioning out in the real world? That I’m—”

“I’m sorry,” Melissa says, taking Stef’s hand to take the sting out of her laughter, “the cheery concrete *what?*”

“It’s what Aaron calls the basement. Or variations on that theme. God. Fuck. That’s the other thing. That’s why I was so fucked up when you came. I messed up badly with him last night and I didn’t sleep at all and then Pippa and Paige dressed me up and... I mean, I’ve had this whole thing I’ve been trying to get over where I don’t want people to see me — especially you, but also just, you know, *people* — while I’m still so early in transition, because I feel sort of ridiculous and ugly and male, all that shit. And I’m working on it, but... I didn’t want you to see me,” she says again. Melissa doesn’t say anything. Like she doesn’t want to prompt her. But it’s important she knows this; it’s important Stef expel it. “I never wanted you to see me as a guy again.”

“Steph—”

“It’s just so hard, you know?” Stef continues, caught in the need to see it through. “It’s been wonderful getting to know the girls and Pippa’s amazing and so are Christine and Paige and Maria and all the others but it’s hard to look at them and then look at *me*, like all the *shit* I hated when I was growing up is still there, and I’m changing but I’m not changing *fast enough*, and then I feel guilty raging about that because if I’m not changing fast enough then what does that say about— about— *Fuck.*”

“Steph?”

“Aaron. Everything I want for me is *bad* for him.”

Melissa lets go of her hand so she can turn around on the bench, tuck her legs up underneath and properly face Stef,

properly look at her.

“Okay,” she says, “first, Stephanie: you’re *beautiful*. You are.”

“I still look male.”

“You look *in transition*. You look like most other trans women who’ve been on hormones a couple of months. I know there are things about your face you don’t like, and there are things that are—are *tells*. I know because I had them, too! But you’re beautiful, Steph. You have wonderful features. Only an idiot would call you ugly, and only a *complete* idiot — or a cis person — would call you *male*. And do you see any cis people around here?”

She’s so sincere. She’s so fucking *sincere*. It’d be so easy to believe her. So tempting.

So why *not* believe her? Stef’s struck suddenly by the vivid memory of the night after she talked to Maria in her room, when she saw *herself* in the mirror for the first time. What good does denying that do her? And what does she care, in this place, with these girls, if she doesn’t look cis yet?

“Okay,” she says.

“Just ‘okay’?” Melissa asks, poking at her.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Steph...”

“Really! I will!” She’s been leaning forward, so she deliberately relaxes, returns her back to the bench, and Melissa moves in, closing the space between them again. “I can’t promise instant results, but... it’s a process, you know?”

“I know. Just remember—” and Melissa pulls Stef’s face around so she *has* to look in her eyes, “—I think you’re beautiful. And I’ve known you a *long* time, girlie.”

Stef nods dumbly.

“Now,” Melissa says, “tell me about Aaron. Tell me how you messed up.”

Another shrug. “He’s my friend. Down there. And I feel stupid about him because he’s this complete fucking jerk and he’s done terrible things and, Liss, I love him. I love him and I want to help him and instead I lied to him, pretended I was just like him, and yesterday...” Stef sucks in a cold, wet lungful of air. “Yesterday he asked Maria to help him die.”

Melissa takes it all in with much more calm than Stef expected. “That’s not uncommon,” she says quietly. “A lot of the girls in my intake had something like that.”

“That’s what everyone keeps saying to me. I just... I don’t get why it has to happen.”

“Abby explained to me once, when I asked her why everyone else in the basement was being such a dick to me, why so many of the boys the programme targets have similar life stories. You know, neglected childhoods, distant or abusive parents, victimisation at school or church or wherever, a history of having to prove themselves and a habit of choosing the most — oh, what was the exact phrase she liked to use? — the most culturally convenient psychological defence mechanism.” She smiles, and tucks a lock of Stef’s wind-blown hair back behind her ear. “I didn’t realise, the first time we spoke, that she was talking about herself, too. It’s different for Black kids, of course, because her... youthful misadventures were punished pretty severely while the white kids in the basement have mostly gotten used to getting away with shit, but still. Sometimes those for whom masculinity isn’t intrinsic but still forms a fundamental part of their socialisation, their training for the world, have the hardest time imagining life without it. It’s their foundation. Their framework for understanding what the world expects from them. Losing it, as everyone here does eventually, is traumatic. Terrifying. They feel lost, like they have to start again literally from scratch. And, fuck, Steph, if there’s anything I understand, it’s feeling like there’s no way forward, wanting to just *stop*.”

Stef snakes out a hand and grips Melissa’s. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I never knew it got so bad for you. Until you

disappeared.”

Melissa smiles. “It’s not like I *told* anyone. And the ones who worked it out, I pushed away.”

“Still sorry. I would have helped if I knew. And that’s just it; I knew this was all happening to Aaron, and I just... let it happen. *That’s* my big fuckup. Not *telling* him. The icing on the shit sundae.”

“Could you have stopped it?”

“Well...”

“He’ll get through it, Steph. He *will*. And I don’t just say that because we can both point to dozens of women who’ve survived it. I’m saying it because that feeling is a *lie*. And it’s a lie that can’t survive the gradual realisation of the truth, which is that there *is* a way to live, and live well. That’s why they do big intakes. And, honestly, if he’s reached that point and he’s being coached through it, he’s halfway there.”

“What’s the other half?”

“Don’t be a girl,”” Melissa says, with air quotes. “So much of what’s taught to boys, especially boys with the sort of fucked up relationship to masculinity that the programme tends to sweep up, is based around not being a girl, not being a pussy, whatever. In many ways it’s harder to unlearn than the defence mechanisms. They all have to learn that being a girl isn’t shameful or weak. They have to learn that the thing they were taught their whole lives to be afraid of is actually... fine. Just completely one hundred percent normal and fine.” She rolls her eyes. “Personally, I think it’s *clearly* the better choice, but that’s the advanced class.” She grins, shows her teeth, but doesn’t quite break Stef’s mood. “You can help with that most of all, I think. Show everyone you can just... be a girl.”

“I guess.”

“Do you *want* him to stay as a boy? Is that why you like him? Because he’s a boy?”

“I don’t know why I like him at all,” Stef says. “I never have. He just... takes up all my thoughts. It makes me happy to be around him. I don’t think I care if he’s a girl or a boy, but I care that *he* cares.”

“Then maybe the best thing you can do is let him figure it out for himself. With his sponsor.”

Stef wants to contradict her, wants to confess *more*, wants to keep pulling out chunks of herself until she can find something to throw at Melissa that will make her *judge* her. Instead she just wriggles against Melissa’s body and tries to diagnose why it’s so important to her that she disappoints the woman she’s been looking for all these years.

In her head, she draws a circle around the whole conversation and compares it to what she said earlier, about feeling too male to be seen by her, and nods to herself. Reflexive lying; reflexive self-hatred. Got to watch for those.

“You okay, kiddo?” Melissa asks.

“Yeah,” Stef says, nodding slowly, telling herself firmly that Melissa’s *right*, and of course she is, because she’s as close to an impartial observer as she’s ever going to find, and if *she* thinks Aaron will be okay, that’s something she can cling to. “Yeah, I actually am. You know, it’s weird hearing you defend the programme like that. Abby always said you hated it.”

Melissa shakes her head. “I do. I did. But it works, mostly. It’s a fucking trauma factory sometimes, and you can *definitely* argue there are better ways to achieve similar results, but, by its own standards, it works.” She shivers.

“You want to go indoors? It’s getting cold.”

“Um,” Melissa says, frowning, “not yet?”

Stef twists in her grip. “Are *you* okay?”

“You mean, aside from making a colossal idiot of myself today?”

“Come on, no-one thinks that.”

“I think everyone thinks that.” She smiles weakly. “But that’s not what I’m antsy about. Shahida’s here. Downstairs.”

“I know,” Stef says, nodding. Christine filled her in.

“I feel a bit like you, honestly,” Melissa says, repositioning again so she can look out into the rain. “I don’t want her to see me like this. Not because I’m ashamed of being like this — far from it — but because... because I feel stupid.” She pokes a thumb into her chest. “I’m a trans girl who didn’t work it out until it was too late. I was hours away from ending it when Abby brought me here. By rights, I should have died seven years ago. Except, actually, by rights, I should have died even before that.”

She’s quiet for long enough that Stef nudges her. “What do you mean?”

“Shahida saved my life. I was going to end it, and she stopped me. She had this—” she laughs, suddenly, “—this daft little picnic blanket, and she chattered at me and she took me home to her family and she saved me, and for years I took that with me.” She clenches her fist over her heart. “For *years*. It was only when it all went wrong with her, and I didn’t know why, because I’m trans but I’m *stupid* and never worked it out, that I started to really fall again. I didn’t have that to hold onto any more.

“I don’t want to see her because I hurt her *so* bad, Steph. I know it. At the time I thought it was fine, it was better, because it was *me*, and I *knew* I did nothing but bring bad things into people’s lives. Hers especially. I thought it was better that I just vanish. That I just fade away.” Another deep breath. “It took me a *long* time to get over that. Way longer than it did to work out I was trans. It was Abby, in the end, who got through to me. Who showed me I had value, that I really was, I don’t know, a real person. Not just a hole in the world. Shahida tried to show me, too, but I was missing this—this vital puzzle piece. I didn’t know who I was, I didn’t know why I hated myself, I didn’t know why it killed me to look at

her sometimes, or why when she touched me it made me feel...

“God. You know, I actually can’t remember how it felt. I still struggle sometimes with feeling fake, or less good compared to other women, but I can’t remember any more what it was like to have a girl I might have loved touch me like I was a man.” She sniffs. “She touched me, and I ran.”

“I’m so sorry,” Stef says.

“I can’t help feeling that when she sees me, that’s all she’ll think about. Not that I was a man or a boy or whatever, but that I ran. I ran because I was stupid.”

“She won’t,” Stef says, with sudden confidence. Melissa looks at her like she’s going to say something, so Stef continues before she can. “She won’t! She’s been looking for you. Putting up posters all around town. Seven years later she’s still thinking about you. She thought you were *dead*, Liss! Do you think she’s going to judge you for things you had no control over when you were a teenager?”

“Maybe?”

“She won’t,” Stef repeats, taking Melissa’s hand and standing up. “Come on. Come see her and prove it.”

“But—”

“Come on!”

“Steph!”

“You need to do this, Liss. Not just for the woman who’s been papering Almsworth looking for you, but for *you*. You *need* to know that she’s nothing but happy to see you. She’ll understand. I promise.”

It’s easy to be confident about that. Tabby would likely have sent Shahida packing if her attitude suggested she was here to get revenge or something.

Melissa nods, and allows Stef to pull her up off the bench. They’re standing together at the very edge of the protection

provided by the tarp, and Melissa's haloed by technicolour neon light shining through rain.

"How do I look?" she says.

Stef grins. "Melissa, I've been *dreaming* of seeing you again for, what, nearly six years? Ever since I saw you outside the supermarket. And I've always thought of you as this... ethereal beauty. Like an angel, or something."

"And I'm a disappointment?"

"No," Stef says firmly. "You're better. You're *real*. You're my fucking *sister*, Liss, and for the first time in seven years I can talk to you, I can hold your hand, I can hug you. And you're beautiful. Right now, with your eyes kinda red and your cheeks all flushed, you're beautiful."

"I am?"

"Yes," Stef says, and pulls on her, drags her out into the rain, towards the door that will take them back down into the warm, "now come on!"

There's a sudden lightness to Melissa, a quickness to her step, and when Stef looks back through the rain she's laughing quietly and skipping along behind her, holding onto Stef's fingertips with the barest of contacts. It's like she's been made anew. And that's what this is for all of them, she realises: a chance to go back seven years, to erase mistakes, to start again.

Maybe she can do the same with Aaron tomorrow. There's not seven years of mistakes there, but there are enough.

They head back down the main stairs, and as they approach the kitchen they can hear voices. Lots of voices. Enough to make Melissa hang back in the lobby, nervous again. Stef smiles, instructs her with a raised finger to wait, and lets herself in.

"Hi, everyone," she says, as a kitchenful of women turn their attention to her. She silences them — at least five of them

are surging forward or asking if she's okay — with a wave of a hand. "I'm fine. I'm going downstairs for some bloody *sleep*."

"Amen," Pippa says quietly.

"But before I do, I have someone here who wants to see Shahida, but kind of doesn't want to be crowded. Oh, and I said she can use my room on the first floor tonight, so could someone sort out the biometrics?"

Tabby nods. "No problem," she says. "All right, clear off, everyone. And, Steph—" she points to Shahida, "—don't let her out yet, will you? We only let her have her phone again because she had this whole dead woman's switch thing going on."

"Right," Stef says, as the other women file out into the dining hall, most of them waving or winking or otherwise greeting her on their way. "Um, hi, Shahida. I don't know if you remember me, but—"

"Hi, Stephanie," Shahida says, smiling warmly. "I've been told *all* about you."

Stef laughs. "Of course you have. Are you going to stick around? I'd love to chat. Just, you know—" and thinking about how tired she is prompts a yawn, which she tries and fails to keep down. "God. Sorry. Just not tonight."

"Yes," Shahida says, hesitant, "I think I'll stick around."

"Good." Stef leans heavily on the table, fatigue making her heavy. "I was going to do this a bit more gracefully, but... Cover your ears?" Shahida complies, and Stef yells, "Liss! Come in!"

A few moments later the kitchen doors open again and Melissa enters, nervous but smiling, and Stef might as well no longer exist as far as Shahida's concerned. She lifts herself up from the table as quietly as she can and follows the rest of the girls out into the dining hall so she can take the stairs back down to the basement, but she hesitates just beyond the threshold, unable to resist eavesdropping.

“Hi,” Shahida says, enraptured, and there’s a scraping sound as Melissa pulls out a chair to sit down. “Um, Melissa, right? Does that mean I can still call you Em?”

“Sure,” Melissa says. “Em is fine.”

* * *

He’s pretty sure he’s never felt so nervous about anything in his life, and he’s trying to keep down the hysterical laughter that keeps threatening to bubble up at the thought of what he’s about to do, but like Maria said, you can stop still or you can go forward, and after everything today the thought of stopping still scares him stupid.

He knocks on the door.

Maria left him alone in the end, with the cooler and the last of the sandwiches and the promise of a small favour and a dwindling reserve of certainties, of which only two are relevant right now: he’s going to survive, if only out of spite for the person he once was, and he has to do this.

He knocks on the door again.

“Oh. Hi.”

He jumps, because the voice comes from behind him, and there’s Steph, wearing a skirt and a nice top and looking pretty but really, really tired. He steps aside, lets her unlock her bedroom door, and waits.

She turns when she’s inside her room. Frowns at him. “Aaron,” she says, “I know you deserve to kick seven kinds of shit out of me for what I’ve done, but I’m exhausted, so could it wait until morning?”

“I’m not going to do that,” he says, and his voice comes out like claws on cardboard. He’s barely used it today but his throat’s wrecked all the same.

Shit. He’s going to have to start learning to talk the way she does. Something about chest resonance? Sounds hard.

“Um,” Steph says, “okay?”

“Can I come in?” he says, a little more clearly. “I’m not going to yell or anything.”

She nods, confused but too tired to make an issue out of it, and he steps inside, waits for the door to close behind him.

“I asked Maria to buzz me when you got back down,” he explains, sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. Needed a piss.” She starts undressing with her back to him, pulling off the skirt and top but leaving on the leggings and the bra. She drops a loose t-shirt over her head before she turns around again.

“Brought you your phone,” he says, holding it out.

“Um. Thanks.” She takes it, lays it on the table and sits down on the bed, on the far end from him. “Look, I’m sorry about—”

“Don’t, Steph,” he says. “Maria told me everything. I’m still a little mad? But I get it. Rock and a hard place. I get it.”

“I’m still sorry.”

“I know. You told me willingly, though.” And that’s important. That’s something he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about. Someone else would have just kept lying. It would have been the easiest thing in the world.

But she didn’t. She couldn’t. Because she loves him.

Maria told him that. He knew it anyway, even if he didn’t really believe it. But she told him, and that’s important, too.

Steph breathes out, almost wheezes at the end, like she’s trying to clear something nasty out of her lungs. Before she

can get her breath back, though, before she can apologise again or say something else unnecessary or ridiculous or self-flagellating, he moves up on the mattress towards her.

To her frown, he says, “There’s some stuff I want to talk to you about. And you don’t have to talk back. You just have to listen.” She nods, perplexed but compliant, and makes herself more comfortable in the bed, wordlessly handing him a couple of cushions for his back and arranging some for herself. He holds up the edge of the duvet, waits for her nod, and drags it over both of them, enclosing them in a single shared space.

She closes her eyes for a moment. “You can tell me anything,” she says.

“Not up until now, I couldn’t,” he says. He’s been thinking about how he wants to say this, how he wants to start, and at the last moment he abandons his plan and just fucking goes for it. “George Rollins. Georgina. She was the first. She—”

“I know about what you did, Aaron,” Steph says, leaning forward, touching the back of his hand. He turns his hand over, takes hers, and she’s surprised — she’s still expecting him to yell at her, probably — so he seizes his momentary advantage to interlace their fingers.

“You *don’t*,” he says. “You’ve seen... names and dates and summaries on a screen. You don’t *know*. And I can’t compartmentalise all this shit, you know? I can’t put all the things I’ve done in a box and call them separate from the rest of me because they *are* the rest of me. And what I said and did down here, to Maria, to myself, to *you*, it’s just another part of all of it, and I have to get it *out*, Steph. I have to get it out.”

“Okay.”

“It’s just... this is important.”

“I’m listening,” Steph says, smiling.

“So,” he continues, “it was primary school. George, she was in the year above. She and her friends called me something, I don’t know what, probably a gaylord, that’s what a lot of the other kids called me back then, you know, like,

‘Hey, gaylord, show us your dick,’ that kind of shit, and I hated it, Steph, I really fucking hated it, and one day I waited behind the shed, out by the car park...”

It’s not a long story, but it’s the first of many. Too many for Steph, who listens as attentively as she can for as long as she can before she slumps over, asleep in what looks like a position guaranteed to wake her with muscle cramps after a few hours. So he moves her, carefully and slowly, keeping her head on a cushion and lowering it until she’s in his lap, her legs instinctively curling up under the covers. He billows the duvet out to catch her splayed arms, shuffles a little so her head is comfortable, and reaches down to pick up her corded headphones.

He sends Maria a message, asks for one more favour: that she put something on Steph’s computer for him to watch, because he doesn’t dare interrupt her sleep. A minute or so later he gets a winking emoji in reply, and Steph’s computer wakes up and starts playing, of all things, *The Little Mermaid*.

He wonders if there’s a message in that.

Probably not.

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ELEVEN

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

1985 MARCH 20 — WEDNESDAY

He hadn't wanted to come to the UK. Did anyone? Cold and windy and wet and miserable, and you can't get a good cup of coffee, and the boys are rowdy and the girls are worse. Perhaps it's just his upbringing, but he's always preferred the pace of life, and the taste of it, in Paris. But he's old enough now at nineteen to start learning the way his parents do business, and the townhouse is lonely without his parents, so grudgingly he agreed to cross the channel with them.

Don't be a snob, his mother insisted, when he gagged on borderline inedible British hotel food.

It's just your imagination, his father told him, when the drunken lads jeered at him in the street and their girlfriends laughed along.

Fucking England.

He closes his eyes again, tries to forget about the concrete ceiling and the iron bars and the single recessed light bulb that burns a harsh yellow-white, too bright and with an unpleasant and incessant buzz, and remembers his mother and father. They come to him as he saw them last, ugly red dots dead-centre forehead, tongues hanging stupid.

He was *useless* when they killed them. He practically hung there in the arms of his captors, paralysed by fear, willing his feet to run or his hands to strike and finding nothing inside him but white-hot static.

The cold efficiency of it all! The emotionless practicality! Against street thugs or opportunist thieves he and his father might have had a chance, but the first act of the ones who attacked them had been to place a gun to his head, and against that all three of them were powerless.

His mother had begged. His father had attempted to bargain. Instead they were made to walk through darker and darker streets to a dilapidated house in the middle of nowhere and stand facing the end, and he could do nothing. Not until the guns fired and he finally broke his captors' grip and ran to them.

Couldn't even catch them as they fell.

He rolls over on the hard cot, screws up his face, fights the tears. His father always told him to hide his weakness, but that's a consideration long in the past. He's just so fucking tired of the headaches.

He finds a better memory. Four nights ago. Dinner at the hotel. More slop, and his mother scolded him for the judgement. Her half-smile, the eye contact she shared with his father, indulgent and fond. His father's chuckle, and the way he leaned across the table to make his promise. They'd eat at his favourite restaurant when they got home. Just one more thing to do, while we're here.

“Vincent!”

Fuck. Her again. Her voice, guttural and deep, saturated with the unthinking arrogance of the English upper classes and their retinue. He'd loathe it even absent context. She says his name again, rapping metal-on-metal on the bars of the cell with the end of the cane she carries as an affectation, and she says it with the same satisfaction as she did when she greeted him two nights ago, when she strode into that dingy little

room, swinging her cane like a ringmaster's baton and regarding the death of his family as one might look upon the contents of a grisly but necessary mousetrap.

His parents' business partner in this country; their murderer. Dorothy Marsden.

"Vincent Barbier, you will *look* at me when I speak to you, or it will *not* end well for you!"

Two fingers to her.

She claps her hands twice, sharp in the still underground air like fucking gunshots. Footsteps on concrete as underlings step forward and the door to the cell slams open. Rough hands grab at his limbs, pull him out of his cot, press him against the wall, and there she is: Dorothy, who insisted with ridiculous pomp that he call her Grandmother, who has taken his parents from him and thrown him in a cell to starve, who approaches him pinned like an insect and presses the end of her cane to the wall between his legs, locking eyes with him and smirking as she drags it up, scraping it on the concrete and forcing him to the tips of his toes as the cold metal begins to press painfully up against his genitals.

"Vincent, Vincent, Vincent," she says. "What are we to do with you?"

Does it matter? Two days without food and one without water have made clear what she wants from him, so what even can she do, in this space between life and death, that is worse than what awaits him?

He spits dry in her face. Nothing but the barest flecks reach her, but on her nod they beat him to the floor, anyway.

2019 DECEMBER 12 — THURSDAY

The girls all clear out at Stephanie's instruction, leaving the formerly bustling kitchen suddenly open and intimidating, the massive table and the camera in the cornice and the carefully innocent-looking doors out to the entryway all reminders that

Shahida's locked into a place she doesn't belong, where the motives of her hosts are something she has to take on trust, where someone's always watching. Not even Melissa's presence is enough to dispel her unease, and she nervously reintroduces herself while trying not to look at the massive biometric bolts on the only exit.

She left voicemail for Rachel, instructing her to disregard both email and previous message. That might have been premature.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Melissa says, settling in the chair she's pulled out next to Shahida, crossing her legs under her, just the way she used to. "It's like a normal kitchen, and then you start noticing things."

She saw her looking at the locks, then. "It's not so bad," Shahida says, wanting to disabuse Melissa of the notion that Shahida is in any way unnerved; this is *her* home, this is somewhere she feels *safe*, and the least Shahida can do, after everything, is not taint it. "The AGA sort of reminds me of home."

Melissa rolls her eyes. "It gets *so* hot in here when people are cooking. It's a nightmare."

"I'm sure it's fine," Shahida says quickly, and Melissa snort-laughs, covers her mouth and looks wide-eyed at her. Shahida sighs. "Shit. Sorry. I'm trying too hard to make this —" she looks around, her gaze encompassing reunion and torture house both, "—normal."

"Shy," Melissa says, and Shahida warms at the nickname, the one she likes even more than the others Melissa has for her, "this place is unbelievably weird. You're allowed to be freaked out."

"They were telling the truth, then?" It's not that Shahida doesn't believe Paige, Tabby and the others, not after everything. But doubt is proportional, and the truth is... Well, it's ridiculous.

“Did they tell you this place is a good girl factory?”
Melissa asks from behind a wry grin, and Shahida nods.
“Then, yes, they told you the truth. The details are... messy.”

“They didn’t say much about the process. Mostly focused on results.”

Melissa nods. “Wise.” And then animation takes her and she leans back, swivelling on her chair to face Shahida properly. “Jesus, Shy, you look amazing!”

There’s Mark there, in all the details of her: in her nose, delicate and with the slight kink removed; in her eyes, just as intensely blue as ever but topped now with shaped eyebrows and a brow that seems subtly different; in her smile, broad and genuine and so fucking real it chases away the dregs of Shahida’s nervousness. Because it’s all true, and here’s the proof, beautiful as he always was but alive in ways he never was, and she doesn’t *care* what it took to make it happen because it fucking *happened*.

She needs to say something and she does, mumbling thanks or something superficially like them but she’s distracted now by Melissa’s voice, which is light and melodic and again so much like the best of Mark, the way Mark was when she or Rach or Amy dragged him briefly out of his shell and into the light with the rest of them, and she’s torn between exulting in just getting to hear it and her sudden and intense curiosity as to how she did it, how she gets her voice to do that; did she have surgery (Shahida’s read it’s not ideal), or did she train it? And if she trained it, which method did she use? When first exploring her theory Shahida watched a video of a trans woman demonstrating something called ‘head voice’, and meant to watch more, to try to gain a more intimate understanding of the mechanisms by which Mark had become the woman she desperately hoped he’d become, but fell into a tangent of wondering if she, a cis woman, spoke in head voice automatically, or if it was solely a way to hack vocal cords that had been subjected to an unwanted testosterone puberty.

And when she moves her hands and her fingers, when she reaches out, there again is the echo of Mark, but there's a confidence there, a solidity, where Mark had always seemed a little unreal, like if she stopped looking at him, stopped keeping him in her thoughts, he would fade away—

“Shy?” Melissa says, and Shahida refocuses. Melissa's close, so damn close, and leaning closer, reaching for her, creating in Shahida a giddiness that displaces all else. “Shy, what's up?”

Shahida grabs Melissa's hand, just to feel the fingers, just to feel the anchor of the real fucking person in front of her, and forces herself to close her eyes, to breathe deeply, to still herself, and the intoxicating energy that's been threatening to overwhelm her finds its balance, finds stability through her contact with her friend. Opening her eyes, she still feels at the crest of a wave that might crash at any moment, but she's riding it now.

Melissa's seen this in her before, once or twice, and she's been waiting quietly. To hold her hand as she processes is enough.

“I'm okay,” Shahida says. “Too many inputs,” she adds, and Melissa nods.

“Do you need time?”

“No. I'm fine. It's not even— I'm just— Fuck.” She holds up a finger, asks for a moment. Melissa nods again. “I'm looking at you, taking you in,” Shahida says, unable to stop herself from smiling at how lewd that sounds. “And it's like I'm seeing all seven years at once. I want to know *everything*, and even the *idea* of how much everything there is... It's overwhelming.”

Melissa pats her hand. A disappointingly platonic gesture. “There's no hurry,” she says. “Before I, um, rushed down here, I told my boss I had an emergency to deal with. He's given me until the start of the next semester off.” She frowns. “Used up all my holiday days, though. And I should email him,

actually.” She shakes her head. “Later. What I mean is, I don’t need to leave any time soon. I know you probably have a thousand questions; we have time for all of them.”

More like a million questions. Shahida feels childlike; she’d expected to be the together one in this situation, even if she can’t put her finger on exactly why. But then, Melissa’s been living this life for seven years, which is almost as long as Shahida’s been running from hers.

She looks around the kitchen. It’s still just as empty, with only the two of them in it, but it seems friendlier now. Context is everything.

“It was good to see Steph,” she says. “I was worried about her.” Shahida congratulates herself on hitting the correct pronoun and then struggles not to scold herself for what Melissa might infer from her statement: that Steph might have been in trouble because *she* left.

She doesn’t seem to mind, though. “It was really good to see her again,” she says, withdrawing her hand so she can prop her chin on it. “She’s doing so well here. Which is *incredibly* weird, but it kind of makes sense. She always felt like she needed the right environment, and she’d thrive. She’s... she’s making jokes about this place, and she has *friends*, and— and I feel so stupid.”

Melissa’s blinking fast, like she’s trying to hold back sudden tears, so Shahida breaks the boundary between them again, puts a hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay, Melissa?” she asks, and even through her concern she thrills at the name. *Em* is good, and it’s wonderful to be able to use it again and revel in the restored connection to their shared adolescence, but Melissa’s the name she chose for herself, and it fits so marvellously. A Melissa *would* have those long, graceful arms; a Melissa *would* have those delicate eyebrows, those full lips, that soft peach skin. A Melissa *would* be so beautiful it almost hurts to look at her.

“Yeah,” Melissa says, “I’m okay. I made a colossal idiot out of myself today, but I’m okay.” She smiles at Shahida, and

she's no longer close to tears, instead radiating serenity. "And I make an idiot of myself a lot. The saving grace is that this place is *built* on acts of colossal idiocy. It just sort of absorbs them. I point a taser at this lovely girl, Christine, and she tells me it's fine, she's deactivated it, she's had tasers pointed at her by people who are *far* more intimidating than I am, and, oh, by the way, she's controlling the security for the entire building from her *phone*. So that's *me* dealt with. And then I misgender Steph because I'm congenitally incapable of reading a room, and she just *forgives* me. I come charging in here—" she mimes, on the table, a little version of herself running across the wood, "—all bad plans and faulty weapons, and I just bounce harmlessly off a bunch of airbags." Her mimed self flies backwards and lands on its butt. Shahida giggles.

"You should know," Shahida says, "three different women made it very clear to me that they understand what happened completely. They know you and Stephanie are close, and that Christine girl — she's lovely, I agree, although mostly I spoke with her girlfriend, Paige — complained *vociferously* about how some 'bored, second-rate sponsor' updated the records without checking the notes first. She said she put flags all over your file specifically relating to Stephanie, and they just got ignored. She also said something about wanting to quit and go live in a nice, normal house with only the people who were around this table at the time, because everyone else in the building is—" Shahida brings up her quoting fingers for the second time, "—'criminally incompetent'."

Melissa snorts. "That sounds about right. They have to run this place entirely with graduates — because who else could you bring in? — and it means everyone has to be a Jill of all trades and a, uh, mistress of none. God. That's probably a mug, actually. Anyway, if this place seems chaotic, that's why."

"Christine said something similar, actually."

"Oh?"

Shahida laughs, remembering the outraged look on the girl's face. "One of the older women told her to calm down, said it can't be *that* bad, and *she* said—" she takes a moment to remember Christine's exact words, "—"Dorley's a shambles and opsec is shit and pretty soon I'm going to have to find a way to be in five places at once or we'll be on the cover of *News From The Anthill* by the end of next year."

Melissa nods, and pushes up out of her chair. She stands for a moment, pensive and hesitant, and Shahida almost asks what's up before Melissa says, "Um, Shy? Can I, um, have a hug, please?"

"Of course!" Shahida says, too loud. She stands and collects Melissa into her arms, privately amused that, after all this time, she's still taller than her. And then Melissa's almost squeezing the breath out of her so Shahida returns the passionate contact and for a little while, they say nothing.

"Steph didn't want me to know," Melissa whispers, loosening her grip but not breaking the embrace. "And I get it. I know why. I don't blame her. It's hard to be seen while you're all in between, and I get that. I do. When all you want, all you need, is for people to look at you and see a girl, but you're still working on it yourself... It's really hard. But it's everyone else. They agreed I *shouldn't* know, because I wouldn't trust them with her, because even if I knew she chose to be here I'd come running anyway and fuck everything up. And I don't know if I'm more upset that they think that of me, or that they're bloody *right*."

"Em..."

"They made the right decision. I think. Fuck, I don't know."

"What's done is done," Shahida says, wincing at the cliché, "and you're here now, and so am I, and so is Stephanie... It could have gone a *lot* worse."

"Yeah," Melissa says, nodding into Shahida's shoulder, "yeah. And I guess it's not the only reason they didn't tell me."

I asked Abby for some space a while before Steph even showed up. She was just doing her best to respect that.”

“I talked to her, too,” Shahida says.

“Abby?” Melissa, smiling, steps out of the hug and leans casually on the edge of the kitchen table. “What did she say?”

Shahida, hiding her disappointment, mirrors Melissa, and taps her fingertips on the wood. What *should* she say about Abigail? Should she tell her that Abigail *and* Christine tried to throw her off the trail, but messed up? Should she tell her that Abigail’s love for her is so written all over her face that it broke Shahida’s heart a little? Because, goodness, Abby’d been so agitated during their conversation that after a while Christine had to give her a shoulder massage. She’d terminated their conversation with a simple, “Please take care of her,” before leaving the room at speed, with one of the other girls trailing her, which Shahida thought a more eloquent summation of her designs on Melissa’s heart than anything she could have said.

A rival. And one who knows Melissa better than anyone, even Shahida, ever knew Mark.

“She said you’re amazing,” Shahida says.

“So’s she.” Melissa looks up at the ceiling. “She saved my life. Much the same way you did, actually, at the bridge. She found me right on the edge, and she rescued me.”

Shahida tries hard not to be bitter. “Except *she* had the resources of a mysterious organisation with methods laser-targeted to meet your needs, and *I* had... a picnic blanket.”

Melissa reaches for her, takes the hand that’s tapping idly on the table, meshes their fingers together. “To be fair, it was a *very* funny picnic blanket.”

The contact turns Shahida’s thoughts incoherent. “I still don’t get that,” she mutters. “It was just a blanket.”

“I know,” Melissa says, and the warmth, the fondness in her voice is calming. And then a yawn catches her, and she

pulls her hand away to stretch, leaning even farther back. It's another human moment, a grounded and boring and simple thing, and it reinforces once again Shahida's relief: she's *here*, she's *alive*, and everything else is unimportant. Even if they can never have the relationship Shahida once dreamed of, Melissa is *whole*.

Smiling at the apex of her stretch and enjoying the release of tension in her limbs, Melissa looks over again, illuminated perfectly by the overhead lights. She looks wonderful. And tired. *So damn tired*. All Shahida's protective instincts fire up, replacing Melissa for just a moment with the image of Mark, from the last time she ever saw him: thinning, exhausted, wounded.

Unfair to think of her that way. Mark was always the shell around Melissa, and now *she's* here, and while Shahida never knew how to help Mark, it's pretty clear what the girl in front of her needs.

"We've both had a hell of a day," Shahida says, when Melissa's done stretching, "and Stephanie gave you her room. Why don't we go somewhere with more comfortable chairs? And a little more privacy?"

"That sounds great," Melissa says, sighing, "but I've got to go move my car to the long-term car park, I've got to bring in my things, I've got to email my boss..."

"Actually, Tabitha sent one of the other girls to move your car and bring in your luggage. The athletic-looking one with the really long black hair?" Shahida holds a level hand over her head, to also indicate *tall*.

"Monica," Melissa says, nodding and prodding at the shoulder bag she dumped on the table. "How did she get in? I've got the key card."

"How do these people kidnap eight boys a year without anyone noticing?"

"True." Melissa looks away. "They really did give you the rundown, didn't they? You know all of it. You *and* Steph.

That's so *strange*..." She flexes her fingers for a moment, releasing tension. "I'm a little surprised at how much they told you, actually. Institutionally, we're given to thinking of outsiders with information as pretty dangerous to us."

Shahida shrugs, trying to say with her body what she can't bring herself to say aloud because she still doesn't quite believe it of herself: that she hasn't even considered trying to take this place down, because *all* she cares about is that Melissa's alive, and if Dorley is important to her continued safety then everything else, moral quandaries included, can go hang. "I heard from *several* victims who assured me that they're happier now, better off, better people, and so on, and I also met some of their *girlfriends*, and then one of those girlfriends, an extremely determined young thing who swears she only found out about this place a fortnight ago, stridently defended the very *concept* of therapeutic kidnapping. I had no chance." She nods at the notebook sticking out of her bag. "I did make an org chart, though, and graphed the process out a bit."

"Of course you did," Melissa says, sounding stunned.

"So," Shahida says, "why don't you email your boss and I'll make us some tea or some hot chocolate or something, and then we can go upstairs? Monica dropped your luggage off in the dining hall; we can pick it up on the way."

Melissa nods, still frowning a little, but after a moment her expression clears, she smiles at Shahida, and extracts a phone from her bag. She switches it on and waits through the bootup while Shahida, taking the absence of an expressed preference as a vote for hot chocolate, finds oat milk and a clean saucepan.

"Steph said she's got an ensuite in her room," Melissa says, while she swipes around on her phone. "I'd *kill* for a shower. And it might wake me up a little."

"Or make you even sleepier," Shahida points out. "That's how it usually works for me."

“I remember.” Melissa might be trying to hide her smile or she might just be typing her email but either way she looks sweet, tapping away at the screen. “Oh,” she adds, “they do actually have mugs here that aren’t a complete embarrassment.” She puts down her phone, looks around the kitchen. “I’m, um, not sure where, though. I think they redecorated? Everything looks kinda different.”

“They’re in the cabinet by the fridge,” Shahida says, quickly shooting a grin at Melissa before returning her attention to the milk. You mustn’t allow oat milk to boil or it becomes unpleasant, and on an unfamiliar stove it must be watched carefully. When Melissa laughs again, though, it’s very difficult not to throw the bloody milk in the sink and start again after, just so she can spend a couple of minutes drinking in the elixir of Melissa’s pleasure. She’s missed this *so much*.

“Okay, it was odd that Steph knows stuff about this place I don’t, but *you*...”

Shahida shrugs. “I listen.”

It doesn’t take long for the milk to heat up, nor for Melissa to finish her email to her satisfaction, and soon enough Shahida’s arranging mugs on a tray and beckoning for Melissa to follow, only realising *after* she steps into the dining hall that she has no idea where to go from there. But she has time to get her bearings while Melissa finds her luggage and checks everything she needs is where it should be, so Shahida keeps careful hold of her tray, waits for her to be done, and stares at the place.

It’s so damn *big*...

Dorley Hall looks large from the outside, sure, but aside from its slightly incongruous architecture it could be any institutional building. Yesterday, before she put up her missing poster on the corkboard — damn; she’ll have to run around taking those down, unless some poor underling from here has already done so — she’d assumed it was another grand old university building, probably an administrative one, and populated it in her imagination with rows of orderly offices,

cavernous conference rooms and cute little kitchenettes, in which harassed staff would gather mid-afternoon to complain about recalcitrant students or some new piece of unworkable guidance come down from above.

It was only after she got a look into the kitchen and met Victoria and Lorna that she'd realised it was a dorm. It's incongruously large and opulent-feeling for student accommodation, and that alone would have been enough for her to search it out online had Abigail and Christine, also associated with the Hall, not come to talk to her. It sat like a celestial object in the centre of her theories, dragging them all into its orbit; how could she *not* lose a few hours to investigating it?

It turns out that Dorley Hall isn't and never has been owned or administrated by the university. Instead it's passed through multiple private hands, all of them obfuscated behind generic organisations and guarded by financial firewalls, the dirty tricks of old money with something to hide; distressingly common in the UK. The most she could find out was that it last changed ownership in 2004, and since then has been the property of a trust set up to provide accommodation and financial assistance to women and nonbinary people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

She smirks. What a cover! Still, *someone's* paying for all this, and at least now she understands why something so apparently straightforward is veiled in such secrecy, even if she still doesn't have a clue as to the motives behind the money. There are cheaper, simpler and less risky methods of reform, surely?

Except Victoria, Lorna, Paige and Tabitha all argued quite persuasively that, in their collective opinion and regarding the inhabitants and graduates of the Hall, there is not.

Melissa taps her on the shoulder, nods to confirm she has everything she needs, and leads her quietly across the dining hall, smiling at the few remaining women who, blissfully, keep their interactions to waves and returned smiles. Probably

because they're mostly older ones who look like they have actual work to do, with laptops and notebooks spread out on tables. Tabitha, huddled with Monica on a small couch by the unlit fireplace, nods at them as they pass.

Dorley Hall's got a total of three staircases up from the ground floor — and one down — and Melissa's leading her towards the one at the other end of the dining hall that goes right up through the building's centre and leads, according to Paige, who gave her a very quick rundown of the layout, directly to the first and second floors, the locked-down areas for the girls who are still in the programme and not yet technically granted their freedom (Tabitha had laughed at that; Paige had scowled at her for it). There's another at the back of the building, locked to everyone but the senior sponsors, which will take you up to the third floor if you have access, and finally there's the main staircase at the front of the building, publicly accessible, backed up by a small elevator and leading to all five above-ground floors. Third years like Paige and Christine are *supposed* to use the central stairs unless they're actually leaving the building, but rarely do; the main staircase is simply closer to all their rooms. No-one, Paige said, wants to walk all the way down the corridor and around the corner, past a load of unused rooms, and then walk all the way back through the building when they get to the ground floor.

What surprised Shahida was what an ordinary, everyday concern that was. Here's Paige — tall, beautiful; a transformed man, supposedly — and she lives in the house of the people who forced change upon her, who compel her behaviour still... and she complains about the layout of the staircases, about having to walk past all the rooms that lie empty because of the need to house each year separately from each other.

She found herself liking Paige a lot. The others, too, but Paige especially, with her earnest nature and the emotions she wears clear upon her face. Shahida felt she ought to fight it, to stand up for reason and morality and all that other stuff, but almost immediately found the impulse absurd, given

everything she'd seen. And that's the point of it all, they told her; to build responsible, thoughtful, happy people out of irresponsible, careless, miserable young men. The girl thing is almost a side-effect.

Almost.

But it *does* seem to work.

Paige: helpful, sincere; dating Christine and incapable of hiding how much she revels in that fact. When her girl had leaned over her, kissed her, demonstrated her love, Paige had beamed like she'd won the lottery and blushed right through her foundation. It was adorable.

And then there's Vicky: shy but friendly, and once she realised Shahida wasn't judging her for her past almost immediately started to discuss things with an enthusiasm Shahida wanted to bottle. And she's dating Lorna, a girl from outside the Hall, to whom she clings with a fierceness that makes Shahida's heart ache.

And Tabitha: level-headed and pleasingly straight-talking, willing to hand Shahida most of the information she asked for; a little difficult to concentrate around, because her smile is—

“First floor,” Melissa says, to break Shahida's concentration and prevent her from automatically continuing on up; she would have done it, too, just kept climbing until her head bumped into a wall or ceiling. Too much new information to absorb.

“Thanks,” Shahida says, smiling and following Melissa into a wide corridor dotted with labelled rooms. She can hear voices muffled almost into silence from behind one of the closer ones, labelled *Faye* and decorated freehand with sharpied stars and hearts.

The door opens as they approach, to reveal a girl, one of the second years, stepping half out into the corridor and leaning back on the jamb. Behind her, dotted around the room and making it look quite crowded, are various other girls; and, yes, they are all unambiguously *girls*, in that they feel very

adolescent to Shahida, despite all having to be, per Tabitha and Paige, at least nineteen but likely twenty or older.

“Hi,” Melissa says, stopping with her luggage and looking only a little like she’s hiding behind it. “Faye, right? I’m sorry about earlier. I was, um...”

“You were worried,” Faye says, smiling, “about Steph. It *totally* makes sense.” Her voice is husky; Shahida can’t help but compare it to Melissa’s and wonder how long the girl’s been training it (if that is, in fact, what they do here; Shahida *needs* to get into the mechanics of everything, and as soon as she finds someone willing to give her a whole afternoon of their time, she will). The girl glances behind her. “We all have *someone* we’d break into an evil feminising torture facility to save.”

(The girls break out into giggles. “Oh my God, *so* evil,” one of them says.

Another holds up two hands in surrender and squeals, “Rescue me, Faye! I’m your damsel in distress!”

A third leans back on the bed and pretends to struggle against an invisible enemy. “Help,” she moans, “I’m... being... feminised... right now!”

“Shut up,” another says, leaning forward to swat her on the knee. “You picked those stupid socks out yourself.”)

“Of course,” Faye continues, meeting first Melissa and then Shahida’s eyes and shrugging, “the girls I’d *want* to rescue are already all here, and they’re being—” she raises her voice, in volume and pitch, “—super annoying! So *maybe* I’d just leave them here.”

(“Guys, stop it!” the girl on the bed stage-whispers. “We’re embarrassing Faye in front of the crazy lady!”

“Melissa’s not crazy, Mia,” the first girl says. “She’s *passionate*.”

“Well, *I* think it’s romantic,” says the damsel in distress, hugging a cushion.

“She’s not in *love* with Steph, Aisha. They’re, like, sisters, or something.”

“I don’t mean romantic like that, I mean romantic like, you know, throwing everything away on a quest to save someone. It’s epic. Like an old movie.”

“Okay. That’s it. Get the pillows.”)

“Sorry,” Faye says, “I’m needed. Pillow fights get messy without even teams. I hope you get a good night’s sleep, Melissa. We’ve apparently—” she air-quotes, “—‘defeated the soundproofing’, so just ping me on Consensus if we’re keeping you up. I don’t have a surname yet, but I’m the only Faye in the directory.”

“Have a good pillow fight,” Melissa says to the closing door.

“She doesn’t have a surname yet?” Shahida says.

“They— *We* have to pick a new one. You can’t keep your old one, obviously — hence *Haverford* — and there’s a big book of safe names, somewhere. Ah; here we are.”

The door just before the corner, labelled *Stephanie*, opens to Melissa’s thumbprint and reveals a room that’s bigger than Faye’s but not enormous, with a second door inside that Shahida assumes leads to the ensuite. She deposits her tray of hot chocolates on the dresser so she can claim a bean bag chair and give Melissa, who looks more tired by the minute, the bed. Melissa, having stood back to let Shahida through, toes the door closed, dumps her luggage and bag by the wardrobe, kicks off her shoes, and drops face first onto the mattress. A muffled giggle follows, which confuses Shahida until Melissa rolls over and sheepishly rubs one of her breasts, through her clothing.

“I never got out of the habit of just flopping into bed,” she says, “and I still get sore around here sometimes, so...”

Shahida, eyes wide, nods. Yeah. She cured herself of the same habit during puberty, for the same reason, but it took a while. She laughs suddenly, the realisation hitting her for the

dozenth time and with absolute clarity that *Melissa* is *alive*, and she's the person she used to see sometimes when Mark could fully let go, and with a lightness in her chest she retrieves the hot chocolates and passes one of the mugs over.

“ROGB: Rapid Onset Girl Basement,” Melissa reads off the side of hers. “I thought you said you knew where the *normal* mugs were, Shy.”

Shahida snorts. “Yeah, but they're no *fun*.” She rotates hers so Melissa can see the slogan: *Boys Will Be Boys (Without Prompt Intervention)*, superimposed over a silhouette of a man, circled and crossed out in red.

“Oh my God,” Melissa says. “I should have known you'd get into the mugs.” She shuffles up on the bed, displacing pillows and plush toys, and pats the mattress next to her, nodding when Shahida frowns questioningly. “It's weird with you all the way over there.”

That's good, right? The whole time Shahida's been worrying that Melissa won't want her close for some reason, that Abigail provides for all her emotional needs, that the hug and the other brief contacts they shared were one-time deals... so this is good. She scrambles to her feet, carefully holding the mug out in front of her, with another hand underneath when it threatens to spill, and climbs onto the bed, reaching forward to put her drink on the table so she can flop forward onto the pillows, turn over, and shimmy up the headboard. She feels playful; she feels seventeen again.

It helps that Melissa's been smiling at her. “What?” Shahida asks, when she's in position.

Melissa runs a hand through her hair, and she looks *so* much like she did that night at Amy's. Except her hair's loose and longer than it ever was, her cheeks are more full, she's had some work done on her face, she looks smoother and softer and she has *breasts*... Fine. She looks different. But she *feels* like the same person to Shahida, the person she understands at last is and always was a girl, who related to her like a girl, who might just have loved her like a girl.

Who might still, with time.

“It’s just... It’s nice to see you,” Melissa says, and then shakes her head and laughs at herself. “Understatement. It’s *amazing* to see you. And you’re just like I remember, Shy. You move like you always did. You talk the same. It’s like nothing’s changed.”

Shahida smiles and pokes at her belly. “*Some* things have changed.” She’s bigger than she used to be, but she likes the extra weight.

Melissa giggles and pokes herself in the chest. “Two can play at that game,” she says.

Can I join in? she wants to say, and she swallows it. She might feel seventeen again, but she’s *not*, and twenty-five-year-old Shahida is better at controlling her impulses. Mark always responded oddly to her playful flirting, and now that she knows why, she’s angry at her past self for ignoring the signs and indulging herself anyway. No, she’s going to be careful, the way she always wanted to be, and being careful is emphatically *not* flirting on their first evening together. They haven’t even talked about sexuality yet! Melissa probably thinks of her as the same straight girl she always claimed to be, and if she flirts with her...

If Shahida flirts with her, Melissa will think she still sees her as a boy. And that could *hurt*.

She sips at her hot chocolate instead, and Melissa does likewise. It’s warm in Stephanie’s room, and pleasingly decorated, and with the white noise from the rain battering at the window it’s among the most comforting places Shahida’s ever been. She smiles at Melissa again, wriggles her shoulders against the headboard, and grins when Melissa copies her.

It’s nice.

It’s so bloody nice.

“You don’t have to say or do anything, you know,” she says, into the companionable silence. “The girls have given me

enough to think about. You don't have to talk about *any* of it if you don't want to. You can just... hang out."

Melissa nods slowly. Drinks some more hot chocolate.
"What do you think of the girls?"

Shahida breathes out carefully, watches the ripples in her mug. "When Paige told me about who she is — or, actually, who she used to be — I expected that to affect how I looked at her. But, you know, it just *didn't*. I like her. I like Tabitha; I like Victoria. I like Lorna, although she's not *from* here."

"She's not? Which one is she?"

"She's dating Victoria."

"And Victoria is...?"

Shahida giggles. "Victoria's Vicky; I just think she *looks* like a Victoria. Elegant, you know? She's the third year who isn't a third year. She finished the programme in two years, moved out, and started dating Lorna. And a couple of weeks ago — less a few days, I think — they had this whole disaster I don't know much about, which ended up bringing Lorna into the fold. She's quite the ambassador on Vicky's behalf. And between them they seem to know *everyone*."

Melissa nods, and that doesn't seem unusual until she doesn't say anything, just keeps rocking her head. She sets down her mug on the table beside her and pulls her knees up so she can hug them.

"Em?" Shahida says. "Em, what is it?"

It comes out in whispers. "That's all stuff I could have done. If I hadn't been so stubborn. If I hadn't been so stupid." She relaxes a little, lets her legs sag, leans against the headboard and looks sideways at Shahida. "It wasn't just you I ran from. I ran from everything. From my own shit. From Mum. From Dad and Russ and my whole life. And then, here, I had as little to do with everyone as I could, and I signed myself up to be a stupid fucking cis girl and I ran from here, too. I keep—" she slaps her knee in time with the words, "— making things hard for myself. Because I don't stick around to

make things work. I just... run. And before I know it I'm faking being cis around a boss who's a trans man and I'm trying to date but I can't because I'm scared of being *seen* and *understood* and— and fucking *real*. Shy, I am *so* stupid and so prone to overreacting I saw Steph's name on a screen and drove all the way down here to get her out without stopping to think for even a *second*, and the *only* way that deviates from my usual shit is that I was running *to* and not *from* for once."

"Hey," Shahida says, when the words dry up and Melissa's left staring at nothing, looking past her into places Shahida doesn't want to visit, "you're being way too hard on yourself, Melissa. And even if all that's true, you can just stop running. You're home, or whatever this place is, and it's not all that scary here, really—"

"Shy—"

"It's not! Tabitha locked me in and for a split second I was worried and then she made me tea and fed me croissants and was pretty apologetic about the whole thing; and *Steph's* here, Em. Steph's here, and I'm here, and— and Abby's here, and you don't *need* to run. You don't need to pretend to be a stupid cis girl—"

"—sorry—"

"—and you don't need to be on your guard. You can just... be."

There's another gasp from next to her and Melissa's gaze refocuses on her, and before Shahida knows it Melissa's reaching for her and wrapping her so tightly in a hug it takes her a second to rearrange her limbs so she won't pinch a nerve, because the last thing she's going to do is let go of this beautiful, sweet, damaged girl ever, ever again.

1986 FEBRUARY 14 — FRIDAY

They brought in the new mirror last week. Toughened glass or something, so he can't ever do again what he threatened to do with the old one. They don't know it was only a bluff, the last

thing he had left to damage them with after his failed attempt to get at Karen's carotid artery with a shard of broken glass. Four of them to tackle him; overkill, obviously, but clearly it's important to them that he not turn any weapons he might find on himself, and that's useful to know.

Truth be told, he only shattered the old mirror because of what he saw in it. Everything else had just been opportunistic. Satisfying to cut the bitch Karen, though, in the same way she delights in cutting him. She loves to threaten his veins, loves to dig into his wrists, loves to restrain him and kiss him and touch him in the places they've mutilated him; loves to hold his life in her hands.

He got her in the shoulder. He hopes it scars.

And now he has a mirror he can't break.

What he sees: a beautiful woman, with blonde hair almost to her shoulders, a choppy fringe cut to her eyebrows, an artfully sculpted face, and the remains of messy colour only partly wiped from her lips. She's slight-hipped and slim-shouldered, stands on crooked legs and shivering ankles, and wears a soft green nightgown draped over her small breasts. Some of the cuts on the back of her wrist have opened up again, staining the hem of her gown and smudging her palms red.

When he first saw her he despaired, for he understood then that there was no way back. She's everything they've taken from him.

The other girl consoled him. Offered him a rare moment of comfort in this nightmare. And then, like the others, she was taken away.

All the girls who were here when they brought him in, all the girls who were once like him, are gone.

Except he's not much like him any more, either.

She consoled him because once you're ready, once you're healed, once you're done, you don't have long. She looked at him with death already clouding her eyes and made him

promise to defy them to the end and he didn't even see them take her away. Her room was just empty, the door open and the few books and other scraps she'd accumulated cleared out.

She never even had a name.

But despair can't last down here. Dwelling on it will kill you as surely as the bitches upstairs eventually will take you away. He wished her a quick and painless end, and did his best to forget her.

That was two days ago.

“Vincey-boy!”

The shout's accompanied by a banging on his door, intended presumably to wake him up; pointless, since he barely sleeps and Karen knows that, but sometimes she gets it into herself to pretend to be civil, to knock before entering, to allow him to clothe himself, and today might be one of those days. It usually presages other forms of unpleasantness, but he'll take the little reprieves where and when he finds them.

He coughs before he answers, forces some bile into his throat. He's been experimenting with his voice, with projecting it the way his old singing teacher taught him, but he doesn't want them to know. The last girl gave him the idea. Defy them to the end, she said; well then. He knows there's one thing they *don't* want from him.

Idiots should have put microphones in the rooms.

“I'm awake,” he yells. Good. Just as deep as always.

Karen kicks the door open. It crashes into the concrete wall and rattles there, loud enough to wake the whole floor, if there were anyone left but him. Karen's in her tweed, a class affectation as fake as her accent, and he hides his irritation; dressing up usually means guests, and guests usually means he has to perform for them. Put on something titillating, serve drinks, answer any question put to him in his man's voice for their tittering amusement. Display the only parts of Vincent that are left, for their arousal. Sometimes they masturbate. Sometimes they involve him in their debasements.

“But you’re not dressed, are you?” Karen announces, glaring at him. “Come on. To the back with you.”

He complies, stands with his back to her at the far end of the room, hands flat against the wall, head down. Making himself safe so she can rummage through his clothing chest.

“Did you shave, boy?” she demands.

“Yes,” he says. She doesn’t mean his face. It doesn’t need it any more.

“Then dress yourself.”

She drops her choices for him on his bed board and leans against the door, clearly planning to watch him change out of his nightgown. She’s like the rest of them: obsessed with his body, with the alterations they’ve made to it, with the changes that continue to happen. She’s got a sheaf of photos, some of them candid from the cameras behind cages in the main room, some of them posed, and she likes to show them to him in order; a sadist’s flip book.

See your shame, she tells him. So he pretends to.

He hates what they’ve done to him, but simply having been made to look like a woman is nothing to be ashamed of. He’d ask his mother why English women are like this, if they hadn’t had her killed.

He dresses. She has at least selected for elegance today: a black skirt with a wide belt, cut to below the knee but tight enough to slightly restrict his movement, a white blouse with billowed shoulders, and white sandals with a low heel. She’s put out his makeup colours as well, and sneers at him as he paints his face. They think he should be ashamed of this, too.

When he’s done, he stands, examines himself from head to toe in the shatter-proof mirror. His hair falls easily and is controlled with a little finger combing, so he considers himself finished, and turns around to be evaluated.

“You’re like Lady Di fucked Stevie Nicks, Vincent,” Karen says. “We are *fucking* artists.”

He winces when she uses that name, and her smile deepens. She loves that. Loves to feel like it harms him whenever she uses it. Loves to imagine that the dichotomy between body and name causes him pain. But it means nothing any more, and describes someone long dead; she could name him anything and it would mean the same. But she likes to hurt him, and she thinks it a weapon, so when she calls him by that name he winces, and he controls her, just a little.

She beckons him to follow, and even though she's walking ahead of him, he can picture her glee at the sounds his heels make on the concrete. Every artefact of femininity she forces onto him gives her shivers of pleasure. Childish impulses in adult bodies, all of them. This prison is a playground for cruel and artless English girls who never tired of crushing bugs with rocks.

The underground area's laid out around an L-shaped central corridor, which tapers off past the bedrooms into an eventual exit to somewhere unknown, and which terminates just past the main room in a double-locked iron door blocking the stairs up into the main building. Some old hospital for the rich and secretive, Karen said on one of her more loquacious days. It hasn't officially served patients for many years but — and she made snipping motions with her fingers — they keep the equipment bang up to date. That was a month before they operated on his face.

Karen leads him off the main corridor and into the central room, an ugly affair of benches and seats and restraints and discarded devices, somewhere he and his fellow girls are allowed to congregate after hours; somewhere they are abused.

Dorothy's there, waiting in the centre of the room. All up in her tweeds, too; another wannabe aristocrat. And with her, bent under her hand even though he's taller than anyone else present, is a boy. He's skinny, malnourished even, and his messy black hair's pushed back from his face with the remains of whatever product he had in it when they took him. It has a blue sheen, suggesting hair dye, and a ragged cut; probably doesn't quite reach his eyes when brushed flat. He has healing

puncture marks in his earlobes and one eyebrow; they'll have removed his piercings when they brought him here.

But it's his *eyes* that are inescapable. The fury in them, the sheer, concentrated hatred.

And the beauty. The boy's eyes shimmer in the light, green-grey and sparkling with tears, flicking around the room, searching for answers. Or escape, perhaps.

He's breathtaking. The boys they take always are. Except for the one who'd been Vincent, who used to regard his reflection with the interested indifference of one who planned to age into his looks. He still doesn't know why they bothered with him, why they didn't kill him with his parents, especially since Karen took pleasure in informing him just how much work it took to make something pretty out of him, and how much *money*. Their jobs are so much easier if the boys are already delicate and feminine.

The boy is these things and more, and can't have been able to put up much of a fight when they took him. Although the bruises blossoming ugly on his exposed arms and upper body suggest he tried, anyway. Good for him.

"Vincent!" Dorothy commands. "Attend!"

He steps forward, realising as he does so that Karen's hand is around his upper arm, the better to control him, and he fights off a sneer. This is not the time to try anything stupid.

The boy's eyes bore into him. Probably trying to work out if he's prisoner or captor. Either that, or trying to puzzle out why Dorothy used a man's name for him.

"This," Dorothy says, "is David. He belongs to Frankie." She nods sideways, and he spots the ginger one lounging by the entrance, twirling her weapon around one finger. She's clumsy; he hopes she drops it and zaps herself. "But while he is down here, he is *your* responsibility."

"Mine?" he asks. Shit. The golden rule: say as little to the bitches as possible. Karen giggles at him; the boy doesn't react except to frown slightly.

“Yeah,” Frankie says loudly, her crass voice carrying as it always does. “Yours. Idiot boy.” She’s the odd one out amongst them all, the only one who doesn’t pretend to an aristocratic accent, but he doesn’t like her any more for it.

“He’s a little older than we normally do,” Dorothy says, twisting the boy in her grasp like an attractive ornament she wishes to show off, “but just *look* at him! Frankly, I couldn’t resist.”

Karen leans closer and whispers, “Happy Valentine’s,” before releasing him. She’s still laughing, and he wants to puncture her pleasure somehow, perhaps by prodding at her bandaged shoulder, but that would not end well, not for him, not for the boy.

“Make sure he knows what’s expected of him,” Dorothy says, turning to leave. “Oh,” she adds, “and *do* ensure he’s properly dressed. Or you know what happens.”

He nods as the women file out, leaving him alone with the boy.

The first time they gave him the run of the place, after they turfed him out of his cell with no more instruction than to comport himself appropriately, the four girls lounging despondently in the main room descended upon him and greeted him with sympathy and compassion, and when he asked why he’d been imprisoned with four beautiful women they informed him, sadly, that that is not what this place is for.

“It’s a toy factory,” one of them said, “and we’re the toys.”

“So are you, now, sweetheart,” another said.

“We’ll teach you how to live with it,” the third said. “At least for as long as you can.”

The fourth said nothing, but embraced him and cried on his shoulder.

They cared for him, they taught him, and they were taken away.

Looks like that's *his* job now. He steps forward, holds out a hand.

"You don't need to be scared of me," he says, leaning into the accent Karen keeps trying to beat out of him, the better to differentiate himself from their captors. "You're... David?"

"Davy," the boy says.

The boy hasn't taken his hand yet, so he takes another slow, careful step forward. Eventually Davy accepts it and he guides the boy to one of the clumps of chairs in the far corner of the main room. It's minimally comfortable, with cushions and a handful of books, the bitches upstairs having presumably realised that you need to provide *some* entertainment or your prisoners will lose themselves before you're done having fun. He sits, crossing his legs at the knee in the manner that's become unnervingly comfortable ever since he healed from their first mutilation. Davy sits to attention, like a schoolchild.

Start with the basics.

"How old are you, Davy?"

"Twenty-one."

A stab of jealousy. At least the boy got to finish his teenage years. "What's the last thing you remember?"

Davy stares at him.

"What does it matter?"

"Indulge me."

"Why do you *sound* like that? And why's your name Vincent?"

He frowns. "What's the last thing you remember, Davy?"

"I was at home," Davy says, sullen, "with Mum. I just got off probation. We were going to celebrate. She went out for food. She was only gone ten minutes. Then the doorbell went and *then* I was fighting for my fucking life. And then I was here."

It takes a heavy breath to get him through what he needs to say next. “Davy... how long have you been here?”

The boy shrugs. “Woke up about an hour ago with that old woman in my face. One of the other ones, the ginger one, she brought me food, then they dragged me in here.”

Damn it.

“Okay,” he says. “Okay. How do you feel? Any... unusual sensations?”

Another shrug. “Not really. Bollocks are kind of itchy.”

Double fucking damn it. There goes any hope that they haven’t done to Davy what they did to *him*...

“Seriously,” Davy says, “who the fuck *are* you?”

They can break someone in a year. It’s a common boast of Dorothy’s, one she likes to relay with embellishments to the drunken old fucks she makes him serve sometimes. And she’s been right so far, or close enough: the girls who were taken from him had been here a maximum of fourteen months; enough time for their surgeries to heal — or heal *enough* — and for a course of hormone treatment to soften them up, the way Dorothy prefers.

But the other girls all gave up.

If today’s Valentine’s 1986, then it’s been almost a year for him. A year of abuse, of mutilation, of unending degradation... and he’s still fighting. Not in the way the other girls fought, because Dorothy and her bitches are ready for that. He’s fighting simply by refusing to become what they want, and he *knows* they’re starting to see it.

He won’t be humiliated. He won’t be made ashamed. And maybe, from now on, he won’t react to the name they use for him, either.

How long can he last? Because now he has someone to protect. Someone to help. Someone who might be able to fight them the way *he’s* learning to.

It's been a year and they haven't broken him? He decides, right here, right now, that they're never going to. And the agitated innocent in the chair next to him, glaring fear and confusion with those beautiful eyes?

They're not fucking breaking him, either.

2019 DECEMBER 13 — FRIDAY

It's satisfying to lie here, one arm around her, feeling her belly rise and fall in slow time with her deep breaths and her whimpered snores, and to do so without conflict, without confusion. He knows exactly who she is. She's not a girl through adaptation, like Maria or Monica or the other women here; she's a girl because she's always been one. She's a girl no-one could see, and she unveiled herself here, in this absurd place.

She showed herself to him. How could he be angry about that? How could he *deserve* to be angry about that?

Aaron chooses to feel special instead. Because she picked him.

She picked *him*, despite everything. Despite all he's done, despite his behaviour towards her, despite—

No.

She knows. That was the point of telling her, yes? That was the *point* of fucking bleeding out in her bed, telling and retelling the stories of the women and girls he's wronged. The final challenge, the one which nearly killed him when he faced it himself: *know me; know all of me*.

She saw his remorse. She saw how absolutely and completely the knowledge had broken him. She saw his determination, raw and unsteady and new but *real*, to mend himself, to make something out of the wreckage of Aaron Holt.

God, he hopes that's what she saw. But she fell peacefully to sleep in his lap; she wouldn't do that if she hated him, right?

He told her everything, or as much as he could, and she persisted in looking at him like he's *someone*.

Steph fell asleep in his lap and he lay back and stroked her hair and watched the movie Maria picked for him and tried very, very hard not to cry at all the stupid romantic bits. She messaged him when it was done, asking if he wanted her to put something else on, but he said it was fine, and wished her goodnight, and she sent him a hug emoji.

All of this is so new. How ridiculous to feel at peace in the place that imprisons him.

So now he lies sleepless in his friend's bed, with his arm around her, to make certain she doesn't turn over in her sleep and fall, and thinks about mermaids.

Everything's a lesson down here. Everything's a tool. Even the accidents; *especially* the accidents. Steph being here in the first place, a trans woman thrown to the misanthropic, misogynist and occasionally outright violent wolves: a tool. A lever. If Maria's to be believed, not one they even knew about for a while, but a tool nonetheless; a moderating influence on the boys. It had worked on him! And Maria's attack: another tool. Aaron had been forced to undergo Indira's tender ministrations, and face up to the ugly implications of his own grim satisfaction at seeing Maria hurt. Not something a good man would enjoy.

And now here's the bloody Disney cartoon. He wondered as he watched who he was supposed to identify with. Is he the Prince, centre of a love story that becomes convoluted when the full details of the girl's backstory are revealed? Or is he Ariel, asking the impossible — to walk on land; to be forgiven — and trading the only life she knows in return?

He's not the Prince. The man's barely a character in his own right, and the love story is almost incidental. He's just the reason why Ariel chooses voluntarily to sacrifice a part of herself.

So *is* he the mermaid?

You want dick pics? I've got twenty!

Fuck it. Maybe he's the fish.

Steph grumbles, and he loosens his grip, lets her fidget a little, listens to her mutter something incomprehensible and sweet. Smiles because even in her sleep the voice exercises she's been doing are changing the way she sounds.

She's going to be beautiful.

Of course, they say that to him, too.

Maria talked about the voice inside him, telling him he's a man, telling him men can't change, but while it's definitely there, it's not been the whole of the problem.

It's the choice. The one that's implicit in everything Maria's said, in everything she's *not* said, in the evidence of the other girls: Pippa, Tabby, Edy; Steph. Fuck, even the others, the nameless women who help out sometimes, who point tasers and bring food and scowl at him when he cracks jokes. The girls who came down when Maria got hurt — once again his throat almost ruptures at the thought of it; his emotions are so close to the surface these days — like the tall blonde one Steph seems to know. All of them, avatars of the choice. All of them women who, at one point, chose the same thing.

It's the choice and it's the only one left: accept it or don't. Refusing to participate isn't enough; they'll just keep injecting him and changing him no matter what, and Maria will be disappointed and Steph will grow distant and they'll probably bring Indira back to grin at him and feed him through a tube and he'll be a girl-shaped hole in the world. No.

It's the choice and he knows what Elizabeth would say, if she somehow knew everything and could still, afterwards, bring herself to speak to him. The only time she ever shouted at him was one afternoon when he was lamenting his awful fucking school. He was complaining like he always did but she was different, and he didn't see what was going on with her until she raised her voice. Tell your parents you don't want to

go any more, she said. And if they don't listen, run away from the bloody school! *Make* them listen! Make yourself a problem and make them or bloody social services solve it! Do the hard thing! She shouted at him and fled to the back room in tears and when he followed her and placed a nervous hand on her shoulder she apologised. They lost the shop barely six weeks later. She must have known what was coming, and still she made time for the windblown rich boy refusing to properly evaluate what's in front of him. Do the hard thing, Aaron.

It's the choice and it's terrifying and it has implications he hasn't even begun to examine and even though he knows Maria and Steph and all the others will be there for him every step of the way he still doesn't know if it's something he can do without losing his mind completely. But Maria said it: it's not just Steph and the girls he knows; the girls upstairs are rooting for him now. The ones who used to view him with contempt. A family. His for the joining.

It's the choice and he made it without meaning to. And it's only now, looking back, here with the girl who might love him curled up in his arms, that he understands how and when he made it. Because the choice to grow, to become someone new, to reject the person he once was and all his excuses and all his bullshit, the choice to *live with it*, is one and the same as the choice to become like Steph, like Maria. And he rejects the comparison even as he makes it, not because it's inaccurate but because if he's going to do it, if he's really going to do what Maria asks of him, then he's not going to hide from it any more, especially not in his own head. Yes, he's going to be *like* them, but he's going to be his own person. His own creation.

It's the choice and he made it.

He's going to be a fucking girl.

1986 SEPTEMBER 9 — TUESDAY

She rarely knows the exact date, but sometimes they give her just enough information to keep track of roughly what time of

year it is. She knows when she was brought here, and she knows when Dee got here, and that idiot Frankie was going on about her birthday a few weeks ago, which means it has to be September by now.

She's beaten Dorothy's much-vaunted timetable by half a year. She can almost see the bitches getting desperate.

Karen took all her things away, including her clothes. Said they were for visitations only. But camera coverage down here is laughable and their staff of sadists is small enough that she was able, with the help of Dee and one of the new girls, to hide away a few items in a box behind a cabinet in a disused and filthy room a little way past the bedrooms. They've even got money in there, and a passport; Frankie was stupid enough to bring her purse down with her a few months back, and the downside of drawing your captive population from the ranks of petty criminals is that some of them can pick pockets.

She closes her eyes for a second. The girl who stole it for her didn't make it. Learned she was about to go on the table, that the countdown to the end was about to start, and took the other way out. Smart or stupid?

Academic, really. She's running on guesswork most of the time herself.

At least she doesn't have to pretend shame to Karen any more. No, she spits the names and the pronouns back in her face. Karen wants him to be humiliated by his woman's body and his man's soul? Fine; he'll embrace the body, he'll teach himself to revel in it. And he'll even begin working on the soul. Anything to survive. Nothing else matters.

She still needs a name, though.

"Vincent!"

It's Karen again, waiting outside her room. The bitch doesn't even come in here any more, not since it was rendered empty. None of them do. They take away her clothes and make her walk around in underwear and find their pleasures on her

body as they like, and still it infuriates them that she refuses to bend to them. The slightest bit of independence is an outrage.

In the corridor she finds her ‘sponsor’ waiting with a sneer and robe, and she is quickly and roughly clothed. Karen hooks an arm around hers and drags her towards the stairs, up through the first basement and into the house proper, through the dining hall and into the corridors at the back of the building that led eventually to the surgical suite, and for a brief moment she’s terrified Dee’s died on the table. The boy’s been up there for days, recovering from facial surgery, and she’s tried not to show it but she’s been scared for him. The bitches have been too successful with him, hurt him too deeply. She’s helped him as much as she can, but there’s a block, something he can’t get past, that’s preventing him from adapting the way she has. She understands — identity is a difficult thing to discard — but it leaves him vulnerable to their manipulations and their scorn.

Maybe he just needs more time. Not something that’s in vast supply here.

“David’s been asking for you,” Karen says, pulling on her arm again to stop her outside the recovery room. “Begging for you, actually. It’s very sad. But Grandmother likes this one. Doesn’t want him to have an episode.” Karen shrugs, with the indifference of one who doesn’t care if any of the girls lives or dies, as long as she can watch it happen. “Fix him.”

“Alone,” she says, and enjoys the deepening of Karen’s scowl. Bitch hates it when she uses her new voice.

“Obviously,” Karen replies in what she likely hopes is a withering tone. She kicks open the door and shoves her charge roughly through, but there’s no time to give consideration to her treatment because there’s Dee, lying there on the incongruous hospital bed and propping himself up on his elbows.

She waits for the door to close before she speaks.

“Hi, Dee.”

The boy has a smile for her. “Hi.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Like someone filled my head with cotton wool and my chest with— uh, what’s a ball that’s bigger than a tennis ball but smaller than a football? Never mind.”

“They won’t feel like that forever.”

“But they’ll be in *me* forever,” Dee says. “Frankie’s already taken great pleasure telling me how much it cost to make me look like a ‘slag’.”

“Ignore her.”

“You know I can’t.”

She pulls a stool over, sits by the bed with her elbows on the mattress, and takes one of Dee’s hands in hers. “You *can*. You can embrace this.”

“I can’t. I don’t know how you do it. Fuck—” and he tips his head back, ripping his hand away from hers and grimacing at what’s probably only a fraction of the pain that’s to come, when they take him off the drip, “—they’ve fucking *unmade* me, Vince! They keep coming at me and *taking* things and *changing* things and even before this I didn’t recognise the face in the mirror and now...” He struggles against the short chains that keep his hands away from his face. No touching the merchandise until it’s ready.

“That’s not my name, Dee.”

Dee glares at her. “Yeah, well Dee’s not mine.”

“*David* is a weapon for them to use against you,” she insists, grabbing at his hands, getting them both under her control, “and so’s your old sex, and so’s your shame, and so’s your ego. You can do what I did. You can just forget it all. You have to, if you’re going to survive this. But more than that, it’s freeing, Dee. And it really, *really* annoys them.”

“Is that a good thing?” Dee says, irritable but calming down. His complaints never last long; he knows she’s right.

He's just not ready to accept it.

"They're going to put cigarettes out on your back whatever you do, Dee," she says. "At least you can make them hate it. Look at how they are with me. They want me to be Vincent. They *need* it. We're here at their pleasure, so why *not* deny it?"

"Because you lose yourself?"

This again. She responds the same way she always does. "What's left to lose? Half the agony of this place is from trying to hold on to your manhood."

There's not much for Dee to say to that. There never is. And he's so *close!* What does a construction like manhood get you, anyway, when they've taken your balls and reshaped your body and taken a chisel to the bones in your face? How can it possibly help you, at this point? Why not simply let it go?

He looks away and she sighs. It's easier said than done. She knows that, too.

She expends a lot of effort to seem more comfortable than she is, but the truth is she misses her former self so much that sometimes she thinks she can hear him, scratching at the edge of her consciousness, trying to break back in. But he can do nothing but weigh her down now, and she needs to be nimble to survive. Cut it all away.

There's only one thing for her to discard.

Vincent's not her name any more, hasn't been for a long time, but replacing it's harder than the pronoun shift, harder than accepting herself as something more akin to woman than man. There's something so final about it...

And then she laughs at herself suddenly — clamping her teeth shut to keep it inside — because if she can't take that final step then she has no business berating Dee for his reticence.

At least she's thought about it. At least she has ideas.

One idea in particular.

She almost laughs again; it seems so *simple*. Why didn't she name herself months ago?

She leans forward a little more, lets one of his hands go but keeps the other, squeezes it. "I've actually been thinking about names, Dee," she says.

"Really?"

"I need a new one. I can't be nobody forever. But I need your help." She doesn't, but she wants to involve him. Wants him to see naming yourself as something powerful, perhaps even something joyful. She'll present a choice to him, involve him in the process, and hopefully encourage him to think harder about his future, and the new identity he'll build for himself. "I have two I'm thinking of," she says. "Béatrice and Valérie."

"I like them," Dee says. "Why those two in particular?"

"Béatrice was the name of my first tutor, when I was young. She was kind, she was pretty—" she grins, "—and she helped me learn your awful language. And Valérie—" now she affects a sigh, deep and mournful, "—was the name of the older sister I never had."

Dee frowns at her. "What happened?"

"My mother miscarried. And then she had me, and the doctors told her not to risk another. She told me to keep the name for any daughters I might have one day." She risks a wry smile. "And since I'll never have any daughters..."

"You should use it," Dee says quickly. "It suits you. You should be Valerie."

"Valérie," she corrects. "You really think so?"

"I do. It's a shame, though," he adds, frowning thoughtfully. "Beatrice is such a pretty name. Especially the way you say it. Maybe you should keep it for a middle name."

A pretty name, is it? "I don't need two." She stands, leans down to whisper in his ear. "I think you should have it. If you want it."

His breath catches in his throat and she *knows* he's considering it, and even if it's only for a moment it still feels significant. She wills him to take the name, to embrace it. Tries to imagine what he could be, free of this place. If they were free of this place together...

Valérie rises, remains close enough almost to kiss him, and watches as his wide eyes lock with hers.

“Think about it,” she says. “Béatrice.”

2019 DECEMBER 13 — FRIDAY

She wakes in the morning to Melissa, standing in the light streaming through the window and repeatedly interrupting her sunshine halo as she rubs her hair dry with a powder blue hand towel. She's brushing her teeth with her other hand and staring at a random patch of wall as she does so, and she's not noticed Shahida's awake, so Shahida can watch her do her thing.

Melissa's dressed in simple clothes, although whether they're from her suitcase or borrowed from Stephanie's wardrobe Shahida has no idea. She's wearing loose jeans and a high cut grey top that exposes her shoulders and, damn, she's still thin, but it works for her, and Shahida's almost hypnotised by the little motions she makes as she cleans her teeth and dries her hair. It's like Rach's bedroom all over again, with Shahida borderline obsessed with every movement Melissa makes; this time, though, Shahida's not going to push, and Melissa's not going to run.

Eventually she's caught staring.

“Hey, sleepyhead,” Melissa says, surprisingly articulate despite the mouthful of toothbrush. She balls up her towel under one arm, raises a finger to ask Shahida to wait, and darts back into the bathroom. After a few seconds of spitting and rinsing, she emerges, damp but unencumbered. “How did you sleep?”

“I slept well,” Shahida says, choosing not to mention how disappointed she was that, despite both of them having fallen

asleep together, when Shahida woke up in the middle of the night, Melissa had moved to the couch. She'd even found a blanket from somewhere, now carefully folded up. "Better than I've slept in a long time, actually," Shahida admits.

"Oh?"

She can't say what she wants to say: that even after she finally moved on, sometimes, late at night, she couldn't help but remember the dead, and wonder if there was something she could have done, wonder if something else could have happened instead of the obvious, the inevitable. On those nights she barely slept, and she's had a lot of them since coming back to England.

Instead she forces a laugh. "I think I dreamed that this—" she waves an arm at Melissa, the room, the building, "—was all just something I imagined."

Melissa smiles, and turns to rummage in one of Stephanie's drawers. "It does have a sort of unreal quality to it, doesn't it?" she says, straightening up and looking for a wall socket for the hair drier she's found. She pauses in her search, meets Shahida's eyes, and adds, "It's really good to see you too, Shy. I think I said that a lot last night, but it is. It won't ever stop being good to see you. It's amazing, actually."

Shahida's glad the stunned silence is broken by Melissa blow drying her hair, because there's nothing she can say to that.

It's not that she expected Melissa to be mad at her, even though part of her, for the longest time, has thought that an entirely appropriate response to her ham-fisted adolescent meddling. It's that in some way everything since then has been shaped around the hole Mark's death punched through her. Her achievements, her relationships, her life have all been in part *in his memory*, and now here she is, walking around the room brushing her hair and looking for all the world like a Disney princess threw on jeans and a t-shirt for an incognito trip to the mall.

Changed utterly, and yet still exactly the same.

‘Amazing’ doesn’t even *begin* to cover it.

Shahida resorts to the banal. “What’s the time?” she asks, when Melissa starts carefully putting the hair drier away.

“Um,” Melissa says, looking around for a phone and failing to find one. “A little after eight, probably?”

“*Eight?* Neither of us have anything in particular to do today, do we?”

“Not as far as I know,” Melissa says with a shrug.

“Then why are you dressed and ready at eight in the morning?”

Melissa taps at her bare cheek. “I’m not quite ready yet. But it’s wise to be awake. The day starts early around here, especially on this floor, and I thought you might want to have a chance to get your shit together before the inevitable— Too late!”

As if scripted, there’s a knock at the bedroom door. Melissa grins and shakes her head, glances over at Shahida to check on her — she’s still in bed but she’s sitting up and she’s got on a baggy sleepshirt she found in a drawer; she’s fine — and runs her hand through her hair before she opens the door. Strands of golden blonde shimmer through her fingers and cascade over her shoulders and Shahida shakes herself: she’s *got* to stop finding every damn thing the girl does unspeakably hot or she’ll never make it to lunchtime.

It’s Faye again, once more heading up a small crowd of girls who, Shahida gets the strong impression, would be clambering over each other to see inside were they not also, between them, carrying pastries and mugs of coffee and other items of breakfast paraphernalia.

“Morning, Faye,” Shahida says, waving.

They’re all in various states of night dress — the same things she saw them in last night, actually; they must have had a sleepover or something — and at least two are yawning, but

they manage to enter with their cargo and drop it off on the bedside table without spilling anything. When Faye takes a step back they all step back with her, almost but not quite out into the corridor.

“I made the croissants,” says one. “I made them yesterday, so they’re not the *most* fresh, but they should still be pretty good.”

“They’re *amazing*,” another one says. “Aisha’s just modest.”

“Modesty’s a virtue, dork,” Aisha says, and a minor scuffle precipitates at the rear of the group.

“I made the coffee,” Faye says. “But it’s just instant. The machine’s busted, and the *other* machine’s busted, and *someone* didn’t wash the cafetiere—” two of the girls point, giggling, at the one wearing a light pink hoodie and stripy socks, “—and I didn’t want to bug Christine this early to see if we could use the one from her kitchen. So. Instant.”

“Instant’s fine,” Melissa says. “Thank you. All of you.”

Shahida has to ask. “Do you always travel as a pack?”

The one standing next to Faye, the one who brought the milk jug, replies, “Not always. But you’re interesting! And it’s been a while since anything new happened here. Just Steph a little while ago, and then a whole lotta nothing.”

“Didn’t you all get...?” Shahida doesn’t want to say *forcibly remade*, but she waves her arms around a little and the girls seem to get it.

“Yes,” the one in the hoodie says, “but that was *ages* ago.”

It takes a couple of minutes for the girls to file out, still talking amongst themselves and breaking off into smaller groups, presumably returning to their own rooms to get dressed, and Melissa can’t hold in the giggles, which burst out into laughter just after the door closes.

“Oh my God,” she wheezes, sitting heavily on the bed next to Shahida, who shuffles up to give her space, “oh my *God*...”

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” Melissa rubs at her chest. “It just... It makes me so happy to see that.”

“What? The girls?”

“Yes,” Melissa says. She’s got her breath back and she’s grinning at Shahida, who is still dealing with her annoyingly persistent disbelief that the pack of giggling schoolgirls used to be *boys*. “We weren’t like that in the second year. I mean, I wasn’t, obviously, but even Nell and her lot... It took them a lot longer to get used to things. And it makes me think...”

Shahida touches the tips of Melissa’s fingers, to prompt her. “Yes?”

“Maybe this place got better. I *want* it to be better, and my intake was a long time ago. Maybe the sponsors are just better at it now. I hope so.” She presses herself into the soft headboard, stretches, and picks up her coffee mug. Plain, this time; disappointing. “I want this place to be good, Shy. They always said they were helping the other girls. And they were, sure, but it took a *long* time. And a lot of pain. I think... I think I *want* this place to feel like home. Abby’s here, and Steph’s here, and *you* know about it, and... I just want to have what Abby has here. What Steph’s building here. What the second years have. I want to get to know Christine. I want to try to connect with my intake. I want a *family*, Shy. I want it so much.”

Shahida takes her hand again, curls her fingers around her wrist. “I think you can have it,” she says. “Everyone I’ve talked to wants you to have it. No-one seems interested in punishing you for what happened yesterday, and my overall impression is that a lot of the girls find you kind of... interesting? They want to get to know you, anyway. I think, if you asked for a room on a more permanent basis, or even just for permission to visit more, or however it works, they’d give it to you without a second thought.”

“You’re probably right,” Melissa says, leaning against her. “The longer I’ve been away, the more my memory has populated this place with monsters. But they’re just people. So maybe the problem’s me. Maybe it wasn’t always, but maybe now it is.”

“You’re not a *problem*,” Shahida insists. “You’ve just had a hard time.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Keep telling me that. Every half hour or so, please.”

Shahida laughs. “It’s actually weird how normal this place feels. Ignoring the locks and the silly mugs and what I *know* is going on in the basement... Once or twice I’ve thought it was all a conspiracy, quickly whipped up, to make me, personally, believe everyone here is just a normal but kind of neurotic woman. Paige and Christine, Lorna and Vicky, the sponsors working away on their computers, all the second years, last night and this morning... No-one *seems* like they’re here against their will. And that, in itself, feels a little suspicious? And then I feel very stupid for thinking that,” she adds, releasing Melissa and fetching her own coffee before it cools, “because everyone here quite clearly *is* a normal but kind of neurotic woman.”

“Don’t forget the nonbinary grads,” Melissa says, sipping from her mug.

“You have those?”

“Oh, a bunch.”

“They’re still neurotic, though, right?”

“A hundred percent of them, probably.” Melissa frowns. “I really wish I’d gotten to know my lot more.”

“So do it now. You’re back; take advantage of that! Message people. Say hi. Bury the hatchet.”

“The scalpel,” Melissa corrects.

“Em,” Shahida says, “that’s so *crass*.”

“Hey, *you* liked the mugs...”

Shahida hops into the shower after coffee, and Melissa waits just outside the bathroom, keeping her company, letting the steam out of the window, and passing her a towel when she’s done, with respectfully averted eyes.

Shahida doesn’t have a change of clothes with her, and she’s still taller than Melissa, so she borrows a top from Stephanie’s wardrobe to go with her trousers. Melissa does her makeup while Shahida dries her hair — and, goodness, it’s fun and a little bizarre to watch Melissa paint her face with confidence and competence — and then they swap places, with Shahida at the vanity applying slightly more makeup than she generally wears and Melissa sitting beside her on the couch, talking about nothing.

It’s like the old days, except Shahida isn’t worried about her any more, and Melissa’s *free*.

“Oh, hey,” Melissa says, as Shahida’s finishing up and contemplating going upstairs to disturb Christine so they can borrow the third years’ coffee maker, “your phone just lit up.”

Shahida makes *gimme* gestures, and Melissa feigns reluctance, getting up from the couch and retrieving the phone from the bedside table. Shahida wants to lean up and kiss her as she hands it over — it would be the most natural thing in the world — and frowns at herself in the mirror instead. Go *slow*, Shy.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

Shy I read your crazy email

what the hell is going on?

are you okay?

is someone after you?

is someone from THE UNIVERSITY after you?

why would a university be after you?

and why wouldn't you be able to contact me after last night?

Shy?

SHAHIDA????

Shahida

I'm here, I'm here. I was putting my face on.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

okay cool good for you although istr that takes you like two minutes tops and I've been messaging you for half an hour

Shahida

I did a little more than usual! I wanted to look nice!

And I had a shower and had to dry my hair.

And WHY did you read the email?

Rachel Gray-Wallace

um

you sent it to me

so I opened it

that's what you do with emails I'm pretty sure

Shahida

It said DO NOT OPEN UNLESS YOU DON'T HEAR FROM ME on it.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

and?

I didn't hear from you Shy

Shahida

I left a voicemail!

Rachel Gray-Wallace

oh

I don't listen to those

does anyone?

I think I have like sixty

all spam

I just swipe the notification away

wait

do americans listen to voicemail?

is this some weird yank habit you've picked up, leaving voicemails and expecting people to listen to them?

is that what they do between hamburgers?

Shahida

They don't eat as many burgers as you might think.

And, no, I suppose they don't really answer their phones or pick up voicemail.

But you're a professional woman! Professional women listen to voicemail!

Rachel Gray-Wallace

I love that you think that

Shahida

Anyway, I'm fine, so you can ignore the email. I was just being silly.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

do you want me to copy paste all the paragraphs from your email that don't support what you just said?

because there are so many

actually

I think that's maybe the only thing that might persuade me to believe you

no one in actual danger would write such a long email

NINE PARAGRAPHS SHY

NINE

no wait

I'm being stupid

YOU would

you absolutely would pause your investigation of a ~mysterious secret organisation~ to write me a novel about it

I bet even being chased by an axe murderer would only force you down to three paragraphs and a yours sincerely

yeah so I'm back to being suspicious again

Shahida

Rach, please just ignore it, okay?

Rachel Gray-Wallace

I love that you think I can do that

Shahida

Please, Rach.

It's important.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

WHY'S it important Shy?

what's going ON?

> **Em&Em** has joined the chat!

Rachel Gray-Wallace

what

> **Em&Em** has changed his name to **Melissa**.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

WHAT

> **Melissa** has changed her pronouns to **she/her**.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

WHAT?????????

Melissa

Hi, Rach.

“Was that really a good idea?” Shahida asks. Melissa, sitting cross-legged on the bed with a laptop open in front of her, shrugs.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

wtf wtf wtf

Melissa

I’ve missed you.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

shit

babe

WHAT

shit

fuck

Shahida

You need to keep this a secret, Rach.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

yeah yeah yeah I got the whole secrecy gist from your email

just one thing

that’s really you Mark?

oh shit sorry Melissa

but I mean just to be clear you WERE Mark Vogel?

this isn’t a joke or something?

Melissa

It's not a joke.

It's really me.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

okay

okay

okay

we need to meet

I'm on campus I'm on campus I'm on campus where are YOU

Melissa points at the screen. "She's on campus," she says. "She was always going to open that email, you know."

"I know," Shahida says. "I was panicking. Sorry."

"It's not like you knew what you were getting into. This is all kind of my fault, anyway. I should have reconnected sooner. Avoided all this."

"I thought you weren't allowed?"

"No, but—"

Rachel Gray-Wallace

BITCHES WHERE ARE YOU

DON'T LEAVE ME ON READ, I HAD BREAKFAST AT A WEIRD PLACE THAT BURNS EGGS AND I'M CRANKY AND SUSPICIOUS

NOW I'M JUST WANDERING AROUND

Shahida

Caps.

Rachel Gray-Wallace

stfu

Melissa

Do you know Café One?

Rachel Gray-Wallace

I'll find it

Melissa

We'll meet you there in twenty minutes.

1987 JANUARY 22 — THURSDAY

It's so fucking hard to move. The bitches upstairs had guests over last night, and while it was one of their look-but-don't-touch evenings, one of the guests overrode Dorothy — and was able to override her! — and took an interest specifically in Val. He liked to stroke her hair, squeeze her buttocks, slap her, call her Vincent. He used her full old name, too, Vincent Barbier, which she hasn't heard since her very first days down here. He used it like it was important to him, like just saying it while touching her was a sensual experience to rival the finest wines.

She learned his name, too. Smyth-Farrow. Smyth with a fucking y, like that means anything in this bastardised language except that its bearer is old money and wants everyone in the country to know it.

He asked her how much sensation she still had in her penis and she spat in his face, and that was when Karen hit her.

So many bruises.

She slept in the main room overnight, with Dee and the others, and while everyone else eventually returned to their rooms, Dee stayed, spent an undoubtedly uncomfortable night in a lumpy old armchair, since Val took the only sofa long enough to sleep on. And now she's stiff, and Dee's still sleeping, and all she wants is a mouthful of water.

Correction: all she *wants* is to return in kind every abuse inflicted upon her for the last two years. All she's likely to get is tepid, metallic water from the fountain in the corner.

If only she can get up off this fucking sofa.

That's all you want, is it?

Shut up.

I'm offended you don't want me back.

Shut up and go away. I'm tired and I'm hurting and I don't want to think about you at all.

Then don't. And try not thinking about pink elephants while you're at it.

Fuck off and die again.

With a grunt she pushes up from the sofa, ignores the pain as best she can, staggers across the room while shielding her eyes from the motion-activated lights, and leans heavily on the water fountain.

The water's horrible, as usual.

Weakling.

The voice isn't real. She doesn't hear it, within or without, and the personality it represents is long dead, a relic of the teenager who never got the chance to grow up. But she creates it nonetheless, succumbs irresistibly to the temptation, and the more she pushes back against the parts of herself she needs to forget, the louder she protests, in the voice of the boy she buried.

Failing completely to remake herself. Just another failure among many.

They took another girl away last week. Here one day, gone the next. She still doesn't know where they go, what happens to them. She hopes they die, quickly and painlessly, but she reminds herself in Vincent's voice that they probably go to the country manors of merciless bastards like Smyth-Farrow.

She swore to save all of them, to teach them to be like her, and yet she loses them anyway, and inside herself, she rebels. What's the point of surviving when everyone around you gets taken away?

Moving slowly on bruised and tired limbs, roughly piloting the stranger's body she's still doing her best to convince herself is her own, she makes her way back to the sofa and collapses onto it.

She's losing the fight. If they want her defeated, they almost have her.

At least Dee's still here. They've talked names, several times, and Dee's rejected them all. Too big a step. But she's been experimenting with new pronouns, and yesterday morning, before the men came, she asked if Val would teach her to speak the way she does, and shared her plan in whispers. In substance, it's the same as Val's: the weak point is when they take you, when they move you out of this concrete prison, so if there's ever a chance to get away, it's then. Fail and get killed? You've lost nothing. But succeed? Escape? Now you're a man out in the world who looks like a woman, and if you can't make yourself also sound like a woman and act like a woman, you're rolling a set of dice weighted heavily against you.

It's progress. Maybe Dee can do it even if Val can't. So she's going to teach her, and Dee's going to survive.

2019 DECEMBER 13 — FRIDAY

One of the sponsors corners them in the kitchen on their way out. She quickly closes her laptop as they approach — Shahida gets a glimpse of what might be camera feeds — and rises to offer a hand to Melissa, which Melissa can hardly refuse.

“Indira Chetry,” she says. “You probably don’t remember me.”

“Hi.”

“I’m Christine’s sponsor. Or I was. The bloody girl’s so precocious they set her free and now I’m doing odd jobs for Maria, picking up slack, et cetera. I assume I don’t have to give you the lecture about pointing a taser at my Christine, do I?”

“Um,” Melissa says, still limply holding Indira’s hand, “no?”

“Good girl. Don’t do it again.” Indira releases her. “And Shahida! Welcome to England’s premier women’s college.”

“I thought Saints was co-ed?” Shahida says, frowning and borrowing a habitual Americanism.

“Give us time. Now. Girls. Where are you off to?”

Ah. She’ll be the gatekeeper, then. What should they tell her? Are they even allowed to do what they’re about to do?

“Before Shahida knew about us,” Melissa says, stepping subtly between Shahida and Indira, “she sent an email to an old friend. Very vague stuff, no details, but it was suggestive enough that the friend’s come here to make sure she’s okay. So we’re going to do damage control.”

“I see,” Indira says, nodding, her expression neutral. “What’s your plan?”

Melissa runs through it, talking quickly to forestall any objections. There’s a ‘standard story’, which Melissa intends to stick to: she hit rock bottom, she ran out on her degree, she travelled to another city, realised she’s trans, and transitioned with the help of some friends. She’s come back to Saints to visit an old friend; running into Shahida was coincidental. And

she never got in touch before because, once she realised she'd been officially declared missing, she decided it was better that way.

“Mark was bad for everyone he touched,” Melissa concludes. “He should stay dead.”

Shahida wants to protest, but Indira preempts her. “Are you okay, Melissa?” she says. “We can send someone to delay your friend if you need some time. *Not* to delay her in a bad way,” she adds, glancing at Shahida. “They'd just strike up a conversation, buy her a drink, accidentally spill something on her, that sort of thing.”

“I'm okay,” Melissa says, smiling. “This is just bringing up memories.”

“Understandable. Just remember, you have all the resources of this house available to you; you need only call on us. I'll be on duty all day. Speaking of: do you have the app suite on your phone?” Melissa shakes her head. “Download it soon. Christine can help. In the meantime—” she leans over and reaches into a cloth bag hanging from a peg, “—take this.”

Melissa takes a rather chunky looking phone from her and unlocks it. “Should I, um...?”

“Yes. Hit record now, drop it in your bag and forget about it. It's in a battery case; it can record all day.”

“It's going to record us?” Shahida asks. “Isn't that rather invading our privacy? And Rachel's?”

Indira, smirk firmly back in place, mimes pulling out a notepad and pen. “‘Invading privacy’...” she mutters to herself, pretending to write it down. “There. Now it's on the big list of crimes, under ‘kidnapping and mutilation’ but above ‘movie piracy’.” She waves the pretend notepad in the air. “Go! Bring us to justice!” When they just stand there, she shoos them off. “Seriously, it's fine. I'll review the recording myself, and delete it when I'm done. Christine can vouch for me.”

“And who vouches for Christine?” Shahida asks.

“Me,” Indira says, and shoos them again. They take the hint this time.

“Are all the sponsors so weird?” Shahida says, after Melissa’s buzzed them out.

Melissa laughs. “*Abby’s* not weird,” she says, “but she’s not a sponsor any more, so... maybe they are all weird, actually.”

Abby. Yeah. “Will she back us up, if it comes to it? If Indira finds something on the recording she doesn’t like?”

“She will.”

“Will we... see her again?” *Will she take you away from me?*

“Abby’s giving us some space for the moment,” Melissa says. “We texted a bit, this morning, while you were sleeping. She doesn’t want to be a third wheel. I told her she’s being ridiculous, and that’s when she stopped replying.” She shakes her head, stops still on the path. “I hurt her, Shy. She saved me, and we— we fell in love, and then I ruined it, like I ruin everything.”

“Em, no,” Shahida says.

“It’s okay. I’m not spiralling. I’m better at heading them off than I used to be. Thanks to her, actually. But I’m serious: I hurt her badly by running off. And probably even more by coming back here for Steph and not for her. And yesterday she still helped me, comforted me, and stepped aside so you and I could reconnect. Without her in the way. She’s... she’s fucking selfless, Shy.”

“You’ll talk again,” Shahida says, massaging Melissa’s shoulder, clenching her stomach against the thought of Melissa loving someone else, reminding herself once again that *her* affection has never brought anything good into Melissa’s life. “You’ll talk again,” she repeats. “She has other friends she can turn to?” Melissa nods. “Then let her. When she’s ready — when you’re *both* ready — you can fix things.”

“Yeah,” Melissa says. “Yeah. You’re right.”

It makes them a little late, but Shahida keeps Melissa there on the path, in the shadow of Dorley Hall, talking quietly, holding each other, until the smile returns to her face. It feels as natural as breathing.

Rachel meets them outside Café One, runs across the quad towards them and envelops Melissa in the first tackle hug Shahida’s seen in a long time. It doesn’t take Melissa more than a fraction of a second to reciprocate, and when Rach comes up for air her eyes are red and she’s grinning like an idiot.

“Melissa!” she says. “Melissa. *Mel-issa*. *Me-lissa*. I’ve been practising under my breath. *Good* choice of name.”

“Thank you!”

“So *now*,” Rachel says, “you have to tell me *everything* about where you’ve been and what you’ve been doing and why—” she leans in and whispers, “—you’re *dead*.”

“Hi, Rach,” Shahida says, poking at her.

“Hi, stranger.”

“Do you want to go somewhere quiet? To talk?”

Rach jerks a thumb behind her. “We can’t talk in the café?”

Melissa meets Shahida’s eye, and she jerks her head subtly towards her bag, and Indira’s phone. Shahida decides she means that Indira won’t like it if they discuss Melissa’s recent past — or supposed recent past — in a crowded space.

“What about up on the hill?” Melissa says.

Rachel makes a show of looking around. “There’s a hill?”

“Hillock, then. It’s nice. There’s a bench. There are rabbits.”

“Ooh!” Rach squeals, seeming to lose a decade in an instant. She links arms with Melissa, pulls on her, and says, “Take me to the rabbits, Melissa!”

1987 AUGUST 24 — MONDAY

“You just have to be careful with it.”

Dee waves the hairbrush irritably. “I know. I know. I hate it. I keep thinking I’ll pull the extensions out.”

“I know, sweetheart. But you won’t, not if you’re careful. Here; put your hand in mine.”

Val holds her hand out and Dee, with only a moment’s hesitation, lowers her hand, hairbrush and all, into Val’s palm. She lifts both their hands up and starts brushing through Dee’s hair, detangling the tips first and working up.

Dorothy decided Dee needs hair extensions; her natural hair’s still too short and tends to spike out at all angles. And it fell to Val, who’s been wearing extensions since her third month underground, to teach her how to care for them. She’s wondered if the bitches upstairs have noticed how close she’s become with Dee, or if they care at all. Because this is about as intimate as she’s ever been with anyone.

The other girls have experimented among themselves. And why wouldn’t they? In such a place you find comfort where you can, and homophobia doesn’t last long when the only other people who care if you live or die are other men who look like women. But Val’s never done anything more with the other girls than a little amateur fumbling; first, because she was alone for so long; second, because of Dee.

There’s no pretending she isn’t in love with her.

She guides the brush through Dee’s hair. Carefully does it. The girl’s sitting on the shorter of the two stools in Val’s room, and looks up with her deep grey-green eyes. She’s still wearing a little of the makeup Frankie slathered on her, even though she’s supposed to take it all off before bed; Val’s going to have to take her to the bathroom later on to wash it off. But she’s delaying it, because that will mean the end of the night, and Dee looks irresistible.

They haven't done anything. Val doesn't even know if Dee would be amenable, and doesn't want to ask; Dee's femininity has developed slowly but surely since her surgeries, and helping her understand and embrace it has been all that's kept Val going. Arguments with the memory of Vincent; dreams of the day her parents were murdered; open wounds and itching scars. All of it wearing her down. But she keeps it together. For Dee.

She releases Dee's hand and returns the brush to the utilitarian vanity.

"Thank you," Dee whispers, in the voice Val's been teaching her.

"Of course," Val says, and resists the temptation to reach out and touch her just for the sake of it. Showing her how to care for herself, that's fine, but she mustn't indulge herself on the girl. It would be foolish to risk everything on the chance of a night's pleasure.

She's beautiful, though. And it's hateful to see her that way. The boy who was brought here, freshly unmanned and glaring defiance, would not thank her for it. They taunted him when he first woke up after surgery. Told him the things they would force him to endure, so he could pay for the cost of making him beautiful. And that was almost the end for him. It's only since, with Val's help, that the girl has recovered some of herself, has found her resilience and her hatred once more, but she still stumbles. Several times Val's had to help a near-catatonic Dee get dressed or eat, while the bitches watch, amused.

"What will you do," Dee asks, when everything's put away, "when you get out?"

It's not a question; it's a game, one Dee plays when she doesn't want the day to end, when she doesn't want to return to her room and shut herself in, alone with the girl they've forced her to become. Val does her best to respond differently every time.

“I will go back to Paris,” she says, “and I will learn to cook. I will apprentice at a terrible restaurant, and when I am good enough I will apprentice at a mediocre restaurant, and when I am—” she laughs at the look on Dee’s face, “—no, listen, when I am good enough I will apprentice at a reasonable restaurant, and when I am good enough I will apprentice at an excellent restaurant. And *then*—”

“*Valerieeeee*—”

“—I will open my *own* restaurant.” She points at Dee. “And I’ll need an apprentice.”

Dee giggles. “Will I have to start at a terrible restaurant first, or can I go straight to yours?”

“You’re making unfounded assumptions about the quality of my restaurant, dear Dee.”

Dee, still laughing, opens her mouth to say something, but the whine of the intercom cuts her off.

“Enough gossiping, boys.” It’s Karen’s voice. The bitches can’t hear them talk, but they can see them now. Innovations. “David, go to your room. Vincent, go to sleep. I have a job for you in the morning and I want you rested and looking your best.”

Val winces, because the fragile state of Dee’s rebellion is always challenged when they assert her maleness, but for the first time Dee doesn’t seem upset. Instead she nods at the crude little camera above the door and stands up from the stool, stumbling on her feet and holding out a hand for Val to steady. She takes it, and Dee falls easily into her embrace.

“Thank you,” Dee says.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m okay. This is helping. *You* are helping. It’s— I’ve— No-one’s ever been so kind to me, Valerie.”

Val squeezes her, relishing the contact and reminding herself that it’s just a hug: an emotional high, not a sexual one.

“You’re a wonderful girl, Dee,” she whispers, and Dee twitches only a little. “And you’re stronger than them.”

“You’re... you’re a wonderful girl, too,” Dee says, stepping back but not releasing her. They stand a forearm apart, holding each other at the elbow.

“Thank you,” Val says, and risks it all, leaning forward to kiss her quickly and lightly on the forehead.

For a moment Dee looks like she might reciprocate, and those grey-green eyes are suddenly intense, stripping Val almost to the bone, but then she smiles, ducks her head, and walks quickly for the door. It closes behind her with a click and Val is alone again, with the girl she’s made out of herself.

2019 DECEMBER 13 — FRIDAY

The swimming complex at the university sports centre is no Peri Paradise, but what is? Not even the arguably even more magnificent water parks she visited while in the States could measure up to the domed tropical wonderland she visited when she was thirteen. Understandable; it was her first real holiday; it was her first major outing since Dad died; it was where she met Mark.

Shahida looks over at Melissa, who is currently suffering through a bout of extreme Rachel enthusiasm over which swimsuit she should buy from the shop at the university’s sports centre. Rach is enthusing over a two piece; Melissa’s unsure and clearly needs rescuing, so Shahida steps in and makes her own, considerably more modest suggestions.

Rachel absorbed Melissa’s story with a thoughtful frown and a shrug, and dragged her into another hug when she was done, saying as they embraced that she *really* needs to meet her wife and what does she do for a living and how long is she in town and does she have a girlfriend or a boyfriend or a theyfriend or any other kind of partner and *oh my goodness* they need to reconnect with Amy and re-experience the wonder of her parents’ pool. And Melissa made the mistake of

mentioning that Saints has its own pool — its own swimming complex, in fact — and from there her fate was sealed.

Shahida hasn't been swimming in ages.

Whereas Melissa, it turns out, when they burst into the changing rooms together with their newly purchased swimsuits, hasn't been swimming in more than seven years.

“This is so fucking scary,” she whispers to Shahida, yanking her into the cubicle and confessing.

“Really? Seven years?” It's hard to imagine.

“Longer. Not since the last time we went to Amy's together.”

Shahida knots her eyebrows. “How come?” she asks. And then she feels stupid, because the answer's obvious.

“When you're early in transition,” Melissa says, as Shahida manages not to berate herself for not guessing *slightly* faster, “and you're, um, intact... it can be actively dangerous. So even though I missed it, I just kinda gave up on it.” She shrugs nervously. “And then *not swimming* became a habit.”

“We don't have to do this—”

“No. I want to.” Melissa forces a smile. “And so do you. Just maybe stay with me? At least until I get used to it?”

Shahida wraps her arms around Melissa's shoulders, pulls her in close and holds her, feeling once again fiercely protective. She wants to go back to the Hall and find Abby and shout at her for all the things Melissa's had to experience, but the more she thinks about it — the longer she holds her — the more she realises that this isn't a Dorley thing. It's just a *people* thing. It's what people have always been like, when you don't know them, when you're marginalised in some way they don't share; sometimes even when you *do* know them. Each one a potential threat.

Melissa's not been able to go *swimming*...

“Um, Shy?” Melissa says.

“Oh! Sorry!”

Shahida releases her, and she’s half-turned the lock on the cubicle door before a hand on her shoulder stops her.

“Stay?” Melissa says. “Please?”

Dumbly, Shahida nods, and turns around in time to see Melissa turning her back, pulling off her top. She should look away, and she knows it, but she doesn’t, and the lacquered walls of the cubicle are just reflective enough that she’s sure Melissa *knows* she’s looking.

Without her top on it’s clear that while she’s still thin, she’s not thin the way Mark once was, all ribs and too-taut skin. She’s supple and smooth, and if Shahida had to pick one word, one over all others to describe her, it might be *healthy*. Or *tantalising*, perhaps.

Or *hot*.

Off comes her bra, and Shahida realises that perhaps she should get changed herself, or else Melissa’s going to be standing there in her swimsuit and Shahida’s going to be fully clothed, still staring at her, and won’t *that* be awkward? So she turns away, strips, and pulls on the black suit she bought, and when she’s done, so’s Melissa, who smiles bravely and poses for her.

Every time she thinks Melissa can’t get more beautiful...

Shahida remembers when she first started thinking of herself as gay. It was after Travis, after Vivek, and after, finally, Austin, who cheated on her with a girl from his gym and who even before that had irritated her with his dull manners and grating, ungenerous spirit.

And she remembers realising that all the short-lived relationships she’d had with men were nothing more than attempts to recapture what she’d had with Mark, to find somehow in someone else the fleeting spark that charged the air between them, that leapt electric from her skin when she touched him, that made her make stupid, reckless decisions, that made her excited to wake up every morning because she

might get to talk to him, see him, be with him. Man after man after man, nothing more than a series of disappointing, dispiriting *boys*.

Maybe Mark had simply been special. Unique. Maybe there *were* no other men like him, anywhere.

Maybe men were just fucking boring.

And when Austin's sister Jordan made kitchen cocktails with her and drank in memoriam of her jackass brother's fidelity, when she took Shahida by the hand and into her cramped bedroom on the top floor of her sweltering Los Angeles apartment, when she touched her in places no man had ever bothered to, Shahida realised she had a whole world to explore, and people to explore it with who interested her far more than any man ever had.

She tore off the label *straight* with gleeful abandon, and when she and Jordan amicably broke up she told the next girl she was bisexual, and the next, and the next, and the one after that she told she was gay, because there really was no doubting it any more; women were who she wanted, who she would always want.

Except for Mark. As she grew older she tried to think of him less and less. She lit candles for his birthdays and on the anniversary of his disappearance, and gradually she forced him to become the boy she once knew, the boy she couldn't help, the boy who vanished from her life.

Until she came home from America and saw his memory everywhere.

Mark. Her first and never was.

And now here's Melissa, standing in front of Shahida with swimsuit and nervous smile, and everything makes sense at fucking last.

Sometimes the only boy you've ever loved is a girl, too.

Melissa's tied her hair up in a bun, ready for the swim cap, but she's done it imperfectly, and Shahida wants to reach

forward and tuck the stray hairs back, smooth them down against her neck, draw her in and kiss her, and she realises she's chewing on the inside of her cheek when Melissa asks her something, says her name, breaks the spell.

“Oh my goodness, Em, you look bloody *amazing*, like, *shit*, you just... You look fantastic.”

Melissa laughs and says, “You look great, too. But I asked if you're ready to go.”

Shahida coughs. “Ah. Yes. I am.” Salvaging her dignity, she unlocks the door and holds it open, and to her delight Melissa laughs again and curtseys her thanks before stepping daintily out into the changing rooms and finding Rachel waiting for them around the corner, and if Shahida's a little put out that Rachel gets to hug her — again — she's gratified when Melissa escapes Rach's clutches quickly and almost skips the rest of the way into the main complex, excited to swim for the first time in years.

There's two pools in the main area, one Olympic-sized and the other a shallow, warmed pool for relaxing, and Shahida hears the splash of Melissa diving into the larger one and starting to swim delighted laps almost before she gets the chance to take in how everything's laid out. It's nicer than she expected, with a glass roof letting in the dull December sun, and she gives herself a moment to absorb all the sensations that batter her, to smell the chlorine; to watch Melissa swim.

“She's beautiful, isn't she?” Rachel says, quietly.

“She's a miracle,” Shahida says. Melissa always loved to swim, even when she had to cover herself in oversized shirts and swimshorts. She'd always seemed at her freest in the water.

“You got changed together, I saw.”

“She was nervous.”

“She doesn't seem nervous now,” Rachel says, and something in her voice makes Shahida turn around. “Her story's bullshit. You know that, right?”

Taking care to control her reaction and relieved that Indira's phone is back in the locker room, Shahida says, "What do you mean?"

"It's too much! People don't get declared dead and then just *show up*. Is she working? Does she have a job?"

"Um, yes."

"Then her National Insurance number, her records, *everything*, will connect her to Mark! And *Mark* wouldn't be dead any more."

"Rach—"

"Tell me I'm wrong."

Shahida glances back to check that Melissa's still swimming. She is, and as she reaches the top of a lap she grins and waves at her; Shahida waves back.

"Look," she says to Rachel, leaning in closer to whisper as quietly as possible, "I know her story's bullshit, okay? I know. We talked about what to tell you; that's what we decided on."

"Why lie?"

"Because the *real* story is about more people's secrets than just hers. She *can't* go spreading it around, and neither can I. So you just have to trust me, Rach."

"I doubted she was Mark. Just for a second. But, you know, I doubted. I was worried about you. Thought you might be getting scammed or something." She sighs. "But she looks like him. Even moves like him."

"It's him," Shahida says. "It's *her*, Rach. She's Melissa, and she's... Look, we spent the night together last night. Just as friends, before you say anything. She slept on the bloody couch, without me even asking. We talked, and we— we hugged. But mostly we talked. She's the same, Rach. She's the same and she's *more*. She's not going to hurt me."

"Okay," Rachel says, and bumps shoulders with Shahida. "I won't push. And I *do* trust you, Shy. And I want to trust

her.”

“So do it. Trust us both, leave me to handle the dark and scary truth, and you can just... be her friend?”

Rachel nods, smiling. “Sure. Sure.” She nods again, firming up her resolve, and Shahida almost sighs with relief; Rachel doesn’t lie about her intentions. She might be very rude about them, a lot, but she doesn’t lie. “But you two *have* to workshop out some of the holes in that story before we bring Amy in on this.”

“Yeah. Yeah. We will.”

“You know what she’s like. She pokes at things.”

“We won’t be in such a hurry for Amy. We’ll work it out. I owe it to her not to half-ass this.”

Shahida starts at the sudden contact on her other shoulder, but it’s just Rachel wrapping an arm around her. They both watch Melissa swim.

“I see how you look at her, Shy,” Rachel says. “I see you staring.”

“Yeah,” Shahida says heavily.

“Is she— Does she *like* women?”

“She was in love with another girl. So yes. But I’m not going to try anything, Rach. Last time I almost fucking *killed* her.”

“That’s bullshit, Shahida, and you know it.”

“Still. I just want to be friends. That’s enough.”

“Enough for *now*.”

“Yeah. Enough for now. Come on; let’s swim.”

1987 DECEMBER 2 — MONDAY

It’s four in the morning when they come for her, when they drag her roughly off her hard bed at gunpoint — and they’re

real guns; not the usual bulky tasers or that ridiculous shotgun Dorothy brings out sometimes, but sleek pistols of the sort that killed her parents, years ago. She's still taking stock when a woman, the only woman out of the six people standing either in her cramped room or out in the corridor, steps into her field of view to hand her some folded clothes and waits patiently for her to dress herself, and it's only when she drops them onto the bed and unfolds them that she realises they're the most ordinary things she's been given to wear since she arrived: blue jeans, a white bra and t-shirt, a black jacket, some nondescript underwear and a pair of grey tennis shoes; the kind of clothes she'd be relieved to wear if it weren't under such circumstances.

As she dresses she looks at the faces watching her and recognises none of them. The woman is small, unassuming, dressed for the office; the men wear casual outfits that all have, she can't help noticing, enough give in critical places to conceal more weapons than just the pistols she can see. All of them are professional in a way Val's not used to; not one of them, for example, has sneered at her or touched her inappropriately. The woman even possesses, if one stretches one's imagination to the limit, an ounce of sympathy.

Val decides to test it.

"What's going on?" she asks.

No-one answers. Oh well. Worth a try.

This is it, then. The day it all ends. She finishes dressing, feeling foolish. Her plans all hinged on the day they finally came for her, the day they took her away from these concrete walls; she would break free and run, screaming for help, because Dorley Hall's near some university, right? Someone would hear. But she assumed tasers, wielded by the careless bitches upstairs. Dorothy's battered shotgun. Against professionals with pistols, she can do nothing.

She yells anyway, for all the good it will do, but all it does is wake Dee, and as the girl kicks uselessly against the inside of her locked bedroom door, Val feels like a horrible

man/woman/whatever for rousing her, terrifying her, and leaving her with nothing she can do to help.

Because she can't. Because this is the end.

They lead her up the concrete staircase, past the still-new security station where Frankie gives her a sardonic little wave, and up into the main hall, and it's only as they're manoeuvring her carefully through the kitchen that she hears running feet behind her. Bare feet. Unusual.

And then more hands are grabbing at her from behind, just for a second, and there's a smack and a thud as whoever it is gets pulled off her, hit, and falls to the floor behind her. One of the men holding her lets go, turns around, raises the butt of his pistol and is about to strike downwards when Frankie's distinctive voice stops him.

"Don't hit the *fucking* merchandise, you idiot!"

There's a girl on the ground behind her.

Dee?

What the hell?

"What's she doing up here?" the woman escorting her asks, pointing downward.

"I let him out," Frankie says, out of breath and seemingly almost as intimidated by the weapons as Valérie. "Look. Her worship's sweet on this one—" she points at Dee, staring up at Val and wiping blood from her mouth, "—so that means, one, *do not fucking hit him*, not in the *face*, and, two, let him say goodbye to his friend, for Christ's sake."

"What do *you* care?"

Frankie steps forward, places herself absurdly between Dee and the men. "I care because *his* welfare is *my* welfare," she says, and Val notices she's got her taser switched on and ready. One taser against all these people! How much power does Dorothy have over her, that she'd risk herself this way? "Grandmother. Likes. Him." She jabs the air with each word. "And she wants him broken, not catatonic. So give him five

fucking minutes, before my headache turns into a migraine and before my boss calls your boss. Okay?”

Five minutes.

Nothing like enough. There are no words to exchange, no sentiments to share. Val could tell her to be strong, to always fight back, but where's that gotten *her*? She can see the lorry, made up to look like a refrigerated transport, parked up right by the double doors out of the Hall, and she tries not to focus on it as she cradles the precious girl in her arms. Her end is coming, and she can think of nothing to say to Dee to make it okay.

Five minutes, over all too quickly. And then Dee's being dragged back into the kitchen by Frankie and Val's being pulled towards the back of the lorry. She looks wildly around as they effortlessly contain her struggle: there's more men waiting, guns ready, blocking any possibility of escape. She never had a chance at all. So she locks eyes with Dee until the doors close, and then all she can do as they drive her away is listen to the sound of the tyres as the vehicle transitions from gravel to grass to smooth tarmac, and wonder where, exactly, they're taking her. Maybe Dee will do better; maybe she'll choose a name, make a life for herself somehow.

Maybe it doesn't matter any more.

Maybe nothing does.

In the absolute dark of the back of the truck, no illusions remain. Dee will share her fate, as will all the other girls under Dorley Hall. And all that waits for Valérie or Vincent or whoever or whatever it is that clings vaingloriously to life inside her abused and altered shell is degradation and death.

The only hope she allows herself is that her end will come sooner rather than later.

2019 DECEMBER 13 — FRIDAY

Christine raises her head from the kitchen table long enough to read the text from Professor Dawson. She's offering a friendly ear and as much office time as Christine needs, if there's anything she needs to get off her chest, but, please, do try to stop missing her lectures.

"I'm going to do it," Christine says, laying her head back on her upper arm, which is splayed out across the table.

"Do what?" Tabby asks. She's looking annoyingly fresh, awake and attractive, which seems unfair for — Christine glances back at her phone — eleven fifty-eight in the morning.

"I'm coming out to my professor. Going to tell her I was — what did Maria call it? — coercively assigned female in a basement. I'll tell her about the hormones, the orchi, that week where I tried walking with the book on my head; everything. Maybe then she'll stop bugging me to unburden myself on her."

Tabby's quiet for long enough that Christine expends the effort to move her other arm out of the way, and when finally she can see her, she's got a smile waiting for her.

"The book thing hasn't been required for a long time, you know," Tabby says.

"Yes, but *you* walk with such grace, Tab; I, on the other hand, stumble around like a drunken baby elephant looking for the light switch."

"I think Paige would disagree. But I suggest you don't tell your professor about it, even if you did choose it yourself. She'd think us a terribly *old-fashioned* forced regendering facility."

"The rain in Spain..." Christine mutters. "Fine. I won't out us to my Linguistics professor."

"By George," Tabby says, reaching forward and tapping her playfully on the arm, "she's got it."

The clock on her phone ticks over to midday, and shortly after another text arrives from Prof Dawson. This one suggests

she contact the counselling service, and Christine makes a mental note to never ever talk to the university's counselling service, before shooting off a quick reply to the effect that she overslept, and it won't happen again.

"You need some coffee?" Tabby says. "The second years cleaned the cafetiere."

"Oh, God," Christine says. "You're the best sponsor. Yes. A thousand times yes."

Tabby's already filling the kettle. "I think William would disagree."

"How's it going with him, actually?"

"Not bad," Tabby says. "Get him away from boys who clap like seals when he says something clever or does something stupid and he becomes quite different. And ever since he admitted his guilt to Steph, he's been cooperative." She turns to fill the cafetiere. "We're thinking of moving him back to his room soon. Privileges restored, and so on."

"Will that be safe for Steph? For Maria?"

Tabby nods. "We'll have more people down there. And—" she shrugs, "—Maria says Aaron's become quite protective of her lately. I don't think William'll be a problem."

A couple of minutes later and Tabby's laying a large cup of coffee down in front of Christine, and tapping her on the shoulder to wake her. As Christine's eyes refocus and she forces herself up onto her elbows, she blearily reads the words *SOME PEOPLE ARE KIDNAPPERS. GET OVER IT!* on the side of her mug.

"Cute," she says. It's not one she's seen before. Then she clears her throat; she sounds like she's been gargling nails.

"You okay, Teenie?" Tabby says, sitting back down opposite and borrowing Indira's pet name for her.

Christine puts off her reply until she's had something to drink. Tabby went above and beyond: there's cream, there's chocolate sprinkles, there's sugar, and under it all there's what

tastes like double-strength coffee. Normally Christine would choose something a little plainer, but right now she appreciates the calories and the caffeine.

“I haven’t been sleeping well,” she says, as her stomach warms.

“I know. Dira said the thing with Lorna shook you up.”

Christine nods. “Not entirely her fault, though. We put her in a very difficult position and I... handled it poorly. And we’re friends again, so—” she wags a tired finger, “—don’t yell at her.”

“Indira already did.”

“Yeah. Kinda told her off for that.”

Tabby smiles, and sips coffee. “She’s just protective.” Her mug’s pink, and when Christine squints at it Tabby swings it around so she can read the cursive: *Do everything a man can do, but ball-less and in high heels!* “Do you want to talk about it? The thing that’s keeping you from sleeping?”

“Are you sponsoring me?”

“I’m being a friend, doofus.”

Christine needs more coffee for this conversation. She finishes the whole mug, and then while Tabby makes her another, she tells her about her sleepless nights. The memories of her old self, flooding back. Paige waking up to find her staring out of the window, crying noiselessly and watching the rain catch the light from the lamps on the path. Paige looping arms around her, protecting her, reminding her who she is.

And then Melissa came storming back to Dorley, waving a taser around and trying to abduct Steph, and reminding Christine that, yes, anyone can go home.

“We’re going to ask Dira to take us,” she says, halfway done with her second cup. “Paige and I, we’re going to go back to Brighton. We’re going to visit my old school and my old village. All the places I used to go. I need to say goodbye to him, Tab.” Her eyes are stinging; she swallows and rubs at

her face. It's not like she has any makeup on to ruin. "I think... I think I need to forgive him."

She jumps as arms wrap around her. She hadn't even noticed Tabby get up, but now here she is, embracing her from behind, so she pushes out from the table and stands. Tabby gives her room to move, and draws her back into the hug when she's ready.

Impossible not to cry now.

"That's okay, isn't it?" she says, finding room between heaving breaths. "He— I did such awful things. And I don't ever want to forget them, but—"

Tabby shushes her, strokes her hair. "It's okay," she says. "You need to forgive yourself. It's important. And—" she squeezes Christine tighter, "—it's *good*. You deserve forgiveness, Christine."

"Really?"

It's childish, to ask for confirmation like that, to be held in someone's arms and be reassured and still ask for more, but it's never something that's been discouraged, and Tabby's whispered, "*Really*," is all that's needed for Christine to cling to her, like the mother she always wanted, and let everything out.

When finally they release each other, and when Tabby drops a sisterly kiss on Christine's temple and departs for the security room — to check on Will and to chat with Indra about Christine's plan — Christine flops back down onto her chair, less tired than she was but more drained. Fortunately there's enough coffee in the cafetiere, and it's on the table in front of her, so she fills her mug for a third time and downs it in one.

She giggles. She's going to forgive him. She's going to forgive *herself*.

She's also had three cups of coffee and she needs to balance it out with something to eat before she starts vibrating. She checks the time — twelve forty; good, Paige will be out of

her lecture soon — and makes herself some nice, mundane Weetabix.

A couple of minutes later she's roused from mindless Twitter scrolling — the Tories got back in, because they were always bloody going to, and her timeline is despairing — by the doors banging open, and looks up to see, rather than Paige or any of the other girls she was expecting, Aunt Bea. She's steadying herself on the frame, looks as exhausted as Christine feels, and is assisted by two women, one whom Christine doesn't recognise and another she's seen only in pictures.

“Ah,” says Elle Lambert, “Christine, isn't it?”

Oh *shit*.

Christine's got sponsor-level access now, which means she knows who Elle is: the money. But not *just* the money; she's involved, right at the top, and members of her family were connected to Grandmother. Yes, *dead* members of her family, it has to be said, and reading between the lines it seems like Elle might have killed at least one of them herself, but the link to Dorley Hall's previous, sadistic custodian is close enough to be unsettling.

There's also the obvious and unanswered question: what the hell is Elle Lambert doing all of this for? None of the answers Christine's come up with have been reassuring.

She stands, supremely glad for Tabby and all her revitalising coffee, and realises as she does so that she's barely out of sleeping clothes: shorts and a tank, and thick socks with rubber paw prints on the soles. Not the best state in which to make a first impression on *the money*.

“Um,” she says, “yes. I'm Christine.”

“Elle Lambert,” Elle says, as if it's at all necessary. She glances at her companion, who gives her the slightest of nods, and steps out from under Beatrice's arm. The other woman doesn't seem affected by the increased weight she has to support, and starts helping Aunt Bea across the kitchen.

“Good evening, Christine,” Bea says, as she passes.

“Is Maria available?” the unknown woman asks.

It takes a second for Christine to call up the information on her phone. “She’s in her flat,” she says, “on the—”

“—the third floor,” the woman finishes. “Thank you.”

Elle, meanwhile, has been pouring herself a glass of water, and sits down at the kitchen table. Christine reminds herself to try not to look nervous.

“Christine Hale,” Elle says. “Third year. Recently joined the staff, officially.” She’s staring slightly to one side, as if reading from a notebook only she can see.

“Yes.”

“I’ve been following your career with interest. Impressive that one so young has already acquired so much responsibility.”

“Thank you,” Christine says, because complaining about all the jobs that keep falling into her lap seems unwise right now. And Elle Lambert’s ‘following her career’? Does she *have* a career?

“Will you do me a favour?” Elle says, and Christine nods, probably slightly too emphatically. “Bring Beatrice something to eat in a few hours?”

“Is she... okay?”

“There’s nothing wrong with her. She’s just *very* tired. We thought we had a lead; we did not. Emotional stress exaggerates physical exhaustion; you understand.” Christine indicates that she does. “But we *did* discover something troubling.”

“Troubling, Ma’am?” Christine says, wincing at the involuntary *Ma’am*.

“Security at Peckinville is implicated,” Elle says, and Christine can’t control her reaction; Peckinville Associates has been run by a consortium headed by the Lamberts for over four decades now, and it provides the men who spend the

majority of their time playing PlayStation in the rec room downstairs. “Not seriously so — you do not have to worry about the staff assigned here; all are personally vetted. But *any* breach is concerning.” She frowns, and sips at her water. “Any theft is concerning. And the fact that it’s taken so long to be uncovered? *Deeply* concerning.”

Breach? Theft?

“Why are you telling me?”

“My assistant will brief Maria once Beatrice has settled in, and thus all the senior sponsors will be briefed in turn.” Elle smiles, and it’s not the most pleasant smile Christine’s ever seen. “I imagine, therefore, with your skills, that you’ll discover this anyway. I simply wish to assure you that I approve of your initiative.” She raps on the table, signalling the end of the conversation. “Good work securing the system, by the way; I have no expertise in the area myself, but my assistant was quite impressed. You have a promising future ahead of you, Christine Hale.”

“Oh,” Christine says, “thank you.”

Elle finishes her water and stands. “You can thank me, child, by living a full and happy life.”

“On it.”

“And by continuing to help your sisters.”

Christine doesn’t trust herself to say anything helpful, so she just nods.

2005 OCTOBER 7 — FRIDAY

The central courtyard of the Smyth-Farrow estate is entirely enclosed, surrounded on all sides by the building itself, exhibiting on each of its four main walls an anachronistic mix of styles from decades and centuries past, and covered overhead with wire mesh over thick, stainless steel bars. The bars are the newest addition, just ten years old, added after Crispin Smyth-Farrow caught her climbing the naked brick,

using handholds she'd carved diligently with cutlery. So no more metal cutlery and no more sky, and no more escape from the deep dirt of the central courtyard, where the bodies are buried.

She tried to help the first ones, she truly did. They'd arrive, terrified and shaking, shipped in from Dorley Hall in civvies, to be dressed immediately by her in the uniforms Smyth-Farrow prefers, the ones that emphasise what they've been given and what they've lost, and she would press upon them the need to survive, to spit his perversions back in his face, to fight him. But one of his many 'little cruelties' — his words; his ghastly, minimising words, whispered always through a delighted sneer — was to delight in taking the girls away from her just as she became close with them, just as she broke through their fear and their shame and their self-disgust, as she once did with Dee. He'd take them away and she'd never see them again, and all he'd tell her was that they'd outlived their usefulness.

Eventually her kindness and her optimism ceased to amuse him, and he desired more to make her suffer instead; he made her bury the next one in the central courtyard, knowing that when she dug deep enough she would find the wet and decayed bones of the others, an ossuary of dirt hidden under paving slabs and braced with ancient foundation.

And so she buried her, she stroked the girl's cheek before covering her with soil, and she wondered as she worked if there was a better way to help these girls, if to insist they resist was to hasten their ends. So she made herself cruel, unwelcoming, cold. And they lasted a little longer, and he left her alone a little more. Her reward for becoming more like him.

She never decided which was worse for them: six months more life or six months less misery. But it was academic; for the sake of her own soul, she numbed herself. The girls he dragged in front of her became nothing more than dead women walking, wounded men with nothing to offer her, and without emotion she showed them their roles and their

uniforms and the punishments they would have to endure. Sometimes she entertained the notion that one of them would escape and bring the authorities down on the manor, name her as accomplice, torturer, murderer. Sometimes she dreamed of it.

She knows why he kept her and none of the others. She asked, after the third girl, and he told her: she was a commission. Her parents had been an inconvenience in one of Smyth-Farrow's ventures, and she, the boy who'd just become a man, masculine for his age but with so much potential, had been too tempting to kill. He told her this as he bent over her, trapping her arms at the wrist, and she spat on him, smashed her knee into his groin, and that time made it as far as the inner gate.

But that was years ago, and the old man slowed down, and no more women came. He confided in her that the money was running out in perfect sync with the rest of his days, and that he was delighted it be so; his bastard children wouldn't see a lick of inheritance, he said, for he spent every last penny on pleasure. On the most disgusting pleasure money could buy.

"You..." he said to her, wheezing and weak, through the reinforced glass that protected him. "You were worth everything. To see you suffer, to experience your hatred, to look upon your body and see *you* in there... It was worth *everything*."

At least she got to watch him die.

But the manor is and always was a fortress, and getting through the glass and out into his wing of the building wasn't enough to free her. The locks and the bars are all still in place and the children he despised never returned, so she shut his body in the room he kept her in, and rationed everything as she searched for a way out.

She ran out of food after three weeks.

Now she waits, as weak as he became at the end, starving in absurd luxury, spending her remaining time looking down

from his bedroom window at the courtyard that imprisoned her. She'd try harder to keep her eyes open, but sleep is easy and willpower is difficult to come by, so the days slip quickly away.

And then there are voices. Echoing: coming from the cavernous entry hall. It seems impossible, seems like a hallucination, but with little left to lose she summons everything that remains, staggers out of the master bedroom and down the long corridor, legs shaking, ankles near collapse. After what feels like hours she finally makes it to the balcony over the hallway and she's about to lean on the banister, about to *rest*, when she puts names to the faces staring up at her and the voices shrieking in delight.

She tries to back away, starts making plans to run, to slip around them and out of a front door they might miraculously have left open, but she's weak and she's slow and she falls, drops backwards onto the carpet, has to sit there unable to move, has to listen to the thump of feet on the stairs, until Dorothy Marsden's looking down on her and Karen the sponsor's laughing like a hyena.

"That evil old bastard," Dorothy says. "He really kept you? All these years? I thought you dead, Vincent."

She's not heard that name in a long time. Old Smyth-Farrow forgot it as his faculties fled him, leaving him nothing but his self-satisfied malice, and she was glad to forget it, to finally leave behind the last vestige of the life that was stolen from her.

In Dorothy's mouth it's despicable, a corpse exhumed, and Valérie would spit, if only she could.

2019 DECEMBER 13 — FRIDAY

The second years got the morning off. Indira and their sponsors have apparently been briefing them on how situations like yesterday's kerfuffle with Melissa are *supposed* to go, and Stef likes to imagine Indira in full schoolteacher mode, sitting

with crossed ankles on a desk at the front of the room and asking questions like, “Can anyone tell me how to disarm taser-wielding blonde women?” while, say, Mia lurks in the back row with her hood up, hoping she doesn’t get called on because she hasn’t done the homework.

It’s left no-one to do the cooking, though, and the fridge has been depleted of all but a few bare scraps of leftovers, so Edy and Christine have been heating up batches of stew, which they’ve had volunteers ferrying in from a chest freezer somewhere. And when Maria came downstairs for her session with Aaron and sent Stef up so she wouldn’t distract him, she got roped into a production line of chopping and buttering a huge pile of French loaves.

The stew’s really good, though, even if she does have to intercept a few well-meaning questions from the second years while she eats. It’s understandable; the last time any of them saw her she was immobile and sobbing on the floor of the conservatory, and they have concerns. Pippa insists she shouldn’t be embarrassed about it, and Faye backs her up, and gradually all the girls at the table start discussing their own most mortifying moments at Dorley. Pippa’s: on her first time out as Pippa she spotted someone she used to know, panicked, hid in a bush, realised eventually that it was, in fact, someone else entirely, and returned to the Hall with her tail between her legs and twigs and leaves stuck in her hair.

“Is that why you had it cut so short?” Aisha asks, and Pippa pretends to throw a hunk of French bread at her.

“At least you had your tail removed shortly after,” Faye says, and Pippa gives in to temptation and the second year gets buttered bread all over her top.

After lunch, Christine hands Stef a container of stew to take downstairs for Aaron. Edy’s prepping one for Adam and Ella’s supposed to show up in a minute, so Stef lingers in a kitchen for a moment; it’s been a while since she last had a chance to talk to her.

Which means she's there when Melissa and Shahida re-enter the building, all energy and damp hair, and as soon as she catches Shahida's eye the woman's got her in a hug. Melissa, a few seconds later, carefully nudges Aaron's stew a bit closer to the middle of the table, so Shahida doesn't accidentally knock it over in her exuberance.

"Hi," Stef says. "You, um— Wow, you smell of chlorine."

Shahida stands back, briefly lets her go and then grabs her by each shoulder. "I do, Steph," she says, grinning. "Hi."

Behind Shahida, Melissa waves, and Stef smiles at her.

"Good swim?" Stef asks.

"The best," Shahida says, punctuating her words with squeezes of Stef's shoulders. "It's *so* good to *see* you, Stef! Especially now you're so pretty!"

"Oh, um, thank you!"

"I always wanted a chance to get to know you," Shahida continues. "And then Em disappeared and that was kind of all my life was about for a while. Eventually I realised that without her I'd never have a reason to see you again, and you'd grow up and so would I and that would be that. But now..." She looks back at Melissa. "Now I have the chance!"

"I've heard a lot about you."

"Same." Shahida squeezes one more time and then steps away. Stef briefly rocks in place, suddenly unsupported. "I'm going to be around for a while, at least until I find a job somewhere, so we're going to have *time*, we don't have to rush *anything*, but I just wanted to say... Hi."

"Hi," Stef says again.

"Hey, Stef," Melissa says, walking up behind Shahida and looping an arm around hers. "I'm sticking around, too. Until early January. So come see me, okay? Or maybe—" her smile turns nervous, "—maybe I'll come down there and see you."

“We’ve done so much with the place,” Edy says, watching with detached amusement from another corner of the kitchen.

“R— really?”

“No,” Stef says, “it’s still horrible.”

“We restuffed the couches!” Edy protests. “Actually, Melissa, we’re prepping a room for you, up on the second floor. It’ll be a bit bare for now, but after tonight you won’t have to squat at Steph’s again.”

“Perfect!” Shahida says, spinning around to take both of Melissa’s hands, and making Stef instantly feel like a third wheel. “I can go *home*, get some *cushions*...”

“Thanks, Edith,” Melissa says.

“No problem,” Edy says. “Someone’ll point you at the right place tomorrow, and we’ll get Shahida put on the system; just entry and room access, for now. As long as we can trust you!” She adds in a light tone, smiling and pointing a finger at Shahida.

“I’m here for Melissa,” Shahida says. “And Steph. And I like Paige and Tabitha and Victoria and Lorna, too.” She shrugs. “I’m not interested in making things hard for anyone.”

“Just remember,” Edy says, “we’re very powerful, we have friends in high places, we can ruin you with a stroke of a pen, and so on and so forth. Ah!” She looks over Melissa’s shoulder and spots Ella about to buzz herself in. “Steph, we should deliver our dinner before it gets cold.”

Stef’s swept up in Edy’s aura of busyness, and allows herself to be guided out through the dining hall and back down the stairs. She extricates herself at the security room, though, spotting Pippa, and remembering something she wanted to do.

Pippa’s still setting her things out on the table, having left the dining hall only minutes before Stef, so she doesn’t feel too bad about interrupting her work. She’s spreading out what look like lecture notes, and Stef catches her attention when she fails entirely to suppress a giggle at how organised they are:

printouts with text inside multiple nested bullet points and further annotated in neat but cramped handwriting in multiple colours.

“Hey, Steph,” Pippa says, an easy smile spreading across her face even though they saw each other barely ten minutes ago. Her eyes flick to the stew in Stef’s hands. “For Aaron?”

“Oh,” Stef says, remembering it, “uh, yeah.” She leans back, places it carefully on a flat spot on the security console. “Pip, can I hug you?”

Pippa’s smile widens, and she stands quickly, stepping forward and into the embrace. Stef remembers once being amused and a little bitter that she’s taller than Pippa, but right now it’s comforting, because right now she wants nothing more than to hold Pippa like a friend, like a sister, and that little extra height makes her feel protective.

Melissa’s back, and now Shahida’s back, and Christine says she’s thinking of visiting her old city, and it’s been hard to watch all of it happen and know that she is, at best, years away from being able to see Petra again, or Russ, or her parents. Harder still to think of Pippa, longer isolated from her family than either Stef or Christine. And she’s lonely. It’s been obvious in the amount of time she spends at the Hall, more than is required for her duties — especially now that Stef is, in large part, being sponsored by all of Dorley — and while her isolation’s abated somewhat, with Stef no longer in an adversarial role, with her repaired friendship with Christine, and with Rani, Stef still sees her sometimes, staring at nothing, running her fingers over her bracelet, turning it around on her wrist. So until something changes, until Pippa finds a way to see her family again, or until things get serious enough with Rani or some other girl that she starts a new family, Stef wants to be her sister, wants to be her friend, wants to be her comfort.

“You okay, Steph?” Pippa whispers, and Stef pushes closer into the hug.

“I’m okay. And you’re okay. I just...” She presses her cheek against Pippa’s. “I’m glad of you, all right? I’m happy we met. I’m *so* happy we’re friends. And even though it’s only been a little while, I’m happy to call you my sister.”

Pippa makes a strange sound, and starts stroking the small of Stef’s back. “You *are* my sister, Steph.”

“And Christine said Tabby might be reintroducing Will, soon, so it’s going to change down there, and I might not be able to get away as much with him knocking around, so I wanted to jump on this opportunity while I still have it.”

“You’re sweet,” Pippa says, and starts to withdraw, kissing Stef gently on the cheek.

“Love you, Pip,” Stef says, grinning and stepping away and wiping damp eyes with her sleeve.

“Love you too, Stephanie,” Pippa says.

Stef leaves her to her work, retrieving the stew and waving at her as she leaves. On the way down she spots Edy and Ella pouring out a bowl each for Adam and Martin in the lunch room and finds Maria and Aaron sitting at opposite ends of one of the couches in the common area, bickering.

“I’m still trying to understand the moral you were trying to teach me with that.”

“There was no moral. I promise.”

“No, see, because there *has* to be, because everything’s a tool, right? I was thinking about it and while, yeah, often there’s no malicious intent—”

“—‘often’—?”

“—there’s always a point to the things you say and do, yeah? So, like, I got to thinking, what was the point of the movie you picked?”

“I thought you might like something sweet and brainless to fall asleep in front of?”

“No, no, Maria, there’s no *way* it’s that simple, I’ve been down here for *months* now, I know how you work. What I’m getting at, right, what I think is the lesson, yes, is that you’re Ursula.”

“I’m not Ursula.”

“Can you sing?”

“I’m not Ursula.”

“No, you totally are! Who are your little eels? Is one of them Edy?”

“I’m going to smack you.”

“I’m *so* not scared of you.”

“I’ll send for Indira.”

“Fine. I give up. You’re not Ursula.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re the *crab*.”

As Aaron reaches towards her, Maria holds out a hand to keep him at bay and pulls her phone out of a pocket in her cargo pants. She dials — or pretends to dial — and says, “Hi, Indira? I have a disobedient little mermaid here, and I’d like to discuss a deal *vis-à-vis* exchanging their voice for something.”

“Don’t listen to her, Indira!” Aaron shouts, play-struggling against Maria’s outstretched hand, and Maria keeps up the poker face for another whole second before a snort breaks through, and then laughter, and she meets Stef’s eyes.

Aaron slowly turns around, cheeks red. He shrugs.

“I brought you some lunch,” Stef says.

They take it into Stef’s room in the end. Aaron argues against them going back to his room, because he hasn’t yet had the chance to ask Maria for that UV light and pack of cleansing wipes, so they make an impromptu table out of the chair and sit either side of it on cushions, keeping it from rolling away with their toes.

“I’m going to ask someone for more furniture,” Stef says, looking around the room. If she really is going to be more limited by Will’s presence — and Ollie and Raph’s, eventually — then maybe she can make her downstairs bedroom a little more like her upstairs bedroom. More pillows. A couple more chairs. Maybe a plushie.

“You really ate upstairs?” Aaron says, before spooning the last chunk of beef into his mouth and pouring the remains of the gravy after it.

“Yep.”

“You really *can* go everywhere, huh?”

“I can’t *leave*,” Stef says. “I mean, I *could*, probably, but it wouldn’t be wise because I’m supposed to be a secret. I’m supposed to be in Eastern Europe or somewhere. But, like, I suppose *technically* I can leave? Except they’d immediately come fetch me back and then I *couldn’t* leave any more, I bet. But yeah. I can go upstairs.”

“Because they know you won’t run. And they know you won’t tell anyone.”

“Yeah. Sorry.”

He waves a hand at her. “No, no, yeah, no, I understand. You have friends here. I get it. And, besides, I, uh...”

She reaches out, takes his flailing hand, and smiles at him when he looks at her. She knows she blushes, can feel the heat in her cheek, and unconsciously she bites her lip. He’s so fucking *cute*. How is that even possible? How is he the same boy she met all those weeks ago?

“‘Besides...’?” she prompts.

Trapped in her eyes, he stares at her for a while before shaking his head. “I have *no* idea where I was going with that.”

He picks up the plastic container and places it by the computer, and pushes the chair out of the way. It rattles across the floor and bumps into the bedside table behind him.

“You okay?” he says.

Everyone keeps asking that today. She gives it a moment’s thought; coming from him, it means something a little different. “Yes,” she says. “Thank you for last night. Not just for, um, telling me all that, but for giving me another chance.”

She’s still holding his hand, and he examines it, frowning. “You should have told me,” he says slowly, “but I know why you didn’t. And last night I was all, I can’t be mad at her because I’m such a piece of shit and I don’t deserve the truth, and that’s not at *all* a productive way to think about myself.”

“Is that Maria talking?”

He squirms out of her grip and rolls his eyes at her. “That was from *me* discussing with *her* some of the thoughts I had while *someone* was sleeping and missing all of *The Little Mermaid*, thank you very much.” Stef raises an eyebrow. “Fine,” he adds. “It’s her *words*. But it’s my sentiment. Thinking of myself as inherently worthless, while it might be technically *correct*, is not actually helpful. So!” He repositions, rolls his legs under himself, moves his cushion closer to Stef. Unintentionally, perhaps. “*Now* my thing is that I’m not mad because I’m capable of viewing your actions through a more objective lens. I know what I was like when you got here. I know what the others were like. I wouldn’t have come out to me, either. So then it’s just a matter of timing. And Stephanie—” he smiles, and she might have expected otherwise, but it’s a fond smile, a warm smile, “—your timing *sucked*.”

“Sorry,” she whispers.

He shuffles closer again. “Apology accepted.”

“Really? Just like that?”

“Hey, you brought me stew.”

“Aaron—”

“Stephanie.” Her name in his voice. She wants to hear it over and over again. It’s more than validation; there’s a thrill

to it, a shiver that takes over her spine and makes her want to reach for him and touch him.

She sits on her hands.

“I said to Pip,” she says, thinking as she goes, “when I ran into her just now, how happy I am to know her. And that goes for you, too. I know we haven’t known each other for long, but...” She bites her lip again, rewinding through everything she’s thought about him, all the realisations... All the fantasies. “You say you know what you were like when we met. Well, so do I. And I know you now. And *you* might say you’re not that different, but I can see the ways you’ve changed, and it makes me—”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Aaron says quietly.

“Say what?”

“I wouldn’t say I’m not different. Not any more. Steph, I’m *so* different.” He collects his hands in his lap, looks away. “I’m so different that I think if I saw the Aaron *you* met when you got here, if I saw the Aaron who lived *out there*, I’d kick his arse. I’d drag him down here myself. Sure, I might just drop him off and leave out the back door, but since that’s not an option I have...”

He’s filled with energy again, and it’s earthing itself through his hands. He’s turning them over in his lap, wrapping his fingers around his wrists, rubbing his thumbs together. Always moving, even though the rest of him is still.

She waits for him to collect his thoughts.

“I think I’m glad I’m here,” he says, almost silently. “I think I’m glad Maria — or whoever it was — stuck me with that needle. I’m glad I had to face my own shit. I’m glad I saw it reflected in crazier and crazier ways in Will, in Ollie, in fucking Declan. Seeing the urge to hurt people taken down different paths. You can’t deny you’ve hurt someone when you’ve fucking hit them, you know? But you can do it if all you’ve done is pushed yourself into her life, made her feel a bit less safe, made yourself into someone, *something* she has

to worry about. You can pretend. Until you see the same urge with a different outcome and you *understand*. It's all the same. Lashing out. Excuses. Reasons to cause pain. Reasons not to feel."

"You know what they're going to do to you, though."

"Yeah," he says, snapping his head up, looking her right in the eyes. Intense but not frightening. "Yeah, I know."

"You want to be a girl?"

"No. Not at all. But it's a way away from it, you know? And there's something easy about it, too. Maria and them, they've done it to countless boys. They've done it to each other. They've got a *system*. With instruction manuals and step-by-step guides and when you give up, when you decide that what matters to you isn't some gender you got slapped with basically at random when you were born but becoming someone *new*, well, suddenly it's simple. They've got the guides. I just follow them." He taps a finger on his knee. "Step by step. And what's so scary about being a girl, anyway, right? *You're* doing it. Maria did it, and she didn't even *want* to. And it's not like girls are worse than guys, either. Weaker or whatever. I've never thought that. Even if I pretended to." He snorts. "Truth is, I always kind of thought they were better than me. Got a bit bitter about that. Let it drive some... some nasty shit. So no; I don't want to be a girl. But I don't have a route to being a better version of Aaron. I literally wouldn't know where to begin."

"We could find one—"

"Stephanie," he says again, smiling. "I'm trying to tell you —"

"No," she protests, angry suddenly that he just seems to be accepting it, that there isn't anything she can do, and feeling stupid because she seems stuck in this endless cycle where she goes from wanting to get him out, to run from Dorley with him as fast as she can, to wanting him to get through the

programme, to change the way he seems to want to, to become a new person, but that means—

There's a finger under her chin. Pulling her in. There's a hand on her cheek. Filling her with warmth. And there's pressure on her lips and she realises she's closed her eyes in her frustration and so she opens them again and there he is, pressed against her, and the finger under her chin presses harder so she follows it up, climbs dumbly to her feet. Her chin drops; he's no longer pushing on it. Instead his hand finds the small of her back and she arches it, accepts his touch, pushes herself into him. She forces life into her limbs, touches him in the places he's touching her and, finally, feeling like she's been waiting for this for hours, days, years, she kisses him back.

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There's a uniform waiting for her on the chair by the door. Strange. It's been years since she was required to wear anything in particular, since the enmity faded to mundane, brutal hatred through the tedium of endless repetition. Granted, the old fuck's been in a worse mood than usual, stomping about her stolen estate with surprising vigour, slipped feet making comically soft noises on the carpet and made all the more amusing because Val still remembers when the bent and tired Dorothy was actually capable of being intimidating.

She despises the brutal practicality that keeps her here: she has the run of the house, keeps an ordinary bedroom far away from the hole Smyth-Farrow stuck her in, has a library of books, music cassettes and VHS movies; lives almost as Dorothy's carer, trapped in her service and inside these walls by the locks on the windows and doors and by the nine-digit code known only to the old woman and her dwindling cadre of sadists, themselves also ageing, decaying. Unable to leave but able, sometimes, to take petty revenge on the old Dorley lot. She hasn't seen Karen for a long time, but Dorothy dresses

only for comfort these days, and Frankie, Karen's replacement, dragged back into service from whatever corner of this horrid country she'd been skulking in, looks every one of her sixty-three years and more; Val delights in making herself up when she can, the better to emphasise that their abused prisoner still cleans up better than any of them.

The wages of sin is shitty skin.

They *could* take it out on her. Stop her estradiol. Restrict her food. Lock her back in her old room. But the fight's gone out of all of them, and Val's kept her hatred burning safely in the back of her mind, limiting herself to spitting in their food and laughing at their attempts to hurt her. Indolent old bitches. She could outrun and outfight them on her worst day.

And yet today there's a uniform. It's not one of the old ones, thank God, the ones Smyth-Farrow used to delight in; borderline fetishwear with cutouts in titillating places. It's just a housekeeper's uniform: beige dress cut to below the knee, white apron, dark tights.

They probably have visitors.

Dorothy still finds her pleasures sometimes, and Val wonders if she doesn't take something, if her orgasms are entirely medicated, if her eighty-one-year-old body can't even delight in deadnaming and misgendering Valérie any more without serious pharmaceutical assistance. She's sharper on those days, anyway, and it's always when someone comes to visit, when the old woman wants to pretend she's still the fierce and powerful Grandmother, and not a revenant, hiding in a mansion, waiting to follow its last true owner to an ignominious end. Hated by all; feared by no-one who still matters.

Val dresses. Does her makeup for good measure. There's pleasure in looking nice, and even at fifty-three her face is an excellent canvas.

The old Smyth-Farrow estate is essentially four buildings in one, each added decades after the last to expand the

mansion and enclose the courtyard, and the failed attempts with each addition to match materials have become increasingly obvious as the place ages, as it crumbles along with Dorothy and the rest of them. She had money once, Val knows, but she suspects the bulk of it goes on protection, with none left for maintenance; the old woman has enemies still, which is presumably why she claimed Smyth-Farrow's place for herself: even in its death throes it remains a fortress.

Val's room is in the servants' quarters on the far side of the house from the front hall and the main suites, and she strides through the place as if she owns it, because it annoys the hell out of Dorothy when she does.

But the old bitch looks pleased. Ecstatic, even.

"Vincent!" she exclaims. Ah. Back to that, are we? Val tries to examine her pupils from afar, to see if she's on something. "It's good to see you in uniform once more. It's about time we had some more discipline around here!"

"What do you want?" Val says, taking up station near the corridor that leads away towards the parlour and the main kitchen. If this is a trick, if there's someone waiting for her, she knows the estate well enough to lead them on a merry chase.

"I have a present for you, Vince!" The woman's grinning like a child.

Val props her arms on her hips and waits and Dorothy, realising that she's got all the reaction she's going to get for now, claps her hands. Frankie steps through into the hall from the entryway, dragging a near-naked woman behind her.

No.

Not a woman.

But not a man any more.

Valérie would recognise a Dorley girl in the early stages anywhere. The girl Frankie deposits roughly on the tiled floor, who drops limply to her knees and looks off into the distance

with the stare of someone who has no particular use for anything they can see, has a relatively large frame. She's got the slightly loose skin of too-rapid weight loss and the pallor of one who's been starved. Val looks for the telltale scars near the crotch and finds them, still raw and new, for the girl makes no effort to hide herself. She'll have been castrated, kept without food and with very little water until all fat has dissolved and all muscle has wasted away, and then put on a high estrogen dose, to encourage development in the 'right' places. The only item of clothing she's wearing is a bra, one of the large, sturdy sort you have to wear after breast surgery, and a slight redness to the skin on her cheeks and neck suggests she's had some hair removal treatment as well. Her forehead and nose are clad in bandages that make Val think of Dee, looking up at her from the recovery bed back at Dorley Hall. Most tellingly of all, though, her face is marked with despair, the sort of despair Val hasn't seen since Smyth-Farrow last dropped a new girl in her lap with the twisted grin of one who is already fantasising about how he will murder her.

Grandmother's modus operandi. Clear as day. She just never thought she'd see it again.

Dorothy's cackling and Frankie's smirking but Val ignores them both, walks over to the girl and crouches down in front of her, lifts her face until she can look her in the eye.

She won't be like she used to be, under Smyth-Farrow. She can't be that cruel any more.

"Hello," she says. "I'm not like them. I won't hurt you."

"*You* might not," Frankie says, in her appalling accent, and laughs her gratingly unpleasant laugh.

"Why is she here?" Val asks, glaring at Dorothy.

The old woman's face turns sour. "Because of Elle," she says. "Because she *took* from me. Again! So this time, I took from her in return. I'm not entirely without resources."

"She started something," Frankie says with satisfaction. "We're just firing back."

“You’re going to train him,” Dorothy says. “You’re going to make him into another *you*. And you’ll do it, or we’ll shut you in your old room. No books. No tapes. No food.”

Val nods. Old threats. She turns a little, shutting the old women out, trying to make it so it’s just her and the new girl in their own little world. Trying to make it safe. She wishes she’d guessed this was about to happen so she could have brought a robe or a towel or something to cover the girl’s nakedness, but if she’s going to be living in the servants’ quarters with her, there’ll be something.

“Hey, sweetheart,” she says quietly, holding out a hand to the girl and, when she doesn’t respond, placing it slowly and carefully on her forearm. “What’s your name?”

The girl doesn’t meet her eyes. Barely moves, except to shift her weight, to subtly accept Valérie’s hand on her.

“Declan,” the girl says.

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Alyson Greaves is a white trans woman who lives in a very small flat in a very large city. She can be found online at twitter.com/badambulist, where she releases chapter-by-chapter updates for her fiction and complains about her bad shoulder.

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