

SUSIE TATE



ANYTHING
BUT EASY

OPPOSITES ATTRACT THEN OPPOSITES ATTACK

Anything but Easy

Susie Tate

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Chapter 1

Are you even a bloody doctor?

Kira

“Kira, you maniac!” Mark grunted, finally dropping the remote after I elbowed him in the stomach. My face split into a wide grin as I scrambled away, remote in hand.

“Man up, Marky Mark,” I said, pressing some buttons to change over to BBC HD. “You know I gotta get my news on in high-def these days. And you were about to turn over to *Say Yes to the Dress*, you big queen.”

“I’m a queen and proud Ki-Ki. And since when don’t you like *Yes to the Dress*?”

“I think we could all do with a bit of current affairs, don’t you, Mark?” I used my best haughty tone as I flung my arm out to the rest of the genitourinary department coffee room. Apart from me and Mark, there was only a locum GU consultant who was trying his best to ignore us, and Sandra, a staff nurse so used to me that she barely even looked up from her tuna salad. “Some of us *care* about the world at large.”

I paused the telly and took a deep breath in. Mark held up both his hands and shook his head.

“Kira, don’t you dare si—”

I leapt off the sofa, got right in Mark’s face and went into my version of *Fight the Power* by Public Enemy, complete with my pop and lock rap moves.

I was cut off by him dragging me up from a slut drop and clamping his hand over my mouth. Just as I was getting into it, the fun sponge. Sandra’s shoulders were shaking with laughter.

“No. Rapping.” Mark looked at me sternly. “You are a small white English girl with hippy tendencies, *not* an African-American freedom fighter from the ghettos of New York.”

“We can all fight the powers that be, Mark.” I grabbed the remote and started up the News again. “But it starts with us being *well informed*.”

The headlines came to an end and I sat back with a dreamy sigh as *He*

filled the screen. Mark rolled his eyes.

“Well informed, my arse. You’re obsessed . . . with a fucking *Tory*.”

I shushed him, my gaze intent on the glorious sight in front of me as I leaned forward over my knees to get a better look.

“Yeah,” I breathed. “Yeah, you *dirty* little politician, you. Wear that suit, you naughty man. Own it. Work it.”

You’d be forgiven for thinking I was watching a Magic Mike routine rather than the current Minister of State for Business, Energy and Clean Growth walk out of Number 10 Downing street and get into a waiting car. He was tall, taller even than the close protection officers that flanked him, and he filled that immaculate suit out nicely. His hair was dark but his eyes were light blue and piercing. Every time he looked into the camera during a speech, he gave me shivers up my spine.

“I love the way he ignores the press. He’s always got this stern, serious thing going on.” I flopped back with a loud groan as the image of Barclay Lucas was replaced by Fiona Bruce. I fanned myself for a minute. “Holy cockwombs. I’m so turned on I’m not sure I can cope with my clinic this afternoon.”

“This obsession is getting weird, Ki Ki,” Mark said. “I mean he’s hot, but honestly. A *politician*?”

“But I love his commanding presence. The way he doesn’t take any crap. He’s just like taking global warming and giving it a good spanking. He cares about stuff. And, well, he’s got a nice arse. I think. Under the suits. At least, I imagine it’s nice.”

I would agree with Mark that Barclay Lucas was not the most logical subject of a Kira Crush – there was a gaping chasm between him and my normal type (think dreadlocks, eyelids half-mast after smoking too much weed, questionable personal hygiene). But the thing about Barclay was that even if his party did support cuts to legal aid, housing benefit and didn’t fully support unions, the times I’d heard him speak on *Question Time* or in the Houses of Parliament (yes I might be a bit of a flake, but that doesn’t mean I don’t like to get my politics on of an evening) he had this *fire* in his eyes, this passion for change. Despite being a Tory, he still seemed to be bent on improving social inequality. And he was the driving force behind the Energy Revolution, which he believed would benefit the most disadvantaged in society *and* the environment. After nuclear fusion producing clean energy for the national grid became a real possibility two years ago, some politicians

had been dragging their feet. Barclay was certainly not. And the way he spoke about it – the intense focus and absolute clarity of his words – it was impossible not to believe him. It was impossible *not* to believe that yes, Barclay Lucas could save this country. In fact, forget the country: Barclay Lucas could save the world.

“Well, he’s gone now so can you please . . .” Mark made another lunge for the remote, but when he was within reaching distance I smirked, leaned forward and licked his face. He had this weird thing about germs. He wouldn’t eat a pasty after it had fallen onto the canteen floor, not even when it was within the five-second rule – fussy, wasteful weirdo.

“Ugh!” he said, recoiling in horror. “You are so gross. I do not want girl cooties, thank you very much.”

“Plenty of peeps would pay good money to have me lick their faces,” I told him, before catching the locum consultant looking over at us in horror and giving him a cheeky one-eyebrow raise. He abruptly abandoned his cheese sandwich and made a dash for the nearest exit.

“Try not to scare off the locums, Kira,” Sandra said in a patient tone, shaking her head. “You know it’s hard enough to get them in the first place and he’s one of the good ones.”

“He’s a pussy is what he is,” I muttered under my breath, snatching up the uneaten half of the cheese sandwich he’d left and shoving it in my mouth. “Come on, losers. Those willies and foofs out there aren’t going to save themselves.”

“Actually Kira, you’re not doing the walk-in today,” she said. “Prof’s had to go to some type of emergency meeting. You’re covering his HIV clinic.”

I smiled. It wasn’t that I minded the bread-and-butter genitourinary medicine stuff, but once in a while it was good to actually get stuck into some difficult cases, and Prof’s clinics were full of those.

I sighed and sat back in my chair to look at the gaunt, scruffy, but surprisingly still handsome, man in front of me. Surprisingly because the skin of his face was red and flaky with seborrhoeic dermatitis, his cheeks were hollow and he wore a sullen, pissed-off expression. Why had I thought that tackling tricky cases would be a nice change of pace? This guy was just depressing. When I’d seen that his second name was Lucas, I’d felt like it was a cosmic sign of how well my day was going to go. I was *very* into

cosmic signs. For me, daydreaming about a guy called Lucas and then seeing that same name on a set of notes in front of me was a good one. I was now realising that my theory had some holes.

“Mr Lucas . . . Henry,” I said, noticing a flinch at the use of his first name, but still no attempt at actual eye contact. “Since your hospital admission with PCP you’ve been on antiretrovirals for a good few months.”

Henry had had a dry cough for long time which he had ignored until it became difficult for him to breathe. He was admitted to hospital a year ago and his chest x-ray showed diffuse shadowing, suggesting Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia, or PCP – a marker of the immunosuppression associated with AIDS. An HIV test was requested in his first set of blood tests and the result had been positive. The pneumonia was treated with antibiotics and he was discharged with antiretroviral medication, but he’d missed two follow-ups in clinic since then. The one time he had actually attended, Prof had described him as having a ‘flat affect’, meaning he’d appeared emotionless. Prof had been concerned, but his attempts to contact Henry after his subsequent missed appointments had been unsuccessful.

“Your CD4 counts and viral load aren’t improving. I . . . there doesn’t really seem to be a reason why they’re not getting any better. We’d expect at this stage for there to be a drastic change in the numbers.”

Henry shrugged and scuffed his feet on the floor. His hair looked greasy and he had a good few days of beard growth on his face – not in the nice, trimmed and trendy beard way, more like the homeless person way.

I cleared my throat and tried again. “Do you . . . Henry, do you actually *take* the meds?”

I waited and watched as he shrugged his thin shoulders, before giving a short nod: not altogether convincing.

“I mean, if you were *taking* the antiretrovirals your CD4 count should be almost undetectable and I just –”

“You done?” he cut in, scraping his chair back and pushing up as if to leave.

“Uh, I –”

“Because this was supposed to be *Professor Patel’s* clinic.” He flashed me a brief unimpressed look. “Not sure I’m up for a lecture from one of his minions, to be honest.”

I took a deep breath in through my nose and let it out again slowly. It wouldn’t do to punch one of the HIV patients in the face.

“For fuck’s sake,” I muttered under my breath.

“What did you say?” he asked, eyes wide and no longer looking down at his feet.

“I said . . .” I paused to reflect on the consequences of expressing my real opinion. All too often I’d landed in hot water for just that. But nothing was getting through to this guy. Prof had been trying to contact him for weeks and he’d only gone downhill. I decided to take a chance. “I said, for *fuck’s sake*.”

Henry’s mouth dropped open. At least I had his attention. “You can’t speak to patients like that! Who the hell do you think you are?”

“Er, well the swearing police haven’t exactly broken down the door so, I’m gonna take a guess and say yes, yes I can. Or rather yes, if the patient in question is a misogynistic dickhead.”

“*Excuse me?*”

“Listen, I am *trying* to help you here. Do you think I sit around in clinic waiting to talk lying wankpuffins into taking their life-saving medication that the NHS is providing for them for shits and giggles? Do you have any idea what someone in Sub-Saharan Africa would do to get their hands on these meds? Well? Do you?”

I had full eye contact from Henry now.

“You-you called me a *wankpuffin* . . .” he spluttered, looking a mixture of shocked and bizarrely ever so slightly respectful. “What does that even mean?”

“I’m sure that in other areas of your life, Henry, you’re a perfectly reasonable human being,” I told him. “But as far as this clinic goes and this treatment, you *are* being a wankpuffin. Now, do you want to tell me why you’re not taking the medication?”

“You can’t speak to me like that.” His tone was angry now and he was leaning forwards in his chair towards me. “Are you even a bloody doctor? You don’t *look* like a doctor.”

That, I thought, was a fair comment. I was wearing a pair of loose sarong trousers I’d bought at the Full Moon Party in Thailand, and a gypsy top complete with tiny mini mirrors around the hem. My earrings were long and contained the odd feather. I also had flip-flops on.

“Henry, I assure you I am a qualified doctor. I—”

“So what are you? First year or something?”

“I’m a registrar.”

He looked genuinely shocked and swiped his hand through the air in dismissal. “No way. No way in hell.”

“When I was applying for training, I would not have got away with wearing this. Not much they can do about it now though. As you can see, we’re not exactly overstaffed. The first thing I did after the interview for my training scheme was give away all my stud earrings. So, now that we’ve established my credentials, let’s get back to the task at hand. Why aren’t you taking your meds? No bullshit this time.”

“Ugh!” Henry flung his hands up and slouched back in the chair. “What’s the fucking point? They won’t *cure* me, will they? There’s no goddamn cure for this bloody disease.”

I shifted forward in my chair and waited until I had full eye contact with Henry before I spoke.

“You are probably always going to be HIV positive, yes. But that doesn’t mean you have to die from it. The medications now can control it so that it becomes just another chronic disease, like diabetes.”

“Don’t you get it?” he exploded, suddenly jumping out of the chair and pacing up and down the room. “I don’t *want* to live. Who wants a life where they can’t do anything meaningful? I used to be the *big man* – did you know that?” He laughed, but there was no real humour there. “At least I thought I was. Living the high life, fast women, fast cars. I *thought* I was the dog’s bollocks, and then . . . bam! All of that goes away.” I watched as the angry energy drained out of him and he sunk back into his chair. After a minute of silence he spoke again, but his voice was much quieter than before. “The worst thing is . . .” He swallowed and cleared his throat before carrying on in a husky, low voice. “The worst thing is that I brought it on myself. I’m not one of those innocent people who picked up HIV ‘through no fault of their own’, I shot it into my arm along with the drugs I was taking at the time . . . for a laugh. Because I was bloody *bored*.” He looked back down at the floor and heaved a sigh as his shoulder slumped in defeat. “I deserve to die,” he whispered to his feet.

I closed my eyes slowly and felt my chest tighten. When I opened them, I saw a tear tracking down one of his hollow cheeks.

“You don’t deserve to die, Henry,” I said, softly now, but all I got was a sniff in response. “Do you think that just because you lived large and had a good time you deserved to contract a disease and die from it? Nobody *deserves* to contract HIV. It’s not like you were injecting heroine into small

children's eyeballs and the needle slipped. You were using it as a recreational drug for yourself. You made a poor choice. That doesn't mean you deserve to die."

"I should go," he muttered, his hands going to the arms of his chair as if to push up to standing again.

I acted on instinct and my hand shot out to cover his thin forearm. "And who says you can't have a meaningful life? Lots of people with HIV live very full lives."

Henry shrugged, but did settle back into the chair. "You know what I mean," he whispered.

"Ah," I said. "Intercourse!"

Henry blinked once before staring at me. "You are *not* normal."

I waved a hand dismissively in front of myself. "Of course I'm not, but that's beside the point. You want some punani, yes? I mean, I'm guessing you're not gay. My gaydar is better than a Grindr app at an Elton John concert, and you, my friend, are straight. Also, I hate to generalize but gay men tend to cope *way* better with a diagnosis of HIV and are always super organized about their meds – something I suspect you are very much not."

Henry rolled his eyes but I caught his lips twitching. I was getting somewhere.

"I'm hardly in a fit bloody state to go looking for 'punani', as you so eloquently put it. I thought you were a sexual health doctor. Shouldn't you be referring to genitals in the correct way?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," I said, leaning forward and propping my chin on my hand on the desk. "I'll start again: You would like to seek out some receptive vaginas for sexual intercourse. Am I right?" He sighed, but the lip twitch was back again. "We-e-e-ll," I drew out the word. "If you want to get into a 'fit state', you have to start taking your medication."

The lip twitch faded rapidly and a scowl took its place. "What the fuck would the point be of that?" he asked. "Who is going to want to have sex with a bloke who's HIV positive?"

I sat back in my chair and softened my expression. "I don't know, Henry," I said. "Maybe someone who finds him attractive, likes his (admittedly at the moment less than sparkling, but I assume circumstances have contributed to that) personality – maybe even falls in love with him. That's who."

Henry huffed and looked down at his feet again. "Nobody, however

much they *love* me, is going to risk their health to have a relationship with me. And nor should they.”

“Henry, antiretroviral therapy can reduce a person’s viral load to the point where it is so low that it cannot be detected by measurements in the lab. You must have been told this when you were first diagnosed? If you have an undetectable viral load in your blood for at least six months, you *cannot* transmit HIV through sex. Undetectable equals Untransmittable. We call it U=U. I’m not saying you wouldn’t continue to wear condoms in those circumstances but—”

“Wh—what?” His eyes had snapped up to mine and I saw something flash through them, something that looked a little like hope.

“If you take your meds as prescribed (just one tablet a day), not only will your health improve, but you can start thinking about punani again. *And*, do you think they’re not working on a cure right now? HIV treatment has come so far in such a short space of time. Do you think in ten years time it won’t have progressed even further? You can’t just give up. The researchers working on it aren’t giving up, so there’s no reason for you to pussy out up the stairway to heaven just because you might have to have a few awkward convos with potential lady friends before you do the dirty with them.”

Henry started rubbing the back of his neck as his head dropped forward and he let out a puff of air.

“You’ve got to *try*, Henry,” I whispered. “Shit happens, life isn’t perfect. But you can’t just give up.”

His hand dropped from his neck and he sat up straighter in his chair. He squared his jaw and his eyes lit with a new determination. Yes, I thought, this guy could definitely be hot if his skin improved, he gained a fair few kilos, and he changed his attitude.

“Okay,” he said, his tone stronger than before. “Take me through the med schedule again.”

Chapter 2

Anything but easy

Kira

“Dr Murphy?” Nigel Derwent, the hospital director, was looking at me with a pained expression. The last time I’d really spoken to him was at my ARCP (Annual Review of Competence and Progression) a year ago. The suit I’d worn to that was a world away from the purple leggings and paisley tunic I was wearing now. “Great, just great,” he muttered to himself, and I suppressed an eye roll as he started looking up and down the corridor as if to try and find another, more suitably dressed, Dr Murphy.

“Sir!” I clipped out, before clicking my heels together and lifting my hand to my forehead in a full-on salute. Sometimes my brain short-circuited a little around authority figures and I lost touch with what was respectful and normal, and what was just plain odd. Nigel looked unimpressed. “Er, hi. You, um, wanted to see me?” I said, lowering my arm and biting my lip. “It’s just I’m in the middle of a ward round. The junior doc I left to finish off doesn’t know his arse from his elbow, so I might need to –”

“Right, right,” he said, and he swallowed as his hand moved to his neck to attempt to loosen his collar. “I, I . . .” he trailed off and gave my outfit another pained look. “We have a *special* visitor. It’s a rather . . . sensitive matter, so before you go in I’m going to have to ask for your discretion.”

“Oooh discretion.” I smiled, as excitement leaked into my voice. “You don’t have to worry about me. I’m the *soul* of discretion. Like a blind badger with laryngitis – you can trust me.”

He blinked. Twice.

“Just . . . just please, *try* to be professional, alright?”

“Yes, sir!” This time for some reason I gave a double salute, which ended up as sort of jazz hands manoeuvre. Nigel closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose for a second.

“Okay,” he said eventually. “Follow me.”

“Dr Murphy?”

I knew my mouth was hanging open, but I didn't seem to have the power in my jaw muscles to close it. I was lost for words. Not a common occurrence for me. In fact, I could not recall *ever* being lost for words before, even in childhood.

I stared at the strong, tanned hand that was extended in my direction. His shirt had cufflinks, *cufflinks*. The only time any of the men in my life ever wore cufflinks was to weddings, and only then if they could find them: often they settled for safety pins. Nigel cleared his throat and I gave a small start. My hand jerked forward, but instead of just taking his, I smacked it . . . hard. Horrified, I withdrew my hand and took a small step back. He blinked at me and slowly lowered his arm, without changing his expression – as if small women smacking him happened on a regular basis. I felt heat flood my cheeks and realised I was blushing. I never, *never* blushed. I was a sexual health doctor for badger's sake: nothing *ever* embarrassed me. Embarrassment just wasn't a Kira thing. But standing here in front of this man, I was paralysed with it.

Barclay Lucas.

In the flesh.

Standing in Nigel Derwent's office and regarding me with a baffled expression.

He looked even better than he did on the telly. His tie was ever so slightly loosened. His thick, dark hair was more ruffled than normal and he had stubble darkening his jaw line. The only thing that remained immaculate was his pocket square. And he was tall. Really tall. Damn it, I *needed* to close my bloody mouth.

“Kira?” Nigel prompted through clenched teeth and finally, finally I managed to snap my mouth closed.

“Er, sorry,” I said into the silence, “about the hand slapping.” I gestured between my hand and his. “That was weird.”

Barclay gave me a measured look, ran his fingers through his hair and then turned his attention to Nigel. “*This* is the Dr Murphy in question? There isn't another, *different* Dr Murphy?” His crisp, posh, public school accent was unbelievably intimidating at close range.

Nigel shrugged. “She's the only Dr Murphy in the hospital. Believe me, if I could find another one, I would.”

I scowled at Nigel and crossed my arms over my chest.

Barclay sighed and propped a hip up against Nigel's huge desk. "Dr Murphy, please, take a seat," he offered, sweeping his hand out to the two crappy, plastic NHS standard-issue chairs beside me.

"Yes, yes," Nigel said, bustling to the other side of his desk to his own leather over-sized chair. "Let's all sit down and discuss this . . . situation."

Barclay, however, made no move from his position next to the desk. He had crossed his arms over his broad chest and was staring at me like I was a bug under the microscope. My eyes flicked from Barclay to Nigel and I raised my eyebrows but did not sit down.

"You treated my brother," Barclay told me.

I frowned. "Your brother?"

"Yes, my brother. Henry."

"Henry?" I said under my breath and then my mouth dropped open again. "Holy sh–Shetland Isles! Henry *Lucas*. Henry is your brother?"

I felt the heat fade from my cheeks as they drained of all colour. Was he here to complain? I thought Henry had got over the whole *me telling him he's a wankpuffin, a pussy and a misogynistic dickhead thing*. It had happened over a month ago, and last week when I'd seen him in the waiting room, he'd lifted his chin and given me a very small smile of acknowledgement. His skin had been clear and he was looking way less skeletal now. Prof said his viral load had dropped dramatically. Had the little shit gone whining to his brother because I'd sworn at him? If so, he was more of a pussy than I'd thought.

"Listen, I'm sorry if he found my methods a bit . . . heavy on the profanity and light on the, er . . . respect. But, before I started dropping f-bombs . . ." Nigel made a choked sound from behind his desk which I ignored ". . . he wasn't listening to a word I was saying. And I didn't–"

"Dr Murphy," Barclay said, cutting me off. "You saved my brother's life." Barclay didn't say this in an emotional way, merely as if he was stating a fact.

My eyes went wide with surprise. Not a complaint then.

"Before you saw him in clinic, he had *never* taken his antiretroviral medication. After he nearly died of pneumonia, he cut my parents off completely and barely speaks to me. Nothing we said, nor any of the private consultants I paid thousands for, or even Professor Patel could convince him to start treatment. But he sees you for ten minutes and he's . . ." Barclay

paused and looked away for a moment as he swallowed. When he spoke again, his voice had a rough edge to it. “He has hope. You gave him hope. So, Dr Murphy I don’t give a damn what sort of profanity you used when you spoke to him. In my mind you’re a miracle worker.”

“Oh,” I said as I took a long blink. “Um, well. That’s . . . good to know.”

“He says he’s not seeing you in the clinic anymore,” Barclay continued.

“Well, he’s under Prof’s care and I don’t usually run the HIV clinics. I just step in to help Prof every so often. I’m mostly on the wards or in the sexual health clinic.”

“I want Henry to see *you* in clinic,” he said, his tone firm. I narrowed my eyes – I’d never been terribly good at taking instructions from authority figures, no matter how handsome they were.

“Well, yes, I’m sure that can be arranged,” Nigel put in. “We’ll easily sort things out so that Dr Murphy will–”

“Mr Derwent,” I said, all business now and, with the way Nigel’s eyebrows went up, I could tell I’d surprised him. “With respect, you don’t know how my department functions. We’re short-staffed in the sexual health clinic *and* on the wards. Neither of those are areas that Prof is going to be able to help with. I do *not* run the HIV clinics and–”

“I’ll pay you,” Barclay cut me off, again. My temper flared.

“I get *paid* by the hospital,” I told him.

“I’ll pay you to see him privately, outside of your hospital hours.”

“I don’t do private work. I do enough hours here. Way over what I’m contracted.” I gave Nigel a pointed look and he shifted in his chair. GU medicine was chronically understaffed.

“Then I’ll pay the hospital for a replacement to cover you. Two replacements. And I’ll pay *you* to see my brother.”

“Privately?”

“Privately.”

I shook my head. “I don’t do private work.”

“Are you being deliberately obtuse?” Barclay clipped, and I realised that it wasn’t just my temper that was flaring.

“No, I am not being,” I paused and lowered my voice to a poor imitation of his posh one, “‘deliberately obtuse’. I’m just telling you: I don’t do private work *ever*. I work for the NHS *exclusively*.”

“That’s not true,” he shot back. “You’ve worked for Médecins sans Frontières. You worked for them last year.”

I beat back the shock that he knew so much about me, and levelled him with my best withering look. “That is hardly private work, Mr Lucas.”

“It’s not exactly NHS work either.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just because I worked for a humanitarian organisation, who only covered my living expenses by the way, does not mean I am for hire.”

“I’ll pay you five hundred pounds per appointment with Henry. Plus, travel expenses to the house. He . . . he won’t agree to extra visits to the hospital.”

“Mr Lucas, I don’t think you under—”

“A thousand. A thousand per appointment.”

“I don’t do private work,” I gritted out.

“Why not? What the hell is wrong with private work?”

“I just don’t do it. I don’t need the hassle of setting up the extra indemnity cover. And it’s . . . it’s against my principles, okay?”

“It’s against your principles to earn perfectly good money?”

“No, Mr Lucas. It’s against my principles to earn money outside the NHS, looking after rich people who can use *their* money to jump the waiting lists. I know that might be tricky for someone of your political persuasion to understand, but it’s not why I went into medicine. Anyway, Henry *should* stay under Prof’s care. He is a leading light in HIV, he lectures all over the world. And Henry *has* to come into the clinic. That’s where the blood tests are taken, that’s where we have all the equipment.”

“I know Professor Patel’s credentials,” Barclay said through gritted teeth. “Why the hell do you think I had Henry go to his clinic in the first place? I’m not saying he should stop coming into the hospital clinics. This would be *extra* input for him.”

“Right, well . . .”

“He *needs* you,” he said, that rough quality back in his voice and an almost desperate expression crossing his face. “My little brother needs you, Dr Murphy. We almost lost him.” And then his blue eyes connected with mine and he swallowed, before saying the one word that I knew could break my resolve. “Please.”

I sighed and looked down at my feet before meeting his eyes again. “Okay.”

“Okay?” He’d pushed up from the desk now, his arms were uncrossed and the corners of his mouth had tipped up in a barely-there smile. I took in a sharp breath and ended up choking on my own saliva. Seriously, the man was so attractive it was almost unreal.

“Y–yes,” I managed to get out through my coughing.

“Are you quite alright?” Barclay asked.

“Fine, fine,” I spluttered, feeling a couple of tears streaming down my now likely red cheeks and feeling like an idiot. I scrubbed them away, glad that I’d forgotten mascara that morning and cleared my throat. “I’ll see Henry, but *not* as his doctor.”

Barclay’s eyebrows drew together and he re-crossed his arms. “What do you mean ‘not as his doctor’? How else would you help him?”

“Look, he needs to carry on seeing Prof at the hospital. And I don’t take money for private work. If you really think that him seeing me would help, then I’ll go to him. But no payment. No nothing. Not private work. As a *friend*.”

“You’ll go and see him . . . for free?” He looked truly confused now.

“Listen, you say he needs to stay motivated. You say he found what I told him helpful. Well, I don’t have to do that in a medical capacity. I can do that as a friend.”

“Well, I’d really rather formalise the agreement.”

I suppressed another eye roll at his stuffy tone. “Well, *I’m* not exactly a formal gal and I’m not going to take over his care from Prof. So, it’s my way or no way.”

“You’re very . . . unusual,” he said, staring down at me with a bemused expression.

“Yes, yes, I am.” I stood up a little straighter and gave him a wide smile. The light buzzing that had been going off intermittently from his pocket grew more insistent, and he finally withdrew his phone, giving the screen an angry glance.

“Right, I’m sorry but I’ve got to go. If I can have your mobile number then I’ll text you the details.”

“Oh sure,” I said, rattling it off and trying not to get too excited that *Barclay Lucas* had my phone number. He made a move to leave after he’d typed it into his phone and I leapt up from the chair to block his way, sticking my hand out for him to shake. “I guess this means we’re friends too now,” I said through another wide smile.

“As long as you’re going to see Henry then . . .” he trailed off and shook my hand, looking less than impressed at the prospect of a friendship with me in the offing. His hand was warm and dry and his grip was firm. I stared down at the veins running along the back of it and the light dusting of hair over its surface as if it was the most fascinating sight I’d seen that year.

I, Kira Murphy, was holding hands with Barclay Lucas.

He eventually pulled back, but my hand had decided that it was quite happy where it was for the moment and so clung on, only letting go when he gave his a sharp tug and I nearly fell into his broad chest.

“Righty ho!” I said as he skirted around me, giving Nigel a cursory, parting head nod.

“Oh, er . . . about my phone,” I called out. Barclay had just reached the door and had his hand on the knob – he looked wistfully at his potential exit for a moment before turning back to me.

“Yes?” he asked with forced politeness.

“Well, the cheeky badger’s not *that* great at text messages.”

“It can’t receive text messages?”

“It *can*, it’s just they don’t really display as any language I would be able to recognise. Started to do it a few weeks ago. I got excited for a bit ’cause I thought I might be receiving intelligence from the Russians, but the guy at Carphone Warehouse seemed to think it’s just ’cause it’s a Nokia from 1998.”

“You have a phone from 1998?”

“It can take calls though. So you could ring me. Except I don’t *really* take it anywhere, and I only check it once every couple of days and, er . . . sometimes I forget.”

One of Barclay’s hands went up to the back of his neck and he stared down at his shoes. “Do you have an email address?”

“Hmm, no,” I admitted, making an eek face at Nigel who looked on the verge of a heart attack.

“Dr Murphy, you *do* have an NHS email,” Nigel put in, shooting me a furious look.

“Oh, yes. See, I don’t really check that either so . . .”

“You’re an NHS doctor,” Barclay told me. Something I already knew. “Surely an NHS doctor has to be contactable in an emergency?”

“I do my on-calls on site and I have a work phone and a pager for them. My personal mobile doesn’t factor.”

“Christ, so what are we left with? Smoke signals?” He let out a deeply frustrated sigh. “Right, okay, my PA will ring you on your phone *and* she’ll contact Mr Derwent.”

“Yes, yes that’s fine,” stammered Nigel, who had been going more and more red in the face throughout my exchange with Barclay. He scrambled up from his chair and made his way around the desk. “Of course, I can get hold of Dr Murphy.”

“Sorted then,” I said. “Get your minion to give me the deets of Henry’s gaffe, and a time he wants me to come over, and we’ll work it out. Easy.”

“Dr Murphy,” Barclay said as he turned away from the door and towards me again. “Do you know what I do for a living?”

“Er, yes. I kind of do,” I murmured.

“Then you must realise that a lot of my time is spent in meetings, negotiating with people, yes?” I nodded. “So, believe me, I have a good frame of reference and a vast amount of experience to draw on when I say that this,” he pointed back and forth between us, “was anything but easy.”

Chapter 3

Please, please never mention my brother's arse again

Kira

“Woah!” Mark breathed as we both looked up at the vast terraced house. “Are you sure this is Henry’s place? That dude always looks pretty rough when he comes to the clinic.”

“Well, this is the address Nigel gave me,” I muttered, pulling the now ratty piece of paper out of my bag and peering at it again.

“Bloody hell, I didn’t think people actually lived this close to Westminster. This place must cost a fortune.”

“Well, the Lucases are proper loaded, aren’t they? It’s probably a family house or something.” Mr Lucas Senior was a judge, and Mrs Lucas a barrister with old money. I’d been Googling, and they were an impressive family.

“I still can’t believe you met him. After all your drooling in front of the news over that man and now you meet him in the flesh. You always were a jammy bugger. Maybe this bodes well for *my* chances of running into Chris Hemsworth.”

“Do *not* mention my Barclay obsession in front of his brother,” I snapped, and for the second time in a week I felt heat rising to my cheeks.

“Oh my God! You’re blushing!” His eyes were wide. “Are you, Kira Murphy, *embarrassed*? Unthinkable.”

“Fuck off, Mark. Just keep your mouth shut, alright?”

Mark smiled and clapped me on the back with a little too much force. “Your dirty secrets are safe with me, you disgusting Tory lover.”

“Well, let’s stop staring at the door like a pair of weirdos,” I scowled at the huge doorknocker before giving it a few loud bangs. “And I’m not embarrassed, I just . . .”

I trailed off as the door was jerked open and a large body, too bulky to be Henry’s, filled the frame.

“Holy sexy smart-casual Tories,” Mark whispered as he took a step back and nearly fell down the stone steps. Barclay Lucas ignored him and

concentrated his annoyed gaze on me.

“You’re late,” he snapped in his deep voice. My mouth had fallen open again and I was, for the second time in a week, struggling to find words. Blushes and speechlessness were not typical Kira traits.

“Oh, sorry, mate, but in Kira World we’re actually early,” Mark told him, recovering his composure much faster than me and stepping forward with his hand extended. “Mark Fletcher” Barclay turned to him, doing an impressive one-eyebrow raise. Mark, at over six foot, was almost as tall as Barclay but with shaggy blond hair instead of perfectly styled dark. He was wearing his standard tight shirt and waistcoat paired with jeans that left very little of his impressive package to the imagination. Barclay only hesitated a second before taking Mark’s hand in a firm grip. “I work with Ki Ki and I’ve come as her bodyguard.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’ve come because you’re a nosy bastard.”

“I’m not about to let you ponce around London to a mysterious address on your own. They could be planning to kidnap you and sell you to dodgy Arab oil tycoon moguls. Haven’t you seen *Taken*? Although, I have to admit, you’d make a hard sell as a virgin. That ship sailed over a decade ago.”

I gave Mark a shove in his solar plexus, which sent him back down the stone steps (I was surprisingly strong for my size) then turned to Barclay.

“I didn’t realise you’d be here,” I blurted out. That damn eyebrow went up again and he crossed his arms over his chest. The suit was gone, replaced by a dark wool fitted jumper, which accentuated his broad chest, and jeans. Actual jeans. My eye went wide as I realised I was finally going to get a chance to assess his arse.

“Well, this *is* my house and Henry *is* my brother so . . .” He looked between Mark and me, took a deep breath and scrubbed a hand down his face. This close up, I could see the weary expression on his face. Did he always look this tired? “Henry agreed to move in after he saw you at the clinic. We’d been badgering him to for a while and . . .” he cleared his throat. “Right, well, can you start, Dr Murphy? I wanted to be here for your first session with Henry but, as you can appreciate, I have other commitments.” Despite his attire, Barclay’s manner was still set to stiff, posh and formal. “If we could get on, I’d really appreciate it. And I know this is an unconventional arrangement, but I was going to ask about confidentiality and if—”

“I’m not here as a doctor and Mark is not here as a nurse,” I pointed out.

“But—”

“We’re here as concerned friends. But we’re very *trustworthy* friends. Confidentiality won’t be a problem.”

“About that, I’d really rather formalise the—”

“No.” Okay, so the man intimidated me – he was bloody gorgeous and had just about the most commanding presence of anyone I’d ever met in my life – but I was not going to agree to being paid. I didn’t do private work and I wasn’t about to start now.

He gave me an unhappy look but stepped back and swept his arm out to encourage us through the doorway.

With some effort, I forced my mind away from the potential Barclay Lucas arse view and managed to walk into the house like a normal person. *He’s just a bog standard human, I told myself. So what if he is so handsome it’s almost unreal? So what if he wants to sort out the environment and may even have the actual power to do it? He puts his trousers on one leg at a time same as everyone else.*

“This way,” Barclay said after he’d shut the door and started walking down the hallway. My eyes flew wide again and I gripped Mark’s arm, hard.

“I told you so,” I mouthed to him, pointing at Barclay’s arse and then putting a hand over my heart, closing my eyes and faking a swoon.

“Are you quite alright, Dr Murphy?” My eyes snapped open at Barclay’s cut-glass accent echoing through the large corridor. We’d reached another door and he’d turned back to face us again, frowning at me, probably because my finger was now pointed at his crotch, with my other hand over my heart and a dreamy expression on my face. Perfect.

“She’s fine,” Mark replied for me after an uncomfortable silence, during which he had had to reach up and force me to lower my pointing arm. “Just a small stroke. She’ll reboot in a moment.”

Barclay sighed and rubbed between his eyes again. “Listen, Dr Murphy, do you need any special equipment? Medical supplies? Anything like that?” He pushed open the door in front of him and led us into a large, ultra-modern kitchen that opened onto a dining area. Beyond were some sofas in front of a glass wall that must lead out to the garden, although it was too dark to see out there at that time.

“Hey Henry,” I called, smiling as I walked over to the solid oak

kitchen table where he was sitting.

“He managed to drag you out here then,” Henry muttered, giving us all an irritated look. “God forbid anyone actually contemplates leaving me the fuck alone for once.”

“Yes, well excuse me for giving a toss about my only brother,” Barclay snapped as he walked to the kitchen island and leaned against it. “Excuse me for not being willing to ‘leave you the fuck alone’ when I’ve been watching you try to die slowly for the last six months.” The outburst was so wrought with emotion and lacking in control, that I would never have believed cool, emotionless politician Barclay was capable of it had I not witnessed it for myself.

“Chill out. Christ,” Henry said, scowling down at the table. “I’m fine now.”

“You’re not fine. But you’re bloody well going to be. Even if I have to drag in every weir—” He stopped himself and flicked me a brief glance. I shrugged.

“It’s ok. I *am* a bit weird.”

“A *bit*?” Mark hooted. I shot him a narrow look and he shrugged too.

“I’m sorry,” Barclay said, trying to force a smile, but it came out as more of a grimace. “I’ve been under a lot of pressure and I—”

“It’s fine,” I cut in, waving my hand as if to brush it off.

“You didn’t answer my question. Do you need any special equipment? Stuff I can buy in? I can have it delivered – tonight, if necessary.”

My eyebrows went up and I paused before a small smile crept onto my face. “Yes, yes, I do need some special stuff, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, right.” He was all business now, and obviously more comfortable at having been given a job to do. He reached across the island to his laptop and flicked it open before hovering over the keys. “Go on.”

“We-e-ll,” I drew out the word and looked up at the ceiling. “I need a circular, ceramic liquid receptacle with a round handle.” Barclay started typing. “Inside it, I require a combination of boiling water, dried *Camellia sinensis* and emulsion of proteins, fats, vitamins, minerals and lactose. One sugar.” Barclay froze, before very slowly raising his gaze from his MacBook.

“You’re asking for a cup of tea, aren’t you?”

“Yes!” I cried dramatically. The shock of meeting the subject of all my fantasies and moral idol may have inhibited me for a while, but I could

feel my normal equilibrium returning, and along with it my personality. “I’m parched. We haven’t had a cup of tea in, oh . . .” I glanced at my watch, “. . . at least forty-five minutes. The tube was murder.”

“Make mine a milky one, Barcos,” Mark added, as he moved to the counter and started stroking one of the kitchen appliances. I didn’t think Barclay was a shorten-his-name-within-five-minutes-of meeting-him kind of guy, or someone who wanted his kitchen caressed by an outspoken gay man, but, to his credit, he didn’t say anything. “By the way,” Mark rattled on, oblivious, “I love your Thermomix. Worth the money?”

Barclay ignored Mark and moved to the kettle. I thought I heard a muffled snort from Henry, but when I glanced over he was still scowling down at the table.

“We still haven’t come to an agreement about your rate,” Barclay said. This was getting old. I feigned ignorance.

“Rate?”

“For the consultations and home visits. I need to know your rate.”

I rolled my eyes. “We *did* discuss it – I don’t do private work. I’m not here as a doctor. I agreed to visit Henry as a friend.”

“I’d prefer to have everything on a more formal basis, and that means me paying you, and you delivering what Henry needs.”

“Sorry, big guy.” I sat down into a chair next to Henry at the table. “I’m not a very formal person. And I’m not accepting your money.”

“But you are *not* Henry’s friend, or mine,” Barclay bit out as he grabbed the milk from the fridge with a little more force than was necessary. “I really think—”

“I make friends quickly, right Mark?”

Mark snorted out a laugh. “*That* is an understatement. The guy who runs the Kosher kebab shop round the corner from me asked her to his son’s Bar Mitzvah last week.”

“Ephraim and I share a special bond which you couldn’t possibly understand.”

“You met him twice, Kira. I’ve been going there every Saturday night for the last five years and he doesn’t even remember my name.”

“Bet *you* never jumped over the counter to help slice the doner meat?”

“No, no I didn’t, ’cause I’m not a crazy person,” Mark said, pulling up a chair next to me and collapsing into it.

Two cups of tea were slammed in front of both of us, some of the

brown liquid sloshing over the side. We both looked up to see Barclay's scowling face above us. "If you two have quite finis—"

"I'd bloody kill for a kebab," Henry put in, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms over his chest. I grinned and snatched Mark's phone out of his hand. Just because I didn't choose to own a smart phone didn't mean I wasn't partial to making use of my friends' ones. Two minutes later, four kebabs were ordered and on their way – the magic of London and Deliveroo.

"I'm sorry," Barclay said. He was hovering next to the table and his hands were on his hips. "I would *really* like to know when you're going to discuss medication with Henry."

"Ah, right," I said, before blowing over my cup of tea, closing my eyes and taking a long sip. "Okay. Henners, you taking your meds?"

"Yes."

I put my tea down and clapped my hands together. "Seems that about covers that! Happy?"

Barclay's handsome face was flushed and his mouth was set in a tight line. He'd brought his hands down to his sides and they were bunched into fists. "What—"

"Look, Barclay, please just *go*," Henry said, rubbing his hands down his face. "You wanted these nutters to come over. At least let them stay and have a bloody kebab without huffing and puffing all night. Go and finish your conference call. It's probably bad form to keep a French president waiting."

"Awesome," I whispered, looking up at Barclay, who returned my wide-eyed look with a deep scowl.

"Fine," he snapped. "Great. Eat a kebab. Whatever."

"Listen, I've added on a shish for you Barcos – my treat. They're amazing, and the hot sauce helps with constipation so . . ." The slamming of the kitchen door behind an irate Barclay cut me off and I shrugged before sighing dramatically and taking another sip of tea. "He is so much sexier in person," I told Henry, resting my head in my hand on the table and focusing on the middle distance with a dreamy expression on my face. "And his arse. Badger me backwards. His arse is a thing of beauty."

Henry's lips tipped up, and then he let out a chuckle. It sounded rusty, like it hadn't been in use much recently. "I'll have to take your word for it," he said through a smile. "Don't tend to look at my brother's arse overmuch."

I sighed again. “You’re missing out.”

“Ki Ki’s got a bit of a thing for your brother,” Mark put in helpfully. “She’s paused the telly multiple times trying to get a better look at that arse of his, so the last hour was probably up there with her best sexual experiences of the decade.”

“You guys *are* weird,” Henry said under his breath, then louder. “Please, please, never mention my brother’s arse again.”

“Well now, there were actually a couple of other areas that—”

“No Barclay body parts, *please*,” he interrupted. “I think I just threw up in my mouth a little.”

“Don’t be a big wuss,” I said, slapping him on the back, and causing more of his tea to slop over the side of his mug. He gave me a startled look but the corners of his mouth tipped up again. “Now, I’m loving this tea but . . . where’s the booze?”

Chapter 4

Ten feet tall

Barclay

I rubbed the bridge of my nose as I pushed through the door into the kitchen. It was two in the morning. The conference call had only wrapped up fifteen minutes ago. Six hours we'd been at it on and off, and still nothing was resolved. Since taking on the role of Minister for Business, Energy and Clean Growth, I *had* made progress. But David Morrison, the unbelievable fuckwit whose ministerial role I'd inherited, had been so intent on dragging the UK back to the dark ages, and so obstructive to the growth of renewable energy industries, that I had had a big job on my hands.

Things were progressing, but we were in danger of being left behind the rest of the world. I knew Nick Chambers, the visionary owner of the tech company that had approached me years ago with his innovation, was feeling the frustration just as acutely as I was, but there was nothing either of us could do. Nick's company had developed the nuclear fusion tech that was just now coming out globally as a solution to the energy crisis. But it was becoming very clear that affecting change would be an uphill struggle. After the brief conference call with the French president, I'd had to move on to negotiations with the unions for UK oil and gas production. Of course they were concerned by their members losing their jobs. Arguments for re-skilling those workers prior to the energy revolution were not going down well. Despite me pledging 250 million for that very purpose. None of the unions believed there wouldn't be a net loss of jobs and I didn't blame them – until I actually managed to pass the bill through parliament guaranteeing those workers their rights, they would be sceptical.

I slumped onto a bar stool at the kitchen island and put a hand to the back of my neck whilst I rolled my head on my shoulders. For some reason, Kira Murphy's eyes, lit with mischief as she teased me, had been stuck in my brain for hours and had robbed me of my concentration – another reason to find her annoying in my opinion. Nobody spoke to me like that. But then I'd never met anyone quite like Kira before.

My stomach rumbled loudly and I tried to remember the last time I'd eaten. Maybe lunch? A container on the counter caught my eye and I tilted

my head to the side.

Did that crazy woman actually order me a dodgy kebab?

I approached it cautiously, gave it a wary poke and then lifted the lid. The first thing to assault me was the smell and, just like that, I was back at uni, stumbling home from a night out with a teenaged Henry who'd come to stay with me and my flatmates during my third year at Cambridge. He was only fifteen. He'd told me he'd rather be taking home the kebab he was holding than any woman. I'd laughed and commented on how convenient that was, considering none of the girls down the union that night would have shagged his underage arse anyway.

“So, if Charlize Theron walked up to you right now, you'd turn her down to eat some rat meat,” I'd asked.

“Of course,” Henry replied. “I'd say ‘Charlize, you may be a beautiful, Oscar-winning actress whom I've had fantasies about since the early nineties, but I have questionable meat products coated in garlic sauce to consume; so you'll just have to wait.’”

I'd been a month away from my finals then, and laser-focused on getting the best results possible. Henry had managed to make me laugh for the first time in weeks when he'd come to stay.

Lost in my thoughts, I'd eaten half the kebab in front of me without even realising what I was doing. Remembering Henry that way was a reminder of why I was bringing that small, chaotic, hippy doctor here in the first place. Back then, my little brother had been larger than life – happy, free, and a force to be reckoned with, even at fifteen years old. Memories of him churned through my head and by the time I was staring down at an empty box, I was grinning.

It felt weird . . . rusty.

Jesus, when was the last time I'd smiled?

“Yo.”

I blinked, twice.

Not only was Kira Murphy on my doorstep wearing the strangest, multi-coloured, very obviously (badly) hand-knitted scarf, but she had no less than four other women with her, and one man (not Mark this time, but a face I was sure I recognised). I was a private person (I had good reason to be), therefore not about to invite five strangers into my house.

I looked down at Kira again. Bloody hell, but did she look ridiculous.

The scarf absolutely drowned her small frame. She smiled and waved her hand in front of my face. Her appearance may have been on the bizarre side, but with her cheeky, irreverent expression, and all that red, pink-streaked hair piled on top of her head haphazardly . . . for some reason, the combination made my stomach hollow out the same way it had done when I desperately fancied Gemma Peterson at the age of fourteen. Gemma had been a whirlwind of craziness, so different from my cautious, teenage self – maybe that’s why I was so drawn to her. Until she got expelled that is (which just goes to show where all that craziness can lead you). Kira Murphy had that same magnetic energy about her. She was so free – her movements, her words, nothing was held back, nothing was monitored. I wanted to tell myself it was purely annoying, but there was something . . . almost refreshing about being around her.

“*What* is going on?” I bit out with what I felt was infinite patience.

“Well, it’s book group night so I thought I’d combine it with seeing your bro.”

“Kira,” a familiar-looking, dark-haired woman with wide grey eyes whispered from the back of the group. “You never told us that this . . . I think we should–”

“Pavlos Martakis,” the only man in the group said, slinging his arm around the wide-eyed, whispering women and moving them forward so he could offer me his hand, which I took automatically. “We’ve met before.”

My attention flashed back to the dark-haired girl and my memory stirred. “You’re David Morrison’s daughter,” I remembered, at last. I’d met Camilla Morrison at political events with her father before I’d replaced him two years ago when he was forced to resign. His public support had waned anyway, due to him being a fascist prick who didn’t give a monkey’s about workers’ rights or the environment (not ideal given his role as Minister of State for Business, Energy and Clean Growth), then when details of how he treated Camilla emerged his fate was sealed. This was after a reporter had witnessed the emotional and physical abuse while at a press conference a few years ago. At the time the Morrisons had believed themselves to be alone in a private back room with their daughter, little knowing they were being overheard: a photograph of livid finger marks on Camilla Morrison’s arm had appeared in the papers that same day, permanently compromising the Morrisons’ reputation and ensuring David Morrison’s swift exit from politics.

“Let’s not get into it about that twatbadger right now,” Kira

interrupted. “I’m freezing my arse off out here.”

I sighed and stepped back to let them in, not really having a choice.

“Excuse me, sir,” I heard a deep voice behind me and remembered the security detail. They’d only been here a few days and I was still getting used to them. Needless to say, pushing a green solution to the energy crisis did not go down well with oil companies. Nick Chambers recently had a number of threats to his life identified by MI5. As the Minister of State for Business, Energy and Clean Growth, and a politician trying to fast-track change, I was also in the firing line – hence the team now stationed with me.

Sam Clifton, the close protection officer who’d been posted inside the house, moved between the newcomers and me. “I’m sorry for any inconvenience, but I’m afraid I will have to ask to see your identification and perform brief routine searches,” Sam told them.

“Ooh,” breathed Kira, eyeing Sam with unmasked interest. “No problem.” Then she whispered to one of the girls standing next to her, “He’s been eating his greens, huh? Yowsers.”

I rolled my eyes. The man was built like a brick shit house. Sam was a couple of inches taller than me, so must have been at least six foot four. All the security detail (one was patrolling the street outside) were dressed in black and, although I hadn’t admitted it out loud, they were intimidating bastards. Kira didn’t blink an eye and, if I wasn’t mistaken, she’d managed to make the big bastard blush.

“Mr Lucas.” Camilla Morrison’s soft voice drew my attention as the security men started searching her and Pavlos. “I, um . . . I didn’t know we were coming here tonight. Kira is . . . unpredictable. She likes the book group to go on ‘field trips’. I had no idea . . . she said someone called Henry asked us to come and . . .” she trailed off and shot Pavlos Martakis an uncertain look. He smiled down at her, took her hand and gave it a squeeze.

“I’m sure Mr Lucas has *no* problem with us being here, Mils,” he reassured her with an easy smile. When he looked over to me, he may still have been smiling but there was a steely look in his eyes as he raised his eyebrows.

I rubbed the back of my neck. Henry had been a little brighter in the week since Kira’s last visit, but it wasn’t like he was a changed man. Was it really worth all this hassle?

“Do me!” I heard Kira cry and looked over to see her push her way in between Camilla and Pavlos, spread her arms wide and throw her head back.

“Search *me*. Make sure you’re thorough. I am a known criminal.”

Sam gave Kira a measured look and took her bag from her hand to go through it.

“Ki Ki,” one of the other women said in an exasperated tone. “You’ve been arrested once for being naked in Burgess Park with a bunch of other crazy women. I hardly think that constitutes being part of the illegal underworld.”

“Shut up, Libby,” Kira snapped, “and let the man do his job. His country is depending on him.” Sam let out a muffled snort as he stepped away, his eyes dancing. “Is that it?” Kira asked, disappointment in her tone.

“Dr Murphy,” Sam said, his lips twitching. “Do you have any identification other than a library card from 2008?”

Kira’s lips twisted to the side as she looked up at him. “Um, no.”

“Look she’s a doctor at the hospital we work at,” said Pavlos Martakis. “We can vouch for her.”

“Er, Claire and I work at a strip club,” one of the two blonde women said as she raised her hand. “But we saw her take a splinter out of Big Barry’s finger this one time. She seemed *really* professional.”

I took a deep breath. “May I enquire how many of you . . . work at that establishment?” I asked slowly. Strippers visiting me at my home was not something I needed leaking to the press.

“Oh, just us two,” the blonde told me. “I hope you’re not prejudiced, mate. We contribute to the economy just as much as the next person.”

“That’s right,” Camilla Morrison put in in her quiet voice. “They bring in foreign investment to the country as well.” She shuffled slightly behind Pav after she spoke with a fearful look in her eyes.

“At least *I’m* not a stripper,” Pavlos said through a smile, clapping me on the shoulder in a familiar gesture that was totally foreign to me given my normal interactions. “Be thankful for small mercies.”

“Hospital ID?” Sam asked, handing Kira back her purse and ignoring the stripper comments.

“Oh, I keep it on a lanyard at home.”

“Driver’s licence?”

“Can’t drive.”

“What?”

“They said I was ‘dangerous’,” she made air quotes and rolled her eyes on the last word.

“It’s fine,” I told Sam. “I know who she is.”

Sam looked at me and then nodded. “Okay, you lot are clear to go through.”

“Thanks, big guy,” Kira chirped, grabbing hold of Camilla’s hand and leading her past me and towards the kitchen. “Don’t be intimidated, Professor X,” she told Camilla. Then, in a stage whisper she added, “And make sure you get a proper look at his arse later.”

Now I could feel heat hitting *my* cheeks and I heard another snort from Sam. Annoyed at the reaction she’d provoked, I stalked after Kira, but then paused in the hallway to look back. The three remaining females were still standing where I’d left them –they had their heads cocked to one side, and were very obviously looking at my backside.

“Yo, Henners!” Kira cried as she burst into the kitchen. “How’s it hanging?”

“Hey, I’m Pavlos,” Mr Martakis said as he moved around the table to shake hands with Henry. “Sorry for the invasion, but Kira said you were keen for a bit of literary criticism and she won’t often let me come along. Sexual discrimination and all that.”

“I don’t discriminate against you cause you’re a bloke, Willy Fiddler,” Kira said as she flicked the kettle on and unwound the scarf from her neck. “I won’t let you come cause you’re boring when it comes to your missus and you won’t let us have any fun.”

“Just to clarify, Kira calls me Willy Fiddler because I’m a urological surgeon – not for any other dodgy reason. But as far as me being a fun sponge – Kira, last month you tried to take Millie on a ‘field trip’ to a sex club,” Martakis said this with obviously well-practiced patience. “I think I’m justified in voicing some concern.”

“I didn’t actually *know* it was a BDSM club,” Kira mumbled. “And we didn’t end up going in anyway.”

“Only because you were the only one who was willing to take your top off to fit the bloody dress code the bouncers demanded!”

“Next time we’ll all get ourselves some PVC cat suits – I bet they’d let us in then.”

“This is why I’m not allowing any more unsupervised field trips,” Pavlos said. “Welcome to Hell, Henry.”

Kira rolled her eyes. “We’re going to ease Henry into Book Group. No field trips for the moment.”

“Okay,” Henry was smiling. Smiling. I almost dropped the kettle. “Not sure I’m up for a sex club at the moment anyway. Listen, you never told me which book we’d –”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Kira cried, as if the idea of actually discussing literature at a gathering specifically designed for that purpose was completely insane. “We’re playing poker.” She slapped down on the table a deck of cards that she’d extracted from her cavernous purple bag (the thing actually had fringe stitched onto it – I wasn’t sure I’d seen anything like it since the early nineties).

“Ki-Ki,” Libby said shaking her head. “You’ve never played poker in your life.”

“Well, *Henry* likes poker,” Kira told her. “Don’t you Henry.”

“I_”

“He nearly died then gave up all his old friends, so he hasn’t played in *ages*.”

Silence descended on the kitchen and I felt my hands clench into fists. This bloody woman was like a bull in a china shop.

“Hey, Mr Broody Face,” Kira called out to me and I blinked in surprise. “Stop stewing over there and come over. I’ll deal you in.”

“I haven’t got time to–”

“Afraid you’ll lose, big bro?” Henry asked, and I shifted my gaze to my brother. “You always were crap at cards.” His eyes were teasing and there was just a hint of a smile tugging at his lips. It was the happiest I’d seen Henry all week. I sighed. Maybe joking about near death experiences was what Henry needed? Whatever that crazy lady over there was trying, it seemed to be working.

“Fine, one round,” I relented, pulling out a chair opposite Kira and next to Camilla, then crossed my arms over my chest as I sat down.

Kira

I was staring across at Barclay Lucas with narrowed eyes. We were five rounds in and I was finally going to beat the sexy bastard.

“I win!” I shouted, laying my cards on the table triumphantly. “I have *all* the Royal family and an ace. Eat that sucker!”

“Kira,” Pav said, giving me his patented ‘Kira is a Complete Nutcase’ look. “Where to start? You’ve just laid down *eight* cards when you were only supposed to ever have five. None of your face cards are in the same suit. You

don't even *have* a jack. I'm afraid you don't win. If anything, you're disqualified."

"What?! Why am I disqualified?"

"You cheated."

"I did not cheat."

"You have *eight* cards, Kira. How is that not cheating?"

I bit my lip and looked to the side. "Well, I just kept a few from the other rounds, in case they might come in useful. That's not cheating – it's being opportunistic."

"*That is exactly* what cheating is, you dullard. Bloody hell, you didn't even have the wherewithal to swap the cards out with your shit ones."

"Face it, Ki-Ki," Millie said with her soft voice, patting my hand. "You're not *great* at poker."

I blew out a breath as I threw my cards down in disgust. It was just typical that Willy Fiddler would have to be a stickler for the 'rules', and ruin everyone's fun like the fun sponge he was. Barclay laid down his cards then with an extremely smug expression on his face.

"Royal flush," he said, raising an eyebrow at me, and then reaching out to sweep nearly all the Smarties over into his already huge pile (I had long ago eaten all of my Smarties and had been slyly 'borrowing them' from Millie ever since).

"Hey! I have more face cards than him," I complained, and Pav let his head fall to the table, banging it once and groaning in frustration.

"Yes, indeed," Barclay said, and I thought I saw his lips twitch but it might have been a trick of the light. Jesus, this guy was moody. Not usually my bag at all, but with Barclay the whole uptight politician thing just seemed to float my boat. If I were honest, any facial expression from Barclay would do it for me. Meeting the man in person had not diminished my crush on him in the slightest.

"You appear to have accumulated an inordinate amount of cards, Dr Murphy," he said wryly. "Impressive."

I scowled at him and Millie stifled a laugh. That was the thing with Barclay – every so often his dry sense of humour would make its way to the surface. Sarcasm was his weapon of choice and I'd always been a sucker for a sarcastic smartarse.

"Playing cards with you is like trying to wrestle an agitated squid," Pav said, slamming his cards down on the table. "You never *listen*."

“Chill your beans, Todger Tussler,” I told him as I made a frantic grab for the few remaining Smarties, shoving them into my mouth before anyone else at the table could launch an objection, then giving Pav a one-finger salute.

There was a snort from across the table, which drew everyone’s attention. Henry’s shoulders were shaking, his eyes were dancing, and after a few seconds he burst out laughing. I felt my chest constrict and a sting at the back of my eyes. Henry’s smiles were still few and far between, and this was the first time I’d seen him actually full-on laugh.

I blinked and glanced at Barclay, who had gone very still in his chair as his brother’s laughter filled the kitchen. Then, after a moment, he relaxed and some of the tension in his shoulders eased. It was as though the worry he carried for his brother was a physical thing that I could see slowly rolling off him. Just as I was about to look away, he caught my eye. The look he gave me was more than his normal intense (and make no mistake, he was an intense guy), and he gave me a short nod. I didn’t know if it was a nod of thanks, an acknowledgment of our shared worry (I was aware that my own eyes had misted over), or maybe just a cramp in his neck; but it made me feel ten feet tall rather than my actual five.

Chapter 5

The flow of time is an illusion

Kira

“I think this might have been a mistake,” Henry said as he took a sip of his second brandy and surveyed the chessboard.

“I’m getting the hang of it,” I slurred, reaching out for one of the horsey ones, and concentrated on pushing it forward a few squares, only to knock over several other pieces in the attempt. “Badger’s arse,” I pulled my hand away and sent a few more chess pieces flying. “I drink I might be thunk.” That didn’t sound right. I frowned as I repeated it back in my head.

“You are such a lightweight,” Henry said, smirking at me over the top of his brandy glass.

“I’m bloody hobbit-sized. Of course I’m a lightweight.”

I leaned back in the leather chair I was sitting in. We were in the library – a huge room overrun with mahogany and leather in a way that would have made the Anchorman very proud.

“Oooh, spinny,” I breathed as the ceiling above me started moving clockwise of its own accord. I heard Henry chuckle again through my drunken fog and my heart lifted. This was why I’d stayed on. It felt like a small victory every time I managed to make Henry laugh. The others had left at eleven just as Henry had dug out the chessboard, and Barclay had retreated to his office to do Very Important Things. Tomorrow was Saturday: I wasn’t on-call, and Henry looked so dejected when he realised everyone was leaving that I’d decided to stay, drink some ill-advised brandy and attempt to play chess. But chess was a game of patience and concentration . . . neither of which were qualities I possessed in abundance.

“Did you mean all that stuff you said at the hospital?”

“Er, Henners, I spout a lot of shit. You may have to be more perpific . . . er, I mean spernific . . . bugger, *specific!*”

His voice dropped to a slurred, soft whisper. “About me having a meaningful relationship. About someone being able to... to love me, to be with me.”

I blinked and sat up in the chair, trying to get my remaining sober neurones to start firing so I didn't fuck this moment up.

"Henry, if somebody loves you, then your diagnosis doesn't have to get in the way of that."

"There was . . . a girl," he said, his voice now hoarse with emotion. "Before all this shit, I'd started sorting myself out – toned down the partying. We were going to . . . I–I wish that . . . bugger it. Jesus, I'm the one spouting shit now. I'm absolutely blotto. It doesn't matter now anyway. I cut her off – haven't spoken to her in ages."

"Henry," I leaned right forward, knocking over all the remaining chess pieces so that I could lay my hands over his as they rested on the table. "If she cares about you enough, it won't stop her from being with you. You can live a good life . . . Gah! I mean live a good life."

He smiled a small, sad smile, and gave my hands a squeeze before he cleared his throat and pulled his own hands back.

"You'd better get home," Henry told me, staggering to his feet before grabbing onto the mantelpiece for support. He didn't seem that much better off than me, but he was still skinny as a rake and had told us all that this was the first time he'd had a drink in over a year. "Come on," he said, giving my jumper a tug as he passed me on his way towards the large oak door. I stumbled after him in a semi-straight line. Once in the corridor he gave me a one-armed hug.

"Weird or not, you're a good egg, Kira." We both swayed to the side and then righted ourselves. "I . . ." he let me go and moved to the stairs. "I'd better get to bed. You'll be alright getting home?"

"I–sh fine." I waved him off with a lopsided grin as he disappeared down the stairs into the basement where, he'd told me earlier, he had a self-contained apartment. Now, where was my scarf?

Barclay

I heard the crash just as I was finishing the last email of the night. It was two in the morning, but I'd still manage to get five hours of sleep if I went to bed now. It had been a bloody stupid idea to waste time earlier playing poker of all things, when I had so much mounting up. And yes, *maybe* I needed to learn to delegate some of this stuff to my undersecretary, but, control freak that I was, I had trouble letting go. So, given that I hadn't managed to delegate, I should have spent the whole evening tackling

everything in my office, but when I thought back to Henry's laugh I couldn't bring myself to regret the poker game. My little brother was born to laugh, to be carefree – to be the opposite of my more wary, cautious nature.

I'd *always* been the sensible one. From the age of nine, I hadn't really had a choice. After Mum lost the baby she spiralled into a deep depression, and Dad's solution was to work all the time. There wasn't anyone else around but me to pick up the pieces – to make it so that Henry could still be happy and carefree like he was supposed to be. I'd felt the weight of that responsibility acutely, and even after Mum got better the feeling never went away. The therapist Mum made me see a few years ago told me that my compulsion to *fix* things stemmed from that time. When I was a child, I was hell-bent on keeping everything together whilst my mum fell apart; but in adulthood this compulsion manifested in deep concern, not only about my family's problems, but about those facing the world. My therapist told me nobody could fix everything, that it wasn't all my responsibility, that I needed to lighten up. I'd listened politely, paid her the exorbitant fee, and never returned. I *needed* that drive, that compulsion – I didn't know who I was without it.

So that was me, but my brother was my opposite. So, this new sombre personality didn't suit Henry. I'd always made sure he was free to be the fun brother, the light-hearted one, and I'd always tried to protect him. But I couldn't protect him from this. His depression had been scaring me for so long that the relief that came with hearing his laughter was immense.

Another smaller crash came from the corridor and I frowned. I wasn't going to let these bloody security people stay the night if they were going to be banging around down there at all hours. Weren't they supposed to be stationed outside the house at night anyway? I pushed away from the desk, rolling my stiff neck then scrubbed my hands down my face, which was now rough with stubble. This was the last thing I needed. In annoyance I slammed open my office door and strode out into the corridor, where I very nearly tripped over a set of legs. I froze with my foot suspended in mid-air over a pair of feet clad in furry boots, attached to two legs encased in stripy tights: purple and pink stripes, to be exact.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” I asked the pile of coats and bags blocking my corridor, underneath which I presumed the stripy-tights-wearing female was buried.

“Got it!” I heard in a muffled shout, then an arm emerged from the

coats with that ridiculous scarf clutched in its hand. I snatched the scarf and used that hand to haul her to her feet. She was so tiny that I overestimated the force required, and she shot up right into my chest. I froze. If I weren't mistaken, she took a deep breath in as if she was . . . smelling my shirt? After a long moment, her small face emerged and she tilted her head back to look up at me.

"Yo," she said, blinking a couple of times as if to try to focus her vision. Her mass of hair was completely crazy, there was a small amount of makeup now residing under eyes, and her huge, bright pink jumper was falling off one of her shoulders. She was a fright, but still my chest tightened with something that felt almost like need, which was unexpected.

My last girlfriend had been five-foot-eleven and a barrister in the City. I'd never seen her in anything other than pencil skirts and four-inch heels; even after sleeping with me, her makeup was never smudged. She certainly didn't wear ill-fitting jumpers paired with stripy tights, and I couldn't imagine her ever saying 'Yo' as if she was in a New York ghetto rather than a terrace house in Westminster.

I felt the sudden urge to hold Kira closer but instead I stepped back, and set her away from me. Once I'd released my grip on her upper arms, she teetered slowly to the side, righted herself on the wall of the corridor, blinked again and then snorted, before she started giggling. I frowned. Her bright hazel-green eyes flashed to me, and my expression only seemed to make her laugh harder.

"I was just trying to get my—" she hiccupped, let out another small laugh then continued, "bits and bobs." I extended the scarf to her and she took it from my outstretched hand.

"You found it!" she shouted, both her hands raising the scarf above her head like she was cheering for a bizarre gay-pride football team. She wrapped it around and around her throat, until only her eyes and her mass of red-pink streaked hair was visible over the top. Her hand came up and she wrestled the scarf down until her mouth was free.

"Alright then, mate." She gave me a surprisingly strong punch in the arm with her small fist and stumbled back two steps as a result. "I'll be offski." She then winked at me, clicked her tongue and pointed at me with her finger, before lurching around me down the corridor and making her way to the exit.

"It's two in the morning," I said as she started fumbling with the locks

on my heavy front door.

“Bugger my badger,” she mumbled as she continued her fruitless attempts to unlock one of the latches. “This place is like Fort Knox.”

I looked up at the ceiling for a moment in frustration.

“Dr Murphy, did you hear me?” My patience was wearing thin now. “I *said* it’s two in the morning.”

“Er . . .” she gave up her battle with the locks and turned to face me, a look of confusion on her face. “Thank you for the time update.”

“It’s too late to—”

“You do know that the flow of time is an illusion, that the past, present and future are all equally real and that time is tenseless?”

I blinked then stared at her. “What?”

“B-theory, man. Get with it.”

“I don’t—”

She held her hand up and cut me off with a “Shhhup!”

I closed my mouth in surprise.

“Don’t ruin one of my fantasies about you and tell me that you aren’t a *Doctor Who* fan.”

I frowned. “One of your fant—?”

“Shhh!”

I’d not been shushed by anyone since I was a child. This woman got more bizarre by the second. Taking a deep breath, and suppressing the urge to either groan in frustration or laugh harder than I had in years, I watched as she started sliding slowly down the door until she was sitting on the ground.

“I’ll just have a little resty-pest right here,” she sing-songed as her eyes started closing.

“Dr Murphy,” I bit out, striding over to her and leaning down to shake her shoulder.

“’Sup?” She opened one eye and gave me a lopsided grin.

“It’s two in the morning,” I told her *again*. “Where are your friends? It’s not safe for you to go home alone in this state.”

“I-ish be fine,” she slurred, waving off my concern and shutting both her eyes again. “I lo-o-o-ove the night bus. If you could just . . .” she gestured towards the locks above her, “. . .twiddle your bits for me.” At that, she snorted and hiccupped again, “Then I’ll mosey on home. ’K?” The last of her words trailed off as she lapsed into unconsciousness, sitting bolt upright against my door. I shook her shoulder again but all she managed in response

was another hiccup.

“For fuck’s sake,” I said under my breath as I stuck my hands under her armpits and lifted her onto her feet. “Of all the ridiculous, stupid, idiotic . . .”

I tried to walk her towards the stairs but she slumped forward, very nearly falling on her face before I caught her.

“I could be a bloody rapist for all you know.” I hooked her under her knees with one arm, put the other around her shoulders and lifted her up to my chest. She was light, very light, but given her height that shouldn’t really have surprised me. With renewed access to my chest, she started snuggling into it again, inhaling my scent in between hiccups. That wild hair felt soft under my chin and smelt flowery but fresh, with a hint of lavender. I felt a wave of that bizarre attraction again and gritted my teeth as I made my way up the stairs. Everything about this woman was getting under my skin: her feistiness, quirkiness, sharp wit and the way she moved – flitting around like a woodland fairy, leaving chaos in her wake. It was all strangely addictive.

I kicked open the door of the spare bedroom and dumped her on the bed, hoping she might wake up and sort herself out. She bounced once, then collapsed like a dead weight in a starfish formation.

“Of all the bloody ridiculous things I could be doing,” I said as I reached down to pull off her furry UGGs, revealing tiny feet. I threw the boots on the floor, pulled her over onto her side into the recovery position, then covered her with the duvet. She promptly curled up into a ball and hiccupped twice more before letting out a little snore. I backed out of the room, staring at her face and marvelling at how angelic she looked when unconscious. No hint of the troublemaker she really was.

Chapter 6

Genital warts are no joke, people

Kira

I woke up with a terrible case of badger mouth. As I blinked open my eyes and saw dull grey walls instead of the bright yellow I had painted my bedroom, I cringed. Evidence suggested that I *might* not quite have made it home. As I turned onto my back and stared up at the cornicing on the ceiling, flashes of last night started coming back to me. Why had I been wrestling a load of coats on the floor of the corridor? I rubbed my temples and an olfactory memory came crashing back into my conscious brain. Oh God, I had *smelt* Barclay last night. I had actually made a show of smelling him! He must think I was an even bigger freak than he already suspected.

“Fuck it,” I murmured, shaking my head and sitting up. Kira Murphy was never one to worry over embarrassment or people’s impressions of her. If I’d made a dick of myself, then so be it – it certainly wouldn’t be the first time. Yes, I fancied Barclay like mad, but it was in the same way I fancied Jamie Dornan or George Clooney – from afar. It wasn’t as if he’d ever look twice at me anyway, so what did it matter if I’d made an arse out of myself in front of him?

I wasn’t stupid – men like Barclay did not go for hippy little eccentrics like me. Based on my press-stalking of Barclay alone, I knew he was much more into tall, polished, professional, sophisticated blondes. Apart from being a professional, I was about as far from that description as I could get. I’d met my last boyfriend at a folk festival. He was a flute player in one of the more random bands and didn’t believe in soap as it *messed with his natural oils* – that was much more my speed.

I peered over the side of the bed and grabbed my bag from the floor so I could fish out my watch. It was seven, an hour after my normal wake up time. I really must have been out of it last night.

I had always been an early bird. It used to drive my mum nuts when I was little – bouncing off the walls, waiting for her to wake up. But then again, I bounced off the walls at all times; my energy levels had been through

the roof since birth. Mum used to call me the Energizer Bunny.

I jumped out of bed, padded to the enormous bathroom (my entire flat could have fitted in there), found some toothpaste to swill out my mouth then surveyed my appearance in the mirror. My hair was all over the place, à la Sideshow Bob, so I used one of the hair bands on my wrist to wrestle it into a half-arsed topknot into which most strands refused to be contained. I then removed the majority of the smudging from my eyes and ripped my jumper over my head, as the bastard was itchy – sleeping in wool was not to be recommended. My *Badgers Rule* t-shirt was just a *little* indecent, but it wasn't as though anyone would care or even see it. I picked up my scarf, wrapped it around my neck and tied my jumper around my waist. Only a sliver of stomach and maybe a *tad bit* of lacy-bra-covered side boob remained on show. But I needed a strong coffee and a bagel, and I needed them five minutes ago.

On my way out, I nipped into the kitchen, penned a quick note to the Lucas brothers and slapped it on their fridge before moving to the front door.

“Dr Murphy,” I heard a deep voice behind me and saw Sam the security man striding towards me. Now sober, the locks presented less of a challenge to me and I managed to finish negotiating them before he could reach me. “Dr Murphy, please don't!” Ignoring the urgency in his voice I flung open the door (chuffed to bits at my now proficient lock-handling) only to be met by a wall of sound, which abruptly fell silent as I stepped out onto the top of the stone steps.

“Badger me,” I whispered as my wide eyes took in the sea of surprised faces and cameras confronting me. Never shy of a crowd, I recovered fast and smiled.

“Yo!” I cried, waving at everyone. There was a long pause, followed by some confused muttering before all hell broke loose. So many questions were fired at me that I couldn't make them all out above the clicking of the cameras.

Hmm. I was not exactly camera shy either.

I threw out a hip, put my hand on it and blew them all a kiss.

“Well, hello there!” I shouted above the crowd. I was nothing if not opportunistic and right now I spied a moment: I'd been waiting for a publicity platform for a while now. There had been virtually no media interest in the launch of my charity last year – despite contacting all the press outlets I could think of. This might be one of my only chances to really get

some traction for the things I cared about. I didn't know why Barclay's door was flooded with journalists, but I thought I might as well make use of them. "If you'd all be quiet, I'd like to make an announcement."

The questions died down after a few seconds and I cleared my throat.

"I have a number of important things to share with you. Number one: my charity Freedom Through Education launched last year – if you could spread the word, it would be much appreciated. None of you bastards were that interested when I contacted you at the time. Number two: wear condoms, people. Believe me, you'll regret it if you don't – I see the results. Number three: write to your MP to push to have *all* teenagers vaccinated against genital warts – it's currently only HPV, but warts are no joke, people – the last thing we need is more young people sprouting cauliflowers down *there* when it's preventable. Number four . . . humph!"

Two large hands went to my hips, lifted me off the floor and pulled me back into the house, after which the door was slammed.

"Well," I said, looking up at a ruffled Sam. "That's one way of moving a human."

"Dr Murphy," Sam said. "It may be better if you leave through the back door. It's not safe to—"

"Ah, codswallop! Safe as houses out there. The BBC were there for badger's sake. Nothing will happen with the Beeb looking on. Brrr, bit chilly though, don't you think? Maybe they could do with some tea."

It was my experience that most situations could be improved with tea.

Barclay

"Er, Barclay, have you got the television on, old chap?" Martin, my press officer, asked through the loudspeaker on my phone as I finished knotting my tie.

"I've turned everything off for the moment," I said as I adjusted the knot and shrugged on my jacket. The bloody press were relentless. How the hell they got hold of plans that weren't due to be announced for another month, I had no idea. Until I had all the guarantees in place for the unions, I wasn't ready for the UK to know it was going to be transferred to one hundred percent clean energy in under a year. Nobody trusted nuclear fusion (or this government) enough for that at the moment. But the promise of a zero-carbon, combustion-free source of energy, with no greenhouse gas or

hazardous radioactive waste was huge, and we had to take advantage of the fact that it had been developed by a company in the UK.

“I think *maybe* you should take a look . . .” Martin paused for a moment. “Do you, by any chance, know a short, slightly-unhinged looking, bizarrely dressed young lady with pink hair?”

I snatched up the remote and flicked onto the BBC. There, outside my house, in full technicolour glory, was Kira Murphy balancing a huge tray of mugs and pushing her way into the crowd of reporters.

“Okay peeps!” she shouted. “I know you’re all gasping, but one at a time. I put milk in all of them I’m afraid, but there’s sugar here if you need it. Now, Laura Kuenssberg, you get an extra strong one, love. Never seen anyone work so hard what with all these elections. All I could find were a couple of packets of digestives. I didn’t want to bring out the Jammie Dodgers out in case I started a riot.”

“Jesus Christ,” I murmured weakly. The live streaming of Kira in my front garden suddenly cut to an earlier clip of her giving an actual *speech* on my front step. Why the hell was she banging on about genital warts? Then, another clip of Kira smiling and telling everyone that she’s a ‘family friend’ of the Lucases – for some reason, best only known to her deranged mind, she’d chosen to add in a saucy wink at that juncture. She may as well have told them all she was my dirty fuck buddy.

Martin, the bastard, was laughing.

“This is not funny, Martin.” I snatched up the phone, turning off loudspeaker before putting it to my ear.

“Fine filly, if you like that sort of thing. Good teeth.” Martin had a habit of describing human females in equine terms. I tried to ignore his buffoonery most of the time given that he was the genius he was when it came to controlling the media, but hearing him describe Kira like a horse at Newmarket made my anger ratchet up a notch. “But a bit of a loose cannon though, wouldn’t you say? What on earth is she doing at your house?”

“She’s Henry’s bloody doctor,” I told him, and he stopped laughing.

“Doctor?”

“Well she’s not actually his doctor now because . . .” I sighed, “. . . look, it’s complicated. But she’s helping Henry so I’ve been willing to put up with her.”

Martin cleared his throat. “That’s great, old chap,” he said, his tone now less brash than before. He was one of the few people to know about how

ill Henry had been and what had happened over the last few months. “And it doesn’t have to be a complete cock up press-wise. We can—”

I started jogging down the stairs so I didn’t hear the rest of Martin’s thoughts. As I made it to the bottom, the front door opened to reveal Kira with an empty tray, flanked by a harassed-looking Sam. Of course she didn’t just open it a crack to sneak through and protect my privacy as much as possible. Noooo, she swung it open as wide as it would go, leaving it that way as she beamed up at me, shouting “Yo!” for the second time that morning. The cameras went crazy as I strode over to the door, skirted Kira, then slammed it shut.

Perfect, just perfect.

“What were you thinking?” I snapped as I turned her away from the door she was so fond of opening, and gave her a light shove towards the kitchen. She just grinned, put the tray down on a side table, linked her arm through mine, and walked with me into the kitchen like we were the best of friends about to enjoy a lovely brunch together. Once there, she released me, skipped over to the kettle, filled it up and flicked it on again. I was so angry I could feel the heat creeping up my neck.

“I can make you a tea, but I’m afraid your fancy coffee machine has foxed me.”

I flicked a glance over to my built-in, grinding-its-own-beans coffee maker and blinked at the chaos surrounding it. Its innards were strewn all over the granite work surface. She’d disembowelled the only thing in my kitchen that I actually used. I took a deep breath and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“What would possess you to take cups of tea to all of those vultures outside my front door?” I said through gritted teeth. I could feel my eyelid twitching in suppressed fury.

“Um, your eyes look a *wee bit* serial-killery,” she told me. “Are you sure you’re alright? Bad news this morning?”

“I am *trying* to sort out a bloody huge mess and deal with the press at the same time! What’s leaked overnight is having massive repercussions globally. I have the *world’s* media on my doorstep. I do not need you waltzing out there, half dressed, offering them all tea like Mrs *fucking* Doyle.”

“Oh!” she smiled at me – *fucking smiled* at me. My head was about to explode. “You like *Father Ted* too, do you?”

I leaned against the counter and dropped my head into my hands for a moment.

“Is that all you got from what I just said?” I asked the granite surface.

“Oh, come on. All this press stuff doesn’t matter. Who cares what they take their snaps of?”

“Kira, you talked about genital warts out there. *Genital warts*. I don’t think I even have the words to—”

“Hey! Warts are a big issue,” she interrupted, having the audacity to look annoyed that I would even question her choice of topic. “You might not have stuff sprouting off your todger, but it’s more common than you think.”

“I don’t care how big an issue genital warts are!”

“Says you with your cauliflower-free todger.”

I took a deep breath. My eyelid was going crazy now. “Kira, the press *does* matter for me right now. I’m trying to make some real change. A carbon neutral UK and massive restructuring of industries – not all of which is going to be popular. The announcement wasn’t meant to be for another month, but somehow it was leaked. I’m attempting to calm down the press attention, not hand out goddamn beverages to them or give them quotes about genital warts.”

Kira bit her lip. “Okay sorry about the warts thing. But, er, well . . . you can’t just ignore them all, can you?”

“Yes, yes, that’s exactly what I am going to do and it’s what *you’re* going to do when you finally *get out of my house!*”

She flinched back at my raised voice. Her eyes went wide and she opened her mouth, but no sound came out. It was at that point that Henry walked in. He looked between my furious expression and Kira’s shocked one and his eyebrows went up.

“Barclay,” he ventured, then paused and gave a small wince. “Maybe you’d better turn on the telly again a sec.”

I released my death grip on the counter and reached for the remote. The widescreen above the kitchen table flicked on to an image of the front of my house with a crowd of reporters accepting tea from a small whirlwind of a woman at the centre. Cameras were held aloft to try and get a better view as she was a head shorter than most of the other people, but then she turned and walked up the steps with an empty tray so that they all had a clear shot of her. She opened the front door, giving a clear view of me striding down the corridor before I slam the door shut again.

“Woah,” Kira breathed, her eyes even wider now. “Maybe I should have given the old barnet a brush before I went out again. I looked a *little* scary.”

I felt my hands curl into fists and heat flood my face.

“You *looked* absolutely fucking ridiculous,” I told her, taking care to enunciate every word very clearly lest she miss any of them. It was clear she was thick-skinned in the extreme and this might be the only way to get through to her. “Maybe you think you’re *quirky* or *just a bit out-there* with your weirdness, but I find it unbelievably annoying.”

“No hang on mate,” Henry interrupted.

“Shut up Henry, you’re not in this.” He went to speak again but I turned away from him and back towards Kira. “I expect you breeze through life irritating the shit out of every person you meet while being blindly oblivious. But when your crazy impacts other people’s lives, it’s time to take a good look at yourself and maybe *try* to be a bit more bloody normal.”

Kira blinked and took a step back. Unfortunately that caused her hip to bump hard into the granite behind her. Her wince pulled me back from the rage for a moment and I swallowed. When she looked up at me, I was shocked to see actual tears swimming in her hazel-green eyes. Her face had drained of colour and the animation that always seemed to light up her features drained away with it. She broke eye contact and looked down at the tiles for a moment. One tear escaped, which she wiped away with a quick movement of her hand. When she looked back up, her eyes were dry. Somehow that made me feel even worse.

“I know exactly who I am,” she told me in a cold voice that I would never have even imagined could come from her. “And I’m *happy* with who I am. Do you think you’re the first person to try to tear me down? The sad thing is that I thought I knew the kind of man *you* were. All that time watching you doing your political knight-in-shining-armor thing for the people and the planet. I idolised you. Turns out even the good guys can turn out to be arseholes. Well, I’ll take my *annoying weirdness* and leave you in peace to carry on saving the country.”

She turned and started marching towards the front door. I jerked out of my frozen stance and jogged over to her, catching her small elbow in my much larger hand. I dropped her arm when she flinched away from my touch, but walked around her to block her way.

“I’m . . .” for some reason my voice was hoarse. The image of that

solitary tear tracking down her cheek kept replaying in my brain. I cleared my throat. “I’m going to need you to leave the back way. There’s . . . there’s a car waiting for you, so . . .”

Henry came to stand in front of me. My little brother was glowering in my direction, displaying more emotion than he had in weeks. He reached out for Kira and put his arm around her small shoulders. She didn’t flinch away from *him*, and I started to feel a dull ache in my chest. Neither of them looked back at me as Henry led her to the back door and out of the house.

Chapter 7

Predator

Kira

“Don’t mind me, short-stuff.”

I jumped at the throaty whisper in my ear and the sudden heat of a body pressing against my back as I stood at the notes counter in the GU outpatient department. I tried to slip out of the way, but an arm caged me in on one side and the wall blocked my exit on the other.

“Just need to reach this file here,” he explained, pressing against me more heavily for a long moment, then finally moved away from my tense body.

Ugh.

Smarmy Simon, aka Wankpuffin extraordinaire, was back from his skiing holiday. I’d had two weeks of not having to put up with his shit, but now my reprieve was over.

I gave a nervous laugh and moved away at lightning speed, holding the notes in front of me like a shield and wishing I’d worn heels today. Smarmy Simon was only about five-foot-ten but he still towered over me. Never had I been more desperate for a few more inches of height. Big men never normally intimidated me, but I was becoming more wary of them having worked with this twat over the last six months.

The thing was, I hadn’t always thought of Smarmy Simon as smarmy. He had been a decent bloke when I’d first met him. At least he’d *seemed* like a decent bloke. A bit overfriendly for an educational supervisor, but funny; he’d made me laugh. And he was good looking. He had a sort of Ken Doll vibe about him: – really well-groomed designer beard, fitted shirts over a buff torso. In the looks stakes, he was no troll. But over the last six months it had become more and more obvious that he considered himself God’s gift to womankind. It started off with the odd wink, a few comments about my legs, inappropriate amounts of eye contact with my chest. Now it was open flirting and invading my personal space. Once, in an appraisal, he’d cupped my face and leaned in as if to kiss me; I’d jerked back so violently that I cracked my head on the wall behind my chair. He’d been all like, “Woah! Calm down, I

was just getting some make-up off your cheek. What did you *think* I was going to do?” Then he’d laughed at me and, *goddamn it*, I’d laughed with him. What I should have done was tell him that his behaviour was inappropriate and to *stop* making me uncomfortable every chance he got. But it was all ‘just banter’, and I was the Queen of Banter. I was the easy-going joker, the girl all the lads could have a pint with and not have to watch what they said, because what came out of my mouth was often ten times filthier anyway. They knew I was not *that* girl – the one that made a fuss, the damsel in distress. If this were happening to either of my best friends Libby or Millie, it would be a different story. They were both that glamorous type of beautiful. People would believe them if they complained about inappropriate behaviour. I wasn’t exactly ugly – I was cute, quirky (I now despised this adjective since my dressing down from Mr High and Mighty Politician), pretty in a girl-next-door-meets-crazy-hippy kind of way. It felt arrogant to assume that a man like Simon was targeting me. And anyway, I wasn’t exactly a shrinking wallflower. I should have been able to deal with this situation myself.

“You’re in a rush today,” Smarmy Simon said, smiling that smile I’d come to hate. It made him look like a predator baring its teeth. “Got something planned for Friday night, have you? Need to get away early? I’m sure you know how to have a good time on the weekend.”

He winked. I threw up in my mouth a little but managed to swallow and give another nervous laugh. What’s with that bloody laugh? Why couldn’t I just tell him to fuck off? I’d told Barclay to go fuck himself easily enough.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, “something like that. Catch you later.” I turned away from him to jog off to the clinic room, but his hand closed around my elbow in a vice-like grip and dragged me back.

“Don’t forget we have our mid-appraisal meeting soon,” he leaned down to say into my ear, the faintest trace of a threat in his voice. I could feel his breath on my cheek. “Maybe this time we should switch things up a bit. Dinner at your place? Bit more informal.”

“Alright Si?” Mark’s sharp voice drew Simon’s face away from my ear, but he kept hold of my arm. “You want to get your paws off the registrars, *mate*?”

Simon’s hand released me and I took two rapid steps away from him. I could feel my eyes stinging again. That would be the second time in three

days, after years of stoicism. I blinked rapidly; there was no way this slimy prick was making me cry.

Simon laughed. God, his nasal laugh made me want to punch him in the balls. “Ki Ki and I were just sorting through some appraisal stuff, weren’t we Kira?”

“Um...” I looked up at Mark who had a face like thunder. I didn’t want to look like a drama queen. After all, Wankpuffin hadn’t actually *done* anything. Not really. I tucked a pink strand of hair that had come loose behind my ear and gave Mark a weak smile. “Yeah, sure, er . . .” I started edging away, wanting to get well out of both their radiuses if I was going to turn on the waterworks again.

Mark’s eyebrows went up and he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Kira’s appraisal is not for another six months,” he told Simon – something he already knew.

“Well, yes.” Simon cleared his throat. “But Kira’s always needed just a little bit more help than the other trainees. Doesn’t hurt to be prepared, does it now *Ki Ki*?”

This was a tactic I had begun to recognise in Simon, tearing me down just subtly enough for it to fly under the radar. But having someone chip away at your self-esteem and self-worth every day was wearing – and this was one of my particular weak points. I had always struggled with my postgraduate exams. I’d failed the second part of my Membership of the Royal College of Physicians . . . twice. But I’d got there in the end. Exam nerves had plagued my entire medical career, and the membership exam was renowned for being unreasonably stressful and very difficult to pass. Now, I just had my diploma of HIV left to do and I needed it to achieve my dream of becoming a consultant in Genito Urinary Medicine and Infectious Diseases.

“I think Kira’s doing just fine,” Mark told him, taking a step closer and putting his hands on his hips. For a very camp gay man, he was throwing out a lot of testosterone into the hallway and he had at least half a foot and a fair amount of muscle bulk on Smarmy Simon.

“We’ll see, we’ll see,” said Simon, backing away fast now that he knew his Kira-taunting opportunities had dried up.

Mark gave a very heterosexual growl as the door to Simon’s clinic room shut behind him, and I moved to him to put my hand over his arm.

“Don’t worry,” I told him. His eyes were trying to laser holes in Simon’s door. “I can handle that wankpuffin.” I smiled, trying to lighten the

mood, but I knew it came off slightly wobbly. I was feeling especially raw after Barclay's attack at the weekend.

Mark huffed a sigh. "You don't have to bloody *handle* him Kira. Report him to HR. Report him to Prof. Change educational supervisor. He's gaslighting you all the time. I can't stand by and watch it happen."

I bit my lip and my eyes slid to the side. There was no way I was reporting this to *anyone*. Kira Murphy was a strong independent woman. She didn't go crying to HR every time someone was a bit of a pillock. And it wasn't as though I was the best trainee either. I probably was on the 'problem' list at the Deanery with my failed exam attempts and the interruptions to my training. I'd taken a six-month break from my training scheme last year to travel with Médecins Sans Frontières, which the Deanery had not been happy about. The last thing I needed was to stir up something else and create more black marks against myself. That would not help me get a consultant job at the end of my training.

"It's nothing," I told Mark, shaking my head to emphasise my point. "Don't make a mountain out of a molehill, okay? Let sleeping cockwombles lie."

Mark's mouth tipped up in a half smile. "You're going to have to settle on wankpuffin or cockwomble as his official title, you know?"

"Hmm ... I think I'll stick to wankpuffin. I've allocated cockwomble elsewhere." I patted his arm and started to move away but Mark kept in step with me.

"Has something else upset you, Kira?" he asked in a low voice. The concern and softness of his tone nearly brought on those stupid tears again and I shook my head to clear it.

"Of course not," I told him, avoiding eye contact.

"It's just you've been a bit . . . well, I never thought I would say this to you but you've been a bit . . . *quiet*. There's not anything else going on, is there, babe?"

I looked down at my shoes for a moment, then gave him a wide grin and just about managed to stop it from wobbling again.

"Now *you're* being a cockwomble."

He gave me a small smile, appeased for now.

Chapter 8

I can spot a non-apology when I see one

Barclay

I pressed the buzzer again then shoved my hands into my trouser pockets. Judging by the state of the intercom box, I had my doubts that it was an actual functioning entity. I'd been out here for five minutes already, and unfortunately I could feel the beginnings of a horrific migraine brewing. How the hell had Henry got in? I heard footsteps behind me and Sam tapped me on the shoulder.

“If you'll allow me, Mr Lucas,” he said, reaching past me and giving the door next to the intercom a solid push. It creaked open and I shouldered my way past with a muttered ‘thanks’. So, *this* was how Henry got in. Not exactly the most secure building in London. For some reason, the thought of tiny Kira living in a block of flats in Brixton with a defunct intercom and no security whatsoever was giving me the kind of heartburn I usually only associated with parliamentary speeches. Christ, over the last few weeks this woman had introduced more stress into my life than all the stubborn idiots in the Cabinet put together.

I took the stairs two at a time, trying and failing to ignore the faint smell of urine, then I stopped outside a purple door. Of *course* her door would be purple. I knocked and it simply swung open. Scowling at the useless excuse for a door, I pushed through into the tiny cluttered corridor, which was jammed with vast assortments of colourful coats and shoes.

She had *two* pairs of psychedelic, flower-power wellies. *Two pairs*. She lived in London for fuck's sake – who needs two pairs of wellies in London? I managed to squeeze past all the clutter, and ducked down to avoid the light fitting that dangled from the low ceiling. I felt my head tighten as the migraine ratched up a notch – I'd better get this over quickly. Laughter was coming from behind the door at the end of the corridor, so I strode over and yanked it open.

“Pizza!” Kira cried as she jumped up from sitting with her hands straight up in the air and turned to me. Her face dropped when she saw who

was actually filling the doorway. Her hands fell to her hips. “Oh,” she said, pressing her lips together and flicking a glance over to Henry. “If you’re doing a big brother check-up, Henry’s fine.” She sank back down onto the massive furry . . . blob in between Camilla and Libby, two of the women from that poker night, so that she was facing away from me. I sucked in a deep breath and took a moment to survey the living room-come-kitchen.

Beanbags.

The place was full of beanbags. The purple furry one that the girls were sharing was just the tip of the iceberg. Henry was sprawled over a neon yellow one. Another two girls from the book club, I think their names were Tara and Claire, the exotic dancers if I remembered rightly, were sharing a leopard print one. The surgeon guy, Martakis, and the huge camp man, Mark, both had their own bags in the same pattern as Kira’s crazy wellingtons. A guy I didn’t recognise was sitting on the only piece of furniture in the room – a small straight-backed chair, which was painted the same purple as the beanbags. In the middle of the circle of beanbags, there was a large bowl full of Wotsits and a collection of beer bottles.

Large swaths of ethnic patterned material hung from the walls. Interspersed amongst the material, there was space made for mismatched frames containing photos. Some were of scenery – the African savanna, Mayan ruins, colourful Indian streets; some were of people, including a younger Kira in school uniform hugging Libby, a more recent picture of a whole group of them at Camilla and Pavlos’s wedding, then one of Kira with a couple of young kids. But the largest was of Kira standing with her arms around a woman who must have been her mother; she was in a flowing Kaftan and had the same auburn hair as Kira, except she had streaks of grey rather than pink. They were both beaming at the camera. In the background, I could make out a stage and other indications that they were at some sort of music festival.

My eyes flicked around the rest of the room. There were candles burning everywhere. The first thought that went through my mind was *fire risk*. The second was that between the heady heat of the candles and the general colour explosion that was going on, this room was a recipe for either an epileptic fit, or (appropriately enough) a migraine.

“What are you doing here?” Henry asked, pushing up off his beanbag and walking over to usher me back out into the corridor. “Listen,” he said in a low voice once he was in front of me. “I told you she doesn’t want to see you.

I know you worry about me, but I'm *fine*."

I let out a huff and raised my eyebrows.

"Okay, okay. I'm *going* to be fine. I like these people. My old friends ..." Henry trailed off and shook his head. "I just can't . . . I'm not ready to see them yet. So, don't come here and fuck this up for me, okay?"

I clenched my jaw in annoyance. Henry wouldn't even have Kira et al in his life in the first place if it weren't for my efforts. All of that had been conveniently forgotten, as so often happened with the youngest Lucas. But Henry *was* looking better. There was no denying the change in him, and the last thing I wanted was to 'fuck it up'. I didn't bother to tell Henry that the logistics of even getting him to Brixton so he could sit on a ridiculous beanbag in a tiny hippie hovel had been seriously painful. When Henry had announced that Kira 'no longer felt comfortable' coming to the house, in order to ferry him around I'd had to hire an entirely new security team with very little notice. Of course, Henry didn't know that. Henry, who hadn't left the house in months, other than to go to the hospital, wasn't aware of any need for security. He just took one of my town cars with a driver as he often had done, even before his downward spiral. The lazy bastard hated the tube and scoffed at my tendency to cycle to parliament, but was blissfully unaware of either the car that followed them, or the two guys who were right now hanging with my own security outside the building.

"I just need to talk to Kira," I explained. "I've tried to apologise and I have no other way of getting in contact with her. The woman doesn't seem to have a functioning mobile, and don't get me started on her email."

"You can start with a bloody good apology, right?"

I sighed and looked up at the ceiling in frustration. "I'm *trying* to apologise, you prick. I've been trying to apologise for two bloody weeks. If you could get out of my goddamn way, I can try again."

Henry eyed me for a moment and then gave a short nod.

"Just remember that you used to have a personality, right?" he said, bitterly. "Before all this politics stuff you were a bit of an uptight arsehole, but nothing compared to now."

"Lovely. If you've finished slagging me off can we please get back into that tiny fire-disaster-waiting-to-happen so I can apologise to her and bloody well sort this out." There was laughter and a couple of shouts coming from behind the door. Henry smirked at me, the spark I hadn't seen for such a long time back in his eyes.

“Not sure you can handle her, bro,” he told me, looking way too pleased with this revelation. “She’s a loose cannon.”

My fingers went up to rub the pounding at my temples. This was not going to be easy.

When we re-entered the room, I blinked, twice. The source of everyone’s amusement became clear. An upside-down Kira was performing a headstand in the middle of the beanbags. Her orange jumper had ridden up to expose her flat stomach, while her firework-patterned, legging-covered legs were peddling furiously to try to keep her balance. She collapsed as I pushed further into the room, both her legs falling onto Mark’s shoulders either side of his head. Everyone in the room applauded and Mark hauled her up into a sitting position in front of him. She turned to face me, collapsing back to use Mark as a human chair.

In general, I tended to be in control of my emotions – Mum often said I was *too* controlled. But for some reason, the sight of Kira’s bare stomach a moment ago, and her red-faced, crazy-haired appearance now short-circuited my brain. My mouth fell open and I couldn’t seem to form words. Pure and simple *need* washed over me. It felt savage, primal, and totally unfamiliar.

Mark’s arms closed around Kira and he gave her a squeeze; the gesture caused a wave of almost rage-level annoyance to sweep through me. I could hear my pulse beating in my ears. Mark, whom I was slowly learning not to underestimate, flicked a glance down at my white knuckles and cocked his head to the side, a curious smile quirking the corners of his mouth.

“Face it, Ki Ki,” Mark said, giving Kira’s temple a quick kiss. “You’ll never be Cirque du Soleil material.”

Kira was watching me, but she broke eye contact to elbow Mark in the stomach.

“That wasn’t the bet, you big fanny-badger. All I said was that I could do a headstand for ten seconds, and I did.”

“Actually, it was eight point seven five,” Millie’s quiet voice piped up from the sofa. Kira shot her a frustrated look. “Um . . .” Millie continued, shifting on the furry beanbag and biting her lip, “sorry, I meant *ten* point seven five . . . at least.”

“You’re a crap liar Prof X,” Kira said, but her tone was soft. “Don’t worry, I’ll just try it again.”

Anxious to prevent yet more stomach disclosure – Mark might be gay but the other two men staring at Kira certainly were not – I cleared my throat.

“I’m sorry to interrupt but I . . .” It appeared my brain was still non-functioning. You wouldn’t think that public speaking was a huge part of how I made my living. “I really need to speak to you for a moment, Dr Murphy.”

Kira rolled her eyes but made no move to push up off her human chair. Mark’s hands were now resting on her thighs. Was this bastard even gay? He could be pulling a fast one to grope women without fear of reprimand. And why did the thought of Mark groping Kira bother me so much? I was losing my goddamn mind.

“For the last time, nobody ever calls me ‘Dr Murphy,’” Kira said. “Even my patients call me by my first name. If you could remove the stick from your arse for five fucking minutes, maybe I’d be prepared to speak to you.”

I forced a smile, which I’d hoped would come off as charming but knew ended up more as a grimace. I’d never been naturally charming and Kira was testing my reserves of patience. My head throbbed and a wave of nausea washed over me.

“I’m sorry, *Kira*.” My words sounding stiff and forced but it was the best I could get out. “If you could possibly see your way to allowing me five minutes of your time, I would be extremely grateful.”

Kira snorted, but she still pushed herself up with Mark’s help and made her way over to the doorway made for tiny people, which I succeeded in cracking my head on.

“If the pizzas get here whilst I’m gone and nobody saves me a piece of vegetarian supreme, I will be *pissed*.”

“Ki Ki, nobody eats the wanky veg one other than you,” Pav told her.

“Don’t give me that, Martakis,” she said, hands on her hips. “I’ve not forgotten the Quorn Sausage Incident.” She shooed me back out into the corridor, causing me to crack my head on the frame *again*, then she slammed the door on Martakis’ protests.

“Right,” she muttered. “Come on then.”

She flitted around me in that super-quick, fey way of hers and led me into her tiny bedroom on the other side of the corridor. It was a miniscule room built amongst the eaves. I couldn’t straighten to my full height so I was standing hunched over and with my thumping head tilted to the side.

“It’s like something out of *Gulliver’s Travels* in here,” I complained as I tried to negotiate a more comfortable standing position. Kira seemed perfectly comfortable, standing to her full height with no problem and

smirking at my discomfort. My gaze flicked to the bed and her eyebrows went up.

“I was just going to ask if I could sit on it,” I told her, feeling my neck spasm on one side due to the awkward angle.

“Say what you’ve got to say. No sitting on my bed. There’s no space there anyway and if you move any of my papers and disrupt my filing system, I may have to kill you.”

“There’s a system in there?” I asked, eyeing the mass of papers and books sprawled over the small bed with disbelief.

“Sure,” Kira looked down at the chaos and stuck her chin out defiantly. “It’s a finely balanced ecosystem. Everything has an exact position. I’m a highly organised genius.”

I thought of my own immaculate desk back in my study. Empty in-tray. Perfectly ordered filing cabinet. Desk bare other than the two screens for my desktop computer. Delicate ecosystem? I called bullshit. But it was not going to do me any favours at this point to verbalise this. I needed to get on with this apology and somehow get her to agree to the idea my PR team had floated yesterday.

“Look, I’m sorry if I offended you the week before last. As you can probably understand, it is a sensitive situation and we’re trying to stay in control of the press.”

Kira crossed her arms over her chest, tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes at me.

“You’re not sorry.”

“What?”

“You said ‘I’m sorry *if you* were offended’, not ‘I’m sorry *I was* a rude arsehole’. There’s a big difference. I can spot a non-apology when I see one. The hospital gives them out all the time.”

I rubbed the area between my eyebrows behind which the dull, throbbing pain was slowly escalating.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry *I was* a rude arsehole. I was stressed and I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.” That may have been the first genuine apology I’d given in years.

She muttered something under her breath that sounded like cockwomble. *What?*

“What was that?” I asked.

“If I accept your apology, will you bugger off and leave us in peace?”

“I . . .” The pressure behind my eyes was becoming truly unbearable now. An entire area of my vision had gone blurry. A little later, I realised that the stress of the last two weeks may have been catching up with me. I’d had very little sleep. Everything was riding on getting this bill through. “Christ, it’s a bit bright in here, isn’t it?”

I tried to focus on Kira through the pain but it was becoming more difficult. When I dragged my eyes away, there was a trail of colour after her image; a sure sign that this migraine was going to be dramatic. Bugger, I needed to get home.

“Hey,” her voice had softened and she was closer now. I felt her small hand on my arm. “You okay up there? You’re looking a bit pale.”

My eyes were closed now. There wasn’t much else I could do against the light. My head felt like it was going to explode. I heard rustling of paper and then her hands were back on my arms, pushing me over towards the bed.

“Migraine?” she asked, keeping her voice soft. I nodded as I was pushed down to sit on the bed.

“How did you . . .?”

“I am, in fact, a doctor,” she told me. “Or had you forgotten?”

I didn’t answer. The pain was building and building. It wouldn’t be long now until I vomited with it. She cut off the lights and I breathed a sigh of relief. The searing sensation behind my eyes abated a little, but the nausea didn’t recede. “I’ll get you some painkillers.”

I shook my head.

“Can’t . . . can’t keep them down,” I managed to get out, wincing as the words echoed around my head. “Vomit.”

There was a long pause. I heard the bedroom door open then close and the low murmur of voices from next door. After a few minutes passed, I heard the door open again then felt the bed depress next to me.

“Barclay?” She smoothed the hair back from my forehead “I’ve got some anti-sickness medication I can give you. It dissolves on your gum. Is that okay?”

“Yes, yes, whatever you’ve got.”

“Are you allergic to anything?”

“No.”

A small tablet was pushed into my hand. “Put this on your gum above your teeth and leave it there. It’ll take about ten minutes to work.” I complied and felt it start to dissolve.

“Why don’t you lie down and I’ll get the painkillers ready.”

“I need to talk to you. I . . .”

Every word was causing me more pain. Bile rose up into my throat and I dry heaved.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she cooed, smoothing my hair back again then pulling a blanket up over me. “Shh, for a bit okay? You can get back to being Barclay Lucas Saviour of Mankind when you’re not about to up-chuck on my fave *Wombles* bedspread.” She left then, and I heard more muttering outside the room but couldn’t act on it through the fug of pain. Ten minutes later, a couple of pills were put in my hand and I swallowed them without question.

“I should go,” I said, my voice not much above a whisper after the effort of lifting a glass of water to drink and handing it back to Kira.

“I know,” she said. “Lie for a minute, then we’ll get Mr Sexy Security to come up and fireman lift you out to your posh car. That’d make for a juicy tabloid story.”

“Just for a minute,” I said relaxing into the bed, which was surprisingly comfortable despite the fact my feet were dangling off the end.

Chapter 9

I melt your ice-cold heart

Barclay

Lavender.

I was surrounded by the smell of lavender.

Had Mrs Scull changed the washing powder?

If she had, I was going to tell her to change it back. Lavender reminded me too much of . . . My eyes shot open and were confronted with an image of a rainbow with a badly painted unicorn jumping over it. I blinked twice but unfortunately it was still there, decorating a wardrobe door that was inches from my face. A fleecy blanket fell off my shoulders as I gingerly sat up and surveyed my surroundings with dismay.

I hadn't managed to take in much detail last night through the pain, but there was *no doubt* that this was Kira's bedroom. The bed was hobbit-sized, the wardrobe was wedged so closely between the bed and the wall that I doubted opening it was an easy task, and the whole room (other than the terrible painting on the wardrobe) was painted bright yellow. The kind of yellow that I'd once read could lead to mental illness.

I rolled my head on my shoulders and rubbed the back of my neck. The pain had gone, but I was left with an odd numbness across my forehead and temples, which I knew would last for another few hours at least. I checked my watch and groaned. I'd been asleep for ten hours. Ten hours? In this miniscule bed? How was that even possible? I always needed to sleep the migraines off, but even when I was at home I only ever managed a maximum of six hours sleep. Why had I slept for double that in a bed that didn't even accommodate the entire length of my body?

I swung my feet around and they landed on a load of papers that were strewn across the floor, scrunching up under my feet. Glancing to the side table, I spied a glass of water and two more tablets with Post-its saying *drink me* and *eat me* stuck to them. I obeyed the Post-its and then stood . . . very, very carefully, lest I fracture my skull on the beams. It didn't take long to search the flat and discover it was deserted. A little nest of a pillows and

blankets was sitting on top of the double beanbag and I felt a stab of guilt to realise that was where Kira must have slept.

I'd just managed to locate my shoes when I heard the front door bang and light footsteps.

"Yo, Migraine Man," she said as she pushed into the living room armed with two brown bags and a large clear cup of what looked like green slime. "I prescribe eggy-bacon bap and a Coke. Cure-all extraordinaire. The wheatgrass smoothie is for the health bit." She shoved one of the bags at me and I caught it before it dropped to the ground.

Kira

I watched as Barclay opened the bag and eyed the Food of the Gods with deep suspicion. After I gestured for him to move to the beanbags, he shuffled over there with yet another frown creasing the skin between his eyebrows. No wonder he had migraines. A permanent scowl would do that to anyone. Once in the living area, he sank down onto a beanbag. It was the first time I'd ever seen him slouch. There's not much else you can do on a beanbag, so it was more of an enforced slouch, but, enforced or not, I thought he could do with a bit more slouching in his life. I walked over to him and shoved a Coke into his free hand.

"I don't really—" he started, but I cut him off.

"No grumble-weeding. I expect that body of yours is a temple most of the time – I've spied that gym you have next to your office – but this morning you're going to experience the magic of greasy carbohydrates and caffeine. I promise you'll feel better. Coke has the same amount of sugar in it as rehydration fluid. That and the caffeine, plus Mr Eggy Bacon Bap, will pull you out of your fug. And the wheatgrass . . ." I shook the smoothie and put it at my feet ". . . that'll health you *right* up."

"I usually drink a protein shake for breakfast," he told me, but still took a long slug of the Coke.

"And I'm usually a vegan," I shrugged. "Flexibility is the key to a happy life."

"Vegan?" Barclay asked, his eyebrows going up into his hairline. "Kira, you're the least vegan person I've ever met. Kebabs and eggy bacon baps are not vegan."

I grinned at him and took a bite out of my bap. "Look, protein shakes are great and I wouldn't expect anything less with an arse like yours," said

around a mouthful of egg and bacon. “But *this* is the stuff your body needs to feel better now.” I usually only reserved this for hung-over days but thought I’d make an exception to keep Migraine Man happy.

“Listen, I am sorry,” he told me, unwrapping his own breakfast. “I was totally out of line the other day. The press attention winds me up and I . . . I hope you still feel you can come to the house. For Henry, I mean.” It was all very stiff and formal, but at least it sounded somewhat sincere this time. I decided to let it go and gave a small shrug. The man was obviously under a mountain of stress, he didn’t need any extra.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, lying back on my beanbag and struggling out of my coat. The bloody thing was like a straight-jacket to get off. I arched my back and grunted as I dragged my arms out of the sleeves. When I looked up, Barclay was no longer frowning. His face was blank and his mouth had fallen slightly open. Maybe he was still a bit out of it?

“You okay there?”

He shook his head as if to clear it, turning away from me to look down at his food, his throat convulsing in a swallow.

“Yes, of course.” His voice just a bit rougher than normal. “Thanks for last night as well. These migraines, they annihilate me and I . . .”

“How often do you get them?”

He blinked before frowning again.

“About twice a month until . . . well, I guess once a week at the moment.”

“What are your triggers?”

“We’re getting off topic here. I came to apologise, but also I need—”

He stopped speaking as I pushed up off the beanbag to kneel in front of him in one swift move. Then, he flinched as my hand came up to smooth the deep worry line between his brows.

“This perma-frown won’t be helping,” I said, before flopping back onto my own beanbag again and feeling heat flood my face. What was wrong with me? Why had I touched his face? I’d felt an overwhelming desire to smooth that frown away. The weight of the world seemed to be on this man’s shoulders and, for some reason, it made my chest ache. “I reckon it’s stress.”

“What?” he asked, staring at me with a dazed expression. I seemed to have shocked all the uptight arsehole out of him for the moment with my inappropriate touching.

“Your trigger, it’s stress. Right? All this negotiating, press attention,

big shit going down: you're under too much pressure."

He snapped out of his trance long enough for his eyes to flash with irritation. "I handle stress just fine, thanks, and even if I didn't, there's not much I can do about that at the moment," he told me. "I have responsibilities and I—"

"I know you do," I said, softening my tone and leaning forward towards him. That blank look came over his features again. "But you've got to look after yourself too. You need sleep. You need to be able to relax. Your body is telling you it can't keep going like this. I know you've got to save the country, but you can't very well do that when you're crippled with pain and unable to look at any bright lights without vomiting."

"My GP's given me some prop—"

"Propranalol's great for prophylaxis, but you can't just swallow the pills and forget about the other stuff. I've got this great meditation pr—"

"No!" he barked out the word and was looking at me in an appalled way, like I had just offered to inject Ebola into his bloodstream. "I am not the sort of person who . . . *meditates*." The way he emphasised the word made it clear that it was not something he'd consider doing, even under torture. I rolled my eyes. There was no helping some people. Let him pop pills and drive himself into the ground. What was it to me? So I sat back in my beanbag, polished off my bap and watched him take a few cautious bites of his as if it were somehow contaminated.

"Get it down you, Fussy McFusserson," I told him. "I swear you'll feel the benefit."

He gave me a doubtful look but did manage to choke it back at a faster rate.

"Why choose politics anyway? I mean, if attention stresses you out. Isn't there something less . . . high profile you could do?"

Barclay stopped chewing and settled back into the beanbag. He let out a long sigh and closed his eyes. It seemed as if battling his migraine had lowered his defences, and I had a feeling that Barclay with his guard down was a rare sight.

"It was just a natural progression really. I studied Politics at Bristol, Law at Cambridge, moved to a firm in London and, well . . . I fell into it. Right so, listen—"

"You did not *fall into it*, you lying toad," I cut him off. "C'mon, the least you can do is give me an honest answer." He sighed again and rubbed

the back of his neck before shifting uncomfortably on the beanbag.

“They were fucking it up, okay?” he said in a rush. I blinked.

“Who was?”

“All of them. All the governments, from whichever side. They always bugged it up. I couldn’t just stand by and watch anymore. I . . .” He looked at me then, those blue eyes with all their intensity focused on mine and my breath caught in my throat. Then he grinned, and I felt the impact of just how handsome he was slam into my chest. “I may be a *tiniest* bit of a control freak,” he said through his grin. I smiled back at him.

“Oh really? I hadn’t noticed.”

He chuckled. “Anyway, I thought I could do a better job. Make people’s lives better whilst maybe helping to stop us destroying the planet . . . you know, all that sort of sanctimonious bullshit.” Two slashes of colour had appeared high on his cheekbones now. He was embarrassed that his real reason for going into politics was to make the world a better place – such a bloody Tory.

“It’s not sanctimonious bullshit and you know it,” I said, leaning forward on my beanbag. “I admire you for what you’ve done, what you’re trying to do.”

He shifted uncomfortably again and his colour deepened before he cleared his throat.

“Thanks,” he mumbled into his Coke. And even though he wasn’t looking at me, even though it was said in such a low voice I could barely make it out, I could hear the sincerity in his tone. It meant something to him that he had my approval.

“Listen,” he said after a long moment. “We’re getting off track here. I came to apologise and, well . . .” He took a sip of his Coke and his left eye twitched. “I need to ask a favour.”

“Okay,” I replied slowly.

“I . . .” He’d finished his bap now and was balling up the bag in his hand. I’d never seen him anything less than supremely confident. It was a little bizarre. He let out a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “You may have noticed that the press have taken an interest in you after that little stunt you pulled at the house.”

“Hey!” I objected. “How was I supposed to know you’d be Mr Centre of the Universe that day? All I did was step out of the front door.” I winked and gave him a cheeky grin.

Another deep breath. Another clench of his jaw. He was clearly holding onto his cool façade by a thread.

“Yes, well, whilst you were just *stepping out the front door*, obviously with your head down and as fast as possible to avoid attention.”

“Obviously.”

He looked up at the ceiling for a moment, as if seeking patience. When he looked back at me, his eye twitch was back with a vengeance. “Despite how *discreet* you were, they are still taking an interest in you. They want to know why you were at my house. Henry hasn’t . . . I mean he won’t even tell his old friends about his diagnosis. If the press knew you were at the house to see him, as his doctor . . .’

“I wasn’t there as his doctor. I was there as his friend.”

“Okay, okay, but so far the press only know you’re a doctor. They just haven’t worked out what *type* of doctor you are.”

“A *sex* doctor,” I breathed, fluttering my eyelashes and grinning again, triggering yet another sigh and another contemplation of the chipped plasterwork on my ceiling.

“When they do, I don’t want them connecting the dots. If Henry were exposed in the media like that, I’m not sure how he’d get through it.” There was the worry back in Barclay’s eyes for his brother. I wondered how much of that worry was contributing to the headaches as well.

“Medical records are confidential,” I said. “There’s no way anyone is finding out unless Henry wants them to.”

“I’m not taking the risk.” His mouth pulled into a thin line.

“So you want me to disappear? Swim with the fishes? Wait! Can you, like, erase a person or something with super-secret government ways? I knew it! I *knew* you guys could do that sort of crap. I’m halfway impressed and halfway proper shitting myself.”

“Give me strength,” he said under his breath as he scraped his hands down his face. “No. We do not *erase* people. You’ve been watching too many episodes of *Spooks*. All I want is for us to give the press *another* reason for you leaving in the morning. One that doesn’t involve Henry. At all.” He cleared his throat and shifted on his beanbag. To my surprise, once again the tan complexion of his face pinked up a little. “My press team came up with it. They actually think that you might be good for my approval ratings. Apparently, the public view me as too controlled. Not *human* enough.”

“Like a robot with a stick up its arse?” I asked with a grin. His lips

flattened.

“Thank you so much for that summary. Great to know my press team have their finger on the pulse. I think Martin’s actual words were ‘stuck-up, boring automaton’. Apparently, having you emerge from my house has done me a lot more good than harm in the public’s eyes. Anyway, they’ve suggested that you . . . sort of pretend that . . .” He trailed off and bit his lip. It was so sexy I very nearly jumped him. I swore I could feel my ovaries convulse. Then, understanding dawned and my eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“Omigod!” I shouted, leaping from my beanbag and pointing an excited finger at him. “You want me to be your *fake fiancée*!” I was jumping up and down on the spot now. “I *knew* reading all those bad romance novels would pay off one day.”

“Woah, woah, woah!” Barclay said, leaping to his feet with both hands going up in protest, but I was on too much of a roll to notice. “I never said—”

“You’ll buy me a tonne of expensive clothes and other bollocks. I’ll pretend to object ’cause, you know, *morals*. Er, by the way – spoiler alert – I take the clothes. *All* the clothes. Got me?”

“Dr Murphy, I—”

“Yes! That’s perfect! You’ll call me *Dr Murphy*,” I put on a low voice to emphasise my name, “but then I melt your ice-cold heart. You fall hopelessly in love with me and the wedding goes ahead, *for real*.”

Barclay groaned, walked over to the high back wooden chair and sat down heavily. It creaked in a rather ominous way as he put his head in his hands.

“Okay, Kira—”

“See!” I jumped on the spot again and pointed at him. “It’s working already.”

“You would *not* be my *fake fiancée*.” I tried not to be offended by how very sure he sounded about that fact. “All I need is for you to go out to a couple of things with me. Be willing to let the press think that we’re an item. Take the pressure off Henry, cover up the reasons you were there in the first place, and boost my boring, heartless robot reputation.”

I launched myself onto the beanbag in front of him to lie on my stomach with my head in my hands, inches from Barclay’s knees. “Hmph, you’re a bit of a fun sponge, aren’t you? Not even a teeny, tiny little diamond for my left ring finger?”

“No engagement, real or fake,” he said, rubbing his temples. I frowned. He was starting to look stressed again.

“Hey, hey. Chill your beans. I was just joking. Of course I’ll pretend to be doing the dirty tango with you. No problem.”

“I didn’t mean . . .” he broke off as he glanced at my smiling face and rolled his eyes, the corners of his mouth tipping up in a small smile. “You’re teasing me again, aren’t you?”

“I never tease about the dirty tango, baby,” I said in my best low, sexy voice, throwing out a wink and tilting my head to the side. Libby had informed me that my *best low sexy voice* came across as more chronic laryngitis than sex appeal, but what did she know?

Barclay pinched the bridge of his nose and took a deep breath in and out. “So, you’ll do it?”

“You betcha, big man,” I said. “I’m all for protecting Henry and I’m defo all in for boosting your political career. You’re the best thing to have happened to the Conservatives for ages. What you’re doing for renewable energy butters my bagel, big time. Would I prefer literally any other party to be in power? Yes. Is that gonna happen? No way. So you’re the best chance we have.”

He stared at me. “You might want to keep the fact you’d prefer *literally any other party* over the Tory party, to yourself.”

I shrugged and gave him an unrepentant smile. “What can I say? Your party sucks, big guy. By the way I have some conditions – you meditate every day and sleep for a minimum of seven hours.”

“I don’t *meditate*, and what the bloody hell has my sleep go to do with you?”

“Well . . .” I flipped over so I was lying on my back across the beanbag with my head hanging off the end and my upside-down face looking across at Barclay. “If you want to be my pretend luuuveer,” I drew out the word and rolled the ‘r’ whilst giving him another little wink. “Then you’ll have to agree to my conditions.”

“You won’t be my pretend lover, and has anyone ever told you that you wink *way* too much?”

“Oh *really*?” I raised one eyebrow. “What *will* I be then? If you’re proposing the *real* thing, then can I suggest some stretches before we hit go time? You’ll do yourself some damage otherwise. I am *very* flexible in bed.”

“Jesus,” Barclay stood up from the chair as his face flooded with

more colour. “Look, can you just agree to meet me this Friday? It’s the Conservative Party annual Black and White fundraising ball.”

My eyes went wide and I flipped the right way up. “Awesome,” I whispered. Of course there’d be a posh fundraising event – every good romance had them.

“It’ll be formal.” His eyes flicked over my outfit as he tried and failed to mask a small wince. Even I could admit that I looked a bit out-there today. I’d had to settle on whatever was in the tumble dryer before I went to get food as the rest of my clothes were in my room with Migraine Man. The result was kilt over cycling shorts paired with my favourite jumper, which was unfortunately riddled with holes from over-wear.

“I can do formal,” I told him, tilting my chin up at a stubborn angle.

“Hmm,”

“I can. Although I’d like to point out at this juncture that this is the part of the story where you offer to take me to an exclusive designer boutique and buy me the whole collection on your triple platinum credit card.”

“Feel free to invoice me.”

“Bloody hell,” I sighed. “Invoice you? That’s not very romantic, is it?”

His lips were twitching. I was getting to the big bastard, I knew it. “Okay, look . . . I am grateful for your help last night and for agreeing to do this for Henry, and me. I promise it won’t take up too much of your time. But we will *not* be pretend lovers, regular lovers, engaged or anything of that nature.”

“Okay, whatever you say Dully Dullerson.”

Barclay let out a slow, relieved breath, then paused as he caught me winking at him again.

Chapter 10

She's my girlfriend

Barclay

“Mr Clifton, I’d be happier if *your* team could put a man on her.”

Sam sighed. “You barely let us put a man on *you*, Mr Lucas. I don’t think that—”

“I do not live in a rough part of Brixton. And I am not a five-foot-nothing female,” I snapped, annoyed with the ultra-cautious Sam for being so cavalier about Kira’s safety, when I was barely allowed out for a run without it becoming a major logistical nightmare. “I fail to see the problem with extending the security team to her and having fewer men covering me. I know I’ve had threats, but Nick’s life has been under threat for years and he’s alright.”

Sam’s company had been contracted by the government to make sure *I* was safe. I paid for my brother’s security myself on top, and now I wanted to pay for Kira’s.

“That’s beside the point, sir. We’re protecting *you*. Hire a separate team for her if you’re concerned.”

“I don’t want another lot of security personnel for her. I trust you guys. If it’s me they want to hurt, then they could very well target her in the process.”

“She’s been seen at your house *once*,” Sam said. “It’s not like she’s—”

“She’s my girlfriend,” I blurted out before I could control my words – a very unusual state of affairs for a man who had made a career of controlled and measured responses.

Visions of that tiny flat in Brixton with its shitty security system and the crappy locks that Kira seemed to forget to fasten anyway filled my mind. I imagined all the times she must have taken the night bus, or simply walked home. Her petite frame in those outrageous outfits – no attempt at fading into the background, not one single care or thought for her own safety. For some reason, none of that was acceptable to me. I tried to justify it by telling myself that I only cared for Henry’s sake – after all, she had been the one to bring him back into the land of the living. But way back in the depths of my

subconscious, I knew that wasn't entirely true.

"With all due respect, sir," Sam did not look at all pleased with this development, "please, tell me that is a joke."

"Uh . . ." Bloody hell, did Sam realise I was trying to pull a fast one? If this man didn't buy it, then I'd have a hard time convincing the rest of the country. "Well, no, I'm not joking. We've been seeing each other."

Sam rolled his eyes.

I frowned. It wasn't like Sam was *that* deferential to me, but he had never been openly disrespectful before.

"Do you have a problem with that, Mr Clifton?"

"Can I be frank with you?" he asked. I nodded. "She is the definition of loose cannon. Keeping an eye on her will be like herding a feral cat. Have you *read* the file we made on her? She's fucking crazy. Apart from the stunts she pulls to raise money for that African charity, she once took two weeks off work to sit up a tree in Burgess Park because they wanted to cut it down to build a new café."

"Okay, I'll admit she's a little unconventional but—"

"Every year she goes out to the countryside for some sort of pagan, Wiccan feminist ritual that her mum organises."

"Okay." My eyebrows went up as I drew out the word.

"And I'm not trekking out to Epping Forest to watch a load of perimenopausal women frolicking in the mud and dancing around a fire under the full moon."

"What?" Heat surged through me as I imagined mud-covered Kira prancing around Epping Forest.

"I'm not saying I'm against scantily clad, muddy females, and your Kira is an attractive girl, but she goes with *her mum*. Most of the other birds there are her mum's age or older. That is some scary shit right there."

I swallowed. "Right, yes, well . . ."

"And that's not even touching on the gay clubs, the strip clubs—"

"Strip clubs?"

"How well do you actually know Kira, Mr Lucas?"

"I . . ."

"She is a liability."

"Well, she's *my* bloody liability so just . . . just put a man on her, alright?"

Kira

“Henners, my man!”

“Argh!” Henry screamed, jumping off the bar stool in the kitchen and looking freaked. I tried not to laugh, I really did, but . . .

“Henny Penny,” I forced out through my hilarity, “you should see yourself! Clutching at your chest like some sort of virgin in a horror movie. I had no idea you were such a pussy.”

The offending hand fell from his chest at lightning speed and he scowled at me, puffing up his chest and planting his feet wide.

“Doesn’t matter how Alpha Male you wanna go now, Jamie Lee Curtis,” I told him, clicking across the tiled floor to get to the kettle, flicking it on then rifling through the cupboard above it. “I now know your scaredy-cat leanings. There’s no coming back from that, baby.” I threw the Earl fucking Grey down on the counter in disgust. “Don’t you freaks have any goddamn PG Tips? I’m gasping here.”

“Kira Murphy,” Henry said, deflating his chest (I would never let Henry know, but it had actually been an impressive display – since coming out of his funk he’d started eating and using the gym in Barclay’s basement. He’d be back up to full Lucas Brother hotness in no time at this rate). “What are you doing here? And what are you wearing?”

I was in my hands down nicest, most posh outfit in my wardrobe. But, judging by Henry’s shocked expression, wasn’t quite sure that my version of *nice* and *posh* quite gelled with the Lucas version. This may have been because my smartest coat was very orange. You couldn’t see the dress underneath but my four-inch heels were electric pink. I hadn’t gone crazy with makeup but it was definitely more than my normal half-arsed effort.

“Well, *that’s* a nice welcome.” I shot him a mock hurt look. “Haven’t you heard?” I gave a little squeak of glee as I found a rogue packet of gingernuts that had been hiding behind the Earl Grey. “Your brother and I are . . . luuurveers.” I took a bite out of a gingernut like a lioness chomping into a gazelle. The man-eater effect was ruined slightly by the crumbs falling onto my coat.

Henry shook his head like I was the most utterly ridiculous creature on the planet. It was a little insulting. Wasn’t he even vaguely concerned that his brother was actually boning me? Was I that un-boneable?

To be fair, I knew I was about the last person the Great Barclay Lucas would bone. Once we’d put on this little show, Barclay could go back to

doing Very Important Things in an orderly and organised manner with some sterile, socially acceptable, normal hair-coloured woman. And I could go back to the festival-attending, beard-sporting, questionable-hygiene-leaning chaps I was partial to.

“Shake your head all you want, baby,” I said, dropping the gross Earl Grey tea bag into my mug (needs must – I hadn’t had a cup of tea in over an hour). “How have I got your security code if I don’t need constant access to your back door in order to have an illicit affair with Mr Fine Arse himself?”

“Dr Murphy.”

I very nearly burned my hand as I whipped around to face the large man filling the doorway and scowling across the kitchen at me.

“You know how much I appreciate this,” Barclay said in a strained voice, as if it physically hurt him to admit his gratitude to me. “But, like I said before, can we please, please not tell people we’re . . . physically intimate.”

I sighed. “I’m having a joke with Henners here. Alright, Serious Face? I know we’re not *physically intimate*.” I lowered my voice and my eyebrows to try to mimic his perma-frown. “But let’s at least have a bloody laugh, right?”

Henry snorted. “Ki Ki, the guy hasn’t *had a laugh* in over a decade. He’s not about to change now.”

“But his luuurrrvveer wants to have–”

Barclay cut in, “Actually you’re just meant to be my girlfriend. Sort of.”

“Ah!” I shouted, jumping up and down on the spot, then putting my finger on my nose with one hand and pointing at Barclay with the other. “I *knew* it! Fake girlfriend! And so it begins: my own personal romance novel. There’ll be tears and laughter, misunderstandings will abound, but love will win the day.”

Barclay’s left eye twitched in irritation and he looked down at his feet. Henry sniggered from the other side of the kitchen and I took the opportunity to take a much-needed swig of my tea.

“Dr Murphy,” he snapped out my name and I jumped. “I’m sorry if I’ve not been clear on this, but we are not going to be romantically involved. Ever.”

Well, that told me. I took my time dipping my gingernut into my tea before taking a large bite out of it. I knew we weren’t ever going to be bloody

romantically involved. He didn't have to spell it out. I wasn't an idiot. Couldn't he take a joke? The uptight twatbadger.

"Barclay," Henry snapped, and I noticed he wasn't laughing anymore. "It sounds like Kira's doing you a favour. No doubt something that idiot Martin thought up. She knows she's not getting access to your *private areas* – she's making a goddamn joke. Not that you would know a joke if it ran up to you and slapped you in the face with a wet fish. But there's no need to be a total dick about it."

"Okay, okay," Barclay held up his hands to his brother, eyes wide, probably in shock at Henry's uncharacteristic display of temper. "I'm sorry, Dr . . . Kira. Again. I just really don't want there to be any misunderstandings."

"Right," I said, putting my tea down, laying one of my hands across my heart, and holding the other up palm forward with the middle three fingers up. "I promise that I will do my best to keep my hands off your private areas, to serve the Queen and my community, to help other people and to keep the Brownie Guide law."

The tense atmosphere in the kitchen was broken by Henry's belly laugh. Even Barclay's lips twitched. I was getting through to this sucker – he'd laugh at my jokes if it killed me. Nobody was immune to my humour. Nobody.

"If we're all quite finished discussing my *private areas*, I think we need to leave."

I swigged at my tea. My neck felt hot as unbidden thoughts about Barclay's private areas snuck into my brain. A naked Barclay would probably fry enough of my neurones to equate to a lobotomy, so it was just as well I wouldn't be getting that opportunity. At least that was what I was telling myself. The little needles of hurt were still there though – that feeling of rejection (as ridiculous as it was) still constricting my chest.

He's not even your type, I tried to tell myself. My last boyfriend had dreadlocks and played the flute at festivals with his folk band, The Monkey Spankers. That's about as far away from a Tory politician with tailored suits as you could get.

"Lead the way, luuurveeer," I purred as I walked over to him and linked my arm with his. The muscles of his forearm stiffened and bunched under my hand – holy anally retentive work out regime, Batman. I swallowed and gave him a wide grin. Luckily, the heat from my neck hadn't spread to

my cheeks. I hadn't blushed so much since I was sixteen. Barclay contemplated the ceiling for a moment, then cleared his throat.

"Forgive me for my ignorance," Barclay said, his eyes flicking down to my orange coat then back to my face, "but how exactly does your outfit fit with the black and white theme for tonight?"

I made a disgusted face. "Blurgh! Black and white is boring. I'm a colourful badger – always have been." His eyes closed for a moment and he took a deep breath in and out as if searching for patience.

"Fine," he said, his tone suggesting it was anything but. "There's a car waiting outside. We'll have to go through the reporters."

"Er, yeah," I said. "I'm guessing that's kind of the point, right?"

"Right." He pulled me in the direction of the front door, not bothering to say bye to his brother.

"Don't wait up, Henners!" I shouted as I was propelled out of the kitchen. When we reached the exit, he stopped for a moment.

"I know you're doing me a favour," he said, staring at the oak in front of him. "But could you please *try* not to say anything about genital warts when we go out there or, well . . . maybe try not to say anything at all."

"Aye, aye captain," I told him, doing my Brownie Guide salute again then miming zipping my lips, locking them then throwing away the key. He stared at me a bit, then his lips twitched again before he forced them back into his standard neutral expression.

"Right, fine." Another deep breath. "We'd better go."

"You *hate* this press attention, don't you?" I asked in a softer tone. "It's not just that you find it annoying, you actually hate it." His expression was tense and his arm was like iron under my hand. I didn't think that this level of anxiety could just be put down to escorting my annoying self out.

He cleared his throat. "You could say that." He disentangled his arm from mine to grab the door handle, closed his eyes for a brief moment, and then pulled it open. Flashes bombarded us as we stepped out onto the front step and, I couldn't help it, I smiled and gave them a goofy little wave. Attention in general had never really bothered *me*.

"Yo, paparazzi peeps!" I called as Barclay steered me to the waiting car with a hand to the small of my back. There was a barrage of questions but it was difficult to make them all out. Just as we got to the car door I heard, "Nice coat!" shouted out from my left. I turned to the reporter and flashed him another smile.

“Thanks, Clark Kent.” He was wearing thick black-rimmed glasses and was a reporter – too easy. “Get yourself down to Daphne’s at Camden Market and she’ll do you a deal, mate.” Barclay’s hand came down on my shoulder and he put enough pressure on it to let me know he seriously wanted me in the car, *now*. I gave another wave and slipped across the soft leather to the far seat. Still buzzing with adrenaline, I bounced on my chair a couple of times as he pulled the door shut.

“Okay, where’s the mini bar?” I pushed on the car seat in front of me and fiddled with any knobs I could find on the car door. “And shouldn’t this thing have a tinted glass screen that whooshes up at the touch of a button?”

Barclay sighed and rested his head back to stare up at the roof lining.

“Not that I want to shut you out or anything, boss,” I told Sam the security man. He didn’t reply, but I’d only heard the man string together five words max before, so I wasn’t really surprised. He did flick me a quick glance in the rear-view and I could swear his eyes were smiling, so I took that to mean he hadn’t taken offence.

“We *are not* in one of your romance novels, Dr Murphy,” Barclay told me.

Fun sponge.

“Listen Barcos, if we’re supposed to be luuuurrrveers, then I think you should probably start using my first name *all* the time.”

“Right.”

It was my turn to sigh.

“Don’t you even have one teeny tiny gin and tonic to offer me for the ride?”

He rubbed his temples, but I could see the corners of his mouth were twitching again.

Chapter 11

And a time ... to dance!

Barclay

“I *think* I’ve just had a ten-minute conversation with your girlfriend about genital warts.”

Some of the champagne I had been drinking went down the wrong way and I started choking.

“She’s quite a character,” Mary Blythe, the new Minister for Transport, continued after slapping me on the back a couple of times. “At one point, she called your predecessor ‘a right wankpuffin’. I have to say it was one of the most fitting descriptions I’ve heard in relation to David Morrison for a while.”

I smiled and looked across the hall to see that Kira was next to the stage talking to the band, which had been playing soft jazz for the last two hours. Over the course of the evening, it had become apparent that this particular force of nature had the capability to charm pretty much anyone in her vicinity. This was despite her rampant swearing, fervent talk about protecting teenagers from genital warts, and the fact that she was dressed like she was headed to a flower festival in the 1970s rather than a charity dinner with an actual black and white theme. The coat, a bright orange number, had been bad enough, but the dress . . . I wasn’t sure my eyes would ever recover from the dress, and I feared for any epileptics in the room. It was strapless, ended high on her thighs, and appeared to be made entirely out of fake flowers, all in various garish shades of pink. She’d been shedding petals all over the ballroom since we arrived. I was no fashion expert, but even I knew that, in general, women with red hair would not choose bright pink as their go-to colour.

Most of the other ladies in the room were barely showing their ankles and, by far, the most popular colour was black interspersed with a few white dresses. It was a sea of black and white with one flash of garish pink in the middle. But, somehow, the sheer force of Kira’s personality meant that none of that mattered. And okay, I was willing to admit that, despite the dress’s

migraine-inducing properties, she did look bloody amazing in it. And those quick, fairy-like movements of hers were slowly getting to me. Watching her was becoming my addiction. She was the most charismatic person I'd ever met, and that was saying something as I'd been a politician for eight years. In terms of sheer personality, Kira put all the other big names and world leaders to shame.

She was up on the stage now talking rapidly with the pianist, her small face animated and her elfin hands flying every which way to help get her point across (however random that point may have been). Her features were lit by the stage lights, and the pianist she had targeted was gazing at her in awestruck fascination. He wasn't the only one. I couldn't take my eyes off her. My collar felt too tight.

"You're a goner, aren't you?" Mary said. I blinked, but couldn't drag my eyes away from the stage. "She'll ruffle some feathers and not everyone will approve, but I think she'll be good for you, Barclay. You need to have a little fun in your life. I know politics is a serious business and I know you desperately want to make a difference, but that can't be your everything. There's got to be some light relief."

I respected Mary's opinion. She'd mentored me for years after I joined the party. Principled, no-nonsense and experienced after thirty years in politics, she was one of the most respected cabinet ministers.

"She's a loose cannon," I said, but I couldn't hold back a smile. I know Martin wanted to add a bit of colour to my public persona, but I doubted even he had any idea what kind of tornado Kira could be.

Mary patted my arm. It was an almost motherly gesture, one that she hadn't ever used on me before. "Maybe a *loose cannon* is exactly what you need."

My smile died and I straightened. I was about to tell Mary that I didn't need any complications at the moment, and that Kira was the least appropriate partner of a politician that I'd ever met, but I stopped myself just in time. Mary didn't know that this whole thing was a set up. To be frank, she'd be shocked if she knew I was capable of that level of deceit. I was one of the only people in this room with an unblemished record, personally and professionally, and I intended to keep it that way.

Kira was now lying on her stomach, wriggling her way down from the stage. Of course she would ignore the perfectly functional set of stairs a few feet to her left and take a knicker-exposing route instead. Her legs (complete

with the highest heels I think I'd ever seen in my life) kicked a couple of times and she shifted from side to side until she made it to the ground, a couple of flowers floating free of the dress as she landed. I noticed more than one of my colleagues staring at her progress with wide eyes, no doubt hoping the hem of her dress would creep up an extra inch or so. She stumbled on her orange stilts when she was finally down, and I wondered how much she'd drunk already. That prick backbencher, Moseley, popped up out of nowhere to steady her and she smiled right up into the fucker's face. Another mesmerised idiot bites the dust. She was raking them in tonight. I frowned when Moseley kept a firm grip on her arm and started tugging her towards the bar.

"Go on then," Mary encouraged and I gave a small start. I'd forgotten she was even there. Bloody hell, I must have been totally ignoring her for the last five minutes. "Go over there, you big repressed idiot."

I cleared my throat, scrambling for a little dignity. "I think I'll go and check which way Moseley decided to vote next week."

"You do that, Barclay," Mary said, her usually stern tone softened. She gave me another motherly pat on the arm and I felt like an idiot, but that didn't stop me striding across the hall.

But by the time I'd managed to make it to Moseley, Kira had used her quick but charming movements to slip out of his grasp and was walking across the room with a look of determination on her face. When I saw where she was heading, horror flooded through me and I quickened my pace to intercept her. Too late.

"Yo."

I paused and closed my eyes for a moment. Please, please let the fact that Kira had just walked up to the most famous person in the room and said 'Yo,' like they were buddies in downtown Harlem, be a figment of my overwrought imagination.

"Kira!" Urvi Bailey replied, and my eyes snapped open. Kira was *hugging* the world-renowned singer now. No air kisses, no polite handshakes, they were full-on embracing. What the fuck universe was I in?

Without thinking, my feet took me forward and right up to Kira's side. When she saw me out of the corner of her eye, she beamed up at me and grabbed my hand.

"Barcos, have you met Urvi?"

I blinked and slowly shook my head, words failing me. The truth was

I wasn't really any good at this. I could hold my own politically because there was an agenda, a clear aim and objective. But at functions like this, meeting uber glamorous celebrities was not my strong suit.

"We've been friends since medical school, before this one hit the big time," Kira informed me.

I frowned in confusion and Urvi laughed. "Kira took me in after I dropped out and started at the Royal Academy. It's wonderful to meet you Mr Lucas." I stared at Urvi's outstretched hand like a mental deficient. Kira gave me a nudge in the ribs and I managed to force a smile and take the proffered hand in mine.

"Hello," I said, my voice was tight and came out a little strangled, but I was proud I'd managed to say anything at all. As I dropped her hand, a change of tempo from the band caught my attention and Kira started bouncing on her orange heels.

"Yes!" she squealed. "I knew they'd play it for me – come on Urvs. It took me a good ten minutes of cajoling to get that band of stiffs to agree to play this one. You still remember the dance, don't you?"

"Of course I do! But Ki Ki, I'm not performing tonight until after the—"

"There's a time to cry," Kira interrupted in a ridiculous American accent.

"And a time to laugh," Urvi replied to her, also unsuccessfully faking a stateside drawl.

"A time to grieve."

"And a time . . . to dance!" They both put their hands straight up in the air and their heads back, attracting more than a few curious looks from the bystanders.

"Come on Urvs, don't be wet." Kira grabbed her hand and dragged Urvi up on stage. She kicked off her shoes and they flew across the polished wood, landing next to my feet.

Urvi laughed and took the microphone. "Hello everyone," she said into it, and the entire room turned to look at the stage. "My friend here feels that this event could do with a little livening up. As you know, my stuff is on the mellow side so we'll take it back and steal one from the eighties." She smiled and, after the intro from the band, she started to sing *Footloose*.

Urvi Bailey's music style was much more blues and jazz with a commercial edge, sort of Norah Jones meets Sia. Never in my wildest dreams

would I have imagined her singing *Footloose*.

After the first couple of lines of the song, Urvi grabbed Kira's hand and they started the most bizarre dance routine I had ever seen, while Urvi somehow managed to continue to sing. It became clear that Kira was not content with staying on the stage after the first verse. She kissed Urvi on the cheek then repeated her near knicker-exposing manoeuvre to get down from the platform and come into the crowd. She managed to pull a couple of unsuspecting ladies in from the side and started to teach them the dance.

Unfolding before me was the unholy mash up of an American line dance with The Macarena, performed by inept but insanely enthusiastic women. Add a large dose of crazy, and you would be about halfway to the reality of the shit-show I was witnessing. She had managed to get a whole crowd involved by the third verse and they were all miming twirling lassoes above their heads. Kira swung one my way and then mimed pulling on it, pretending to put all her strength into the effort.

I did not move.

Eventually she gave up. Urvi had had more success pulling Jack Bailey, her husband and the owner of the largest advertising company in the UK, into their clutches and making him join in with the bizarre routine. Kira must have realised she was never going to lasso me anywhere. She turned her attention to bloody Moseley. The bastard was only too happy to pretend his arms were pinned to his sides and that each time Kira pulled, the rope he was being dragged forward. I felt a burning in my chest. When he reached her and they laughed together as he attempted the steps to the routine, I felt a flash of white-hot jealousy. I'd never experienced anything like it before in my life. All I knew was that I wanted that small face smiling up at *me*, laughing with *me*.

Other people started joining in, with Kira leading from the front. The change of atmosphere was unbelievable. Even Mary was laughing. When I looked back at Kira, I was pleased to see she'd distanced herself from Moseley and was dragging even more women from the sidelines of the dance floor.

It was incredible the way she flung herself about, her small form about a head shorter than nearly everyone else involved, but still remaining the centre of attention.

And the laughter.

It echoed off the tall ceilings and filled the room along with the

music.

As I watched her out-of-time dance movements, her attempts to drag a reluctant Mary into the mix, her absolute and complete lack of self-consciousness, I couldn't hold back my own smile any longer. By the finale, my whole body shook with laughter.

And it felt . . . amazing.

She was amazing.

Chapter 12

Sure . . . *I lock the door*

Barclay

“Buggering badgers,” Kira huffed out as she flung herself into the car. “That was seriously fun! Why’d you tell me it’d be a snooze-fest Barcos? I loved it! Yo, Sambo! You missed out, big man.”

“I was inside the venue, Dr Murphy,” Sam told her. I’d seen him on the outskirts of the room the entire evening, but Kira had been too busy creating a stir to notice.

“What? Hey, why’d you hide away, Lurky Lurkerson? We could have had a laugh.”

“It’s kind of my job to be inconspicuous, Dr Murphy.”

“Kira.”

Silence.

“Well, you could have at least joined in with a little dance, couldn’t you?”

“I’m not being paid to dance. I’m being paid to protect you.”

“Me? I thought you were there for Barc—”

“And I don’t dance.”

“Pfft,” she said in disgust, flinging herself back into the seat. “You two don’t know what you’re missing. That party was *off the hook*.”

I could feel more laughter welling in me. The absurdity of Kira calling one of the most notoriously boring political charity events in the calendar ‘off the hook’ was enough to send me over the edge, and I lost it for the second time that evening. I laughed so hard a tear streamed down my face.

“I think . . .” I started, but then lost it again. “I think my favourite part has to be when you twerked Lord Farnborough.”

“Yeah, that dude was rad,” she said, staring at me with a wide smile.

“He’s the longest serving peer in the House of Lords, Kira. He’s eighty-five. I thought he was going to have a cardiac event.”

“Nah, those posh blocks are made of tough stuff. We had one into

A&E the other day. Ninety-two, massive stroke. Millie did her magic interventional radiology bit, yanked out the clot. Next day, he was sitting up in his bed, shirt and tie on, drinking his tea and asking where his tweed jacket was. Nails.”

I chuckled again.

“Sometimes I forget you’re an actual doctor. It’s a bit terrifying.”

“Well, I’m mostly a sexual health bod,” she winked at me. “But I have to do my on-calls as the medical registrar, at least until I’m a consultant. So I see the admissions in A&E on my on call days and nights.”

My laughter faded. “Why do you do that?”

“What?” She frowned, confused by my tone.

“Put yourself down. Make your job sound like a joke.”

“I don’t, I–”

“Yes, yes you do. Every time I’ve heard you tell anyone what you do for a living, you lean in, wink and tell them you’re a *sex doctor*.

Genitourinary medicine and infectious diseases is your actual job title. You do important work.”

“Hey, hey.” She was smiling again as she laid her small hand on my forearm. It felt like an electric current had shot up right from her hand to my body. I almost jumped in my seat. The atmosphere in the car suddenly felt thick with tension. Her smile fell and she drew her hand back quickly, recovering with a small laugh. “It’s okay. I know I’m an arse-kicking, medicine-savvy boss. I just don’t like to take myself too seriously and I really don’t give a badger’s arse what people think.”

I cleared my throat. “Oh, right. Well, as long as you aren’t underestimating yourself.”

“I don’t,” she said. “But Barcos, it’s nice to hear that you don’t either.”

Our eyes met and I felt my body sway towards her as if she was the sun and I was trapped in her gravitational pull. Her eyes went wide and her pupils dilated. My lips were a hair’s breadth away from hers when a car horn went off outside and I flinched away as the spell was broken. Was I really about to snog a woman in the back seat of a car with my head of security driving us through London? Was I fifteen again? Had I totally lost my mind? The atmosphere suddenly felt clogged with awkwardness and I cleared my throat.

“What made you decide to be a doctor?” It was the first thing that

popped into my head as I was struggling for something to break the tension, but that was probably because it was something I had wanted to ask her for a while. Medicine seemed such a conventional choice for someone like Kira.

She snorted. “My best friend Libby and I did everything together. She was the one with the vocation, I just sort of . . . followed her.” She shrugged at my frown. “Medicine is weird. You make this huge decision when you’re still a teenager. Then you’re sort of locked in.”

“Aren’t you happy in medicine?”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong – I love it now. Once I found my jam in sexual health and infectious diseases, I was golden. See, people think that medicine is all about saving lives and sorting people out. The reality is that a lot of medicine is just tinkering around the edges with medication – you’re often making patients feel worse. But in *my* specialty, it’s all about lifestyle change. The medication I give *is* sorting them out: keeping them alive and making sure they’re unable to infect anyone else in the case of HIV; often curing other STDs completely. And then there’s the whole family planning aspect – giving women control of their bodies, especially getting to do that in countries where it isn’t the norm. All of that is right up my street.”

All I could do was nod. I seemed to have lost the power of speech. Watching Kira talking about her work, hearing her passion for what she did, her small expressive face so earnest and open, and her hands flying around to emphasise her points. It was like I was hypnotised; I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“We’re here, Mr Lucas.” Sam’s voice snapped me back to reality. Kira gave a little start in her seat before looking away out of the window and up at her block of flats.

“Back at the ranch,” she said, reaching for the door handle. “Fun times, gentlemen. Thanks for the memories.” Her voice was bright, but not quite as steady as I was used to, the distinct shake giving it a very un-Kira-like quality.

“I’ll walk you up,” I said, as an image of the dark corridor outside her flat flashed into my mind.

“What? Why?” she asked my back as I shot out of the car. I made it round to her side just in time to see her exit, a sight which highlighted how very short her skirt was and left me with the knowledge that she was wearing pink knickers to match her dress. My neck felt hot again for the millionth time that evening and I felt another surge of blood leave my brain, giving me

such a vicious head-rush that I had to blink to refocus my vision. I fought my way out of my knicker-induced temporary paralysis to register Kira's sudden lack of height. Both orange shoes were now dangling from one of her hands as she bounced on the balls of her feet.

"Okay, big guy," she said. "I'm gonna head on up." She gave my arm a light punch with the shoe-free hand and grinned up at me. "Stay cool."

She turned to go and I caught her shoes, tugging them, and consequently her, back towards me. I looked down at her small bare feet and frowned.

"Your feet are bare."

"Uh, yeah. Thanks for the info. I'll just be . . ." she nodded towards her building and took a small, dainty step in that direction, with *bare* feet – skin in contact with pavement. In London. There was a broken beer bottle not two feet away from us.

I reacted on instinct, something that was not a normal part of my character. But I was not going to watch her bare feet in contact with the dirty pavement any longer.

"Woah!"

My hands had gone to her hips and I lifted her straight up off the ground, then marched her over to the entrance of her building and set her down on the matting.

"Okay, well, that was, er . . . gallant."

A couple of flashes lit up her features and both our heads spun in the direction of the light. Paparazzi. My hands were still on her hips. I yanked them back and straightened up, shot the reporters a scowl then pushed Kira through the main door (the one that should need a goddamn code at least to access, but which was in fact falling off its hinges).

"Papped again," Kira said, a certain amount of glee in her tone. I suppressed an eye roll. "I wonder if we'll make it into *Heat* this time? That would be *awesome*."

"Yes, *awesome*," I monotoned as I followed her up the flight of stairs. The hall light on her landing was still out. I shook my head in disgust.

"What the hell does your landlord think he . . .?" I trailed off as I caught sight of Kira's door. Kira, totally oblivious as always, was digging through that huge tie-dyed cloth bag, looking for her keys.

"Your door is open," I told her, leaning over her to push through the wide-open door and into her flat.

“Ah . . .”

“You’ve been burgled.” I surveyed the chaos and destruction of her living room. Clothes were strewn all over the place. They must have gone through her cupboards – most of the contents were splayed along her very limited work surface.

“Well . . .”

“I’d better phone the police.”

“No, don’t do that,” she said, making a grab for my phone. I held it out of her reach (not hard) and frowned down at her.

“Kira, this is serious. Someone has ripped your place apart. Look at it. We need to get the police here and . . .” I took a deep breath to calm myself down. “Okay, I’m sorry. Are you okay? I know this must be distressing.”

Kira bit her lip. I must say she didn’t *look* particularly distressed considering the damage to her property.

“I’m fine,” she said, fidgeting with her bag and not maintaining eye contact, which was unusual for her – she normally made an uncomfortable amount of eye contact. “Um . . . I’ll give the pigs a ring in a sec. You’ve got to have all sorts of crucial political activities to be getting on with, so . . .” she started ushering me towards her door. I planted my feet wide and crossed my arms over my chest. I wasn’t going anywhere.

“Sit down,” I told her. “*I’ll* make some tea and *I’ll* call the police.”

I stepped towards her kitchen-type-area and unlocked my phone again. She gave a small squeak before darting around me and snatching it right out of my hand. Before I could grab it back, she’d turned and dumped it into her biscuit tin (the bloody thing was shaped like a pig and, as you opened the mouth/lid, it oinked) then slammed it shut before turning back to me.

“Have you completely lost your mind?” I tried to reach around her small body to extract my phone as she pushed ineffectually at my chest. She was so close now that her hair brushed against the underside of my jaw, and I got a blast of her lavender fragrance. A wave of attraction swept through me, making me almost lightheaded again. I took a rapid step back. “Give me my phone.” My voice came out hoarse so I cleared my throat.

She bit her lip, but didn’t turn around to get the damn phone.

I crossed my arms over my chest again and glared at her.

“Look, I . . .” she started, shifting on her feet in front of me. “Barcos, I live like this, okay? I knew I was having peeps over the other night when you were here, so the place was sort of in order. I haven’t been burgled; I’ve

just been having some trouble with the locks on my door. That's why it was open."

"You live like this?"

She snorted. "It's only surface stuff."

I picked up a piece of toast, which was jam-side-down on what looked like an important tax document from HMRC.

"Well, *mostly* surface stuff. Not all of us have housekeepers you know."

"What kind of problems are you having with the locks?"

She shrugged again and looked away.

"You know just some . . . issues."

"What issues? Don't they lock?"

"Yeah, sure, they lock. It's just I don't . . ." she lowered her voice to a whisper ". . . *always* remember to lock them."

I looked down at my shoes for a long moment. Of course she didn't bother to lock her door. She was only an attractive, defenceless single woman living in one of the most dangerous areas of London. Why bother?

"Please tell me," I said slowly, dragging my gaze from my feet to her small face, "that you double lock the fucking door when you're *in* the fucking flat."

"Woah! That's a lot of f-words Pollyanna. Alert the media! Politician McUptight uses profanity."

"Kira."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. *Sure* . . . I lock the door."

Her eyes slid to the side.

"You're a crap liar."

"No, I'm not, I—"

I grabbed her keys off the counter and turned back to her door (it wasn't very far away, but, then again, nothing was very far away in Kira's tiny flat). It wasn't long before I realised that the Yale lock did not work, at least not with the key that Kira had.

"I'm calling a locksmith."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am."

I made a dash for the biscuit tin and reached around her to open the pig's mouth. Oinking sounds filled the kitchen as I tried to extract my phone, but my hand only came up with a couple of custard creams. Kira inserted

herself between the kitchen counter and me, her small hands attempting to push me away. I could feel her body up against mine, her soft breasts pushing against my lower chest and that citrusy smell surrounding me again. The head rush that followed was so strong I had to blink it away again. She'd started giggling as she pushed against my chest with all her strength.

"Christ, you're stubborn," I said in a rough voice as I pulled out a Jaffa Cake from the tin, but still no phone. She encircled my wrist with both hands, trying unsuccessfully to pull it away. Then, she did something so completely unexpected, I blame it for all the events that followed. She tickled me. I hadn't been tickled since I was a child. In truth, I'd forgotten just *how* ticklish I was. Her small fingers snuck up under my arm and danced over my ribs, and I let out a startled laugh, letting go of the biscuit tin lid (and thankfully shutting off the oinking sound) as I tried to fend her off.

I had strength on my side but she had speed, and she was so small that she managed to avoid my attempts to repel her. Soon, I was laughing so hard that my eyes watered. I managed to get hold of both her hands in one of mine and, before I knew what had happened, I had her pressed against the kitchen counter with her hands trapped behind her back. We were breathing hard, grinning at each other, but as I looked down at her beautiful, expressive face surrounded by all that soft, fiery, pink-streaked, citrus-smelling hair, my smile waned and all I could think about was how much I wanted her. There was nothing I could do about it. My old friend self-control had left the building. Her eyes went wide and her pupils dilated as I leaned in further.

"Kira," I breathed. My lips were inches away from hers. I felt her shiver in my arms before she closed the gap between us. I released her hands to plunge mine into her glorious hair, and her arms came up around my back. Her lips were soft and she tasted of champagne. When I deepened the kiss, she opened her mouth to let me in, letting out a small moan, which short-circuited my brain even more.

I heard a low, feral noise fill the kitchen, and it took me a moment to realise that it was coming from the back of *my* throat. It felt like I couldn't get close enough to her with the disparity in height, so I lifted her up and set her on the kitchen counter. She gave a shocked little squeak, then another groan as I moved between her legs, tilted her head back to exactly where I wanted it and kissed her again. I used my other hand to press her into me and she moved against me. My mouth shifted from hers almost of its own accord and down her cheek to graze her neck, then behind her ear. The hand that wasn't

wrapped around her back, pressing her into me, moved to slip underneath the hem of her dress, now rucked up around the tops of her thighs. Just as my fingers reached the lace of her knickers and she'd let out another small moan, the biscuit tin started ringing.

We both froze.

What the bloody hell was I doing? My hand was up her skirt for badger's sake. And now I was using weird Kira-speak . . . in my head. I was losing it. Abruptly, I pulled back and took a step away from her. Her body swayed where it was perched on the counter, but she managed to keep her balance. She closed her legs and pulled her skirt down to cover herself, her wide eyes blinking rapidly and her chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. The biscuit tin stopped ringing.

Kira pushed her thick hair behind her ears then jumped down from the counter to land on her bare feet. The goddamn tin started ringing again. "Hadn't you better get that?"

I moved to the tin and opened the mouth, which set off the oinking again, and managed to find my phone on the first attempt. It was covered in crumbs.

"Is there a problem up there, sir?" Sam's voice rumbled down the phone and I rubbed my hand down my face.

"I'm just trying to sort out Kira's door. I'll . . . I'll be down now." I ended the call and then stared at my phone for a full minute.

Chapter 13

Time to stop moping around like a wet ferret

Kira

I'm not sure what just happened but . . .

That. Was. Hot.

Mr Uptight Politician is *smokin'* when it comes to sexy times. How does he keep all that passion and fire under wraps the whole while? Maybe it's because he's so repressed that he goes off like a firework when he has the chance. I'd seen him suck back a couple of champagnes and a few glasses of scotch at the party, so maybe he was sloshed? He didn't *seem* drunk, but maybe this was what happened when Barclay got shitfaced – a bit of quiet smouldering until you tickle him and then . . . Bam! Instant smokin' hot sex maniac.

He wasn't looking like a sex maniac now though. He looked shocked. When he finally managed to drag his eyes away from his phone to meet mine, his face was pale. I bit my lip. I felt *great*. That was awesome. Since all this bullshit at work with Smarmy Simon, my sex drive had taken a real nosedive. It's like he'd tainted all men for me with his slimy grossness. But just now, with Barclay . . . I was back on the sex train, baby! How many girls could say they'd snogged their celebrity crush? I grinned at him but he just frowned in response. With a sudden sinking feeling I realised that, now that reality had set in, sex-maniac-Barclay-who-laughs-until-he-cries-when-tickled had left the building, leaving tedious-overthinking-uptight-Barclay in his place.

He cleared his throat and it reminded me of the sexy noises he'd made earlier. My knees started to feel a little weak.

"I'm so sorry," he told me, his cut glass accent seeming to put more distance between us. My smile fell away. "That was a mistake. I don't want you to get the wrong idea."

I glanced at the counter that he'd had me pinned against a minute ago and back at him. Maybe, he shouldn't have snogged the life out of me if he didn't want me to get *the wrong idea*. A little arrow of hurt shot through me, which was ridiculous. I should be celebrating! Of course Barclay Lucas

didn't want me to get the wrong idea. That didn't change the fact that we locked lips and he *touched my knickers*. I squared my shoulders and forced my grin back in place, willing my voice not to shake as I felt my stupid eyes sting.

"Of course I wouldn't get the wrong idea!" I told him. Turning away to fiddle with the kettle so he wouldn't see me blinking away tears. "We've both had some jars tonight. Everyone gets a bit handsy when they're squiffy."

Having fought the tears back and managing a much more convincing smile, I turned back to him.

"Don't give it a second thought, Hot Stuff. I'm just glad to have done the tongue tango with the Great Barclay Lucas. Something to document for posterity: *Dear Diary, Today I snogged the future saviour of mankind. PS he had a nice arse.*"

"I really do think you should get that lock looked at. I—"

"Woah!" I cried, making a big show of looking at my watch. "Is that the time? You know, Barcos, I would make you a cuppa, but I've got an early shift tomorrow. So, I'm going to have to ask you to mosey on back to your paparazzi-surrounded mansion."

"Right, yes," he said, a look of relief coming over his features, which, goddamn it, made my chest feel tight and my eyes start stinging again. He backed away towards the front door, but then hesitated when his hand was on the knob. "Are you sure you're not . . . I mean are you . . .?"

I forced a laugh even though it hurt my throat to do it. "I'm fine. I've got loads to do tomorrow so I'll be off to Bedfordshire. I'm sure you've got a fair bit of environmental and industrial policy making left to do today, so . . ." I gestured towards the door and he pulled it open.

"Thanks for tonight," he said before he left, still looking unsure. "I don't think we'll have to do it again. They seem pretty well off the Henry scent now."

"Yes, well, we've given them plenty of other juicy stuff to talk about. No worries. It was fun."

"Right, yes . . . you know it actually was." He looked a little surprised by that then frowned. "I didn't know you needed to do extra shifts. If you need money, I'm still happy to pay you . . . for seeing Henry. And for your time tonight."

I turned back to the kettle again, unable to keep the fake smile up any longer.

“Don’t be a cockwomble,” I said, forcing my voice to come out light as I felt a tear leak down my cheek. “It’s not an extra shift. It’s life as a registrar – like I said, I have to do general medical on-calls and we work odd hours. I don’t want your money. Henry’s my friend.” I swiped the tear away and straightened my shoulders. “Right, well,” I risked a glance over my shoulder at him, and gave him what I hoped passed for a cheery wave. “I’ve got to get some shut-eye so . . .” I trailed off and made for my bedroom door.

“Kira I–”

There was a thread of concern through his voice that I found I couldn’t stand.

“Bye then!” The forced cheer in my voice was starting to make me sound mentally ill, but it was either that or my shaky-on-the-verge-of-sobbing voice, and *that* was not an option.

“I hope you don’t–”

“Argh!” I cried, wrenching my elbow from his grip and flinging my hands up in the air. “It was a cheeky snog, okay! No big deal. So, I’ve played tonsil hockey with my celebrity crush? Good for me! Now, could you just leave? I’m *tired*.”

My tirade had started out with clipped tones but degenerated to a shaky whisper by the end. Christ, I’d become so wrapped up in the whole ‘romance novel’ fantasy that now I was behaving like one of those wilty, sniffing, doormat heroines. How boring. And if there’s one thing Kira Murphy is not, it’s boring (yes, sometimes Kira Murphy talks about herself in the third person – because she’s awesome and not at all . . . *boring*). Barclay cleared his throat and I could hear him shuffling his feet.

“Okay,” he said, his soft tone the kind you might use when approaching a feral animal. “I can see you’re tired. I’ll just go. We can talk about this another time.”

“K! See ya,” I called over my shoulder as I grabbed the bedroom door then shot through it, slamming it in his face like the mentally unstable weirdo I had become.

I heard his sigh through the door. After a few seconds, I heard his footsteps retreating and I let out a breath I hadn’t realised I’d been holding. When I finally heard my front door shut after him, I allowed myself to flop down face first onto my bed and burst into tears.

“Ki Ki,” Millie’s soft voice and her hand on mine pulled me out of

my morose contemplation of the vegan lunch in front of me. “What’s wrong, honey?”

I gave her hand a small squeeze and managed a smile. “Nothing’s wrong. Why would you—?”

“Pav’s mentioned his new car twice now.”

“So?”

“So, it’s a Porsche.”

“And?”

Millie sighed. “Kira, you think sports cars are only for men with tiny penises.”

“Yeah,” Pav put in from across the table. “I’m feeling a bit miffed actually. You haven’t told me to just buy a vacuum pump, try some Viagra, book in for surgery. Don’t you care about me and my micropenis at all?”

I smirked at him over my forkful of lentils, trying to muster up the banter he sorely deserved. “Listen, Pin Dick. You and your inadequacies may be the centre of this one’s world,” I nodded towards Millie and gave her hand another squeeze. “That doesn’t mean the rest of us want to get involved in your idiocy. Maybe I’ve got more important shit on my mind than how you choose to compensate for Little Pav.”

“I think we’ve all got more important things on our minds than Little Pav and his Willy Fiddler-mobile,” Libby said in a dry voice, rolling her eyes at Pav and giving me a tired smile. I felt bad when I saw the dark circles under her concerned eyes. Libby and Jamie had had their second baby a few months ago, and this one was not very keen on sleep. Libby had only just come back to work after a six-month maternity leave, and it looked like those sleepless nights and the stress that I knew she felt after a long break from her paediatric training was taking its toll. Jamie didn’t look much more rested himself as he slumped over his coffee, and I felt a rush of shame at my self-pitying moping.

So what if a bloke had snogged me and then gone out of his way to make sure I didn’t get the wrong idea? So what if he hadn’t contacted me since? I’d been rejected before in my time. My last boyfriend was a right piece of work who’d slept with another girl at the charity festival I’d organised.

When I’d confronted him, he’d told me, “I didn’t think you’d mind. Aren’t you hippy chicks all into free love anyway?”

I kicked his arse to the curb and didn’t shed a single bloody tear. I’d

barely given him a second thought after that day, and I'd been with *him* for six months. I could count on one hand the number of actual conversations I'd had with Barclay Lucas and we'd only kissed for badger's sake. He hadn't even touched my boobs. So why my chest still felt tight when I thought about his horrified expression when he'd realised what he'd done, and why I was struggling to just be *me*, was a mystery.

It hadn't helped that Smarmy Simon had been back to wind me up again this morning, this time cornering me in the treatment room. He'd deliberately pressed his groin into my arse while reaching for something over my head, then laughed at me when I'd jerked away from him and spilt the entire tray of equipment I'd set up for a speculum exam.

I'd never ever been an anxious person. I'd always been comfortable in my own skin, happy for people to take me as they found me. But now that was changing. I was rethinking my work outfits. I'd changed twice that morning, rejecting the orange tunic I would normally team with my thick purple tights, and instead going for something longer, something Libby's mum had once bought me – a dress that came to my knees. I wasn't sure if I'd worn something that reached my knees since secondary school under the tyranny of Mrs Dennington, who'd made us all kneel in the school corridor and sent home anyone whose skirt wasn't touching the floor (the woman was a psychopath). Mark had raised both eyebrows when he saw me in the dress this morning. Not only was it long, but it was *grey* and *loose*. Probably the most un-Kira-like item of clothing I'd ever worn. But then Libby's mum, who loved me to death, was always trying to make me and my mother (her unlikely best friend and next door neighbour) more conservative. This effort had largely been a wasted one, until today.

Well, I'd been wallowing in my own crap for way too long. It had been over a week since *The Kiss*: the longest I'd ever gone to ground. I had been described as 'pathologically social' before, but over the last week I'd avoided people in general as much as possible.

I was the driving force behind the book group and this week I'd cancelled it for the first time since its inception (Libby and I had started it up a few years ago to drag Millie out of her shell – which worked, I might add: I am a genius . . . obvs). My first excuse had been my e-portfolio, which had shocked everyone, as I was known for not giving a single fuck about my e-portfolio until exactly twenty-four hours prior to its submission every year. But Mark knew I had Wankpuffin breathing down my neck, so he hadn't

pushed things. Libby and Jamie were too tired to notice much, and Millie and Pav were probably still on newly-pregnant cloud nine (not that I was jealous of their perfect love . . . Okay maybe a teeny tiny part of me was jealous; most of me was just nauseous at the thought of it, but if anyone deserved a happy ending it was Millie, so it was hard to hold a grudge). Claire and Tara were crazy at work due to some sort of group gymnastics move that required an aerial component and had ended up last week with two girls in hospital with broken bones. (The club was more crazy-gym-moves-meets-burlesque than stripping, but it worked – those dancers were the highest earning of their kind in Europe.)

My second excuse had been the press attention. It turned out that people do try to sneak photos at boring political charity functions. I'd expected them to show photos of me with Barclay outside the venue – that was the point. But I had not realised that photos of me dancing with Urvi would cause such a stir. Seeing celebrities, random sexual health doctors and politicians line dancing together was apparently newsworthy. Who knew? So, now the press were following me and staking out my flat. There were even a couple of paps outside the clinic that morning until security moved them on (genitourinary medicine patients were not keen on being papped whilst entering the clinic). So I'd told everyone I needed to keep a low profile for a bit.

But now, sitting in the hospital cafeteria, there was no avoiding my friends. I knew Millie and Libby were probably going over the last week in their minds and getting worried. I'd never been comfortable having people worry over me. My mum was great but she was about as far from a helicopter parent as you could get. *Free spirit* is how most people described her two decades ago; *ageing hippy* was the more common description now. She loved me beyond reason but, when it came to regular hot meals and help with my homework, Libby's mum was more likely to step in. I was used to looking after myself. I was not used to and not comfortable with others worrying over me. It was game-face time, womaning up time, and time to stop moping around like a wet ferret.

“Are you sure you're okay, honey?” Libby had forgone falling asleep over her bowl of soup to focus on me. All four of them were staring at me now. The last thing I wanted was to add to any mental load Libby might be carrying, or takeaway from Millie's happy pregnant glow. *I* was the one who asked people if they were ok. *I* was the fixer, I was not the fixee. It didn't sit

right.

“I’m fine, peeps,” I told them, giving them all what I hoped was a convincing grin. “You, however,” I said to Libby, pointing at her with my fork. “Are not fine. You need a break. Let the crazies have a sleepover at Auntie Kira’s tonight. They love their Auntie Kira time.”

Libby tilted her head to the side and narrowed her eyes at me, but I kept my grin in place. Sad Sack Kira was not my vibe. Not until now anyway.

Chapter 14

If we could just extract this dog from my genitals

Barclay

“Yo! Gasman, what the—?”

I felt my chest tighten as I watched Kira’s smile fall when she saw me in her doorway instead of whomever she was expecting, and for a moment I let myself imagine how it would feel to be one of the people she greeted with that level of enthusiasm.

When Kira saw people she liked, people she cared about, her whole face lit up. She’d fling herself at them and shower them in Kira Joy. I’d seen this happen to her friends arriving at that bloody book group before. Friends that I knew for a fact she’d seen earlier that day, but it was like they’d been separated for decades by an evil political regime and Kira was the welcoming committee on release day. It was quite a show. But instead of giving me Kira Joy, she was eyeing me like *I* was the evil political leader behind the regime, despite the fact I hadn’t seen her in two weeks.

“Bah!” the small person attached to Kira’s hip shouted and I blinked across at the baby. He had blue eyes and a mop of dark curls. His body was encased in some sort of mini sleeping bag, which left his arms free and had a zip down the front. He was bouncing in Kira’s arms, straining to get to me. “Bah! Bah!”

“Gus!” Kira snapped, struggling to contain the rather large baby in her arms. “Stop squirming, buddy.” She turned back to me. “I thought you were Jamie checking up on us.”

“Bah!” Gus shouted in her face as he twisted more violently in her arms.

“Ugh, okay, okay little man.”

She blew a raspberry into his neck. He stopped struggling for a moment in order to give a delighted squeal and a baby giggle, before he renewed his escape attempts.

“You’d better come in,” she said, her smile dying as she looked from Gus to me, and that hollow feeling took over my chest again. I followed her

to the beanbags and nearly went flying as my foot caught on a particularly solid one.

“Oh yeah, mind out for Beauty,” Kira said, picking her way through the various obstructions with that fairy-like swiftness then flinging herself back into a beanbag with Gus still in her arms. I looked down at a huge mound of black and white fur on the ground. The smell emanating from it could be likened to rotting cabbage, and the creature’s face, with its large tongue lolling out as it slept, was about as far away from ‘Beauty’ as I could imagine it was possible. I carefully stepped around it and over the pool of slobber it had created, and walked to the beanbag area to sit on the solitary wooden chair. The baby had launched himself from Kira’s arms and was now fighting in earnest with his sleeping bag.

I was a planner. I tended to run conversations through my mind before I actually embarked on them. So, I’d already decided what I wanted to say to Kira, already run through all her possible responses. I had *not* factored a huge dog that smelt of arse and an infant into the scenario. But then, it was safe to say that Kira was the most unpredictable person I’d ever met. Being with her reminded me of a family trip to Alton Towers when I was eleven, and Henry (who was six) and I had ridden together on the biggest rollercoaster. Despite being younger, Henry had laughed his way through the terror of the ride with his arms straight up in the air. I’d held onto the bar for dear life, not liking being out of control, and completely unable to give in to the thrills. When I’d come out the other end, white as a sheet and sombre, Henry had been beaming and begging my mother to let him go again. Mum, who was emerging from her depression at that stage, was finally starting to notice things again – like how cautious and wary I’d become, how risk averse. She’d kissed me on the forehead, cupped my face and told me, not for the first time, “Let yourself go darling. Life’s there to be *lived*.” It made me angry at the time. Didn’t she realise that I couldn’t let myself go anymore? Somebody had had to keep things together over the last three years. At the age of eleven, after my mother’s descent into depression, I already knew that the worst *could* happen, and it’s better to be prepared for it when it does.

Kira made me feel like I was back on that rollercoaster. Once again I was out of control and I couldn’t take my hands off the bar. I couldn’t do it when I was eleven, and I still couldn’t three decades later.

“Is there a reason why you’ve turned your flat into an animal sanctuary slash nursery?” I asked.

“Bah!” I tore my eyes away from a beanbag-encased-Kira and her bizarre but disturbingly arousing nightwear (a pair of tiny shorts with small badgers over them, and a tight tank top with a large red-eyed badger face on the front with the words BRING IT in bold underneath) to look over at the baby and see that he had emerged victorious from his sleeping bag. How he’d managed to unzip the thing and undo the buttons required in the few seconds he’d had available was a mystery to me, but Superbaby was very much free, and he was making use of this freedom to crawl towards me with alarming speed and efficiency.

“Gus!” All three of our heads whipped around to see a young girl standing in Kira’s bedroom door, wearing pink pyjamas covered in small, black skull-and-cross-bones. “It’s way past your bed time.” The girl moved to us, snatched the baby up from the floor with cool efficiency, settled him on her hip, and turned to me.

“Hello, Mr Lucas. I’m Rosie Grantham.”

“Hello, Miss Grantham,” I said, once I’d recovered from my shock. The little girl, who couldn’t have been more than ten, looked completely unphased by my presence in the flat, as if meeting a famous politician was an everyday event for her. I’d met world leaders with less poise.

“You can call me Rosie.”

“Okay, Rosie.”

“And, by the way, I’ve forgiven you for being a Tory.”

“Oh, well . . . thanks?”

“I didn’t think I would,” she continued. “But your policies have redeemed you since the cabinet reshuffle. I imagine that you simply adapted your politics to be in the party most likely to be in power, so that you would be in the best position to effect change.”

My mouth dropped open. Nobody had ever called me out on this issue. I’d never admitted to anyone other than Henry why I had chosen the Tory party. Even if someone thought that was what I’d done, I doubted they would have the balls to say it to my face.

“Now, Auntie Ki Ki,” Rosie continued, turning her attention to Kira, who was still sprawled on a beanbag. “Gus should be in bed.”

“But he escapes his sleeping bag and climbs out of his cot,” she protested.

Rosie rolled her eyes as she tucked her brother back inside his sleeping bag, but this time with it the wrong way around so that the zip was at

the back.

“Night night, Auntie Ki Ki,” she told her. Kira held out her arms and wiggled her fingers. After another eye roll, Rosie dropped down next to her with her baby brother still in her arms. Kira dragged them both on top of her on the beanbag and kissed both of their faces multiple times before blowing raspberries into their necks. Rosie’s stern expression melted away as she giggled, and the baby was laughing so much he was doing little snorty wheezes.

“Love you to the moon and back, gorgeous things,” Kira whispered after the kissing session. The baby gave her a slobbery lick on her cheek and Rosie gave her another hug.

“Love you more, Auntie Ki Ki,” Rosie Grantham whispered back, then pushed up from the floor with her brother and made her way back to the bedroom.

“Bye, Mr Lucas,” she called from the doorway. “We can talk about your plastics waste policy when I see you again. I’ve got some ideas.”

“Right, yes,” I forced out, still in a state of shock. “Great.”

The bedroom door slammed and I was left staring at Kira.

“She’s . . . unusual,” Kira said through a smile. “Got you pegged though, huh?”

“What on—?”

“They’re Libby and Jamie’s kids. I told them to have a break for a night.” There was a scratching sound, then I watched as the huge pile of stinky fur lumbered over to me. When it had made it to my chair, it sat its massive arse down on the floor and shoved its large head onto my lap with its snout in my groin. Kira giggled. “That’s how she says hello. Beauty and the kids are kind of a package deal. Gus can’t sleep without her by his cot.”

Traumatised by the dog drool that was soaking through the material of my Saville Row suit, I was, yet again with this woman, at a complete loss.

“She’s friendly,” Kira explained.

“Quite,” I returned in a strangled voice. Kira giggled again. There was something about her laugh. Or maybe it was the way it lit up her small face, making her eyes twinkle and her cheeks glow. It was infectious and, despite an ugly dog’s nose being buried in my manhood and the fact that I was thrown by this entire situation, I could not help smiling. Now I was with her again, now that I was watching her laugh, I felt . . . lighter. Like some weight had settled over me when we were apart that had now lifted. Kira’s laughter

died slowly and she looked from the dog's head to my face, a crease of confusion forming between her brows.

"Why are you here?" she asked, that tiny crease deepening into a real frown.

I cleared my throat, made an attempt to shift the dog off my groin, which only succeeded in causing more drool to soak into my suit. The bastard's head weighed a ton. "You didn't see Henry this week."

I didn't see you this week. I blinked as that thought flashed through my mind. That was the real reason why I was here. Yes, of course I was worried about Henry, but since that kiss, my obsession with Kira, which, if I were honest with myself, had started from the moment I first spoke to her at the hospital, had gone into overdrive.

Straight after our kiss the other night, I'd resolved that that would be the end of it. I justified my decision with the knowledge that I couldn't think of a less suitable partner for a Tory politician. Maybe Martin was pleased by the results of our little experiment in the press (they seemed to love Kira Murphy and her antics), but *I* knew that she was too much of an unknown quantity – too prone to saying and doing what she felt like at any given moment, with not nearly the amount of repression and reserve required to smile along at press conferences. But that wasn't the only reason I'd avoided Kira. The truth was, she scared me to death. I needed to be in control, but with Kira, just like that rollercoaster I'd clung onto so tightly, I was anything but.

She was just so . . . magnetic, so full of charisma, so unpredictable. The elfin way she moved, the way she spoke, the pink streaks in her beautiful hair, her haphazardly applied make up. But more, so much more than all of that, was her humour – her crazy logic and the conversational tangents she took people on, it was all so . . . addictive. I needed to be around her, and it was that need, that strength of feeling that terrified me most of all.

And since I'd felt her small, soft body against mine, heard the quiet sounds she made when she was turned on, and felt how goddamn soft her pink lips were . . . I had become *obsessed*. I thought about her all the time. My days were spent struggling to concentrate, while my mind drifted off to images of the freckles across her nose and her beautiful hazel-green eyes.

I very nearly embarrassed myself in Parliament the other day. *Parliament*. The most unsexy place in the United Kingdom had turned me on, all because of this woman. And the nights . . . the nights were worse – dreams

of soft, lavender-scented, pink-streaked hair, imagining that hair spread over my pillows, her gorgeous body under mine in my bed. I hadn't had those types of dreams since I was fifteen years old.

I had no idea what to do about it. With the other women I'd been with over the years – attractive women, sexy women, women I'd got on with, women who were *great* in bed – everything had been so much calmer. I hadn't had all these raging *emotions* and I'd been able to put the women out of my mind when I wasn't with them. I hadn't even slept with Kira and I felt like thoughts of her were consuming me.

Now, she looked guilty at my inference that she had neglected Henry. Her eyes slid to the side and she bit her lip. "I was . . . busy. But it's on for this week. Pav and Millie are gonna host so–"

"No," I cut her off and she frowned again. "No I think it should be at my house. He . . . I think he'll be better if it's on his own turf."

Kira cocked her head to the side. "He's better leaving the house, Barclay."

"I know but–"

"Has he contacted any of his old friends again yet?"

I sighed and lifted a hand to absently stroke arse-smelling dog's head. "He's not ready for that. I don't think–"

"He's never going to feel ready for it, Barclay, but it's time he reconnected with his old life. I know his mates still contact him. I've seen him ignoring the messages, I've caught him deleting the emails. And that's after he's ignored them for what, now? Nearly a year? That says something about their friendship. They really care about him."

I tore my eyes away from her earnest expression and looked down at the fur in my lap.

"He was always a social bugger," I muttered. "But if his friends . . . if he contacted them and they weren't . . . I just want to protect him."

Kira sighed and her face softened.

"He's bad again," I said in a low voice.

"Has he stopped–?"

"No, he's still taking the meds, but he's disconnecting. I can see it happening. I can feel that . . ." I swallowed and cleared my throat. It was that darkness I could feel creeping over my brother again. That sense of hopelessness. "He doesn't have to work. Our family has money, and he made enough on his own for three lifetimes in the City, but without a focus . . ."

I'd tried to engage Henry in something, anything. Stocks and shares, financial investments. Henry had always loved making money. I was the one who wanted to save the world, Henry the one who wanted to buy it. But now he would just shrug, say he had enough money and retreat back to the basement of the house, which I was now sorely regretting converting into a self-contained flat. Over the last week, Henry had stopped even coming up to the kitchen. Mrs Scull, our housekeeper, left him meals and cleaned for him. The times I went down to check on him, he was either sleeping or sitting staring out of the window. It was scaring me.

I must have let some of my desperation leak into my tone because Kira's expression had softened further.

"Okay," she told me. "I'll come over."

I let the relief wash over me and tried to tell myself that it was just for my brother. Tried to tell myself that the thought of no Kira contact for an indefinite amount of time didn't make me feel physically ill.

"Thank you," I said and smiled at her. A real smile, the kind that had become very few and far between in recent years. Her eyes went wide and unfocused for a moment.

Then, she cleared her throat and it was her turn to swallow. "No problem." Her voice came out slightly higher than normal.

"Right, great. Now if we could just extract this dog from my genitals, I'll be on my way."

Her dazed expression cleared and she threw back her head, that glorious laugh filling the room. I stared at her, my chest constricting almost painfully. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen in my life.

And, just like that rollercoaster, she scared the shit out of me.

Chapter 15

Don't throw it away

Kira

“Henners?” I called through the door again. “I’m not going away, you big knobhead.”

Now, maybe calling someone with clinical depression (due to a chronic disease that they felt was destroying their life) a *knobhead* was not an accepted approach, but I’d been standing in that freezing fucking corridor for twenty minutes and I was losing patience. Why did rich peeps live in such cold houses? Was that *why* they were so rich? Because they never turned on the chuffing heating? My flat might be a tad bit shit, but I heated that fucker up to a comfortable twenty degrees whatever the weather. If living in a multi-million pound terrace in Westminster meant freezing your tits off, you could count me out.

“Cockwomble,” I sing-songed, which gave me an idea. “Okay, maybe you’re not going to open up for me, but I’ve decided you shall suffer for this.” I braced my hands on either side of the door and started singing the guitar intro to *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* by The Clash, beating out the drum rhythm on the wood.

“I should let you know at this point,” I paused to say after the first couple of lines, “that despite the lyrics I’m about to sing, I’m not actually *asking* for your advice. I’m *going* to stay until you open the door or are driven insane.” As I launched back into it, the door flew open and Henry’s infuriated eyes locked with mine.

“I’m warning you,” I told him, threateningly, “I once sang *Careless Whisper* at Libby for over an hour to get my own way. That’s a *lot* of George Michael. Even *I* can’t listen to that shit anymore. If you don’t talk to me, then that’s what you’ll get.”

“Ugh!” he cried, pushing back from the doorframe to barrel into the living room. His hair was dishevelled, he was in dire need of a shave, and, by the smell of him, a good few days past needing a shower. “What the fuck do you want from me? I’m taking my meds, aren’t I? You don’t have to keep

hassling me.”

“I’m not your doctor, Henry,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest as I watched him storm over to the sofa and fling himself down on it. “I’m here as your friend.”

“Whatever,” he said under his breath and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You expect me to believe my brother’s not paying you? That he hasn’t been paying you from the beginning? Bullshit. That was just a show you both put on for me to make me think that you were my *friend*.”

“It is not bullshit you . . . you . . . *badger’s arsehole*,” I shouted at him, and he flinched, his eyes going wide. He stared at me for minute and, thank you God, I saw his lips twitch – it was faint and it was masked quickly, but it was there. “Stop being a dick.” I flung myself down next to him and elbowed him in the ribs.

“I’m not sure Barclay’s dragged you here to call me a cockwomble, a knobhead, a dick and a *badger’s arsehole*. What the fuck kind of insult is that, anyway? You’re so *weird*.”

“If your brother was paying me, do you think I’d come here, insult you – and, btw, my insults are creative and awesome, *not* weird – shout at you and physically assault you?” I elbowed him in the ribs again then reached up to his chest, put my hand on the thin material of his t-shirt, pinched along it hoping to gather chest hair, and then gave it a yank.

“Ow! Shit!” he shouted, pushing me away from him and scooting down the sofa as far as he could get. He pulled his t-shirt away from his body and looked down it. “You just pulled a clump of hair out of my goddamn chest, you lunatic.”

“Well, you were pissing me off.”

He sighed, eyeing me warily as he pushed up from the sofa to collapse into the chair opposite. I jerked forward as if to make a dash towards him and he flinched. I grinned. He rolled his eyes.

“What will it take for you to leave me alone?” he asked.

“Er, I’m not going to *leave you alone*,” I sang the last bit – it was just too easy. Henry let out a groan. “So best get used to that fact. I am, however, going to serenade you until you comply with my wishes.”

“Which are?”

The grin I’d been sporting since managing to extract actual chest hair dimmed, and I leaned forward on the sofa.

“Barclay tells me that you’re not leaving the flat. That you’ve stopped even coming up to the main house for meals. He’s worried about you. *I’m* worried about you.”

“Listen, I’m not going to boycott my meds like before, okay? You don’t have anything to worry about. I just need to be alone.”

“You know it’s not just getting the tablets down your throat that I’m concerned about, Henry. I think you’ve sunk back into a clinical depression.”

Henry snorted. “Being an antisocial wanker does not equate to clinical depression, Dr Murphy.”

“No, no it doesn’t,” I said, before softening my tone. “But you know what does? A feeling of hopelessness, difficulty with sleeping, lack of motivation, thoughts that it would be better for everyone if you just weren’t there anymore, lack of appetite – all of those *do* equate to clinical depression, Henry.”

Henry swallowed and looked away, but not before I saw the wet gather in his eyes. I knew I’d struck a chord.

“You’ve lost weight again, and not because you aren’t taking your meds. Did you know that well over twenty percent of HIV-positive people develop depression, and it’s often not diagnosed until very late?”

Henry shrugged but remained silent, not looking me in the eyes.

“You need help with this, hun. It’s not a sign of weakness to acknowledge that, you know. You need counselling and some help definately. But you will feel better.”

“I can’t face it,” he whispered into his lap.

“Can’t face what?” I asked, laying my hand over his. I took it as an encouraging sign that he didn’t flinch away.

“Any of it. Life with this fucking thing following me around. I’m . . .” his voice dropped to a whisper again. “I’m not strong enough.”

“You *are* strong enough, Henry. I know you are. You’ve come this far.”

“No,” he said, turning to look me in the eyes. “Barclay’s always been the strong one. Not me. Never me.” He closed his eyes. “I wish I could go back to my old life.”

“But you can,” I said, springing off the sofa to squat down in front of him and take both his hands in mine. “I promise you can. Please don’t give up. Start counselling. Think about the medication. You can still have a beautiful life, Henry. Don’t throw it away.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll think about it.”

“And if you want your old life back, you can have it. Contact your friends – the ones you’ve been ignoring. The ones who keep trying to get hold of you. Perhaps even The One – that girl you told me about when you were blotto.”

“No fucking way,” he snapped, his face turning red and his eyes flashing. Going from grudging compliance to fury in the blink of an eye. “And *that* is none of your business. I don’t need some pint-sized, violent, goddamn-*awful*-eighties-music-obsessed, hippy, sex-doctor weirdo telling me what I need.”

“Okay, okay,” I said softly. “I’m sorry Henry. I don’t mean to be bossy with you. Honestly, I’m just worried.”

He sighed. “I know.” The heat had left his words now. “You’re only trying to help. I do know that.”

“Just, maybe think about what I’m saying?” I leaned forward towards him, trying to get across the sincerity of what I was saying. “You will feel better, Henry. I promise you will. It’s difficult to see now, but you’ve got to start to believe it, to start living again.”

He closed his eyes and let out a long breath, then gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. “You’re a persistent little shit, aren’t you?” When he opened his eyes to look at me, I grinned at him.

“I’m sorry for getting radgy,” he said, his cheeks pinkening up a little. “I don’t really think you’re a weirdo.”

“Yes, you do.”

It was his turn to smile now – it was small but I counted it as a victory all the same. “Maybe I do.”

“See, this just shows how good it is to talk to peeps about how you’re feeling.”

He rolled his eyes. “I don’t think that–”

“You know what you should do?” I said, getting up from the sofa and taking a step onto the coffee table. The tension in the room needed breaking and I knew just the way to do it.

“Oh God, you’re not going to sing again, are you?”

“Do you believe in love?” I shouted, and he let his head drop into his hands as he let out a long groan.

I launched into Madonna’s *Express Yourself* right there on the coffee table. I had all the moves down for this one. This was not my first Madonna

rodeo. Crotch grabs, the lot.

I.

Was.

Awesome.

I started the squatting crotch thrusts bit, but I may have misjudged the size of the coffee table. My arms windmilled as I began to fall, but instead of encountering the hard ground, a pair of strong arms caught me and lifted me against a broad chest. I looked up into those familiar blue eyes and blinked before managing to get out the last *hey, hey, hey, hey*.

I saw it building, felt his body shaking, but I was not prepared for him to burst out laughing. Wowers, his serious face was handsome, so handsome, but with his features lit up with humour . . . such unbelievable masculine beauty, it almost hurt to look at him. I wished . . . I wished for once in my life I could have some bloody self-control. Because staring up at his beautiful face, I forgot where I was, I forgot who I was, and more importantly, who I was to him, and I reached up with my free hand and touched his jaw – as if to check he was real. With the amount of time my brain spent thinking about the guy, fantasising about him, I wouldn't have put it past my neurones to start going wonky and making me see things.

Well, he *was* real. Of course he was. And him being real and in the real world meant that I was a real woman touching a real man's face without invitation – like a completely unhinged freak. I bit my lip, snatched my hand away and cleared my throat.

“Er, thanks,” I said to his shirt collar.

I was a direct-eye-contact kind of girl, but this was one of the few times in my life I had ever felt embarrassed. He lowered me to my feet and once free of him, I took a few steps back. Better to put some distance between us before I smelt anymore of his clean soap, aftershave, and *man* smell and started mauling him in earnest. When I did manage to look up at him, he was still smiling.

“Great moves,” he said through his grin, and I felt another wave of embarrassment hit me. Embarrassed? Me? What the fuck was going on? “I think that might have been the funniest goddamn thing I've seen in years. If not ever.”

He took a step towards me and I took another away from him, the backs of my legs colliding with the sofa. His smile died a little and frustration flashed through his features. I was confused. Relief that the crazy woman was

no longer touching his face would have made more sense.

A throat cleared from across the room and I turned to see Henry looking between his brother and me. His brows were raised in question.

I decided I needed to skate right past this latest ridiculous Kira exploit and move the focus back to the reason I was actually there.

“Right well, I may have misjudged that squat thrust, but there’s *way* more where that came from, Henners. I have an extreme amount of patience when it comes to annoying people in order to get my way. I was a breath-holder as a child – worked a charm.”

“I am not contacting any of my friends, you crazy person.” Henry threw himself back into his chair. His curious expression from a moment ago had been replaced by a glare aimed in my direction.

“You need to get out of this rut Henry. Barcos says you were super social before all this crap. You need to get back to what made you, *you*. Not shut yourself away up here.”

He let out a frustrated groan and tore his hands through his hair.

“*I can’t go back to that life,*” he shouted.

I flinched and Barclay made a move towards him, but Henry put up a hand to ward him off. When he looked back up at me, his blue eyes, so similar to his brother’s, were filled with tears. “I can’t go back. I can’t tell h– I mean my friends about *any* of this. They know I got sick. They don’t know why, and I’m not going to tell them. So what is the fucking point of contacting them? I can’t really drink, can’t party like I used to. I certainly don’t want to go around fucking half of London’s totty or being my mates’ wingman so they could fuck the other half. So, what’s the point?”

“Your life’s not over, Henry,” I said slowly. “And don’t underestimate your friends. Yes, okay you’re different now. Maybe you can’t do some of the stuff you could before, although your life is in no way as restricted as you seem to think. But you’re not giving your mates the chance to know you *now*. That’s unfair. What if it had been one of them that this happened to? Would you think ‘Oh dear, old Fruity Metcalf can’t wingman me anymore so I can get a decent shag in – well, bollocks to him then, may as well jog on without him. Don’t want to be dragged down by some boring loser managing a long-term health condition.’”

“Fruity Metcalf?” Henry asked, his lips were twitching again, which I took as a good sign.

“Oh, I know you posh lads – all your mates are called something like

Tubby, Plum, Stiffy, CopperKnob (that was Churchill's btw), Tibs, Minky, Spunky, Piggers, Stiffy, Flopsy . . .”

Both Barclay and Henry stiffened.

“Ha!” I shouted, pointing at one then the other. “I got one right, didn't I? You lot have a mate called Flopsy! Wow, I knew I was good, but I'd no idea I was *that* fucking good.”

“Bugger off, shorty,” Henry snapped, but his lips were twitching again.

“Uh uh,” I said, wagging my finger. “Shorty is a shit nickname. Too obvious. No back-story. And, unless you're a genuine rapper from the projects in America, you cannot use it to refer to a woman without looking like a clueless twat.”

“Barclay,” Henry looked at his brother. “Can you please, please *for once* make use of that expensive security team and ask them to remove this woman. I don't think I can take it anymore.”

“Unless you phone Flopsy, Binky and co., I'm here for the duration.”

“*I can't*,” he shouted at me, losing the lip twitching and going red in the face again. But worse than that – much, much worse – his tears finally spilled over and he choked on a sob. It was one of those manly-type sobs, but so more awful as it sounded like it was wrenched from his very soul, and then squashed back down again. “Just go,” he whispered as one of the tears in his eyes made its way down his cheek.

Chapter 16

Stop running away from me

Kira

“Oh Henry,” I whispered back, moving around the coffee table.

Barclay moved as well, but I was quicker. When I reached Henry, I grabbed his face and pulled it down to mine so our foreheads were touching. To my great surprise he allowed this.

“You *can* be you again,” I whispered. “Life is ten per cent what happens to you and ninety percent how you react to it. Don’t waste yours looking back for what you’ve lost. Move on. Life isn’t meant to be lived backwards.”

There was a long pause and I was quite sure in that moment that he was going to shove me away, but he didn’t. In fact, he surprised me again by letting out another manly choked-back sob, shoving his face into my neck and then bursting into full-blown tears.

His face stayed in my neck and his body continued to shake with his now-silent sobs for the next few minutes. I could feel the tears running down my skin and soaking into my shirt. Barclay looked a little awkward, a little unsure, but mostly spooked to shit. He sat on the arm of the sofa and laid his hand on Henry’s back, which seemed to be the limit of soppieness between the Lucas brothers, but I thought it was sweet all the same. After a good few minutes Henry emerged from my neck, his tearstained face blotchy and his eyes red.

“Bloody hell,” he mumbled, running both his hands down his face. “Okay,” he drew out the word before clearing his throat. “Well, this is awkward.”

“Henry I . . .” Barclay swallowed and took his hand away from his brother’s back to scrub it thorough his hair, leaving dark tufts standing up in his normally perfectly managed style.

“Look Barclay, you don’t–”

“I know I work a lot,” Barclay cut in. “But I’m here for you. I . . . want to be here for you so you could . . . you know . . .”

“Cry like a pussy?”

“Crying is not for pussies,” I told them both, my own eyes starting to prick as I bore witness to their uncomfortable, posh and repressed version of a sweet heart-to-heart. “Sometimes a good cry can sort you out. If anything, it’s the *most* macho thing a man can do.”

Both brothers shook their heads as if I was ridiculous, but their expressions were soft and that was sweet too.

“Do I need to start singing again?”

“No!” they said together with insulting speed.

I took a deep breath in, ready to launch into some *Man in the Mirror*, but Henry’s hand flew up to cover my mouth. I licked said hand and he couldn’t pull it away quick enough.

After my smug smile of victory faded I looked into his eyes and softened my voice. “One of the most difficult things you will have to do is reconnect with your old life and friends again, but it really is the only way to heal. And it is up to you if you share your diagnosis or not. Some people are open about it. Some only tell close family and friends. Some tell nobody at all.”

“I think I’d *have* to tell them if I saw them though. My close mates – I wouldn’t be able to hide it from them. And . . . and what if it disgusts them?” His voice had dropped to a whisper now. “What if they pity me? I’m not sure I could handle that.”

My heart squeezed in my chest. “I know this stuff is hard and I’m sorry that it has to be so difficult. I’m sorry that there is a stigma around your condition right now. But the stigma is only down to ignorance. If your close friends are reasonable humans then they’ll listen to you and you can educate them. Just like I educated you – after you’d finished being a stubborn twat, that is.”

He studied me for a moment his brows drawing together as he considered my words.

“I’ll think about it,” he said finally. “And I’ll, er, think about that other stuff you suggested too.”

“Listen Henry, only do what you feel comfortable doing,” Barclay told him, and I resisted the urge to punch his arm.

“Let’s leave Henry to do his thing,” I said, standing and putting my hands on my hips.

“I don’t think–”

“I’m fine, Barclay,” Henry said. “It’s late and to be honest, I’ve had enough emotional crap for one day. I need to sleep. We’ll talk tomorrow, right?”

“You’re okay?” Barclay asked, his whole body tense, the concern radiating off him in waves. I could imagine that a cry fest was not normal Lucas behaviour and it seemed to have shaken Barclay . . . a lot.

“Come on, big guy,” I said. “Let’s leave Henry to get some shut-eye.”

“You know I’m here if you need me, right?” Barclay’s voice broke at the end. It was subtle but I caught it. Yes, he was spooked.

“Go,” Henry said, moving to Barclay and doing the whole half hug, half slap the tar out of the other guy’s back that men tended to do. “I’m good, mate. I promise.”

I saw Barclay’s arm tighten around his brother – a clear breach of manly hug protocol – but Henry allowed it. Then they both let each other go. Without thinking, I took Barclay’s hand and led him out of the door.

“Catch you later, Flopsy,” I called behind me.

“I wasn’t called Flopsy,” Henry returned, affronted by the very idea.

“How do *you* know?” I returned as I walked out into the corridor with Barclay in tow. “There’s no telling what the birds called you behind your back.”

“I never gave the birds any reason to call me Flopsy!” he shouted, but I shut the door on his outrage.

Once out in the corridor, I realised I still had a hold of Barclay’s hand. First face touching and now hand holding – he was going to think I was obsessed with him at this rate.

“Okay, right, great,” I burst out, dropping his hand like it was on fire and scuttling up the corridor away from him. I was not used to embarrassment and I was not finding it a pleasant sensation. Millie was the most self-conscious, shy, easily embarrassed person I knew – did she feel like this all the time? If so, she was a goddamn heroine for even leaving the house.

“See ya.” I gave what I hoped passed for a jaunty little wave and decided to make a run for it.

“Wait,” he snapped.

“Stuff to do,” I said, not slowing down and not turning to look back at him either. “Peeps to see. Bedfordshire to visit.”

I jogged up the stairs hearing his heavy footfall behind me. Once on

ground level, I made a beeline for the kitchen (I'd learnt my lesson about leaving from the back door to avoid the press) but just as I'd cleared the counter, a large hand closed over mine and I was pulled to an abrupt stop.

"Just for once," he said, spinning me round to look at him, "just this one time can you *please* do what you're told?"

"I . . ."

"I really appreciate everything you've done for Henry."

"Don't wor—"

"But you went too far," he said, cutting me off. One look at his face told me he was over being spooked and had gone straight to angry. He was scowling down at me and a muscle was ticking in his jaw. "You pushed him too far. He's not ready to contact his friends."

"Let go of my hand," I said in a quiet voice. For a moment his fingers actually tightened around mine. His jaw ticked again and then he released me. I took a step back and if anything, his scowl deepened. "He needs to get back to his old life, Barclay. There's no reason for him to live like a hermit. Okay, if all his old friends are cockwombles and he wants to get new ones (one of which by the way is *me*), then he can do that. But I suspect that Flopsy and co. are anything but a bunch of cockwombles, and that Henry would be a lot happier if he could reconnect with them."

"He was crying," Barclay said, his voice gruff and worry seeping through the anger of his tone. "You made him cry."

I frowned. "I didn't *make* him do anything. He *needed* to cry. He's been bottling everything up for way too long. It was good for him."

"I've never seen him like that."

"I know it scared you—"

"I wasn't scared," he lied, his mouth setting in a hard line. "Look, I'm not sure he's ready for all this. What if they—?"

"Life with HIV is still life, Barclay. You can't keep him here protected forever."

"I don't think—"

"Do you *want* to keep him locked away?" I asked, narrowing my eyes and crossing my arms over my chest. "Is that it? Are you worried he'll air his dirty laundry in public? Maybe impact your squeaky clean reputation?"

"How *dare* you say that," he said in a low, dangerous voice, the air in the room vibrating with his hostility. "I would never—"

"Then don't hold him back." I flew in the face of the thick

atmosphere. “Encourage him to get back out there. You’re such an uptight, priggish, old worrywart.”

“Shut up.”

“Don’t tell me to shut up, Flopsy. You asked me here. You wanted my help. This is me . . . *helping.*”

He took a step towards me and I took one back.

“You just don’t want to—” I was cut off by his lips on mine. One moment I was standing a foot from him, pointing in his direction from a safe distance, the next he was kissing me. It was hard and closed mouthed at first but then it softened. His hands moved into my hair and mine moved to his chest where I felt a low sound vibrate through the expensive suit he was wearing. Maybe it was the sound that did it. Or maybe his smell. Or maybe the stubble grazing my face. But I was lost. I opened my mouth, his tongue swept inside and any last vestige of self-control or self-preservation was obliterated.

“Fucking finally,” he muttered against my mouth. “You finally shut up.”

“Shut up yourself, Flopsy.” I fastened my hands behind his neck and hopped up to wrap my legs around his hips. He caught me, his large hands hoisting me higher as he started walking me backwards until I was against the wall.

Okay, so all my boyfriends had been bigger than me (I *was* barely over five foot) but none of them had ever lifted me up like I was made of feathers and held me against a wall with one hand, before burying their other hand into my hair and kissing down my neck.

“I need to see you,” his voice rumbled against my skin, and I shivered before giving him a small nod. His hand slid from my hair to my shirt. He started undoing buttons. One went flying across the kitchen and the sheer frantic desperation of it sent a wave of excitement through me that was so strong I actually felt lightheaded. Thank you Universal Spirit Force for directing me towards my 70s paisley shirt and lime green miniskirt that morning. The skirt was now up around my waist and the shirt was open, revealing my purple lace bra. He held himself slightly away for a moment to look down at my chest. Slashes of red appeared across his cheekbones and another low humming sound vibrated against my hands, still on his chest.

“You’re so goddamn beautiful.” His low voice still held that thread of desperation. “I missed you,” he breathed out as he went back to pressing his

body and lips against mine.

“You did?” I asked when we finally came up for air. Barclay was not exactly an open person. Telling me he missed me was revealing a lot.

“I think about you all the time,” he said against my lips before moving them down my neck. I pushed both my hands into his jacket to feel him through his shirt. The muscles of his chest and upper arms were tense. All my other boyfriends had been . . . well, a little bit spongy if I was honest. This guy was properly ripped.

“You do?” I breathed as his hand reached behind me to arch my back away from the wall so he could unfasten my bra.

“Yes.” His hand was now moving to cup my breast, his thumb swiping across my nipple. I let out a small moan and moved my hips against his, and he pressed me further into the wall. “You’re in my blood, under my skin. I can’t get you out of my head. It’s driving me insane. *You’re driving me insane.*”

“Holy badgers breath,” I whispered and I felt him smile against my neck, his still-strung-tight-with-tension body shook with a small chuckle.

“Good God, you’re so weird. Why is that a turn on?”

“I don’t know, but let’s just go with it.”

I put my hands either side of his head, pulled his lips to mine, opened my mouth and let his tongue in again. We were both so caught up in our haze of need that everything became almost frenzied. He ground against me and I let out a type of feral moan I’d never heard from myself before in my life. My blood felt like it was on fire. I couldn’t get close enough to him. It felt like I was coming out of my skin.

“I have to really see you,” he rumbled, lowering me to my feet and pulling my shirt down my arms. Once they were free, I managed to get his suit jacket halfway down his arms and he shrugged the rest off before grabbing my knickers either side and yanking them down my legs. I stepped out of them but didn’t have time to take off my sandals before he’d lifted me up against the wall again. Then the heel of his hand was right where I needed him to be and I let out a sharp hiss at the feeling. After what felt like hours of balancing on a cliff edge of sensation and when I was almost desperate to feel him, I heard his belt buckle fall onto the ground.

“I want that one,” I murmured nonsensically like a kid making a selection in a sweet shop as I looked down, then made a grab for my bag on the kitchen counter to retrieve a condom (I had so many condoms and so little

chance to use them I could probably open my own family planning clinic). His rumbly chuckle cut through the thick atmosphere again.

“Hurry,” I whispered, and then he was there, right there. Finally, we were connected. I made that feral noise again and he groaned in response, his movements going from deliberate and measured to wild and uncontrolled.

“Oh. My. God.” I whispered. I threw my head back to arch my pelvis into him and the back of it slammed against the wall with some force. I didn’t feel it. I didn’t feel anything but what he was doing to me. But I did feel his hand coming up to cradle the back of my head and provide a barrier between the hard surface and me. The sweetness of that gesture, combined with the absolute brutal beauty of what we were doing, for some reason made my eyes sting with tears.

I felt it building, a tingling from the top of my head down through my body until I was suddenly soaring, pleasure so intense it was like a flash of bright white light, before spots appeared to cloud my vision. As I came down, I felt his body tense even further until it was rock solid under my hands.

We stayed locked together, our foreheads touching and our heavy breaths mingling between us. Then he let me down from the wall gently to set me on my feet as I lost him. I blinked up at his handsome face and he cupped my jaw, his thumb sweeping over my cheek to brush away a tear as he scanned my features. Then he stepped back and moved away into the kitchen. I teetered for a moment without his large body holding me up, then bit my lip as reality started to invade my bliss-addled mind.

I was a free spirit in every sense of the word. Okay, I’d never had multiple partners and I didn’t exactly sleep around, but I did *not* have any hang-ups about sex. I thought sex was great (although until just now I hadn’t realised sex could be life-altering) and so long as people did it safely (I was a sexual health doctor after all), I was all about freedom. But now, as I stood next to the wall I’d just been epically and life-alteringly shagged against, mostly naked other than my skirt bunched around my waist, for the first time maybe ever I felt . . . shame.

Another tear fell, but this one wasn’t for the same reasons as the last. This one was a tear of humiliation.

‘That was a mistake. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.’

His words from a week ago flew into my mind along with an image of his shocked face after we’d kissed. He’d looked ready to jump out of my flat window after just a kiss. What was his reaction going to be now? I blinked

away the rest of my tears and swiped my face furiously with the backs of my hands before I grabbed my skirt and shimmied it down over my hips again. My movements were jerky as I squatted to make a grab for my shirt, pulling it on without bothering with the bra. I straightened and tried to do up the buttons at top speed, but my fingers were shaking. Before I could even get one of the damn things secured, his expensive shoes appear in my line of vision and large hands closed around mine.

“Kira?” he asked, his voice gentle, and that made the backs of my eyes sting even more. “Are . . . are you okay?”

No, no I was not okay. Why, I had no idea. The Kira of old would have quite happily slept with her celebrity crush and then crowed about it to her mates. *This* Kira was feeling anything but triumphant at the turn of events. She was feeling ridiculous and humiliated.

I shook off his hands and continued to struggle with the buttons, refusing to look up at his face and see the rejection that I knew would be written all over it.

“I . . .” my voice cracked and I swallowed, forcing a smile that I was sure was more of a grimace. “I’ve got to get home. I’m a busy badger tomorrow, so—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he told me as he took over the buttoning.

“Um . . .” I looked to the side and bit my lip. Was he angry? I mean, I could understand him regretting what happened but why would he be angry about it? It wasn’t *me* who’d bonked *him* against the wall.

“I really just want to go home,” I whispered and then, goddamn it, I sniffed. Once he was finished with my shirt, he bent to the floor to pick up my pants and my bra only to shove them in his suit pocket, which, despite my distress, I still managed to find insanely hot. Then his hands came up to my face again to cup my jaw on both sides. He swept away another tear that had fallen and his next words were soft with concern.

“Did—did I hurt you?”

The shock of Barclay’s unsure tone made me look up. His blue eyes, stark with worry, searched mine and a deep frown marred his forehead.

“You’re so small and I was rough. I should have been gentler. If I’ve hurt you, I . . .”

I shook my head in his hands, reaching up to hold his forearms.

“No,” I told him quickly. “No, of course not. I was right there with

you. That was . . . That was freaking amazing, off the charts amazing. I've never felt anything like that before in my life. Of *course* you didn't hurt me." The words were out before I could register what they would reveal. His frown smoothed out, his eyes flared and I wished I could claw them back. "Okay, so I'll just be moseying off to—" I started to sidestep towards the back door but he caught me around my middle and pulled me, gently, back into him.

"Stop running away from me." The frustration in his voice caught me off guard, but then he did something so un-Barclay Lucas Conservative Politician that it shocked me speechless. He turned me into him, one arm went around my back and the other under my knees and he swung me up in his arms against his chest. My mouth fell open and my eyes went wide as I stared up at his stubborn face. "You're staying."

"I am?"

"Yes," he told me as he stalked out of the kitchen to the stairs and proceeded to take them two at a time, not like he was carrying a full-grown, custard-cream-eating woman in his arms. "With me."

"Okay," I said, the shock doing my talking for me.

He pushed through into what must have been his bedroom then kicked the door shut behind us. "And . . . and don't cry again," he commanded. I smiled. There was still some concern there and he was hiding it by barking out orders.

"I don't always have total control over my tear ducts," I told him. "But I will resolve not to cry from this point forward."

"Good, as long as we've cleared that up," he said as if he was in a Cabinet meeting and would be sending me a memo to that effect in due course. He put me back on my feet by the bed and took a step away. Now that he'd done the whole caveman bit in response to my distress, he seemed to be at a little bit of a loss. He lifted his hand towards me then hesitated before it went to rub the back of his neck. Those two slashes of red appeared high on his cheekbones again. It was becoming clear to me that Barclay found all pesky emotions, even his own, difficult to deal with. Unable to stop myself and wanting to ease his discomfort and the worry I could see still behind his eyes, I reached up to his tie and started grappling with the knot. His eyes flared again and he started to help me, pulling off his tie and making short work of his shirt buttons.

As he shrugged off the shirt, my hands made a thorough investigation

of his warm skin, pulled tight over the musculature of his torso, and then delved into the dark hair on his chest. He shuddered beneath my hands and made a choked sound of need before pushing me back onto the bed and hovering over me. My hands snuck around to feel the smooth expanse of his back and he let out a low sound before he drove one hand into my hair, the other around my back to arch me up into him and he kissed me.

“Are you quite sure this is acceptable?” he asked against my lips, his body moving against mine as he reached up under my shirt. His stiff, formal tone made me smile against his mouth. Ever the stuffed shirt – even in the bedroom.

“Yes,” I breathed, letting out a low moan as the friction built, my eyes rolling back in my head. “Anything with you is *acceptable*.”

Chapter 17

Glitter blessings be upon you!

Barclay

I blinked against the bright light pouring through the window. I wasn't used to waking up to full daylight but this was the second time it had happened in a month. Normally I never slept past five-thirty in the morning. My body had adjusted to that. And I never usually slept *well* – at least I hadn't for a good few years. My dreams were always a constant battle against all of the urgent things I had to get done the next day. Endless lists and conversations I needed to have, speeches I needed to give, constitutions I needed to answer to. I hadn't felt fully rested in years. But, as I slowly swam up to full consciousness, I realised I felt great. Being around Kira seemed to be some sort of sleep cure.

I rubbed my eyes and focused on my watch. It was eight in the morning. *Eight*. Totally unheard of. Yes, it was Saturday, but my security team must have thought I'd died up here. I smiled as I remembered just why I'd managed to sleep and turned over in bed ready to pull her towards me. But there was nothing there. Only the small indent in her pillow and her scent still lingering in the air – but no Kira.

I frowned. We'd taken our time on the second round. It had been much more like making love than the frenzied desperation of the kitchen. And after we'd finished, I'd held her to my side, kissed her temple and swept the hair back from her damp forehead as she snuggled into my chest. I'd kept my arm around her as her breathing evened out and her body relaxed against mine. I didn't sleep then, not for long time. Just revelled in holding her small, soft, relaxed body, appreciating her stillness – something that was in short supply when she was fully conscious, smelling her hair and basking in her glow, her . . . aura (I couldn't believe I'd actually used that hated word – Kira would be proud). There was something so alive about Kira. It wasn't just her beauty I'd missed so much over the last two weeks – it was her irrepressible optimism, her humour, her life force. Even in sleep that energy still vibrated around her.

So no, I hadn't slept for a long time but when I did, I must have done it deeply as I hadn't felt her disentangle herself from me or heard her get dressed and sneak off.

I swore and swung out of the bed, grabbing my phone from the nightstand, punching one of the numbers and holding it up to my ear.

"Where is she?" I clipped as I rounded the bed and headed to the bathroom.

"She got an Uber about two hours ago," Sam told me. I gritted my teeth in annoyance. Why couldn't the sodding woman ever do as she was told? Every other female I'd ever been with would have to be prised off me with a crowbar the morning after. Why did *this* one, the one I actually wanted to be clinging onto to me like a limpet, have to keep slipping through my fingers?

"I'm going to her flat." It was Saturday and I had my constituency clinic soon, but I could maybe make it there before.

"She's not at her flat."

"Well, where the hell is she then?"

There was a long pause.

"Trust me, Mr Lucas – you don't want to know."

Kira

"Oh! Do me! Do me!" I shouted, and I was promptly covered in a shower of glitter.

"May all your dreams and fantasies come true.

May you love freely with passion and beauty too.

Glitter blessings be upon you!"

Shirley bent forward and kissed my forehead, giving me an eyeful of her abundant cleavage. She was *great*. I was so glad I'd hired her for today. Half the peeps at the festival were now covered in biodegradable glitter – it really added to the atmos. And she looked spectacular.

I loved snagging the super strange acts for Bunt Fest, and Shirley – aka *Glitter Angel* – definitely fell into the super strange category. She was tall and well built (especially in the chest region), while her bleached blonde hair was teased out to mammoth proportions and sparkingly with her trademark glitter. Her outfit was a skin-tight, rainbow-coloured, shiny catsuit that was unzipped enough that her huge breasts looked in danger of emerging at any second. But the best thing about her was that she was on stilts, so she could

be seen from any point in Bunt Fest and had a great vantage point to administer her *glitter blessings*. Apparently, when it got dark, she would also start juggling with and eating fire.

Awesome.

She moved on then to glitter bless Giles Grantham who at first looked slightly alarmed (I'd managed to get him to shed his tweed jacket, but he still had his shirt and chinos on), but as she kissed his forehead and he got the same eyeful I had, his face broke into a huge grin. I'd hosted Bunt Fest at Libby's in-laws' massive garden for the last five years. Bunty Grantham (Libby's mother-in-law) had been very much on board from the beginning, but her husband, Giles, took a little longer to warm up to 'a bunch of bloody hippies' invading his land on an annual basis. But the Granthams were sitting on a huge plot of land in Richmond that I suspected had been in their family for centuries – the first time I saw it, I knew it *had* to be the venue for the charity festival I ran every year.

We used to hire a farmer's field way outside London and paid exorbitant prices for the privilege. Bunty and Giles gave us use of their huge garden for free. Their only stipulation had been that part of the proceeds went to support the local church, and that the Parish Council members could all attend. I think Bunty enjoyed shocking the crap out of them and the Church had never before raised as much money.

So, last year fifty per cent went to my charity and fifty per cent went to repair the church roof. This year I'd talked to the vicar and showed him some stats, then I'd gone and spoken to the Parish Council. Now all of the money was going towards the charity: Freedom through Education. Something I'd been involved with during my time in Médecins Sans Frontières. It was a group that helped support women in Malawi, educating them on HIV, birth control and everything in between, and giving them the means to lift themselves and their communities out of poverty – something I, and now Richmond Parish Council, felt passionately about.

“Well,” Giles said to me as Shirley moved on to her next target. “What a cracking young lady.” He gave me a pat on the back. “Damn good show here today, Kira. Kids are having a whale of a time and I've never seen the vicar so happy.” The vicar's wife wasn't looking overly happy at the moment, but then again I doubted she had been expecting a buxom, oversized fairy on stilts to kiss her husband on top of his bald head, while thrusting her assets right into his face.

“Glad you approve, Giles,” I told him, adding my own kiss on his cheek. He flushed red and his chest puffed out in response. “All for your benefit of course.”

Three dreadlocked men, one playing a flute, one on the tambourine, and one with a ukulele, came up to us then. All of them were dancing (but not in time with the tunes they were playing) and they started dipping and diving in front of us. Ferret’s Testicles were a rock-flute band and a regular at Bunt Fest.

“Yes, yes,” Giles muttered, smiling at the men and, I suspected, suppressing an eye roll. “Very good, chaps. On you go now. Don’t waste it all on us.”

I started dipping and diving with them, getting into the badass flute harmonies they were banging out.

“Don’t encourage them, Kira,” Giles said out of the side of his mouth. “Bloody hell, you’d think they’d take a shower before they perform.”

I laughed, flinging myself forward in a shimmy as they started jazz-fluting with a vengeance. As I straightened up, a large hand fell on my shoulder and I turned to face what I thought would be Giles, only to be confronted by Barclay. He looked even more out of place than Giles in his suit trousers and a tie. He had shed the jacket and his tie was loosened at the neck, but he still looked completely ridiculous in the environment. I had to press my lips together hard to suppress a nervous laugh.

“Yo,” I said as the Ferret’s Testicles moved off to treat some other unsuspecting person to their musical talents. “What are you doing here?”

Barclay stared at my face, which had a swirling pattern of flowers over one cheek painted in neon and glitter, before he took in the rest of my outfit. My sleeveless t-shirt was quite conservative for me other than the *Sex Ed is my Jam* in bold letters over my chest, but my denim cut-offs were not. In fact, they were verging on indecent. My legs, although short, were bloody awesome so I never felt uncomfortable showing them off, and it was warm for May so I’d gone with it. But under Barclay’s scrutiny I was feeling half naked. His eyes had swept me from the top of my head down and were now fixed on my thighs. His cheekbones flushed red and a muscle ticked in his cheek.

“Mr Lucas?” Giles cut in. Of course he would recognise Barclay (Giles *loved* the Tories). “Giles Grantham. Great to meet you.” After a long moment Barclay managed to tear his gaze away from my legs to focus on the

hand that had been extended towards him. He shook his head as if to clear it, then took Giles's hand.

"Barclay, please," he murmured, and Giles looked pleased as punch to be on first name terms with a Conservative politician. I could see him planning his next trip to the East India Club to regale all his cronies about this.

"Well, Barclay," Giles continued, completely oblivious to the tension in the air. "Good to have you, old chap. Decent do Kira's put on here, don't you think?"

"You've put this on?" Barclay asked, his eyes flashing back to me.

"I expect you've come down to add some political clout to it all, eh?" Giles went on. "Are you giving a speech or something? Well done, Kira." He gave me a nudge with his elbow. "Capital idea. All this lot must love Lucas what with him sorting out the environment and all that. You're probably not aware, Barclay, but this is *my* land. I let Kira use it every year for the festival. Don't I, dear?"

"Er, yes," I stuttered, trying and failing to look away from Barclay's eyes. "Yeah Mr G – you and Bunts are the best."

"The festival is named after my wife," Giles put in, puffing out his chest with pride. It seemed that now that Bunt Fest had the approval of an actual Cabinet minister Giles was very much on board. "Bunty objected at first – didn't want to take the credit – but Kira talked her round. You're good at that, aren't you, Kira?" I managed to flick my eyes over to Giles and gave him a weak smile.

"Would you mind very much if I stole Kira for a minute, Mr Grantham?" Barclay asked.

"Oh yes, do carry on," Giles said, shooing us away. "Must have lots to sort speech-wise, I expect."

"Quite," Barclay bit out, giving Giles a forced smile and then taking me by the elbow and propelling me away.

"Barcos," I said, my short legs having to break into a jog to keep up with his longer strides. "What's going on?"

He stopped for a moment, looked around and then turned us towards the house, propelling me forward again. But after a few strides, Glitter Angel, who must have spotted him through the crowd and made a beeline for him, blocked his path and we were both showered with glitter as she gave us her Glitter Blessing. After she'd shoved her cleavage right in Barclay's face and

kissed his forehead (when this happened to Giles, the vicar, Jamie and Pav, I'd thought it was hilarious; with Barclay a flash of jealousy shot through me that was so strong it obliterated all amusement), Barclay turned to me and both his brows went up, causing a small shower of glitter to fall down his cheeks. Glitter Angel must have dumped her entire stock over him. Multicoloured glitter covered his hair, face, shoulders; even his dark trousers were carpeted with it.

She moved away in search of fresh victims, and with her cleavage not directly in Barclay's eye line I began to see the funny side. I pressed my lips together to hold my laughter in, but, as he shook his head and more glitter cascaded down his shoulders, I couldn't hold back anymore. Unfortunately, because I had been suppressing it for so long, it came out as my 'piggy laugh' as Libby liked to call it – more snort than laugh really. When I was finished piggy laughing, Barclay was staring at me again, looking way too intense for someone observing my porcine antics.

Then he kissed me, right on the lips, right in the middle of the festival, before stepping back and continuing to drag me along to the house. We went in through the patio doors and I waved to Bunty and Millie as we tore past them. He opened the first door he came to, pushed me inside and shut the door behind us. We were in the pantry. The walls around us were groaning with tins, snacks, jams, all sorts. He was staring at me again. To break the tension, I picked up the nearest packet of biscuits.

"Jammie Dodger?" I asked, waving it at him. His lips twitched but he ignored the offer.

"Why did you sneak off this morning?" he asked, taking a step towards me. I took a corresponding one back and he narrowed his eyes.

"I . . . I didn't sneak off," I semi-lied.

Truth was, I hadn't really wanted to wake him this morning and have an awkward convo. It may have been a bit craven of me, and I was generally not a coward, but after that night, that incredible, mind-blowing night and after sleeping pressed up against his huge, glorious body, I *knew* I wouldn't be able to have a rational conversation.

And I was a rational person . . . ish. I knew my dalliance with Barclay was not going to end up with love and rainbows. Together, we didn't make sense. Not for his political career and not for my peace of mind. I might have been a risk taker in most other aspects of my life, but when it came to my heart I was anything but. If I was honest with myself, I had never really

invested in any of my previous relationships; I'd never risked getting hurt. My ex cheating on me hadn't come as a huge surprise. I guess I'd been hardwired by the lack of interest my father had shown me as a child to expect very little from men. But with Barclay the strength of my feelings was scary, and thanks to Smarmy Simon my confidence had been eroded to such a degree that I couldn't imagine Barclay seeing me as a viable option. What I did know was that Barclay would be the kind of man who would definitely want to discuss where we stood, at length, because he was *honourable*.

Blurgh!

Well, if I'd been subjected to his *honourable* discussion this morning, I knew I would have cried. I would have been a great big sappy mess and I had no intention of letting that happen in front of Barclay Lucas. So, yes – I had carefully shimmied from under his huge, warm arm, and yes, I had tiptoed around the room to get dressed. But in my defence, I did have to be here to help set up at six. There was a legitimate excuse for my clandestine escape.

“Bunt Fest doesn't happen by itself, you know?” I told him, putting the Jammie Dodgers back on the shelf and my hand on my hip, in an attempt to mask how nervous he made me – or just how much I wanted to fall into him and kiss his handsome face off.

“You should have woken me,” he said, glowering down at me still, the pissed-off vibe filling the small space.

“It was five-thirty in the morning. Nobody wants to be woken up at five-thirty.”

“I *usually* get up at *five*.”

Of course he did.

I sighed.

“Look,” I started, my voice coming out small, but I couldn't seem to make it any louder. “What would have been the point in waking you? We . . .” I broke eye contact to look down at my feet and contemplate my toenails, which Rosie had painted electric blue earlier. There were sequin badgers affixed in the middle. “To be honest, I was expecting the old *don't get the wrong idea* speech, and I wanted to save you the bother.” I was mumbling now and still couldn't meet his eyes. My stupid nose had started prickling – a sure fire sign of impending waterworks. “I know last night was a bit of fun and I'm the blooming Queen of Fun Town, no explanations needed, right? I just don't think I can do any more casual kissing, if that's alright.”

“Kira, look at me,” his voice was soft now, the hard edge of anger no longer in his tone. “Please, darling.” I frowned at the endearment. That was not what I would expect from him at all (although if I had to pick an endearment that Barclay would use, a posh one, straight out of a P.G. Wodehouse novel would be top of the list).

He took a step closer. I was already pressed against the shelves behind me so had nowhere to go. His hands came up to cup my jaw on both sides and he used them to tilt my head back so I had to meet his eyes. I blinked a couple of times in an attempt to clear the moisture that I could feel swimming there. “I don’t know what you thought I was going to say to you this morning, but it’s certainly was not about you getting the wrong idea.”

“Well, what am I supposed to think?” I snapped, getting a little annoyed now. “You said yourself after Kitchengate that it was a mistake. You couldn’t get out of there fast enough.” He opened his mouth to speak but I sliced a hand through the air to cut him off. “And that’s *fine*. Last night was fine. I’m not asking for anything else and I don’t need you to do the honourable thing and explore my feelings.”

“Last night was . . . fine?” he asked, that edge of anger creeping in again.

“Yes, I—”

“It didn’t seem just *fine* when you were screaming my name.”

My mouth fell open and I stared up at him. What on earth? Talking about me screaming his name did not compute as part of his Honourable Brush Off Speech.

“Or when you had tears in your eyes because what we did was so goddamn amazing. That did not seem *just fine* to me.”

Humiliation shot through me and I felt my face heat.

“B-b-bugger off,” I choked out, in real danger of crying *again* in front of him. I tried to push past him to get out of the door but he moved to block my way. “I’m telling you I’m happy to let you off the hook but nooooo . . . that’s just not enough for Mr Repressed and Prideful. No, I have to admit how I’ve never felt like that with anyone before and that I . . .” I sniffed and then hiccup-sobbed, my hands coming up to cover my face. “Let me out of here!” I said in a desperate voice I barely recognised as my own.

“Shit,” he muttered as his hands cupped my elbows and gently travelled up to my hands to pry them away from my face. “Kira please, *please* don’t cry.” He stepped towards me and my forehead hit his warm

chest. His smell assaulted me again as his arms closed around me and I felt like I'd come home. So much so that I melted into him, my hands going to his chest, feeling his steady breathing. "I'm so sorry. I didn't come here to . . . Christ, I'm royally cocking this up, aren't I?"

I shrugged. He was confusing me. Was he seriously telling me he wanted to give us a chance?

"I'm not trying to make you admit anything," he told the top of my head, murmuring into my hair and rubbing my back with his large hands. "Last night *meant* something to me. I . . . I just reacted to the word 'fine'. It wasn't just fine. I know I wasn't the only one to feel that."

I sniffed and shrugged again.

"And I am *not* trying to give you the brush off."

"Listen, you don't have to worry about me still seeing Henry if that's it. He's my friend – of course I'll still be a part of—"

"Fuck Henry."

"Uh . . ."

Barclay took a deep breath in and then I felt the air from his lungs whoosh over my head. "I love my brother, but that is not why I'm here, Kira."

"I know," I told him, wiping under my eyes and pushing back against his chest to look up at his face. "I understand and it's great, but honestly, *honestly*, you don't have to come and find me and be all formal about it. I know I've been a bit weepy – which btw is not the way I normally roll – but I'm not going to stalk you or obsess over you. I won't—"

"Well, I bloody well will," he snapped, frowning down at me.

"You will what?"

"Obsess over you. No. That's not true. I *already* obsess over you. I'm consumed by you – the way you laugh, the way you move, your freedom, your humour, even your beautiful, ridiculous hair. I meant what I said last night. You're under my skin, in my blood."

I blinked and my eyebrows went up into my forehead. Right then.

Chapter 18

Like leaves in the wind

Kira

“I am?”

“Yes, you are. And I am not giving you up after last night. I can’t go back to not seeing you for weeks on end.”

“I . . . okay. What exactly do you want to happen here?”

Barclay threw his hands up in the air in a gesture of frustration. “I want to *be* with you.”

“What? For real?”

“Yes, of course for bloody real.”

I tilted my head to the side and put my hands on my hips. “That’s crazy.”

“No, I actually think this may be the sanest decision I’ve made in the last two months since we met.”

I took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. The way he spoke about me was flattering, but it was almost as though he liked me despite himself. Under his skin? In his blood? It sounded more like he’d contracted a terrible blood-borne disease than started a relationship.

“Barclay, we don’t suit each other,” I told him the God’s honest truth. “We’re complete opposites. I would drive you nuts. I already drive you nuts. I don’t think you’ve thought this through.”

“I don’t have any choice,” he told me, stepping into my personal space again and leaning his forehead against mine. He slipped an arm around my waist and ran his other hand through my hair. “I *need* you, Kira.”

I sighed and my body moved into his automatically, like it was inevitable. “You don’t need—”

“I haven’t slept more than five hours at a time for over ten years, and I never sleep deeply. With you beside me last night, I was out. I’m a light sleeper, but even you sneaking off didn’t wake me. I feel incredible today. You make me feel incredible – lighter, bloody happy. So no, you’re wrong. I *do* need you and I will not be giving you up.”

I closed my eyes. Images of his previous significant others flashed through my mind. (My extensive Google research of this man had started before I even met him; I knew the type of woman he was normally seen with.) There was a lawyer, a financial consultant, even a West End actress – quite a diverse group. But they all had in common their effortless style, their subtle not in-your-face beauty, their calm behaviour, and their decorum. I had none of those traits. Yes, my style was effortless for me, but it was off-the-wall in a big way – even I won't deny that. I'm one of the most in-your-face people on the planet. I'm not calm and as for decorum . . .

“Kira!” my mother's shout from down the corridor came filtering through the door. “Sweets, where are you? The Ferret's Testicles are so stoned. One of them is using his flute to try and suck up peoples' beer and the other is playing with his cacks around his ankles. You need to get out here and sort it out. They can't perform with Urvi until they've sobered up.”

“I'll be out in a minute, Mum,” I called back, forgetting my mother had the ears of a bat and a sixth sense when it came to my whereabouts. Instead of retreating footsteps, I heard approaching ones and I rolled my eyes to the ceiling.

“What are you doing in there, love?” her voice called again but this time it was just outside the door.

“Mum,” I said in a warning tone. The door handle started to turn and I grabbed it on my side to stop it, but mum had always been freakishly strong and my puny hands were no match for her determination. After a brief struggle, the door was flung open and light came pouring into the dim space from the corridor outside. Mum looked at me then at Barclay. Her mouth fell open before her face lit up with a massive grin.

“Well, hello there,” she said in her *posh voice*, which always sounded like a combination of a bad impression of Dame Judy Dench merged with a rather good one of Dame Edna Everage.

“Mrs Murphy,” Barclay said in his deep voice, unleashing the full wattage of his white smile on my unsuspecting mother and holding out his hand. “Pleasure to meet you. I'm Barclay.”

Mum looked a little dazed for a moment. I started to wonder how many of those *special brownies* she and Bunty had scoffed down earlier. It had been enough for Bunty to be talked into wearing a matching gypsy skirt. Mum had picked up a two-for-one deal at Camden market, probably due to the fact that they were both see-through and completely indecent. Mum had

paired this with bare feet ('I need to *feel* the grass, love'), a gauzy top involving way too much fabric and a suede-fringed waistcoat. She looked exactly like the crazy, ageing hippy she was, and I realised this was perfect. Mum was a prime example of why Barclay and I would not suit each other.

"Well, hello Barclay Lucas," Mum breathed after she'd broken out of her daze. "Please, call me Sheena."

"Sheena, wonderful to meet you," Barclay said in his deep voice, and instead of shaking his outstretched hand Mum took it in both of hers and grasped it like she was hanging onto him whilst she dangled off a cliff face. After a super weird minute of hand holding, during which my mother studied Barclay from top to toe with her tongue practically hanging out and with Barclay's lips twitching, she let go and took a large step back. "Don't mind me," she told us. "Go *right* back to what you're doing. I'll go and spank those naughty flautists – they'd probably enjoy that, mind – you two go on with yourselves in here."

She closed the door behind her, then we heard her retreating footsteps and she shouted: "Bunty! Rita! Where are you? You'll *never* guess who I just caught my Ki Ki with. A Tory! Would you *believe* it?"

I turned to Barclay and looked up at his now-smiling face. "Example number one in the long list of why we would not suit each other."

At that he burst out laughing and pulled me into his chest again to kiss the top of my head. "I like your mum."

"Does your mother wear fringe?" I asked his now shaking chest.

"Uh, not that I've noticed, but what does my mum wearing fringe have to do with why we're not suited?"

"My mother is a *sex therapist*, Barclay. Did you know that? And not in the conventional psychosexual counselling that you can see on the NHS way, noooo . . . in the dodgy group massage sessions, essential oils and crystal healing type way. *Exclusively* to the over sixties. Do you know what her website's called? *Sex: Emotion in Motion*. She's out there creating all the diseases that I treat in my clinics. She's probably single-handedly responsible for the upsurge in chlamydia prevalence in the elderly population of South London."

Barclay's mouth fell open just enough for me to see that I'd managed to shock him. He blinked at me, tried to speak a couple of times then shook his head as if to clear it.

"Right, so . . . there you go," I told him, and for some ridiculous

reason my voice was wobbly with holding back tears. “You see my point.”

“Look, I can’t stay away from you. It’s that simple. So, we’ll make it work. Together.” His tone was firm and his arms tightened around me to make his point.

As easy as it would be to melt into him and accept what he was saying, the hurt of his rejection in my kitchen last week was just too fresh. And now . . . now it would be even worse. If I got my hopes up only for him to come to his senses, I knew after last night it would destroy me. And I didn’t need that stress at the moment. Between organising Bunt Fest and another event I had coming up to support Freedom through Education, plus the trouble I was having with Wankpuffin at work, I was feeling a little on the edge. If I added in falling head of heels for my dream crush and waiting for him to *literally* crush me, I might explode. So I wiggled my way free of his arms and slid around him to grab the door handle. He opened his mouth to speak and I put my finger on his lips.

“Just take a moment,” I told him, forcing my voice to be steady. “Think it through. I can’t change who I am and that might not be what you need.” Before he could say anymore, I’d flitted out of the door and down the corridor. Bunt Fest was in full swing now and there was a naughty flautist’s hairy arse to sort out and a folk band to corral onto the stage along with a world-famous singer.

Barclay

“They’re difficult for us to understand,” a soft voice behind me said.

I turned to see Camilla Martakis. She looked nearly as out of place at this bloody festival as me, but at least she wasn’t wearing a suit. It wasn’t that she was the only pregnant woman here (there were plenty of those) but most of them were floating around barefoot in summer dresses. Millie’s white maternity shirt was buttoned almost to her throat and her cream trousers had an actual crease ironed into the front. The only sign that she’d been involved with the festival at all was the small, intricate flower painted on one of her cheekbones. In contrast to the majority of the festival-goers, her make-up was immaculate but subtle and her dark hair was secured in a low ponytail.

She was staring over across the garden, and when I followed her line of vision I could see Camilla’s husband, Pavlos Martakis, with his head and hands trapped in a wooden stocks, and wearing a loud, ridiculous Hawaiian shirt,. Kids were paying a delighted Kira money to throw sponges soaked in

neon green slime at his handsome face. I heard Camilla chuckle and turned back to her.

“They’re like leaves in the wind,” she said, still staring at her husband with a slight smile on her face. “Beautiful but . . . unpredictable.”

I got the impression that Camilla didn’t find talking to relative strangers that easy, so I was intrigued by her approach.

“You know, when I first got to know Pav and Kira,” she went on, and I had to shift closer to make out her quiet words, “I assumed they were together. They seemed so close, so playful, so, so similar – uninhibited, free. I thought they were made for each other. But that’s not how it works. Not for them. They don’t need another leaf, or more wind – they need the earth. Something . . . *someone* calmer, grounded. Someone they can flit around and always come back to. And we need them too.”

“I . . . Camilla, I –”

“Don’t call me Camilla,” she cut me off which was a shock. The Camilla Morrison I’d met in the past would never have cut someone off mid-sentence. I’d barely heard two words from her before. “I’m Millie. Only my parents ever call me Camilla – well, not now – but then. You know my father. I think you can understand why I don’t have contact with them anymore. So it’s just Millie now.”

“Okay, Millie, I appreciate the feedback. I do. But I don’t think you know me well enough to–”

“I watch, I listen, I take things in. I know the kind of man you are. Duty, stability, responsibility – these are the important things for you. You’re passionate about what you’re doing, but the public face of it doesn’t always sit right because . . . well, you’re shy. Like me.”

“I am not–”

“I can spot a fellow introvert you know. There’s nothing wrong with it. Just like there’s nothing wrong with your values. But remember, you’ve got to let *them* fly. They’re not always sure where they’re heading, they’re impulsive and unpredictable, but you can’t stifle them. Just sit back and enjoy the ride and be their ground when they need an anchor.”

Kira had a large percentage of the green slime smeared down her top now and the stuff was causing the ridiculous t-shirt she had on to be mostly see-through. Her tiny excuse for a bra was clearly outlined and I felt a flash of jealousy as watched her. When Millie laid her small hand on my arm I flinched. I’d been so focused on Kira I’d almost forgotten Millie was there.

“I love Kira,” she told me. “She was the first person in my life to give me a nickname, the first one to really force me out of my comfort zone. I want her to be happy. I want her to find her ground when she needs it, but I don’t want her stifled or hurt. Do you understand me?”

“I would never hurt her. I wouldn’t want to change her.”

“I’ve seen the way she looks at you. I . . . Kira’s always seemed like a force of nature to me – strong, confident, indestructible. This is the first time I’ve seen her . . . vulnerable. And for the last two weeks she’s been . . . different. I know you wouldn’t mean to hurt her, I just . . . she’s got a lot going on at the moment and –”

“What’s she got going on?” I tore my eyes from Kira to stare down at her friend.

“Er, that’s probably for Kira to tell you. It’s just some stuff with work.”

“Work? But I–”

“Barclay, old chap,” Giles Grantham cut in, giving Millie a kiss on the cheek and then clapping me on the back again. “So, about that little speech . . .”

I looked over Giles Grantham’s head as he droned on between us. Millie gave a quick shake of hers and I resolved to find out later what was going on with Kira at work.

Only after I was strong-armed into giving a speech, and finally managed to make it to Kira again, it was like she wiped my memory clean away. She’d smiled at me before, but after I’d spoken about the environment and the energy revolution to the entire of Bunt Fest, she fucking beamed at me before throwing herself into my arms and covering my shirt with that neon slime in the process. Full wattage Kira was intoxicating. So much so that when she grabbed me a lukewarm cider (I hated cider), I drank it down, and when she then offered a sincerely disgusting lentil curry that her mother was selling at a small stall, I choked that back too. Pav and Jamie found me eating the vile stuff and laughed at me until Mrs Murphy forced them to take their own plates of it.

It was then, eating a foul-smelling lentil curry, that I realised why it had been such a ball ache to get into the festival at all. I’d come straight to Richmond from my constituency clinic which I ran every Saturday morning. Seeing as my constituency was in London, I felt that even though I was a Cabinet minister I owed it to the people who voted for me to listen to them

every week without fail. I hadn't wanted to waste time changing, hence the ridiculous suit. When I arrived, I'd assumed I could just walk straight in, but there was a massive amount of security surrounding the entire estate. Eventually Sam had to vouch for me (the company running the security was well known to him) so I could get in the bloody place. I thought this might be overkill for a small folk festival, but as I watched Urvi Patel take to the stage and the crowd go absolutely nuts, I realised that it was *her* team, not the festival's, guarding the estate and now guarding the stage.

Of course Kira danced right at the front of the crowd, dragging her friends with her. Jamie and Pav had pulled me aside and we'd retreated slightly uphill. We couldn't actually see Urvi and the Ferret's Testicles but we had a great view of Kira, Libby and Millie.

"Same shit food every year," Jamie shouted.

"Worth it though," said Pav, his eyes glued to his wife who was being spun around by Kira, and laughing so hard she was nearly crying.

"Yes," I said, my mouth lifting in a smile as I watched Kira's beautiful hair flying out behind her as she spun Millie Martakis. "Totally worth it."

Chapter 19

Hot like an Aga hot

Kira

“I could have taken the tube, you know,” I told Barclay as he pulled up into a rare space outside my block of flats. He frowned at me.

“You were not getting on public transport in that get-up.”

“What about my ‘get-up’?”

He gave me a side-eyed look and raised one eyebrow.

“Ha! You’re a prude.” I mean, okay, my cut-offs were a *little* short, and my t-shirt was a *tad bit* see-through with my bra being a *tad bit* purple but . . . hello? Glitter Angel? Compared to most of Bunt Fest I was in a nun’s habit.

“I might have been able to tolerate a crowd of hippies staring at your nearly-naked torso,” he told me. “But I’m afraid that tolerance does not extend to London in general.”

He put the handbrake on and I grinned at him as he turned to me fully.

“Okay, Sex Badger, but you’re still a prude.”

He blinked. “Uh, Sex Badger?”

“Sex,” I held out one hand, “‘cause you . . . well . . . as we’ve discovered, you’ve got it *going on* in that department. And Badger,” I held out the other “‘cause – even though it doesn’t show on the telly – up close you’re rocking a little bit of the grey stuff just here.” I touched his temple before bringing my hands together palm to palm, “Sex Badger.”

He stared at me for a few seconds before he burst out laughing.

Making the normally taciturn Barclay laugh had to be up there as one of life’s biggest highs. I mean, Stern Barclay was of course a joy to behold, but Happy Barclay was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at him.

“We’ll call you SB for short in company. Wouldn’t want the next *Daily Mail* headline to be My Wild Night with Sex Badger. I mean–”

Barclay’s lips on mine cut me off. One of his hands wrapped around the back on my head, the other cupped my jaw and he kissed me. Hard and demanding. When he pulled back, my eyelids fluttered for a moment as I

tried to get my bearings.

“Total Sex Badger,” I breathed, and his face, still only inches from mine, split into a wide, white, glamorous smile.

My God, if this man ever actually smiled on telly the whole country would lose their minds.

I started leaning into him again when a loud knock from his window made me start in my seat. We both looked around to see Sam’s body blocking the glass. Barclay pulled back and turned to open the door, slipping out and slamming it before I could hear what Sam was about to say. I quickly shoved open my side and stepped out. When I slammed my door both their faces swung to me. For some reason, Barclay looked angry, but when he caught my eye his expression softened. I rounded the car to him and he pulled me into his side.

“I wasn’t watching the building today. We don’t have anyone on it when she’s not there,” Sam continued, flicking me a wary glance. “But when I saw you were on the move, I thought I’d do a sweep. Door was busted open. Place is a right state. Not sure what’s missing but it’s not pretty.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked Sam, before turning to Barclay and twisting my neck to look up at him. “Was your place broken into?”

He gave me a squeeze and shook his head slowly. “Kira, I have twenty-four-hour security, an alarm system, and a hoard of paparazzi camped out in my front garden. The chances of somebody breaking into my place are zero. I’m sorry, but it’s *your* flat that’s been burgled.”

“Barcos, have you forgotten that my place in its natural state is not exactly neat as a pin. It’s probably not—”

“Your television is smashed on the floor after, I assume a failed extraction attempt,” Sam told me. “I doubt even you could have achieved the level of destruction up there. And it’s not that you forgot to lock the door again – something I’ve been told can be a problem,” he glanced at Barclay and then back at me. “The door has been *kicked in*; it’s nearly come off its hinges.”

“Oh bugger, not again,” I muttered, rolling my eyes. “Bloody kids.” I felt Barclay’s arm stiffen around me but didn’t take any notice. “But Sam, why were you talking about watching my building? You don’t . . . I mean . . .”

Sam looked at Barclay and raised his eyebrows.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “Are you having me watched? Me? That’s .

. . . that's . . .” The very idea of Barclay thinking, I, Kira Murphy, needed security was so funny that I forgot all about the break-in and gave a small snort before letting out a longer giggle. “You’re such a . . .weirdo,” I managed to get out around my laughter.

“I fail to see what’s so fucking funny when your home has been violated, demonstrating your obvious bloody need for the very security you find so hilarious.”

“Oh, for badger’s sake, SB,” I said, giving his arm a light punch and grinning up at his frowning face. “It’s not a big deal. I don’t have anything to steal anyway. Chill out, big man.”

Barclay’s jaw locked and a muscle ticked in his cheek as he pulled me along to the entrance of my building. He didn’t drop my hand when we got to the stairs and pulled me up the two flights to my flat. When I glanced back at Sam, he didn’t look much happier. We arrived at my flat door, which was half open with the lock hanging off where it had been kicked in. Bloody Barclay insisting I needed to lock the place. I *knew* this would happen if I didn’t leave the door open. Barclay pushed it open fully and pulled me inside with Sam following. The three of us surveyed the damage. A couple of my plates were smashed in the kitchen – probably out of frustration that there wasn’t anything worth stealing in the small space. My drawers had been emptied onto the beanbags, the chair overturned and some of my clothes were strewn out from the bedroom. The telly was smashed face down in the centre of it all.

“Sorry, Kira,” Sam said, giving my shoulder an awkward pat. I shrugged.

“It’s fine,” I said, smiling to show I wasn’t upset. “My telly was from the nineties and I don’t have a laptop. All the rest of my stuff is pretty cack so, like last time, it’s really just the clean-up that’s a pain in the arse.” Barclay’s hand jerked in mine and he swung me around to face him. Looking up at his face I flinched. I’d seen him annoyed before, frustrated maybe, but I’d never seen him look *this* angry.

“Last time?” he asked in a low voice.

“Yeah, uh . . . you know the last time my place got done over.”

“Exactly how many times has your flat been *done over*?” he asked, a dangerous expression on his face and his voice vibrating with quiet anger.

“Hmm, a couple?” I lied.

“Kira,” he said in a warning tone. I bit my lip, which only seemed to

wind him up more.

“Okay, okay,” I said, holding up my hands palms up between us and pushing them down in what I hoped was a placating motion. “It *may* have been about four or five.”

“And you reported *all* of these to the police?”

“Er, yeah.” I bit my lip again, and my eyes slid away from his to look to the side.

“Kira.” He took both my shoulders in his hands and turned me to face him. “Did you report all the break ins?”

“Look, I told the fuzz about the first couple but then it . . . well, it just didn’t seem worth the hassle.”

“Not worth the hassle?” His tone was incredulous and his face awash with disbelief. I was starting to get annoyed now.

“Yeah, *hassle*,” I told him, shrugging his hands off my shoulders and stepping back, which made that muscle in his jaw tick again. “I have to wait around for them, leave all the clean up until they’ve been, get interviewed for *ages*. After the first two times it just didn’t seem worth it. You try coming home from a night shift and finding your place a complete state. The last thing you want to do is call the pigs in before you crash out.”

“And you didn’t think of maybe beefing up the locks or putting in an alarm?”

“If anything I un-beefed the locks after a while. They’ll crash through whatever’s there anyway. Does more damage to have sturdier stuff in the way.”

Barclay threw his hands up in the air and let out a low frustrated sound, which, despite the fact he was being grumpy and annoying, I couldn’t help but find a massive turn on.

“It’s not a big deal,” I told him. “You kind of get used to it.”

“Tell me, Kira.” His voice now low and edged with anger. “Do your friends know what you’ve decided to *get used to*?”

“Uh . . .”

“Because, if it’s ‘no big deal’, then surely they would be absolutely on board with it. Am I right?”

My eyes slid away again. Libby and Millie would be furious with me if they knew, and Pav, Jamie and Mark would lose their minds. I would have been moved out of here and into one of their places before I could blink. But that’s why I didn’t tell them. I liked living in my little studio and I hated

taking charity. My rent here was tiny compared to the rest of London and my commute was short. Okay, my registrar salary was alright, but it wasn't the greatest and I had student loans to pay back. Plus I liked Brixton. It had a fun vibe to it . . . other than the drug dealers and stuff.

"What if the *kids* that keep breaking into your home decided to break in whilst you were actually there?" he asked. He was so angry now that little slashes of red had appeared high on his cheekbones. "What if they had found you here and were so fucking high or tweaked that they'd decided not to *just* ransack the place?" He took a step forward into my space and put his large hands back on my shoulders. "What if they were so pissed off there was nothing good to steal that they'd decided to take that out on someone?" He gave me a little shake. "What if you were raped, or stabbed? What if you were killed?"

"Woah, woah, woah," I said, my hands going to his chest and feeling a solid expanse under my fingers. "Chillax, SB. Nobody's going to break in whilst I'm here, and even if they—"

"You're damn, fucking right they're not," he said. "No bastard is breaking in whilst you're here because you are not going to *be* here."

"Er, Barcos this is my home. I can't —"

"Pack a bag."

"What are you on about? I—"

"In fact no, pack a suitcase. Pack up all your shit. Everything. You're moving out of this tiny little hovel today."

I stiffened and took my hands off his chest to plant them on my hips.

"Listen up, Bossy Badger," I told him. "*I* decide where I live, and I live here. I can't afford a hotel and I don't want to impose on—"

"You're not imposing on anyone and you're *certainly* not staying in a hotel."

"That is serious overkill. You're probably super busy and I've slept with the door like this before. It's fine. I—"

"*You've done what?*" he shouted. Mr Ice's control was now totally out of the window. Considering his reaction to the break-ins, it probably was ill advised to let him know I had been happy to sleep with a busted door. I mean, I *had* put a chest of drawers up against the handle – I wasn't completely irresponsible. I decided that bit of info might not help my case though by the look on his face. "I have never in my life met a woman more reckless with her own safety and well-being than you."

“Look, SB,” I said, trying and failing to lighten the mood. “I’ve been fine so far. I don’t think the druggies would come anywhere near the flat whilst I’m here. Don’t make it into this whole *big thing*.”

“What you’ve been so far is lucky.” Taking my hand he dragged me over the mess and into my bedroom and kicked the clothes on the floor out of the way so he could slam the door, shutting an uncomfortable-looking Sam on the other side.

Once in the bedroom, he spun me around and backed me up against the wardrobe, taking my jaw in both his hands and tilting my head back so he could have eye contact before moving right into my space. A vision of what happened the last time he backed me up against a solid surface swam into my mind and my chest rose and fell rapidly as I breathed in his scent. The hours he’d spent at Bunt Fest meant that his normal clean male smell was layered with a subtle hint of smoke from the bonfire. I wanted to bury my face in his neck and lick his stubble. With him this close, my ovaries had taken over where my brain left off, and Murphy ovaries are not the best decision makers: case in point my mum’s when it came to my dad, whom I hadn’t seen in over a decade. He’d lived with us until I was two and then moved out when he met his real wife and started his real family. Apparently, my mum wasn’t ‘conservative enough’ for an insurance broker. She embarrassed him. Contact dwindled after that. The last time I’d seen him as a teenager it had been so awkward that I think we both decided to just drift apart. I think this was a big part of the reason that I found trusting Barclay so difficult. I knew I wasn’t *conservative* enough for most people, leave alone a Cabinet minister.

Barclay glanced down at my heaving chest, and when his eyes flicked back to mine his pupils were dilated. He gave a quick shake of his head as if to clear it.

“I know you are a free spirit,” he said, his breath mixing with mine and making me feel weak at the knees. “I don’t want that to change. I swear I don’t. But Kira, I cannot let you live somewhere you’re not safe. I know you’re not used to having anyone tell you what to do. But even if I have to sling you over my shoulder and carry you all the way to Westminster, I am not leaving you here. You’re going to move in with me for now, where I know you’re safe. You can be as much of a free spirit as you want, just with you coming back to *my house*, and sleeping under my roof . . . *please*.”

It was the ‘please’ that did it. Well, that and the fact he was now bent down even further to kiss my jaw line. The Murphy ovaries were very much

on board with sharing Barclay's home – they weren't bothered about my trust issues or concerns over getting in too deep with this guy. A wave of pure lust hit me so hard I could hardly breathe, let alone form a coherent response.

"I . . . well . . ." My words died as his mouth moved across to mine. Then we were kissing and my brain turned into scrambled eggs with a side of black pudding. The Murphy ovaries were deciding that they didn't care if a huge security guard was on the other side of the door or that my flat was a total state. No, they wanted to do the funky Mambo again, right here, right now. So, when he pulled away a couple of inches, I gave a little moan of protest like a horny thirteen-year-old boy.

"So, you'll move your stuff in with me."

He didn't say it as a question and the Murphy ovaries, who had officially taken over the running of my body and decision-making abilities, caused me to let out a breathless "K."

The inappropriate moaning, the 'K' response, and the fact that I was plastered over him like a cat to an Aga, seemed to soften his expression from furious to annoyed, with an edge of Sex Badger.

"Although I wouldn't mind the whole 'carrying over your shoulder' deal," my ovaries told him. "That would be h-o-t, hot. Hot like an *Aga* hot."

His eyes warmed a few more degrees and he fought the smile that tugged at his lips, but fortunately lost. "Kira, are you trying to make sexy Aga references?"

"Yeah, baby," my ovaries breathed. In truth, they'd only really heard him saying the word sexy in his deep rumbly voice and that was all they needed. His chest started shaking under my hands and he let out a short laugh then looked at the ceiling.

"Agas are not sexy, Kira."

"Hmmm . . ." the ovaries sighed as I closed my eyes and leaned forward to breathe in his chest. "Sexy."

His chest shook with another deep rumbly laugh.

"How the hell do you manage to piss me off, scare me to death and make me laugh twice all in the space of ten minutes?"

There was a loud bang at the door, snapping me out of my daze and enabling me to wrest control of my consciousness back from my ovaries.

"The door is paper thin," Sam said in a monotone voice from the other side of it. "I'm very sorry Mr Lucas, but I did *not* want to hear *any* of that and if you don't mind, I would like to get you to a secure location where

I can maybe . . . I don't know . . . do my job?"

I rolled my eyes. "Chillax, Grumpy Knickers, I'm just—"

"We'll be five minutes," Barclay told him, moving across to the wardrobe and dragging my ancient suitcase off the top of it.

"Ah!" I shouted. "Wait! That's got . . ." It was too late. Barclay had lifted the suitcase down and been showered with about one thousand condoms. All unopened, but still . . .

He put the suitcase down on the bed slowly, it was now only half full of condoms, and then looked at me with his eyebrows raised.

"I'm almost afraid to ask," he said, flipping open the top and surveying the plethora of safe sex options (there were even a few femidoms in there and a number of diaphragms for good measure).

"The government – Tory obvs," I gave him an eyebrow lift of my own, "closed down the family planning centre in Lewisham. These were leftovers I've been meaning to cart over to the clinic in St Thomas'."

He gave me a look.

"What?" I shrug. "I wasn't going to let them throw it all away. Think how many safe shags this lot could generate."

He pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment. "Kira, why are we talking about safe shags and condoms?"

"We wouldn't have to if your government hadn't shut down the family planning clinic."

He looked at me, shook his head then upended the suitcase to tip the rest of the condoms out onto the bed.

"No more sexy Agas, no more safe shags, no more condoms," he told me, and his bossy tone made the Murphy ovaries sit up to attention again, ready to take over my weak mind. "Pack."

Chapter 20

I'll give you refractory period

Barclay

“I’ll wait here until you talk to him,” Kira told me, a stubborn expression on her face as she stood next to the back door.

I was trying to move her in.

Or rather, I was kidnapping her and installing her in my home. Not an in-character action for me at all, but it was clear that Kira Murphy was doing a shitty job of looking after herself. And after hearing that she merrily stayed in her tiny pigsty of a flat after multiple break-ins, even sleeping in said flat directly after a break in with no bloody lock on the door, I was done.

Yes, okay she could have stayed with her friends, I accepted that, but the woman was a liability. She had no sense of self-preservation and quite frankly, those people were not up to the task of keeping Kira Murphy out of trouble and safe.

No, in my opinion she needed twenty-four-hour security, a complex alarm system and a goddamn bodyguard. All of which I could provide in my home. Plus, the fact that she’d actually *be* in my home – I wouldn’t have to wonder where she was all the time and I wouldn’t struggle to get hold of her, given that she didn’t carry her goddamn mobile. Kira must have been the only twenty-something in 2019 not carrying a mobile phone. She told me she has one *somewhere*, but I’d have to get the removal people I’d hired to look for it that week, because between the thousands of unused prophylactics strewn over her bedroom and the chaos of the break in, there was no way we were ever going to be able to find it. I asked her if I could ring it and she looked at me like I’d just asked to send an envoy into the Amazon Rainforest to communicate with the lost tribes people. I rang it anyway just to see. It went straight to voicemail. Of course it did. And her voicemail message went something like this:

‘Okay, so if you’re about to leave a message, you don’t know me very well. I don’t check my voicemail. I’d say you can text, but I’m not hot on those either – #sorrynotsorry.’ Yes, that’s right, she actually *said* hashtag.

‘Anyhoo, if you want to communicate with me you could maybe find me and you know . . . have an actual conversation with me. Give it a try. Let’s do it like it’s nineteen eighty-five. Peace out, cockwombs.’

I’d let my phone drop to my side and stared at her for a full minute after that. An argument about the fact that she’s a bloody doctor and should have a mobile she answers (failing that a professional voicemail message) earned me another eye roll, another ‘Chillax, Sex Badger’ and a long explanation about how she doesn’t do on-calls from home and, if she’s on call in the hospital, she has her work mobile and a pager. At any other time, there was no way to contact Kira. At all. She didn’t even have a functioning landline at her flat. So essentially, if you wanted to contact Kira out of work hours, you’d need a carrier pigeon or a bloodhound at your disposal.

So yes, I was moving her in. But now that she was here, she was refusing to move from the back door until I had spoken to Henry.

“It’s his home too,” she said. “I won’t invade until I know he’s okay with it.”

“He lives in a separate flat downstairs,” I argued, just wanting to get her firmly installed in the house. “The bastard refuses to come up here anyway.”

“I’m not moving from here until you talk to Henry and that’s it.”

“Talk to me about what?” Henry was standing in the doorway to the kitchen with one eyebrow raised and a small smile on his face.

“You’re out of your PJs!” Kira cried, flying across the kitchen and giving him such an aggressive hug that he let out an ‘omph!’ and went back on one foot. I strode over to them and pulled her back by one of her belt loops.

“The man managed to wear actual clothes, Kira,” I muttered, shooting Henry an annoyed look as he shot me a smug, amused expression. “I don’t think it deserves quite that level of exuberance.”

“Hmm,” Henry said. “Kira’s hugs *do* make me feel a lot better though. And I have been through a rough time so . . .”

“Oh, Henry!” she cried, attempting to launch herself forwards, but I still had a hold of her belt loop so she was going nowhere. Henry’s smirk turned into a full-on grin.

“I take it you two have progressed from fake news to actual headlines now in the relationship stakes.”

“Well –”

“Yes,” I cut Kira off and pulled her back into me and away from Henry. “Kira is with me now. There will be no more hugs, however *good* it makes you feel, you cheeky bastard.”

Henry let out a short laugh. “I knew it,” he said.

“What do you mean you knew it?”

“This,” he pointed between me and Kira, “was inevitable to anyone with eyes in their head. The only thing that surprises me is this possessive caveman bit. Never seen you like that before.”

I was about to punch him in the face but Kira spoke.

“Listen Henners, bit of trouble at my gaffe and Barcos wants me to stay here. I didn’t want to impose on you guys. If it’s not okay, I can—”

“What kind of trouble?” Henry stopped smirking, he crossed his arms over his chest and his eyes were now alert. Before Kira could play it down, I told him the whole story. He was nearly as furious as me and wouldn’t hear of Kira staying anywhere else. I hadn’t quite realised how important she had become to Henry as well, but I couldn’t say I was surprised.

It was after he’d helped us lug her suitcases up and when I was trying to find the sheets in the airing cupboard that I overheard them in the corridor.

“You doing okay?” Kira’s soft voice asked, the concern clear in her tone.

“I’m fine.”

“Please don’t you tell me you’re fine. I know that you’re not.”

“Okay, I’m not fine but I have contacted a counsellor. And I’ve got an appointment with my GP next week.”

“And your friends? Maybe even that girl that you—”

“One step at a time,” he told her. “You’re a pushy little bugger, aren’t you? Ow! Not more chest hair, you little shit!”

I let out the breath I hadn’t realised I’d been holding. With Kira right here in the house, maybe I wouldn’t feel so helpless when it came to Henry.

“So,” I said as I emerged from the airing cupboard and made my way over to them. Kira was carrying a beanbag that had seen better days and a lava lamp. Henry had chucked the suitcases down on the carpet. “There’s lots of rooms, so you can take your pick.”

I’d forced her to come here and I didn’t want to make her sleep with me and not have her own space just because I was a horny bastard. Her gaze snapped back to me and she frowned.

“Oh,” she said. Her shoulders dropped a bit and her eyes dropped

from mine. “Right, great.” She sighed, dropped the beanbag on the floor and then plonked herself down on it. Since this behaviour was *not* choosing herself a room from the vast quantity she had available to her on this floor, and since she seemed weirdly sad, I wasn’t sure what to do.

Henry snorted. “I’ll just leave you two to hash it out,” he said, beating a hasty retreat down the corridor and then down the stairs to his flat.

I cleared my throat after a minute.

“Kira, are you okay?”

“Sure,” she mumbled, fiddling with her lava lamp, still avoiding eye contact and sinking further into her beanbag.

“Then, why aren’t you choosing a room?”

She sighed and her head flopped back onto the beanbag.

“Give me a minute, Sex Badger,” she said. “Just go off and sort your important stuff out. Go and talk to the Canadian Prime Minister – hot politician to hot politician. You can compare hair care products.”

I dropped the suitcase and crossed my arms over my chest. Maybe she was after an apology for dragging her here. If it would get her arse off that beanbag, I was willing to give it a try. “I’m sorry I–”

“Argh! Don’t apologise,” she snapped, then gathered her thick hair up onto the top of her head before letting it fall back down and releasing a puff of air from her mouth in what sounded like frustration. “Please,” she said as she looked up at me. “You don’t have to apologise for not wanting me in your room.”

My eyebrows went up and I opened my mouth to speak, but she cut me off.

“I know you’re busy . . . but I only snort a *little bit* in my sleep. Libby says *she* can sleep through it. And I’m small, so I’ll barely take up any space in the bed. You’d hardly know I was there. I’d be like a tiny hedgehog tucked into your side – minus the spikes. But, if you *could* sleep with your shirt off that would be much appreciated. And we wouldn’t have to shag for hours like we did the other night. I’d be happy with just a quick bit of penetration when you’ve got a spare five minutes. I mean, maybe you need a few days to recover anyway? It was intense, and men *do* have a longer refractory period than women. You could just let me know when you’re ready for another round. I wouldn’t put *that* much pressure on you to . . . umph!”

During Kira’s little speech about snorting in her sleep (she did snort like a little pig – but it was cute, not annoying), how I would barely notice

her, and listening to the disappointment in her voice as she talked about my ‘refractory period’, I lost the last shred of my control.

“Right,” I told her as I stood with her slung over my shoulder and stalked down the corridor to my room. “I was going to be a bloody gentleman and let you have your own room, but bollocks to that and bollocks to my *refractory period*. I’ll give you refractory period. The only reason festivities stopped at all last night is because you fell asleep like a snorty little pig and then scurried off this morning.”

“There was just this one bag left to bring up to—” Henry’s voice trailed off as he reached the top of the stairs. “Argh! My eyes!”

“Bugger off ,Henry,” I called over my shoulder, and I felt Kira take her hand off my back, no doubt to give him a little wave.

“It’s okay, Henners,” she said, the dejection in her voice now completely gone – in fact she sounded positively chirpy. “Mummy and Daddy sometimes fight, but they still love you.” Henry beat another hasty retreat. I heard the door to his flat slam in the distance.

I stormed into my bedroom and dropped Kira on the bed. She bounced once and seemed to be pleased with that too; a huge smile on her face as she scrambled to a sitting position.

“So you don’t have to go and discuss hair care with Justin Trudeau?” she asked, pushing herself up to her knees and clasping her hands in front of her like a child about to receive their presents on Christmas morning.

I let out a bark of laughter and pulled off my shirt. Her eyes got bigger and her smile even wider.

“Hurrah!” she shouted, clapping once and bouncing on the bed. I’d had a not insignificant amount of experience of women in my bed before, but it was safe to say not one of them had clapped at me and shouted *hurrah!* prior to bedroom activities. In fact, I didn’t know anyone who had ever said ‘hurrah!’ to me under *any* circumstance. Kira wasn’t even trying to hide her enthusiasm – no coy looks under her lashes, no sexy pouting – she was all wide grin and bursting energy like an overexcited puppy. I was more turned on than I’d ever been in my life, but even with that fierce need pumping through my body, I couldn’t help but grin back.

Christ, she looked so bloody pleased that I was going to have time for a *quick bit of penetration*.

Of course I had time to take her to bed. Fuck.

Chapter 21

The one

Kira

“Cockwombles,” I mumbled under my breath as I read the article on the Lucas computer.

“Er, what’s cockwombles?” Henry’s voice made me jump and I looked up to see his tall frame in the doorway. It was Saturday and I’d been living with the Lucases since the Sunday before. Henry had started coming out of his lair, as Barclay called it, with much greater frequency and he no longer smelled like a homeless person.

I waved at the desktop and he moved closer to look at the screen.

“Ah, yes,” he said. “Cockwombles indeed. You know, it’s best not to read any of that shit. Barclay doesn’t, he just lets the press officer trawl through it.”

Barclay had warned me that there might be some ‘heightened press interest’ in him over the next few days, following Monday’s Cabinet meeting. Top of the agenda had been his proposed changes in energy provision and, crucially how the government were going to minimise the impact to other industries and their workforce, as nuclear fusion and other renewal energy resources became the norm. Debate was raging and everybody’s hopes or grievances seemed to centre on Barclay Lucas as the Minister of State for Business, Energy and Clean Growth. Everyone knew that Barclay’s approach was to ‘embrace change’, something his predecessor (Millie’s dickhead of a father) had been staunchly opposed to. Barclay was clever though. He didn’t just make the environmental argument. No, he made the argument that appealed to everyone, whether they liked to admit it or not: he made the economic one. I’d seen his speeches before and I knew how convincing he was. As far as he was concerned, we had to change now and *lead* the world rather than wait to see how everyone else fared with it.

So, what with the Cabinet meeting earlier in the week and now the upcoming parliamentary debate (before the bill was, hopefully, passed) all eyes were on him. And yes, there were plenty of serious *Guardian* articles

about his political career and his current policies, but these were outnumbered by the huge interest in the man himself.

It seemed that although Bunt Fest was all about love and acceptance and a peaceful (if slightly stoned) existence, that didn't stop some of the attendees taking pics of Barclay and me and selling them to the media. Mark sent me a link to an article that morning entitled 'Hippy Lucas' True Colours Revealed', with a picture showing Barclay receiving a second glitter blessing from the well-endowed Shirley. I was in the background laughing my arse off – unfortunately post-sliming, so my t-shirt was see-through and my bra was clearly on show. The pic with Barclay and his expensive suit covered in glitter made me smile, but that smile died as I read the article.

Barclay, described as a 'secret lefty' and 'green crusader', is now considered by some to be a liar, trying to trick the country into becoming a bunch of green-tea-drinking, pot-smoking . . .

(Unfortunately, they'd managed to get wind of the Bunt Fest Bong, which had been passed around throughout the day.)

. . . environmentalists without a care for industry or jobs, or the country as a whole.

The whole thing made my blood boil. And to make things worse, there were pics of us together. The main offender was taken just as the Ferret's Testicles were about to start their performance. As the singers had picked up various tambourines and ukuleles, I'd whispered to him not to expect Guns 'n' Roses, and he'd pulled me into his side and thrown his head back to laugh. I was staring up at him like a lovesick puppy and the whole moment was captured on film. One of the biggest tabloids had been busy overnight and had dug up that I was a 'sex doctor'. My crusade for both boys and girls to have the HPV vaccine was couched as some sort of obsession with genital warts (ok so maybe I was a little obsessed, but hello, a vaccine against cervical cancer and genital warts? What's not to love about that?).

"I must say, I like that they've called me a sex doctor," I told Henry, trying to look on the bright side. "It sounds so much more glam than *registrar in Genito Urinary Medicine and Infectious Diseases*. Like I might be in a fabulous LA clinic tutoring celebs in some sort of group therapy session on the best way to administer cunnilingus – all of us on yoga mats in an aromatherapy-oil-scented studio. Not like what my mum does, which is conducted in a community centre that doubles as a day centre for the local elderly population."

Henry stared at me and blinked once. “You have a strange and vivid imagination, and an even stranger family,” he said. “Why haven’t I met your mother? She sounds even more bizarre than you, and that’s saying something.”

“Just cause someone doesn’t fit into your conventional norms does not mean they’re weird, loser.” Henry raised his eyebrows. “Well, okay. Even I can admit my mum is out-there in wacky town.”

“What’s your dad like?”

I sighed. “He works in insurance. I wouldn’t call him my dad. I’m sure he is a good dad to the two children he actually wanted, but to me, not so much.”

“Oh . . . shit, sorry Kira. I didn’t mean to –”

“Nah, it’s okay. I’m over it . . . kind of. And I had Libby’s parents growing up. Libby’s dad is as good a father figure as you could hope for and her mum is the opposite of mine. Our terraced houses were next door to each other. So if Mum was on one of her retreats or at a festival and hadn’t dragged me along, I’d stay with them. Mum was great, but there was a lot of craziness that came along with her. Still is. I had a rebellion as a teenager, which consisted of wearing button-down shirts and sensible shoes. That’s the reason I ended up doing medicine; I was so bloody studious at school I got all As in the sciences, and Libby had her heart set on it, so I thought, why not?”

“No more button-down shirts now though?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, when I realised that I wasn’t really sticking it to my mum like I thought I would be, and that my dad still had zero interest in me, I went back to my roots. Must be in the genes.”

“And you thought you’d treat sexually transmitted infections rather than encourage their spread?”

“Ha! Yeah, well, GU medicine tends to attract the less conventional peeps in medicine and I wanted something I could use to make an actual difference to the world. Infectious diseases and family planning are some of the best ways to do that, so I guess it was meant to be.”

“You want to save the world, just like my brother,” Henry said, tilting his head to the side. “You know, you two are actually more similar than I’d realised, I think.”

I snorted and shook my head but didn’t say anything more.

“And now you’re his own personal sex physician. Am I right?” He raised an eyebrow and winked at me.

“Well, Henry,” I said in a sing-song voice. “When a mummy and a daddy love each other very much, they sometimes go upstairs and have a special cuddle, where the daddy’s—”

“Argh!” Henry shouted, cutting me off and grimacing as he put his hands over his ears. “Stop, I do *not* need to hear the gory details of my brother’s sex life.”

“Ugh, some people are so repressed. You should be happy for him that he can do this thing with his tongue that—”

“La la la,” Henry sang loudly with his fingers in his ears. “La la – please don’t scar me permanently with any more traumatising information – la la la—”

“Okay, little bro,” I shouted above his singing, and he gingerly took his fingers out of his ears. “No more sex deets. I want to know about you anyway. I’ve shared—”

“Overshared.”

“Don’t be such a big girl’s blouse. I barely told you any of the good stuff.”

He put his hands over his ears again and I held my hands up. “Calm down, Clare Raynor” I said as I moved to the kettle and started filling it up. “Listen, how are you – really?”

He sighed. “I’m getting there.” He cleared his throat and shifted his feet. I bit my lips to stop myself speaking. “I went to the counsellor again yesterday. It’s . . . I’m getting there.”

“What about your old friends? You said on Tuesday that you were going to contact them this week.”

“Yeah, I did. Texted like a pussy at first. Just sort of a hi and sorry, blah, blah, blah.”

There was a long pause.

“And . . .?”

“And, well they were pretty cool I guess.”

“You guess? Is that it? Is that all I’m going to get?”

“Kim rang me and after I grew some balls I managed to return her calls. We’ve talked quite a bit this week. I hurt her when I ghosted her but she knows something was really wrong so—”

Henry’s phone started vibrating on the kitchen counter. We both dived for it but, with my ninja-like reflexes, I was quicker. And it was FaceTime – even better. I accepted the call and dashed around the island,

away from Henry. A beautiful girl with dark cappuccino skin and wild black curls framing her face filled the screen.

“Hi!” I said, grinning madly at her. Her smile fell and she frowned.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” Her mouth pinched and my grin grew even wider. This must be Kim, aka The One, and if I wasn’t mistaken she was *not* happy that another girl was answering Henry’s phone.

I told her not to worry – that I was boning the other brother. She brightened after that and we managed a little chat before Henry finally wrestled the phone off me. He shot me a furious look, muttering something about me being an “oversharing little shit” before softening his expression to apologize to Kim. He disappeared then down to his lair and away from me to talk to her. I couldn’t make out his words as he walked away, but I did hear his low laughter at something she said. When he returned ten minutes later his eyes were brighter than I’d ever seen them. He tried and failed to hide his goofy little smile from me as he made some tea.

“She’s beautiful, Henry,” I said softly. For some reason my words caused his smile to die a little as he poured the milk.

“Yeah,” he whispered. “She is.” He shook his head as if to clear it and then looked back up at me. “I’m meeting up her and Danny next week. We’re going to go to the pub for a quiet drink. I wanted to wait until we were face to face to tell them.”

“Just tell them what you’re ready to tell them Henny Penny, okay? Like I’ve said before you don’t have to tell them at all.”

He nodded but I could see the uncertainty in his expression. So I moved to him, took the milk out of his hand, put it on the counter and gave him a hug. He stiffened as I wrapped my arms around him and I gave him a squeeze.

“Relax, little bro,” I told him. “You’re going to have to put up with the odd cuddle now I’m moved in, you know. You were happy enough to have one when you thought it would wind your brother up.” He sighed, but did manage to hug me back briefly before I released him.

“Kim is *her*. Isn’t she?”

“Her?”

“Don’t act stupid with me, cockwomble. You know what I’m talking about. ‘*Her*’. The girl you were in love with. The One.’”

“I–I don’t know what you’re–”

“I have an excellent drunken memory. The more pissed I am, the

better my recall – it’s a gift.”

Henry sighed.

“She . . . I . . .” he started to say as I finished making tea for both of us.

“She what?” I asked, avoiding eye contact as I didn’t want to spook him into not telling me – like luring a stubborn badger out of his set.

“It’s complicated, okay? Before I got my diagnosis, I was trying to clean up my act. I . . . I’d liked Kim for a while. We went to uni together. I decided to man up and try to be good enough for something more with her just before I got sick. We’d been friends for ages and, well, it was . . . she was . . . You’re right, okay? I was in love with her.”

“And then you didn’t speak to her for over a year.”

“Yeah.” Henry slumped onto one of the stools and put his head in his hands. “We never . . . you know . . . so I didn’t have to contact trace her. Thank Christ. If I’d put her at risk, I would never have forgiven myself. Never.” His voice shook at the end and he sounded suspiciously close to tears. I moved around the island and put the tea down in front of him. He blinked at it then took a long sip, wrapping both his hands around the warm mug, and the wetness in his eyes receded (tea, in my opinion, made everything better).

“Give yourself a chance to be happy, Henry,” I said as I sipped my own tea. “And give her and your friends a chance too. You don’t know what their reaction could be, but I doubt any of them will run screaming from the pub. If . . . if things were the other way around, would you prefer to just be cut out of their lives for good?”

“I know. You’re right.” He looked up at me again. “I’ve contacted Mum and Dad as well.”

I let out a relieved breath. Barclay had said that Henry had cut off their parents a couple of months after his diagnosis and had been refusing to see them. Apparently, they were almost driven mad with worry, despite Barclay’s regular updates.

“It was cruel to keep them away,” he said, shaking his head. “I see that now. I’ve been so selfish. But I couldn’t look at the pity and devastation in their faces any longer. I couldn’t deal with the guilt of having let them down so badly.”

I groaned. “Henry, you haven’t let anyone down. If I hear you talk like that again I’m going to give you another dose of Madonna.”

He swallowed and squared his shoulders. "I'll give it a chance." He shrugged. "I wouldn't want to risk any more cheesy eighties à la Kira after all."

"Oh, you'll be hearing me sing again, Henny Penny," I warned him. "That's not going to change, no matter what you do." He grinned and I blew him a kiss, which set him off laughing, the kind of deep, genuine belly laugh that I'd been managing to get out of him more and more recently. I was smiling across at him when the door to the kitchen flew open and a tall, middle-aged, dark-haired lady in head-to-toe Boden, followed by a taller man with almost completely grey hair, walked in. The woman's wide eyes went to a laughing Henry and her mouth dropped open.

"Henry," she whispered, and her eyes filled with tears. The man moved to wrap his arm around her and I saw him give her shoulder a squeeze.

"Mum," Henry said softly, coming out of his chair to her. When he was inches away he snatched her up in a fierce hug, lifting her off her feet, then went over to the man and did a manly back slapping version of the same thing. As soon as he moved away from what I assumed was his dad, his mum's hands came up and framed his face. Tears fell down her own as she took him in. "Come on now, Mum. No need to get all sappy."

"You look good," his mum said in a choked voice through her tears. "I didn't expect . . ." she fell into him again and he took her in his arms, gently guiding her over to the kitchen table.

I started sidling over to towards the corridor so I could make a speedy exit. This was a family affair and I didn't want to intrude. But just as I was about to make it to the door Mr Lucas's voice cracked across the space.

"Dr Murphy?" he said, and I heard a chair scrap back as he stood up.

"Don't mind me," I said, edging further towards the door. "I'll just let you guys catch up and . . ."

Mr Lucas's sharp gaze came to me. With his blue, too-intelligent eyes, so much like his sons', it was a little unnerving.

"*The Dr Murphy?*" he asked again, taking in my outfit from head to toe. I was wearing one of Libby's t-shirts that showed a dejected storm trooper sitting under a caption saying *I had friends on that Deathstar*, which I'd teamed with my extra-frayed cut-offs and a pair of furry UGGs.

"Hi." I gave them both a finger wave and a lopsided grin, which was not returned by Mr Lucas. Whilst his expression was blank, Mrs Lucas gave

me a small, curious smile.

“Thank you,” Mr Lucas said, drawing my attention back to him. My eyebrows drew together – that was not what I was expecting him to say. No doubt he had seen the papers, and I did not think that a retired judge and his barrister wife would be over keen on their politician son hanging out with a sex doctor who was happy to be covered in green slime and show her bra to the nation.

“What . . .?”

He cleared his throat. “Barclay told us what you’ve done for Henry. He says you were a big part of his recovery.”

As far as gratitude goes, this dude had a lot to learn.

“Well, not really. We’re just mates. Henry’s the one that turned things around,” I told him, my voice getting smaller under his disapproving stare, which I found frustrating because that just was not *me*. Kira Murphy did not speak in a small voice for anyone. But I’d encountered this type of person before and I was feeling the familiar sting of hurt at his disapproval.

Unconventional was not everyone’s cup of tea, and I often found that people like him had perfected the withering stare until it felt like it could reduce the average person to mush at a single glance. Usually I could shrug this type of thing off, but it felt important that the Lucases liked me. They were Barclay’s parents. “Oh, and please call me Kira, Mr Lucas.”

“Kira,” Mrs Lucas piped up, shooting her husband an irritated look. “I’m Liz.” She moved towards me and took my hand in hers. “It’s so good to meet you.”

“Hmm,” Mr Lucas mumbled, ignoring his wife’s interruption. No offer of me using *his* Christian name forthcoming. “You seem to be *mates* with both our sons, if the press are to be believed.”

“Fergus,” Liz said in a warning tone, dropping my hand to turn back towards her husband.

I gave a nervous chuckle. “Ha! Yes, well it’s all very jolly. I just–”

“Barclay’s close protection officer tells me that you are, in fact, currently resident at this address. Is that right?” Mr Lucas’s eyebrows went up into his hairline and I felt colour flood my face (another very un-Kira-like event).

“Funny story. I had a bit of trouble at my gaffe and Barcos didn’t think it was super safe, so he thought–”

“Convenient,” Mr Lucas put in.

“Dad!” Henry finally entered the conversation. “Will you *lay off*?”

“I was just asking the young lady some perfectly reasonable questions, Henry,” Mr Lucas told him. The way he said *young lady*, sounding as though I was a fifteen-year-old vagrant rather than a twenty-nine-year-old professional.

Henry gave me an apologetic look. For some reason, his solidarity in the face of his father’s obvious dislike made my throat feel thick. I turned to the only solution I could think of.

“Tea?” I asked almost desperately into the awkward silence.

“I’d love some tea, dear,” Mrs Lucas said. “Don’t mind my husband, Kira. Look up aggravating, stubborn, prejudiced, ancient hypochondriac in the dictionary and you’ll see his face right there.”

“I say!” blustered Mr Lucas. “That’s a bit—”

“Oh, do dry up, Fergus, you great ninnyhammer,” she snapped, sparing him a disgusted look before turning back to me. “Now, I for one am *very* grateful for all you’ve done for my boy, Kira. Sit down, dear. *I’ll* make the tea. Barclay tells me that you are a specialist in genitourinary medicine and infectious diseases. I hope you won’t mind if I ask a few questions about my son’s condition.”

I smiled at her and nodded. Now, *that* I could do. Making sure people were informed about HIV was right up my street. There were so many misconceptions out there.

I started off with U=U and moved on to long-term prognosis. Despite Mr Lucas’s obvious dislike towards me, they both listened to me. The fact that Henry couldn’t transmit the virus, that he could lead a normal life with a near normal life expectancy, that he only had to take one tablet a day – I could see the relief in their eyes as I answered all their questions.

And Mrs Lucas made good tea. In fact, she was all round awesome.

And I was definitely adding ‘ninnyhammer’ into my insult repertoire.

Chapter 22

Obvious choice

Kira

Liz and Fergus (or Mr Lucas to me, as there was still no offer of Christian name usage) were planning to stay for the rest of the day. They'd brought provisions over for lunch. I told them all I had plans, Henry put up a half-hearted protest but I could tell he was only really focused on his parents.

Mr Lucas might be a judgmental arsehole, but I could see the lingering fear in his eyes and his wife's as they watched their youngest son. I knew how long they had been out of contact with him. The whole family needed to heal, and I wasn't going to get in the way of that.

Barclay arrived back from his constituency clinic just as I was about to slip out the back door.

"Hey, where are you off to?" he asked, crowding me back against the coats hanging by the back door and kissing my neck. His tie was loosened and he was looking mildly dishevelled, which I found even more attractive than his usual razor-sharp Saville Row appearance.

"Your paren—" I was cut off by his mouth on mine and with his smell surrounding me, his fingers in my hair and his stubble grazing my face, I forgot what I was going to say. Reality returned in the form of a throat clearing in the hallway next to us.

"Mum!" Barclay's strangled voice exclaimed as he shot backwards from me as if I was patient zero in a swine flu epidemic.

"Sorry darling," she said, her voice shaking with barely suppressed amusement. "I heard your voice and—"

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I didn't think I had to check in with you and your brother before I—"

"Of course not, Mum," Barclay said, his tone softer now he was over his initial shock. He moved forward and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I just didn't expect you." I started sidling towards the exit again and the movement must have caught Barclay's eye, reminding him I was there.

"Have you met Kira?"

“Yes, of course,” she said, her wide smile and happy expression the complete opposite of Mr Lucas’s, who had come to stand next to her in the corridor – his brows drawn down in disapproval. Seeing his son wrapped around me clearly was not a happy experience. “Lunch is ready, darling.”

Barclay frowned as he looked between his dad and me. I forced my own smile and moved a little closer to the door.

“Kira, you’ll stay for lunch,” Barclay said. It should have been a question but came out more like a command. I’d never been very good with commands. “Won’t she, Mum?”

“Of course she can stay, darling,” Liz said, and Mr Lucas made an unhappy noise in the background, followed by a grunt when his wife elbowed him in the ribs. “We’ll be back in the kitchen getting the Yorkshires out. Come on Fergus.” She dragged him off to the kitchen and the door shut behind them.

“What was that about?” Barclay asked in a low voice.

“I don’t think I’m quite your dad’s cup of tea.”

He sighed. “He can be a bit blunt. Have you been doing your usual mad as a box of frogs routine?” I blinked at him. It took a moment for me to swallow down my hurt pride before I could answer.

“No, Barclay,” I said, looking down at my fluffy UGGs and scuffing my feet on the ground. “I think he’d already drawn his own conclusions before he met me. I think it’s best you have some time as a family without an outsider hovering around and winding them up. Alright?”

“Kira, if you just spend some time with them, I’m sure that–”

“No,” I snapped. I was not sacrificing more of my pride and myself on the altar of the Lucas family dysfunction. They needed time together and I needed to get out of here before my already battered self-esteem took another nose-dive in the face of more gold-digging insinuations.

“You could at least try,” he said.

I decided I’d had enough. Barclay was so damn bossy. I’d had enough of overbearing men telling me what to do.

“They need time with you and your brother,” I told him, my voice now firmer. He wasn’t going to guilt me into staying when I knew it wasn’t the right move.

“Fine,” he said, and by his tone I could deduce that it was anything but.

I spent the day mooching around at Libby's house with Jamie and the kids, returning to Westminster that evening when I thought the coast might be clear. When I arrived, I could hear voices in the kitchen and made my way there, but on hearing my name I paused outside the door.

"Kira's not like that, Dad," Barclay said, irritation threading his tone. "You don't know her."

"All I know is that she's generating all kinds of crazy stories in the press, and you do not need any negative attention if you want to carry on being the next *obvious choice*."

"Dad! For Christ's sake, not everything is about me becoming the goddamn prime minister."

"Of course it is!" Mr Lucas's voice rose in obvious frustration. "What's the point of all this otherwise? You run rings around those daft halfwits in the House of Commons. Why shouldn't you be in charge? And I'll not have some lunatic hippy ruin your chances. You are a Conservative politician. The woman at your side should not *ever* be wearing the kind of get-up I saw on the front of The Mail or get covered in whatever this green stuff was." Oh dear, it seemed the Lucases really had read all the headlines.

"She's *popular* with the public."

"She's a novelty act. Of course the public like her *now*. You wait until the novelty wears off. All that will be left then is contempt – towards her and towards you."

"Fergus!" Liz shouted, and I jumped when I heard a load of plates clatter as if they'd been slammed down on the granite. "That's enough. You don't know what you're talking about. You are such an arse!"

I decided this convo was best continued without my presence, despite my need for tea, and I took a step back. Unfortunately, my foot landed on The Squeaky Floorboard and the sound echoed around the hallway like I'd set off an alarm.

"Kira?" I heard Barclay call, and closed my eyes in resignation before I managed to paste a strained smile on my face.

"Fuck it," I said under my breath then pushed forward into the kitchen. "Hey gang!" I called out to everyone as I crashed into the room. I left my neon orange fluffy coat on for maximum Weird Magic Mushroom Eater points. Liz looked mortified and furious, her husband, however, tilted his chin up and crossed his arms over his chest. I suppressed a sigh.

“Dr Murphy,” he addressed me, no matter that I’d asked to be called Kira. Twice.

“Mr Lucas,” I said back, deciding to go all out in the annoyance stakes and mimicking his deep baritone voice as I withdrew a packet of biscuits I’d picked up at the Co-op from my deep pocket. “Tempt you with a Jammie Dodger?”

“No, thank you,” he said, the distaste lacing his tone enough that you would be forgiven for thinking I’d offered him rat poison. “We had better be going. I’m sure you’re busy enough. Henry, good to see you, boy.” Mr Lucas gave both his sons an awkward hand shake slash hug.

“Don’t let us worry like that again, darling.” Liz was full-on hugging Henry now – no repressed emotion for her, her muffled voice was chock full of it.

“It’s okay, Mum,” Henry said as he hugged her back. Her hands were gripping his jumper behind his neck so hard that her knuckles had turned white, and when she stepped away her eyes were damp. She gave another, slightly less desperate, hug to her elder son before they both start moving in my direction.

“Thank you again, Kira,” Liz said, surprising me by pulling me into a hug just as fierce as those she’d given her boys. “And please ignore the crusty old mumpismus,” she said in my ear, not bothering to lower her voice and throwing her husband a filthy look after she pulled back from me. “Dementia is no doubt setting in.” Mr Lucas scowled at his wife then turned back to me.

“Well, it’s been . . . interesting meeting you,” he told me, his sheer Britishness forcing him to offer me a brief handshake. I took his hand in mine, glanced briefly down at it, and something caught my eye.

“How long has this been there?” I asked, managing to keep his hand in mine when he attempted to tug it back, and reaching over with the fingers of my other hand to trace a lesion on the back of his.

“What?” he asked, clearly thrown by my question and the whole hand stroking thing I had going on.

“This, here?” I traced around its rolled edge and then the scaling in its centre. “How long has this been there?” I finally let him withdraw his hand.

“I . . . I . . . a few months.”

“Much sun exposure in the past?”

“Well, I . . . a fair bit. I sail and . . .”

“Get that seen by your GP. They can refer you to a dermatologist. It

doesn't look too worrying, but they'll probably cut it out and send it off."

He blinked at me, opened his mouth to speak, shut it again, then gave a short nod. I smiled at him and he looked even more confused. Liz was looking between us with a bewildered expression. She grabbed her husband's hand and held it up to look closer. In the end, Barclay stepped in to usher them out and she only managed a small wave back at me as she was gently herded through the kitchen door.

"I'm sorry, short stuff," Henry said as I moved towards the kettle. "He's always been uptight but that was uncalled for."

"It's fine, Henners," I said with fake cheer. My neck felt tight and I could still see the disapproval swimming in Mr Lucas's too-familiar blue eyes. "Not everyone can be a rampant Kira fan. I'm an acquired taste." I would have been more convincing had my voice not cracked at the end. I didn't know why I was letting this upset me so much. It wasn't like Barclay and I were engaged.

Barclay chose that moment to swing the door open and push his way back into the kitchen. The door swung back on its hinges and he stalked over to the island, put both his hands up on the granite and let his head hang down between his shoulders as he contemplated his feet. I heard a few muttered expletives, some of which were drowned out by the kettle boiling. He held that defeated pose for so long that I thought it best to get on with making some tea. Who knew how long he could brood for? And I hadn't had a cup since leaving Libby's house. My teaspoon clattering onto the granite seemed to snap him out of it though and his head came up.

"I'm sorry," he said to me. I smiled, hoping he couldn't see through it.

"Nothing to be sorry about," I looked back at the kettle, away from his searching gaze. "I don't butter everyone's bagel and that's fine."

"There was no need to be so rude to you," he went on. "He's not usually ..." He didn't complete the sentence and my stomach roiled. I knew what he was going to say, and the fact that I had brought unusual amounts of unpleasantness out in his dad was not something to be celebrated.

"He's being a total dick, Kira," Henry put in, flashing his brother an annoyed look. "Ignore them. If Mum hadn't been one wrong comment away from blubbing all over me again, I would have chucked Dad out."

"Look, I'm not bothered okay?" I said, going for a breezy casual tone. "I'm rhino-skinned when it comes to disapproval. Nothing I haven't dealt with before."

Barclay was rubbing the back of his neck and contemplating his shoes again. In my perfect scenario, he would have strode over to me, snogged me silly and told me his dad was a narrow-minded twatbadger and that he could bog off. But that wasn't what happened. Instead, he kept his distance, muttered something about having a conference call and shuffled out of the kitchen. He spent the next hour doing Very Important Things in his office. By the time he emerged, I'd made Henry put *Footloose* on and despite my aching heart, or maybe because of it, I pulled a few shapes in the living room during the bar scene. Barclay'd laughed, pulled me off the coffee table and down next to him on the sofa. He'd even kissed my temple, making my stomach hollow out and my heart feel like it was too big for my chest. But I didn't miss the tension around his eyes, and I had to wonder whether he was considering that there might have been just a *little* bit of truth in his dad's words.

Chapter 23

The way the world works

Kira

Even more reporters outside the sexual health clinic entrance today.
Not ideal.

After Barclay's parents' visit I was feeling a little raw. Barclay had managed to relax after they left. He'd then scrambled my mind so effectively in bed later, that I managed to sleep without thinking about the day before. I'd even managed to make the broody tosspot laugh after I broke my promise to never use the word *penetration* again by muttering it in his ear mid-sexy times – he'd choked out a laugh, breaking the tension and making me smile. Later, when I was lying with my head resting on his chest and my leg slung over his thigh, he'd told me that he'd never laughed in bed with a woman before.

“Never?” I'd asked, truly surprised. “What kind of boring bastards have you been boinking?”

“Okay, boinking is another word that is officially off the table.” He grimaced. “And I didn't think those women were boring at the time. Not everyone can crack jokes mid-shag, Kira. But I must say, that now I've experienced it I don't think I could go back to those 'boring bastards', as you put it, ever again.”

But come the morning, as I perched on the bathroom counter watching him shave, I knew something was still a little off. He was just that bit quieter, there were a few more worry lines around his eyes. Something was weighing him down. I really hoped that something was the massive weight of political responsibility on his shoulders, but I had a sneaky suspicion it may also have had to do with his dad's opinion of me.

There were some journalists outside Barclay's house as I'd left in the morning, but I'd blown them kisses, promised them tea later and left them behind. I could handle them there, at *his* house, in *his* environment. But the paps camped outside the hospital . . . this was a problem. The last thing I needed this morning was Barclay-related hassle at work.

I had assumed that the press interest would only focus on Barclay. After all, I wasn't the one making massive changes to our energy industry or having meetings with political leaders. But it seemed that a disconcerting number of reporters didn't give much of a shit about the environment-saving

aspect, and cared more about the ‘Barclay shags Sex Doc’ angle. I didn’t smile at *these* guys. Instead, I ducked my head and pushed my way through the crowd – an endeavour that was not easy until Sam forged a path for me (I hadn’t realised that he was following me, the sneaky bastard). Sam and I made our way into the department and the first thing I noticed was the dearth of patients in the walk-in clinic waiting room.

“Rather an elaborate way to ensure a quiet clinic, don’t you think?” Mark joked as I stepped into the department. “Make sure you’re banging Mr Politician of the Moment so that the clinic is swamped with paps and no fucker wants to come in to get their dodgy bits and bobs given the all clear.”

“Dr Murphy,” Smarmy Simon’s voice cut off my reply. He was standing in the doorway to his office with a benign expression on his face. “Could I have a word in private?”

My stomach sank. I’d had enough ‘words in private’ with this guy to last me a lifetime. Sam had slunk back outside to deal with the reporters, but Mark stiffened beside me and took a step forward.

“Hey, don’t you –”

“It’s *fine* Mark,” I said, laying my hand on his arm to stop him and giving him a small shake of my head. Mark didn’t need to get on the wrong side of Dr Wankpuffin on my account, and I’d never been very keen on having others fight my battles for me. Mark pressed his lips together and crossed his arms over his chest, clearly unhappy but knowing how stubborn I was. Wankpuffin opened his office door wide and swept his arm out in a sharp impatient movement for me to go in. I sighed and walked over to him then through the door (he stayed in the doorframe so I had to squeeze past him – standard creepy Simon behaviour), and when we were both inside, he slammed it behind us.

“Can we do . . . er . . . this,” I gestured between us, “later. I should really start the clinic.”

“How long have you been fucking him?” Simon’s voice was still even, his tone conversational, which somehow made his words even more shocking. What was this guy’s problem? He was married for badger’s sake. Why did he care who *I* was with?

“I don’t really think that is an appropriate question,” I told him. I was on the far side of the desk and he was between the door and me. The room started to feel very small.

“Oh really?” He raised his eyebrows and took a step towards me. I

took a corresponding one backwards but came up against the wall. “I wonder, is it *appropriate* to drag a load of paparazzi to a sensitive clinic and discourage half the people with potentially serious communicable diseases not to attend? How many cases of pelvic inflammatory disease causing infertility and chronic pain will result from your press pack scaring people away?”

“I didn’t bring them here,” I said. “It’s not my fault they chose to stake out the hospital.”

“Maybe if you’d have kept your legs closed, they wouldn’t have a reason to stake it out.”

“Y—you can’t speak to me this way,” I said. Ugh! Why was my voice shaking and why did I stutter – I *never* stuttered. But he seemed too huge in that tiny office and he was my boss. My reference would come from him, my appraisals were written up by him. I was frozen as he stalked even closer. A slow smile spread across his face.

“Seems to me that I can speak to you however I want,” he said, one of his arms caging me on one side to cutt off my escape, and the other going to the back of my head and grasping my hair to hold me in place. My eyes went wide, my mouth went dry and my breathing sped up.

“Get off me or I’ll scream,” I told him, furious again that my voice wasn’t stronger.

He let out a bark of laughter.

“You’re so overdramatic,” he said, dropping my hair and taking a step back. “I was only messing around. Don’t be so sensitive.”

“If you ever try anything like that again I’ll report you.” I moved towards the door but he caught my wrist as I passed him. He still wore a neutral expression and his voice was still eerily calm but his grip on my wrist was crushing.

“Careful, Kira. I’ve already drafted a dozen reports about your unusual behaviour and unstable mental health – ready to go in your portfolio, if needed.”

“W...what?” I whispered.

“Everyone knows you’re a flaky little hippy,” he told me. “Nobody will be surprised when you have to be put into special measures for being a *little* bit crazy.”

“B—but I’ve never had any problems at work,” I told him. “I’m the most reliable registrar on the rota. You can’t fake all my past records, all my

other references and recommendations. People aren't just going to believe I'm crazy because I have some pink hair and I eat falafel."

"I think you'll find that when it comes down to it, people will believe a stable, male consultant with an unblemished record over a weird little girl like you. That's the way the world works." A loud bang sounded on the door and both of us flinched. Simon let go of my wrist and I spared no time speeding past him, but not before I'd kicked him in the shin.

"Kira?" Sam shouted, and the handle started to turn.

"Ow! You bitch," Simon swore as I ran away from him. I shivered at the fury I could hear in his voice. All façade of civilised male was stripped away now to reveal the dangerous predator underneath. The door burst open as I reached it and Sam stepped into the office.

"Who are you? This is my private office," Simon snapped, his eyes flashing and the colour in his face deepening.

Sam didn't reply. Instead, he looked between Simon and me slowly. My eyes were stinging, both from the pain having my wrist squeezed a little too tightly and the humiliation of the whole situation. One look at my face and Sam's turned to granite.

"Dr Murphy," he said, ushering me past him and out of the office and ignoring Simon completely. He kept his hand on my back as he moved me to the department's small coffee room. I wrapped my arms around myself as I leaned against the counter. I was shaking and concentrating on not throwing up.

"You know I'm here for your protection," Sam said. "It doesn't matter what it is I'm protecting you from. I'm here to keep you *safe*."

I let out a short humourless laugh. There wasn't much even Sam could do about this particular situation. Wankpuffin was right. Nobody would believe me over him. All I'd get was a reputation for being a troublemaker and terrible future job prospects. After a long moment of silence, a warm mug was pushed into my hand and I blinked up at Sam who was staring down at me.

"He's *my* boss, Sam," I said, taking a sip of tea and feeling a little better. "I can deal with it. It's nothing to do with you." Much as I would have loved to set my own personal bodyguard onto Simon, I knew that this was something I would have to sort out on my own.

"If that's the case then why are you shaking?" Sam asked. His voice was low and measured; if it weren't for the muscle ticking in his jaw, I

wouldn't have guessed he was annoyed in the slightest.

I looked down at my tea and bit my lip. "It was from the press. They took me off guard when I got to the entrance."

Sam narrowed his eyes at me, probably because I hadn't been overly camera shy in the past. "Well, we've dealt with the press."

"Oh? That was quick."

"I rustled up some hospital security. Between us we managed to get rid of them, for now."

"Right, thanks."

My voice was hoarse and my mouth felt too dry. I gripped my tea harder and tried to ignore the pounding in my chest. It felt like my skin was crawling where he'd touched me, like I was contaminated. The loss of control had shaken me to my core. I could feel little tendrils of fear snaking through me – fear and anger. How dare that sick bastard make me feel afraid at work of all places?

"They've never really bothered you before."

I blinked and tried to snap my mind back to the conversation with Sam. Everything felt unreal – like I wasn't quite standing there with him. Like I was watching myself from afar. "Did you know I'm married?"

Sam was not exactly a sharer, so no, I was not aware of that, and the fact he was telling me now was slightly bizarre.

"No. Um, congratulations?"

"She's off the wall just like you," he told me.

"Oh, I –"

"'Bout your size too. Can talk the hind legs off a donkey. Tiny dynamos the pair of you. But neither of you are very good at lying."

Chapter 24

A life with no Kira

Kira

“Yo, SB!” I shouted and waved as I made my way to him across the foyer of the Houses of Commons. Yes – me, Kira Murphy, in the Houses of Parliament. I’d kind of assumed I could drop my package off for Barclay at some sort of reception, but I had instead been ushered through to the inner sanctum of this place. I was blown away. This building was seriously cool! High ceilings, ornate, massive light fittings, carved panelling on the walls – I loved it.

The whole ushering thing might have had something to do with the press pack that had followed me there from Barclay’s house. The buggers. It seemed to wind the door people up to have the paparazzi swarming around the entrance.

I was getting used to the press by now, but they had their drawbacks. My policy was endless tea. I had bought a couple of those hot water dispensers and set them up outside Barclay’s house, leaving a tray stocked with cups, tea bags, instant coffee and milk, to save me always carting everything back and forth. And I brought them out biscuits every day. Even Jammie Dodgers and the good chocolate digestives, not the just Tesco’s own brand. Barclay thought I was nuts. Sam also thought I was nuts, which was fair. But Mum always says you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. How much more sex doctor stuff could they print about me if I was providing them with tea and branded biscuits?

As I made my way over to him, and took in how vast and ornate my surroundings were, I started to feel intimidated. I had thought this would be a great idea. In the two weeks since my run-in with Simon I’d hardly seen Barclay in daylight hours. The new bill for the unions was about to go through parliament and he had been working non-stop. So, I’d decided to go to him. Plus, I’d been feeling anxious and jumpy since the Simon thing, almost a little out of it, if I was honest. All very out of character for me. I needed something to help me get back to myself and I was determined to

shake off this sick, fearful feeling.

“Kira?” Barclay’s eyebrows shot up as he saw me. I decided to interpret this as Delighted Surprise and skipped over to him and his colleagues. Mary, the lovely older lady who I’d met at the Black and White ball greeted me with a warm smile. She was standing next to a younger man whom I also thought I recognised. Both of them wearing suits and looking immaculate. I was *not* wearing a suit. No, I was wearing short dungarees over a rainbow t-shirt and I had UGGs on my feet. Not a fashion triumph, as Mark would say, and *maybe* not appropriate for the Houses of Parliament. However, I’d been more inappropriately dressed in worse circumstances before (difficult to believe, but it was true), so I shook off any worry and grinned at Barclay in all his tailored perfection glory as I approached.

Barclay, who seemed to have frozen to the spot in shock, scanned my appearance from my face to my feet then let out a huff of air, which sounded half laugh and half exasperation. After giving him a light punch on the arm, I focused back on the chap I thought I recognised. I frowned at him for a moment before my mouth dropped open in shock.

“You!” I exclaimed, my volume control not quite what it should have been, given my surprise. But it wasn’t every day you came face to face with the current Health Secretary. My mind was going crazy with all the information I had stored up that I wanted to discuss with this guy: the need for better working conditions for junior doctors and nursing staff, the privatisation of the NHS and what a huge mistake that would be, the lack of funding for sexual health services (such a short-sighted move in terms of saving money in real terms). But I decided to focus on the one thing that had infuriated me the most over the last few months. Passion for my cause and a determination to shake off the anxiety I’d been carrying around overcame my intimidation at my surroundings and the man in front of me. “You. You *have* to immunise the kids against genital warts.”

Mr Health Secretary had been wearing a benign expression, but at this it morphed into one of open confusion. Okay, so an opening line about genital warts was a bold choice, but his policy was a huge mistake. Somebody had to tell him. Right?

“Do you have any idea how many warts I freeze in clinic every week? Men and women’s bits and bobs resemble cauliflowers in severe cases. It can worsen in pregnancy. Imagine being nine months pregnant and growing a veritable vegetable patch where your perfect lady garden should be. It ruins

lives, and if you were to fund the combined vaccine and not just the HPV one, and give it to girls *and* boys, it would be an entirely preventable condition.”

“I—I . . .” he stuttered to a stop and after some effort managed to close his mouth.

“Warts *matter*, people,” I put in, addressing all of the assembled audience now (we had drawn quite a crowd).

“Er, Barclay, old chap,” the Health Secretary said, not taking his eyes off me as if I was a dangerous animal liable to pounce on him at any moment. “There is a young woman next to you talking to me about warts and . . . *lady gardens*. What is happening?”

Barclay sighed and rubbed between his eyes.

“Yes, Duncan, yes there is,” he said, looking up to meet the other man’s eyes now and dropping his hand from his face. “But I’ve looked into that policy since Kira mentioned it to the press a few weeks ago and you’ve got admit, she might be outspoken, but she’s right. Have another look at it. Good day gentleman, Mary.” He turned away from the group, took my arm in a gentle hold and guided me away from the group of now openly staring MPs.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. I gave his colleagues a little wave over my shoulder. Barclay tightened his hold and quickened his pace. He drew me into a corridor and then through one of the doors, closing it behind him. I took a look around and frowned.

“Is this your office?” I asked. I’d expected something a lot grander than the cramped, flat-packed furniture filled space he’d led me to.

He let out another half-laugh. “This isn’t the White House, Kira. I think you’ve watched too much *West Wing*. In England they give MPs glorified cubicles. Now, you haven’t told me why you’re here.”

He was using his Stern Voice – the one he usually reserved for when I chatted openly with the press (especially after I set up the tea stand for them; that day he’d used the Super Stern Voice of Doom). Problem was that I found his Stern Voice a bit of a turn on, so it was, in general, rather ineffective. I had no idea why he was using it now.

“I brought you lunch,” I told him, waving the *Frozen* lunch box Rosie had rejected and let me steal last year. Barclay stared at the lunch box I was jiggling in my hand and frowned like its existence was an assault to his eyeballs, before he looked down at his shoes and rubbed the spot between his

eyes again. I often seemed to provoke this type of eye rubbing. I bit my lip and lowered the lunch box slowly.

Maybe this wasn't the best idea. He seemed really grumpy. Perhaps the debate wasn't going so well. Maybe the other MPs were being dicks. What did I know? Politics was complicated. But something seemed to have rubbed him up the wrong way.

Living with Barclay over the last three weeks had been amazing, well, when I saw him that was. Because Barclay was busy. Super, super busy. So, mostly I made Henry watch TV with me in the evenings when I came back from work (he tried to hide out in his basement apartment but I soon found out where Barclay kept the spare key and made copies, so there was really no escaping me). I was sure with time that he'd learn to appreciate eighties films, *Love Island* and *Made in Chelsea* just as much as me. And he was laughing more, smiling more. He'd persisted with his counselling and was beginning to see how he could work through the grief reaction to his diagnosis.

And things had gone much better with his mates than he'd thought they would – I personally thought that was contributing more to his recovery than anything. The relief on his face when he came back from the pub to meet them was enormous. He'd then asked if they could come and talk to me about it as well, to ask any questions they might have. So, last night they had come over to hang out with Henry and me. Kim was an architect and Danny worked at Henry's old management consultancy firm. I could see why Kim was Henry's *One*. She had a dry quiet sense of humour, which complemented Henry's. They just seemed to fit.

Henry had deliberately left us alone for a bit so they could feel free to ask whatever they wanted. Kim had asked the most questions. But to be honest it was pretty obvious she'd already done her research. She knew about U=U. She knew various health stats and how HIV was managed like a chronic disease. When I told them all that Henry could live a normal life her eyes had flashed and she'd sat up straighter in her chair.

"Of course he can," she semi-shouted, shocking me as she had been soft-spoken up until then. "Of course he can have a normal life." All eyes snapped to her and her colour deepened as she looked down at the table. When she spoke again her voice was more subdued. "He just has to believe it, that's all." There was determination behind those words. This was a strong woman and there was no way she was giving up on Henry any time soon.

So, between sorting Henry and his friends out and my own share of on-calls and anti-social hours it wasn't like I was sitting at home waiting for Barclay either.

The sting of his dad's rejection hadn't faded completely, but I'd managed to push it to the back of my mind, and Barclay avoided all mention of them so I thought I'd leave it be for now. Mr and Mrs Lucas did visit Henry again but, luckily, I'd been working long hours so didn't have to endure any more disapproval.

Although Barclay was back late most nights, there had been the odd one where he'd managed to get home in good time, for one of which I cooked my speciality: vegan Moussaka. (I'd made Pav's mum teach me how to make the trad version a couple of years ago then replaced all the ingredients – apart from the aubergine. Mrs Martakis was less than impressed with my 'new-age version'. '*How can it be Mousakka without lamb, Kiroula mou?*' she'd cried, then made me promise never to tell anyone that her recipe had '*helped to create this monstrosity*'. Seriously, Greek mamas could really bring the drama.) Okay, so it didn't taste *great* and Henry might have winced more than a little on his first swallow then refused to eat the rest, but Barclay had manfully scoffed the entire plate down without one retch, which I decided to take as a compliment. He *may* have had a huge order from Cook of luxury ready meals delivered the next day 'just to make it easier for you and Henry', but I tried not to take that as an insult.

"I told you yesterday," I said, feeling the happy glow of seeing Barclay in the daylight start to fade, "about the vegan packed lunches I make for Mark? I said I had the day off after doing nights and I could bring you one in. You agreed."

"I did?"

"Well, you were half asleep post . . ." I made two mouth clicks and a whistle (my standard terminology for sexy times) ". . . in bed at the time. But you did nod and make a hmm sound, which I took as a green light."

He rubbed his forehead again and I decided to hold the *Frozen* lunch box behind my back with both hands.

"Kira, I . . ." he sighed. "I'm sorry. I must not have been listening."

"Oh."

"It's just difficult to make out everything you say because, well . . . there's quite a lot of information to process."

"Ah, right." I wasn't a complete numpty. I knew he was saying I

banged on about so much random shit that it was tricky to pay attention to it all. But the thing was *I* hung on *his* every word. I found everything he told me interesting. Even the boring politics stuff was interesting. So, in that moment I felt small. The old Kira would have busted his balls, but since Smarmy Simon had been eroding my confidence at work, I was finding New Post-Smarmy-Simon Kira was a bit of an insecure, anxious wimp. I'd be chuffed to bits if Barclay came to *my* work. Barclay looked horrified that I was at his.

I let out a small laugh that sounded shaky even to my own ears and I started backing away to the door. "I'll just get going then."

"Kira, I really am sorry," he said. "It's not that I don't—"

"No!" I said a little sharper than I'd anticipated, and Barclay took a step towards me. "No, it's fine. You're busy sorting out the House of Commons, one Tory at a time. And I've volunteered to cover a clinic this afternoon, and then there's my thing this evening."

"What thing?"

"My charity event. The one I told you about?"

"That's tonight? Oh, Kira. I'm so sorry I didn't realise—"

"No, no. Don't be crazy. It's not a big deal."

I'd turned the door handle but his large hand appeared above it, blocking me.

"Thank you," he said, taking his hand off the door and using both to turn me to face him. "I'm sure I'll love my vegan lunch."

One of his hands on my shoulders slid down to my hand, which was clutching the offending lunch for dear life. He tugged at the handle and I tried to hold on to it, but he was too strong. After this conversation there was no way I wanted him seeing what I'd put in the box. But once he managed to get it away from me, he put it on the desk behind him, out of my reach. After that manoeuvre, his hands went to my jaw, he tilted my head back and kissed me. The Barclay-sensitive trip switch in my brain shut off rational thought and I kissed him back. This was what I needed. With Barclay, I could feel the stress and anxiety of the last week falling away. I was still in a daze as he guided me through the door and down another corridor, at the end of which was Sam. As Sam led me away to the waiting car, I tried not to feel like I was being escorted out by security, but I couldn't quite manage it.

Barclay

I opened up the insane Disney Princess lunch box Kira had brought me . . . to the House of Commons. When I'd seen her in the foyer, I'd been talking to two of the most influential MPs in politics, and there she was dressed like a five-year-old on steroids.

Unpredictable.

That was the best word to describe her. She was a loose cannon. My security team even called her Liability – that was her actual code name. Her face when I'd snapped at her swam into my mind and I winced. Okay, maybe it wasn't ideal her turning up in the middle of the day when Parliament was in session and discussing genital warts in front of other Cabinet ministers, but did I have to be such a dick about it? The problem was really mine. My thoughts were consumed with her and I'd never felt so undisciplined in my life. During the last Cabinet meeting, I had taken a full minute to realise that the Prime Minister was asking me a question. For me that was unheard of and I couldn't afford such a big distraction, not with everything that was happening with the new Energy Workers Rights Bill.

Every time I saw Kira it was like I fell deeper and deeper under her spell. She was like a drug. I came home late last night – I hadn't really needed to stay in the office so long, but the only control I felt I could exert was to try and limit my time with Kira. When I arrived, I found her sitting cross-legged on the sofa next to Henry. She was wearing a tight t-shirt with no bra, a pair of knickers (she told me they were 'boy-shorts'. They looked like knickers to me and, more importantly, I bloody knew by the smirk on Henry's face that the bastard thought the same and appreciated the view) and . . . leg warmers.

Leg warmers.

I knew nothing about women's fashion, but I was pretty sure that leg warmers had not been commonplace since *Flashdance* had been in cinemas in the eighties. The absolute ridiculousness of Kira's scantily clad body being adorned with neon leg warmers –, as if the only area of concern for heat loss were her lower legs minus her feet (which were bare of course, her small toenails painted a bright shade of purple) – would have made me laugh in other circumstances. But with my bloody brother sitting too bloody close to her on the sofa, I was not in the mood to find anything about it funny. So I'd grabbed the blanket off the back of the armchair, covered Kira with it up to her chin, and plonked myself between her and Henry.

"Ah, you're such a cutie-patootie," Kira had said, snuggling into my

side under the blanket like a small kitten.

The familiar sensation of falling overcame me as I clamped my arm around her and kissed her silky red and pink hair, and it wasn't a feeling I was entirely comfortable with. It was a wave of such intense attraction mixed with protectiveness and warmth that it almost felt painful – and it definitely did not feel in my control. I had never felt like that about any of the other women in my life. None of them had made my throat dry and my chest tight. And I knew that I wouldn't have been bothered about any of them sitting on the sofa with my brother, however little clothing they were wearing.

“Anticipating my every need. I was feeling a bit chilly too,” she mumbled.

Typical Kira, not aware of the fact that instead of preventing her from getting ‘chilly’, I was in fact covering her up from my brother's greedy eyes.

“Henry, you could learn something from big bro here. You didn't even *think* of the blanket when I complained a minute ago.”

“Hmm. . .” Henry mumbled at the telly, his smug little smile taunting me. “Can't understand how I forgot about that. My bad.”

He shot me a quick grin and a wink. It was all I could do not to smack that smile off the pillock's face. I resisted the urge and turned back to the television screen. Two ladies with suspiciously long eyelashes were sitting staring at each other, both holding glasses of champagne, their faces unmoving – either from the Botox or for dramatic effect. I faked a yawn and drew Kira closer.

“Hey, you tired?” Kira asked, right on cue. I shrugged.

“Don't worry, you carry on watch—”

“No way, SB! You need your rest time to fight for environmental and social justice. Peace out Henners, we're outta here.”

I did *not* need my ‘rest time’, although I *had* been sleeping much better with Kira next to me, and since she had started making me meditate every day. It pained me to admit it, but the damn stuff did actually work. So no, I didn't need rest, but I *did* need to take her upstairs. The legwarmer-knicker combo was getting to me. She threw off the blanket and sprang up in her fairy-like way. I launched myself after her to block my brother's view of her arse. As soon as the knickers made another appearance, Henry's eyes had lit up again and his smirk was back. I was pleased for my brother's recovery and all (he'd been going to counselling for the last three weeks, and some of his friends were back in the picture), but I'd forgotten how annoying the little

shit could be.

I felt my neck heat up as I remembered the extent to which I'd conveyed my appreciation for those leg warmers that night. When we were finally falling asleep and she was sprawled over me, one of said leg warmers still around her ankle, she whispered, "I thought you were tired," then her breathing evened out and she started making those little snuffling sounds she made in her sleep – the ones that seemed to be helping me with mine. I'd smiled at the ceiling and thought just for that moment, *fuck it*, maybe I *should* get lost in this girl.

Then today I'd had to go and act like a complete wanker, crushing the light behind her eyes just a little more. I hated it when Kira was hesitant – hesitant was not an adjective that should *ever* be linked with Kira Murphy, but me and my attitude had made her that way. And it was obvious whatever she'd organised tonight meant something to her. I should be there to support her.

As I pulled open the lid of the lunch box I stared at the contents for a moment, before I burst out laughing. My door flew open.

"Mr Lucas?" Carol, the latest Under Secretary with an office next door to mine burst in and asked anxiously, "Is there a problem?" As Carol had yet to even see me crack a smile it was only natural that she found actual laughter coming from my office concerning.

I tried to hold it in but I just couldn't contain it. I even wiped a tear from under my eye. Unable to speak, I turned the open lunch box around for Carol to look at.

"Is that a . . . badger?" Carol asked – her face a mask of confusion.

"Yes, Carol," I replied, my voice still shaking with laughter. "Yes, it bloody well is."

A combination of different coloured breads had been used to make a badger's face out of sandwiches. It had an olive for a nose and plum tomatoes cut in half for eyes. It looked terrifying. I managed to get myself under control and my voice was steady again.

"Thank you, Carol," I said. She looked from the sandwiches to me. Her mouth opened as if to say something, then she snapped it shut.

"Okaaay." She drew out the word as she turned and left the room.

I reached into the box and took one of the sections out, shoving it into my mouth. I nearly spat it out. Predictably, it was inedible and even left a slight burning aftertaste. But in a day that had been depressing and frustrating

in the extreme, Kira had managed to come and bring her light to me through the gloom; she'd managed to make me laugh.

For some reason, in that moment I started to imagine a life with no Kira in it. All I could envisage was a grey, bleak landscape of political ambition and seriousness, no light to break up the gloom, no laughter in the middle of the day at ridiculous sandwiches. Then, I thought back on how little of myself I was actually giving her at the moment. All for some bullshit idea about rationing something I felt might be distracting. I always was a delayed gratification kind of guy – I used to save my Easter eggs for months. Drove Henry mad. But what woman was going to put up with some twat that got home late and dragged her off to bed? Kira didn't deserve that. I pushed away from the desk and stood up. Tonight *I'd* go to *her* work and make damn sure she knew how important she was to me.

Chapter 25

Allowed to be happy

Barclay

It was a short walk from the Houses of Parliament to St Thomas' Hospital. I was hoping to catch Kira before she left. As always, my security team tagged along, but thankfully there was no sign of the press. Why hadn't I done this before? I could have met her from work every day and taken her home myself. She deserved someone who was going to put in that kind of effort. She also deserved someone who looked after her and made sure that she didn't volunteer to cover any clinics after a night shift. Between that and coming to see me today, when had she slept?

I turned the corner into her department and was about to approach the nurses' desk when a familiar face caught my attention. It was one of the other doctors Kira worked with. I wracked my brain for a name, but all I could remember was that this guy was her supervisor. He'd been the one to contact the management for me that first day that I'd come looking for her here after she performed a miracle attitude change on Henry.

"Hey Dr . . ." I stole a fast look at the guy's ID and met his eyes, "Dr Tabard, I don't know if you remember me, but I'm—"

"I know who you are," Dr Tabard said, and for a moment his expression darkened so much it looked like actual fury had clouded his features. But then, it cleared just as quickly as it came and he gave me such a casual, seemingly genuine smile I assumed I must have imagined it. "It's a pleasure to meet you again, Mr Lucas."

"Please, call me Barclay." I shook Dr Tabard's outstretched hand. The other man's grip was just that bit too tight, but he let go so quickly I wondered if I'd imagined that too. "I don't mean to interrupt but—"

"Bit late for that what with all the press attention. The normal running of the clinic's been *interrupted* for a while now."

"Right," I said. Kira hadn't mentioned anything about the press at her work. But had I thought to ask? No, I hadn't. "Ah, has that been very difficult? I have security staff who can . . ."

“Don’t worry,” Dr Tabard waved it off. “Your goons scared off the paps a while back. It’s only a problem when *she*’s at work now and that won’t be for much longer anyway.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Dr Murphy’s not up to the standard to be honest,” Dr Tabard went on. “I guess she thought that because we had a thing for a while that I’d be a pushover as an appraiser, but I don’t compromise my integrity like that.”

“A . . . a *thing*?” My mind was reeling. Did Kira actually sleep with this guy?

“But that doesn’t change the fact that she’s flaky, disorganised, not diligent enough to study for her post grad exams. I’m always honest in my assessments. You of all people must know how unstable she is.”

“She’s not—” I started to defend her and then got distracted by another of this guy’s revelations. “Exams? She’s got exams to study for?”

“Not surprised you haven’t noticed her revising, given her previous results. Too busy getting up to all her crazy antics, no doubt. Rather you than me, mate.” He finished that comment off with a light smack on my arm, which made me clench my fists in annoyance. But it wouldn’t do to punch this guy. And on reflection, it wouldn’t really be fair. If what he said was true (and I wasn’t at all sure about that) it sounded like he’d had his work cut out for him with Kira as a trainee. “Anyway, did you want to know where to find her? I can—”

“No,” I said quickly. I needed to process all this new information before I saw Kira. I knew that she was a ‘free spirit’ and all that, but . . . flaky at work? Sleeping with her supervisor in the past and hoping that would exonerate her with appraisals? Failing exams because she’s too all over the place to study? There was being a fun, good time girl and there was being just plain irresponsible. But this didn’t sound like Kira, not the Kira I knew. I wasn’t going to take this guy’s word for it just yet, but . . . I couldn’t even reliably contact her on the phone – no wonder she was considered unreliable at work. I had to be careful. My reputation mattered. The public liked Kira now, but what if any of this stuff came out? I hated that my dad’s words kept floating back through my mind, but I’d always respected his opinion in the past.

I moved away from Dr Tabard, raking my hands through my hair and unfortunately not noticing the satisfied, evil little grin the other man was wearing as I backed away.

Kira

“Phew! You can relax, people. I made it through the piranhas out there with my virginity still intact,” Mark announced as he burst through into the kitchen.

“Baby, your virginity hasn’t been intact since the nineties,” I told him as he flounced his way over the kitchen table and flung himself down on the nearest chair.

“And, sorry to disappoint,” Henry put in through a chuckle, “but I’m not sure those guys want to do anything inappropriate with you.”

“There are many forms of rape, Henry,” Mark countered. “My image was very nearly immortalised in print without my consent.”

“Did they even *take* any pictures, Mark?” I asked through a grin. Mark sniffed and waved me away.

“That is not the point, smartarse. Now get me a tea – I’m dying here. Oh, hello,” he said, turning to Kim and Danny, who both had their lips pressed firmly together, their shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter, “I’m Mark.”

Kim and Danny had been over a few times now, and after poker yesterday I’d asked if they wanted to come along tonight. Henry had warned me to ‘tone down my bullshit’ so as not to scare them off. I did not tone anything down of course – my ‘bullshit’ was hilarious and perfect to help break the ice with Henry’s mates. Tonight would be great for them. And I was right. Reconnecting with his old friends was the best thing he could have done.

With their encouragement, he’d even looked into going back to his management consultancy job. He’d been off for a year, but Danny had told him they weren’t getting the clients like they were before Henry left. Apparently, Henry was a ball breaker when it came to sorting out failing companies. Before he’d had his diagnosis, he’d been working seventy-hour weeks and pulled in a massive salary. With that and his family money there had been no pressure to go back to work, and seeing as Henry had been in deep depression mode, he’d been happy to just drop off the grid.

But anyone that driven had to miss it. I personally couldn’t see the appeal of working in the City, but to Henry it had meant everything. So he had an interview set up for next month with the partners of his old company (one of which was Danny).

As for Kim, it was becoming almost painful to watch her with Henry. She stared at him with her heart in her eyes most of the time she was here. He was more secret in his observation of her, but when I did catch him staring it was with the same level of desperation. I wondered if the loss of Kim (even if self-inflicted) after his diagnosis a year ago had been one of the main triggers for Henry's depression. He certainly seemed more at peace now that she was back in his life, even as just a friend. But, as for anything romantic happening, he was dead against it.

I'd tried to talk him out of that mindset but it was useless. He thought Kim deserved a better life than the one she would have with someone like him and all the baggage he would bring to the relationship. He wouldn't hear me out about the options they had, about how the antiretroviral therapy had reduced his viral load down to undetectable levels so he couldn't transmit the virus to anyone – how they could even have children safely, when it came to it. Henry was stubborn.

Even Barclay, who'd been reticent about the reintroduction of Henry's old friends, was now pushing for Henry to do something about Kim. But Barclay had seen the change in Henry over the last four weeks and all he wanted was for his brother to be happy. Despite his fears that Henry's friends would leak his diagnosis to the press, nothing had come out and that was enough for Barclay to trust their loyalty.

"Hi, Mark," Kim said, putting her hand out for him to shake, which he ignored in favour of an enforced hug and a couple of cheek kisses. "I'm Kim – the girl Henry ignored for a year and now keeps at arm's length because he's a big, fat, twatting coward."

Silence filled the kitchen until Mark gave an awkward laugh.

"Wow, that was *quite* the greeting," he said.

"Good for you, Kim," I said into the silence that followed. "While we don't quite have time for Henry to pull his head out of his arse now, I'm sure that's given the stubborn twat some food for thought. Now, let's move out people."

This was my way of giving Henry time to digest Kim's words before he reacted on instinct and shut her down, which I could see from his agonised expression he was gearing up to do.

I'd sort out Kim and Henry later. Right now I needed to focus on tonight. It might not be saving the *whole* planet, but it would make a difference to some people. Yes, okay, it was an unconventional way to raise

money, but when had I ever been conventional? And at least this time the press would be working *for* me, doing what I wanted them to do and telling the story I wanted them to tell.

This was going to be fun.

Henry, more than anyone, was in dire need of some fun for once. His brother could do with some fun as well, but I doubted he'd show up. I'd mentioned it to him in passing a couple of times but had tried not to make a big deal of it. Of course I was proud of organising everything, but he had enough on his plate right now. He didn't need to have to fake interest in his girlfriend's personal crusades.

At least that was what I told myself.

Chapter 26

Welcome to the show!

Kira

“Right, Marky Mark,” I said, shaking off the hollow feeling that Barclay’s non-attendance tonight had induced, and pasting a smile on my face. “You said you’d help herd the troops, so let’s get moving. Libby and Millie are meeting us there. If you wanna get your image raped, then now’s your chance.”

“You take the lead, Ki Ki,” Henry said, looking me up and down and giving me a grin. “We’re right behind you.”

I raised one eyebrow, put one hand on my hip and cocked it to the side, flicking my hair back with the other one. I was wearing beat-up skinny jeans and a neon pink, loose wife-beater vest which showed a substantial amount of my black lace bra at the sides. I had a pair of thigh-high black boots on and my hair was loose down my back in red and pink waves. I was ready for battle.

I pivoted on my heel and turned towards the front door. Before I could hesitate and lose my nerve, I pulled it open and stepped out onto the stone steps.

“Yo, people!” I shouted over the questions, blinking against the blinding light of the camera bulbs. “You up for a night on the town, Kira-style?”

That shut them up.

“What?” a BBC reporter asked, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

With Mark, Kim and Danny at my back, and Sam shadowing me in the background, I pushed through the crowd of reporters to the waiting car then turned to face the crowd. “Anyone who wants the *real* scoop of the night, meet me at The Main Event, in Soho.” Having dropped that bomb into the stunned crowd, I pulled open the passenger door and slid in. Mark was grinning over at me from the driver’s side.

“You are a lunatic,” he said through his smile.

I glanced in the rear-view mirror. Kim was sitting between Danny and Henry. As we pulled away from the pavement she lay her hand over Henry’s

which was resting in his lap. It was a show of support for his courage braving the press just now, but I knew it was also more. Kim wanted more, and she was tired of waiting. Henry looked down at their intertwined fingers for a moment, before closing his eyes and taking a deep breath in and out. For the next twenty minutes I kept stealing looks at them, thoughts of the charity event swamped by hope for Henry. Five minutes before we arrived, however, Henry untwined his fingers from Kim's and returned her hand to her lap, before looking down at his own and turning away from her towards the window. I expected Kim to look hurt or sad – I didn't expect the anger and determination entered her expression as she stared at Henry's back.

“Fuck me,” Steve breathed as he looked out at the crowd. “What kind of shit storm have you brought into my club?”

I took a peek out of the backstage door and bit my lip. The whole place was rammed and there were a lot of paparazzi out there, courtesy of me.

“You love it,” I told him, drawing back the curtain and squaring my shoulders. “This will be *great* for business.”

“I don't need any more business,” he grumbled. “Why did I agree to this crazy plan? You girls will be the death of me.”

Steve wasn't lying. He really didn't need any more business. He ran the most successful club in the UK.

“I should just cancel this whole thing before I'm shut down for being filled to over capacity.”

“Steve,” Libby said in a warning tone. She was standing across the dressing room facing us with her hands on her hips and one eyebrow raised.

“Okay, okay, keep your knickers on,” he said. “You know I won't really. I've been bloody well Kira-ed. Why else would I let my club be swamped with people who will *not* be returning customers . . . for free?”

“This is why I love you, Steve,” I told him and stood on tiptoe to give his cheek a kiss (the man was a giant). He grunted and rolled his eyes.

“*And* I'm even handing over all the bar takings,” he grumbled, crossing his thick arms and furrowing his grey eyebrows. “Talk about a sucker.”

“It's a good cause and you know it, you big softie,” Libby told him, planting her own kiss on his other cheek.

“Okay, okay,” he said, putting his hands up and backing away from us. “You don't have to butter me up anymore. Besides . . .” He rubbed the

back of his neck before looking up at Libby with an earnest expression. “I owe this one.”

Libby shook her head and opened her mouth to speak but he cut her off.

“Never be able to repay you,” he said, his voice rough. “You girls want to use my gaffe for some of your weird shenanigans, you do it.”

Libby used to be Steve’s star dancer a few years ago. She’d had her daughter Rosie when she was seventeen and had put herself through medical school by dancing. But she was a gymnast, and within the first year of working for him she’d convinced Steve that handsprings and back flips coupled with burlesque, rather than just pole dancing and stripping, would make the club unique – that it would bring in big business. His takings had tripled in the first six months. After that, he gave Libby free rein to train and choreograph the other dancers, and choose the routines. Before long, his club was the most famous in London. Libby hadn’t danced for him since she’d married Jamie and qualified as a doctor, but we still went back to the club for funsies all the time, and to see Claire and Tara who had taken over as the star performers.

“Order some drinks at least,” Steve grumbled, pushing away from the table and stalking off in the direction of the bouncers. He ruffled Millie’s hair as he went past and she gave him a small smile. Millie was still too shy to really speak to Steve, even after knowing him for the last six years, but he had a soft spot for her nonetheless.

Libby elbowed me. “Hey, you’re up, hostess with the mostest.”

I focused on the stage to see Claire up there in her angel outfit, holding a microphone and waving me over. Giving her a wide grin, I pushed up from the table and strutted over to the steps at the side of the stage. Once I was next to Claire, and she’d lowered the mic by about a foot, the stage lights all swung to me.

Chapter 27

Charade

Barclay

“You could have fucked me last night and it would have been *fine*, Henry!”

I came to an abrupt stop at the kitchen door. A woman was shouting at my brother in my kitchen at nine in the morning about fucking him. Such was my life nowadays in the post Kira era.

“So I think a bit of snogging and me sleeping in your bed will hardly a problem. You can’t transmit the bloody virus,” To my shock I recognised the voice as Kim’s. She’d always seemed so quiet and soft spoken when I’d met her before. “Your viral load is undetectable so your HIV is untransmittable. There is no risk!”

Shit. I debated creeping back to my office but wanted to be here in case she pushed Henry too far. So I hovered just outside the door.

“Kimmy,” Henry started, his voice strained. “Let’s go and . . .”

“No,” she cut him off. “No more private *chats* which consist of you informing me of all the reasons we won’t work. As if you are the Big Knowledge and I’m just a stupid little girl who doesn’t know what she wants. News flash asshole: I’m a thirty-two-year-old, professional, well-educated woman and I don’t need you mansplaining my own goddamn feelings for me.”

“Listen, I *know* there’s no risk but that doesn’t mean that last night wasn’t still a mistake,” Henry said. “I had too much tequila. I shouldn’t have brought you home. We shouldn’t have . . .”

“I’m in love with you, you big idiot.”

Henry’s voice was agonised now. “Kimmy, you can’t –”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do. Be brave enough to admit you don’t care about me, rather than making up all these excuses why we can’t be together.”

“Of *course* I bloody love you,” Henry shouted. I had been reaching for the door handle but I froze. “It’s *because* I love that I won’t let you waste

yourself with me, living half a life.”

“It wouldn’t be half a life,” Kim said, her voice now cracking. “If I’m with you it will be *everything*, don’t you see that? Don’t you understand that *your* noble sacrifice will be *my* broken heart.” She let out a proper sob and I heard Henry’s footsteps cross the kitchen.

“Kimmy, please don’t cry,” he said, his voice unsteady;

“J-j-just be h-honest if you don’t want me,” Kim said, her voice muffled now, I assumed by Henry’s chest. “Don’t f-f-feed me this b-bullshit about protecting me.”

“Of course I want you,” he told her. “But I can’t let you—”

I chose that moment to push into the kitchen. They both sprung apart as the door swung open and turned to me with shocked expressions. Kim was wearing one of Henry’s shirts. They both looked hung-over and more than a little dishevelled.

“Oh, man up already, Henry,” I said. I was so tired of Henry sabotaging any chance he had of happiness.

“Don’t tell him to man up,” Kim said, scowling at me now instead of my brother, which I thought was a far better turn of events. “This is hard for him.”

“He’s got a chronic illness. Would he be telling the woman he loves to bugga off if he had diabetes? No.”

Both of them were scowling across at me now. Good. I stared at Henry.

“You never used to be a coward,” I said.

“How dare you say—” Kim started, but Henry cut her off.

“Come on, Kimmy.” He took her hand and started towards the door with her in tow. “The miserable bastard’s not worth it.”

As Kim followed after him she looked down at their joined hands. A small smile formed on her face and her expression filled with cautious hope.

I sighed as the door closed after them. Okay, so I may have been a bit of a blunt bastard, but hopefully that was the kick in the arse my brother needed. Where the hell was Kira? She’d know what to say to Henry about all this stuff. She’d be able to sort it out. Not for the first time I thought it might be time to buy her a bloody phone. Then, as if I’d conjured it from the ether, a notification flashed up on *my* phone from the BBC website, showing a picture of the lady herself wrapped around a stripper pole with the caption ‘Stripper Sex Doctor’ above it.

After my detour to Kira's work, I'd been called back to an emergency department meeting – some crisis over jobs in South Wales. Contingency plans had to be made. Assurances would have to be given to the local population – and those assurances had to be real. So I'd only made it home in the early hours of the morning, and to an empty house. When I'd questioned Sam, I was told that Kira was spending the night with her friend Mark. This was annoying as clearly Kim and Danny had made their way back here, but never mind.

I'd texted Mark (my only option given Kira's allergy to phones) and received a goodly number of totally incomprehensible replies from Kira about *female empowerment*, *pulling some shapes* and the *perfect roly poly*. She'd also said how she wished I could have been there and I felt guilty. *Guilty!* I'd actually had trouble sleeping last night thinking I'd let her down by not coming to her charity event, and the whole time she was shaking her arse on a stripper pole?

To my annoyance, Dad's voice floated through my mind again with words like *liability* and *loose cannon*.

But I knew better than to judge without all the available information. I hadn't got to where I was by jumping to conclusions. So I sat down heavily in one of the kitchen bar stools, read the article, and then moved on to other sources: the *Guardian*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Telegraph*, they all had the same story. I focused on the pictures taken of the crowds – not seedy men, not stag parties, but couples, groups of women, socialites, Urvi fucking Bailey . . . And the dancers were more like acrobats or gymnasts, not strippers. When I clicked on the charity's website, I saw Kira standing arm-in-arm with an African woman in front of a building under the blistering sun. Both were wearing colourful African dresses and were laughing. Of course they were laughing. No matter the culture, the personality, the type of person, their situation, Kira always made them laugh.

They'd raised over fifty thousand pounds last night and donations were still coming into the charity today, thanks to all the press coverage Kira had stirred up. The last video I clicked on made my throat close over and my eyes sting: Kira speaking into a microphone at the start of the night, looking so earnest and beautiful as she talked about HIV awareness and treatment, combined with women's empowerment and education. Her charity helped fund education, family planning and treatment centres for HIV positive women in Malawi. The papers loved her. They thought she was bloody

hilarious and inspirational. They were right. I took a long breath in through my nose and let it out through my mouth.

They were right, but I knew better than anyone how quickly that could change. The press could turn on you in an instant. It wasn't fair to ask Kira to squash her personality so that she could fit into my world. In my world you did not host charity events in strip clubs – even up-market, famous ones like The Main Event. And you certainly didn't mount a stripper pole yourself.

I wished I could get my father's damn voice out of my head.

I was just coming to the end of the last article when I caught sight of Henry's name. I froze in my seat and then slowly stood, feeling the colour drain out of my face.

One of the speeches made at the event was from Henry Lucas, brother to Cabinet Minister Barclay Lucas. The former management consultant and socialite had dropped off the London scene some eighteen months back. He chose Kira Murphy's event to announce that he himself has been diagnosed with HIV. By being open about his condition, Lucas hopes to help combat the stigma and shame often surrounding HIV, something he says he has felt acutely, and which led to a long bout of depression. He credits Dr Murphy for, as he puts it, 'pulling my head out of my arse'. They apparently met at one of the HIV clinics at St Thomas' Hospital, which we presume is how Dr Murphy came into contact with Barclay Lucas, and from there developed their high-profile relationship.

There it was in black and white: my brother, whom I had spent all my life protecting, laid bare for the nation to devour and spit out as they chose, all his secrets exposed. Everything I'd done with the press office to protect him, to keep my political and public life away from my family, especially its most vulnerable member, all of it had been for nothing. He would be torn apart. He'd sink back into that dark place and I'd lose him again.

Henry chose that moment to amble back into the kitchen, a now fully dressed Kim in his wake. They were smiling. If I wasn't so bloody furious I would have been happy for them, but I was beyond any emotion other than shock at that moment. He took one look at my face and snatched my phone away to check the screen.

“Barclay, listen. Hear me out before you—”

“What were you thinking?” I pointed my finger at him and snatched back my phone. “All this effort to protect you. Everything I've done so they

can't get to you, and you hand yourself over to them on a platter."

"Calm down, big man," the bastard had the audacity to say. "It wasn't a snap decision. I've been thinking about it for a while. And, what with Kira's charity being HIV related, I just realised it was the perfect opport—"

"Did *she* put you up to this?" I could feel my shock morphing to anger. Spontaneous, brave, zany, wonderful Kira. Was she the missing link in the puzzle of my brother being so fucking stupid? I'd felt bad for not making time for this event, for not supporting Kira. It never occurred to me that I should have been there to try and rein her in.

"No! But look, Barclay. She was amazing. It was a huge success last night and all the extra press is great for the charity. She's—"

"What are you *talking* about?" I roared. In the corner of my eye, I saw Kim take a small step back. "You slice yourself open and let your guts hang out for all to see and she's up on stage in front of the world's press with her leg wrapped around a *stripper pole*. On what planet is that acceptable? I've put up with a lot of unconventional shit from this woman, but this has to top the lot. There's a free spirit and then there's a goddamn *lunatic*. None of the other women I've ever been with have caused this much hassle. And none of them would have happily sacrificed my brother to the altar of their own causes."

"She didn't *sacrifice* me. It was my decision to go up there. I'm not a child anymore, Barclay," Henry snapped back. "And all the *other* women you've been with have been bloody *boring*."

I let out a hollow laugh. "Well, I guess that's one thing Kira's got going for her – never a dull moment. But I think I'd like to go back to being in control of my life with my brother safe from the media circus, and be with somebody who's not completely mental!"

Henry and Kim were looking past me towards the back door now with stricken expressions. I turned to see a dishevelled Kira standing in the doorway. Her face was pale and her eyes wide. She was wearing a man's overcoat, which was trailing along the floor, with what appeared to be her onsie underneath it. She looked ridiculous and endearing at the same time – a combination that, I told myself, I was sick to the back teeth of. Her eyes darted between me, Henry and the retreating Kim and she forced out a shaky laugh.

"Hi," she said, not taking any more steps into the kitchen, and I ground my teeth in frustration at the sense of longing that being in the same

room as her ignited in me. This need for her was madness. She was making me just as much of a lunatic as she was. “The mentalist is back,” she joked with a small wave.

Chapter 28

If I let her go now

Barclay

Another shaky laugh from her followed and my stomach twisted before I shook my head to clear it. *She* was the one in the wrong here. I was not going to feel guilty for her overhearing the truth. It was about time she heard it, anyway.

“Is that all you’ve got to say for yourself?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest and scowling across at her.

“I, er . . .” she trailed off and cocked her head to the side. My anger seemed to confuse her. She’d encouraged my brother to sacrifice what little anonymity he had and put him at huge risk, whilst goddamn *pole dancing* in front of a packed *strip club* last night, and she couldn’t understand why I might be a bit miffed? I thrust the phone at her and she looked at her own image. Then . . . she *laughed*. It was genuine this time, and it caused me to experience another very unfortunate surge of anger.

“Don’t I look a state?” she said through her amusement. “Yikes, no wonder Barry carried me off the stage.”

“Who the fuck is *Barry*?” I asked. This just got worse and worse. She’d let my brother tear out his soul then made a spectacle of herself in front of hundreds – no, scrap that – millions, if these pictures were anything to go by – of people, and then someone had laid their hands on her and picked her up?

“He’s a bouncer at the club,” she told me, unaware of the fury boiling up into my throat. “He’s *such* a nice guy. Really did me a solid taking me off the stage last night. Not sure I would have made it down those steps again.”

“Was this after your stripping routine?” My voice was low and vibrating with anger. “Were you actually dressed?”

“Barclay,” snapped Henry. “Chill out, will you? It was a *reverse strip* tease as a joke at the end of the night. She was putting clothes *on*. She was like a goddamn Michelin Man by the end, and she finished it on a *roly poly*.” He laughed and I felt my temper spike again. There was nothing funny about this goddamn situation. “It was some of the most hilarious shit I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Kira shrugged. “Barry told me I did his back in as well, the cheeky

badger.”

Kira, *my* Kira, calling another man *badger* (when that was *her* name for *me*), after having allowed him to carry her, pushed me over the edge.

“*Nothing about this situation is funny!*” I shouted. The kitchen fell silent.

“Barclay, maybe you should—” Henry started as he put his hand on my arm, but I shook him off.

“Fuck off, Henry,” I snapped. “If it wasn’t for you and your year-long pity party, I would never have been dragged into this shit storm of a relationship.”

I turned back to Kira, but I was too angry to process the hurt expression on her face or the way her hand shook as she held it up to ward me off. I stalked towards her and laid my hands on her shoulders.

“Okay, maybe the performing and being carted off the stage I can get over. Maybe. But how could you let Henry do this?”

“I—I . . .” She glanced at Henry. “He was determined to speak up. He . . . he thought it would be good for the charity and for his—”

“Part of the reason we embarked on this goddamn charade was to *protect* Henry. Do you remember that?”

Kira flinched at the word charade, but I was so wrapped up in my own anger that I ignored it.

“I remember,” she said, her voice unnaturally quiet for her, but I ignored that too.

“How could you let him do it then? Are you trying to get my attention? Is that it?” I stared down at her wide, tear-filled eyes. “Because if that’s the case, you might want to try acting like a normal human being for a change. Maybe try not rushing to a strip club and performing to the world’s media. Maybe try *protecting* my brother instead of feeding him to the wolves. Those would be far better ways of grabbing my attention and actually *holding it*.”

A tear spilled over onto her pale cheek and then another on the other side. My chest tightened but I refused to be moved by it.

“Let. Go. Of. Me.” she said. Her voice was cold, even expressionless now. The only hint of emotion that remained was the tears that continued to course down her face. I registered her words but my hands refused to move away for some reason. At the back of my mind I knew that if I let her go now, I might never be allowed to hold her again.

With a sudden, violent movement she wrenched away from me and backed towards the door. I was too shocked to follow, but had the vague sense of my whole world slipping through my fingers and sliding away.

“If I remember rightly,” she continued, her voice still laced with ice. “This *charade* wasn’t only about protecting Henry, it was mostly to boost *your* profile in the media – which it seems to have done, very successfully. As far as Henry goes – he’s his own man. He can make his own bloody decisions, and I happen to think he’s made the right one. I’m *proud* I supported him in it and I’m proud of *him*. You should be too. I’m sorry this relationship, oh no, my mistake – *charade* – was such a ‘shit storm’ for you. For me, it was the best few weeks of my life, but that’s before I realised how bloody painful and exhausting it was for you to be with me. Before I knew that you wanted someone *normal* to fit into your perfect life.” Her eyes flashed and some real anger entered her tone. “Well, newsflash asshole: it’s not my idea of the perfect relationship when one person doesn’t make the other feel like they really matter. When they don’t listen to your hopes and dreams. When they don’t bother come to an event you’ve spent months planning. When they accuse you of hurting someone who you’d do *anything* to keep from harm.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper, and some of the coldness left it to be replaced by aching sadness. “When they don’t want you for *you*. When they think you’re not good enough the way you are. No way is all that perfect relationship material. That’s the second time you’ve tried to make me feel like crap for being *myself*, and I’m telling you now there will not be a third. If you can look past your political ambition and your need for everything in your life to appear perfect to the outside world, then you’d realise Henry being open about having HIV is a good thing for him; that it could help him move on without having a huge secret hanging over him. But I’m guessing that, in this scenario, you’re not thinking about *Henry* at all. I’m guessing you’re thinking about yourself.”

She scrubbed her wet cheeks, lifted her chin and gave me the finger before she spun on her heel and fled through the back door. I ground my teeth and balled my fists at my sides. I should be glad she’d gone, that I hadn’t had to ask her to leave, that she hadn’t clung. But instead, I felt like I was going to throw up. I was in the right, damn it – so why did I feel like such a bastard?

“Whatever you think, Barclay, it was my decision to make that

announcement. Kira tried to talk me out of it at first, but I knew it was time to be honest with myself and everyone else,” Henry said from across the kitchen. He was glaring over at me with Kim by his side.

“For Christ’s sake, Henry,” I said, rubbing my temples and heading toward the coffee. Caffeine, I needed caffeine. “You’ve no idea what this *honesty* is going to cost you, what you’ve let yourself in for.”

“I knew exactly what I was doing. And Kira—”

“Can we just leave Kira out of this? What happens between Kira and me is my concern so you can just mind your own fucking business.”

“Well, actually you’ve made it our business,” Kim piped up, and I narrowed my eyes at her. “We care about Kira. And I for one have had enough of you Lucas boys throwing your weight around and thinking you know what’s best.”

“I’m sorry?” I said in a mock-questioning tone. “I’m struggling to see how *any* of this is *your* business. You haven’t made my brother your business for the last year, at least. And now you waltz back into his life just in time for him to make a massive pig’s ear out of it. I’m not sure *your* opinion counts for much.”

She bristled and narrowed her eyes right back at me. “Well, your brother is very much my bloody business now and so is the way you treat him and his friends. You’re a condescending, sanctimonious arsehole. Kira’s well shot of you, if you ask me. Come on Henry, we’re going.”

Henry looked stunned and impressed as he took her outstretched hand and they both followed Kira out of the back door. I hated to admit it, but I was impressed too. Another wave of relief for my brother washed over me. That woman loved him. She was willing to fight for him. She wasn’t going to let him go. There was another person to stop him going down into the black pit again.

But then, there had already been somebody doing that. Somebody taking that weight from me the instant she walked into his house. Someone who’d cared enough to make my brother re-engage with life. The tight feeling in my chest intensified and I absently rubbed my sternum as I glanced down at my phone. Clicking the screen on to show Kira’s image again. I took a long breath in through my nose and let it out through my mouth. I stared at my phone for a long moment before throwing it over to the far wall, where it smashed into pieces and scattered over the floor. I let my head hang down between my shoulders as I rested my elbows on the granite counter.

“Fuck,” I whispered down at the tiles below. Images of Kira flooded my mind – Kira in my bed, in my kitchen, laughing with my brother, teasing me in my office, waiting in the foyer of the House of Commons with that ridiculous lunch box, forcing me to sit on a beanbag in her tiny flat, cooking foul-smelling vegan food for me, laughing at my bad impressions of my fellow MPs. “Fuck,” I whispered again as I closed my eyes against all the visions tormenting me.

“Enough,” I said, my voice rough as I scrubbed my hands down my face and sat up straighter on the stool. I didn’t need Kira and all the craziness that came with her. I needed to keep my brother safe and my career, that I had sacrificed so much for, on track.

So, I focused on that.

I focused on that and tried to ignore the colour fading from my world.

Chapter 29

Saved

Kira

“Dr Murphy?”

I looked up from the screen and saw Mr Lucas standing on the other side of the ward desk.

“Er . . . hi?” I replied, scanning from left to right to try to see why he could possibly be hanging out at my place of work. He shifted uncomfortably on his feet and stuck his hands in the pockets of his suit.

“You’re a tricky young lady to find,” he told me, and my eyebrows went up. Why on earth would he be trying to find me? Then, I remembered the desperate tone he used to warn his son off me a couple of weeks ago and it all made sense. I sighed.

“You didn’t have to come here,” I told him. “I haven’t seen or heard from your eldest son for over a week. I think it’s fair to say that badger has sailed.” I didn’t mention that I was still very much in contact with Henry. Or that I had been following the drama in parliament with rabid curiosity. Barclay’s bill had managed to get through . . . just.

“Oh, no. That’s not why I . . . wait – why haven’t you seen Barclay? I thought you were living with him.”

I rolled my eyes. “I was never living with him. He insisted I stay after my flat got broken into. I’m staying with a friend now and looking for a new flat, so . . .”

“Dr Murphy?” Mark interrupted, and I could have hugged him – saved by the annoying, overly inquisitive gay man. “You said to let you know if Mr Denton was being discharged and Dr Tabard is just sorting out the paperwork, so . . .”

“Bloody shit badgers,” I muttered, pushing up off my stool and tucking my pen back into my ponytail. Kevin Denton was an HIV positive patient, non-compliant with medication and sporting a low CD4 count, who’d come in with vague symptoms of intermittent confusion and one episode of blackout. I hadn’t been happy with his neurological examination yesterday and wanted him to stay in for an MRI as an inpatient. Something was off about the guy. He was confusing his words and I had seen him having what I

thought might have been absence seizure on two occasions.

Simon however, was renowned for clearing out the ‘timewasters’. The management loved him as he discharged patients left and right on his ward rounds. I knew this would happen – that was why I’d asked Mark to contact me if Kevin was going to be discharged.

“I’m sorry but we’ll have to finish this later,” I said over my shoulder to Mr Lucas. I was already moving down the ward to the bay Kevin was in.

“That’s okay,” he called after me. “I’ll just hang on here and . . .”

There really wasn’t any point him ‘hanging on’, seeing as I was frantic on the ward that day and then would be on-call that evening. But I didn’t have time to explain that to him. I had to sort Kevin out.

“Hey,” I said to Sandra, one of the other staff nurses, who was pouring over Kevin’s chart with the pharmacist. I gave her a wide smile and held out my hand. “Hold on a sec – can I see the chart?”

“Of course, hun,” she said, handing it over with a smile of her own that looked a little on the relieved side. “So glad you’re here,” she added under her breath, raising her eyebrows and jerking her head to Kevin, who was sitting on the side of the bed next to his half-packed case, staring off into space again.

“Kevin,” I called, putting my hand on his arm and giving him a small shake. “Yo, Kevernator. You in there, buddy?”

He blinked a couple of times then turned to me. His auburn hair was sticking up at all sorts of angles and his face was sporting a couple of days of beard growth.

“I . . . er, hey Dr Kira,” he said. “Good, er . . . good . . . news. I’m getting through the, um . . . I . . .”

“Take your time, big man.” I squeezed his hand and felt my chest tighten at his confused expression.

“I mean . . . I’m getting to go through . . . to go home.” After he’d finished finding all the words, he looked relieved and then a little scared. “Listen, I think maybe we should hold on to you a bit long–” I stopped as the file was ripped out of my hands.

“Mr Denton is going to be discharged *today*, Dr Murphy,” Simon told me as he looked down at me in my crouched position next to Kevin.

“Dr Tabard,” I said as I pushed up to my feet, unfortunately the bastard still loomed over me, but never mind. I shoved down that sick, anxious feeling he provoked and tried to keep my voice steady. “I really

don't think that it's safe for—”

“*Dr Murphy,*” he continued, with that slimy smile on his face to cover the fact he was shaking with rage. “When you're the consultant, maybe you will understand that non-urgent patients can be investigated on an outpatient basis. If we all practiced medicine like you, the NHS would be bankrupt within a week . . . Kira? Are you listening to me?”

No, no I wasn't, because at some point during that little speech, Kevin had started to fall off the bed. I lurched forward at the same time as Mark to catch him and we both hauled him back up. That was when the fitting started. His eyes rolled back, his body went stiff, and he started convulsing so violently that the bed was shaking. Simon was the most senior doctor there and therefore should have taken the lead. I glanced around from my attempts to stop Kevin from falling to the floor, but saw that Simon had taken a step back and was staring at us in shock with his mouth hanging open. No help there.

“Sandra, call the outreach team, then get some rectal diazepam and the crash trolley please,” I said as Kevin started frothing at the mouth. “And a Guedel airway and some more help here.”

“Right, yes,” she said, sprinting away from us.

“Mark, help me secure his airway and let's put the cot sides up. Simon? Simon, can you do that?”

“Er . . . what?” he asked, then took a deep swallow.

“Can you put the cot sides up?” He remained rooted to his spot a few feet from us. “Now!” I snapped and he flinched before finally moving forward to do as I asked.

“Okay,” Sandra panted after sprinting back to us. “I've got it. Tamra is calling the team.”

“Right, help me roll him,” I said. Kevin was still shaking and thrashing on the bed. Sandra went to his legs and Mark was at his head. Simon, the unhelpful wankpuffin, had taken a step back again. “Okay, three, two, one roll.” We rolled Kevin onto his side.

I glanced up to see Mr Lucas at the entrance to the bay with his mouth open. “Curtains!” I yelled at Simon, who thankfully pulled them around so I could pull Kevin's trousers down and administer the rectal diazepam. We held him on his side for a few seconds. I managed to get IV access and Mark hooked Kevin up to the monitoring.

“Right, we've got to secure an airway properly. His stats are too low.

Where is the outreach bloody team? Okay, turn him again.” Kevin’s oxygen levels on the monitor were falling despite the Guedel airway and oxygen we were administering. I swapped with Mark and went to the head end, tilted Kevin’s back and lifted his chin. “Laryngoscope,” I barked, and Sandra handed it to me. I pushed it down into his mouth and visualised the chords despite Kevin’s continued movements. “Airway.” Sandra handed me a laryngeal airway tube and I pushed it down past the chords. Once it was in, Mark passed me the bag, already attached to oxygen, and we started ventilating Kevin. Kevin’s oxygen stats were low but on the rise, slowly.

“Blood glucose?” I asked Lily.

“Normal.”

“Okay, he needs a four-milligram lorazepam bolus IV.”

“On it,” Lily said, routing around in the crash trolley.

“Hey, Kira?” Tim, the anaesthetist on the outreach team pulled the curtain back and I breathed a sigh of relief. One of Tim’s team took over the ventilating of Kevin from me and I took a step back. “Bugger me, you’ve intubated him already?”

“Well, whilst you guys were scratching your arses on ICU, Kevin’s stats were dropping and I—”

“Hey,” Tim said, and I broke off to take a deep breath. My hands were shaking and my voice had been too. “I wasn’t having a go. You’ve done really well.” I let the air out through my nose and gave a quick nod, tucking the hair that had come loose from my ponytail behind my ears.

“Shall I give the lorazepam?” Sandra asked, pushing in behind Tim. I nodded and then started to do the patient hand-over to Tim. My heart was still pounding, but at least my voice was steadier. I included the fact that I suspected cerebral toxoplasmosis and that Kevin was due for an inpatient MRI.

“What are these discharge papers doing here, then?” Tim asked, picking them up from where they’d fallen to the floor.

“Dr Tabard was going to discharge him,” I said as Tim drew the curtain back and stepped out to look at Simon, whose face was a little green.

“You were gonna send this dude home, Si?” Tim asked, his eyebrows going up in disbelief. “Ballsy move, mate. There was focal neurology.”

“I, well . . . I—”

Simon’s face was flushed now and there was a trickle of sweat making its way down his temple.

“Good job you’ve got such great juniors taking your back, eh?” said Tim, his eyes narrowing on Simon, no doubt wondering why I was leading the peri-arrest when there was a consultant right there to take over. “Well done, Kira,” Tim said, giving me a quick pat on the shoulder. “We’ll get him up to ITU and sort him out.”

My bleep chose that moment to go off and I looked down at the extension number for the medical assessment unit flashing at me.

“Thanks Tim. Gotta go. I’m on-call so . . .”

“No worries.” Tim turned back towards the cubicle, not bothering to acknowledge Simon again.

“Si—”

“Not another word,” Simon hissed, giving me a look of such pure hatred that I actually took a step back. “Don’t you *ever* embarrass me like that again or you’ll regret it.” Before I could answer, he spun on his heel and stalked out of the ward.

I sighed and flinched as my bleep went off again. After I’d dialled the extension and assured the harassed senior house officer that I would be straight down there to review her patients, I turned to leave the ward, but ran into the solid wall of Mr Lucas instead.

“Ah. You’re still here. I—”

“That man, Dr Tabard, is he your boss?”

Okay, where were we going with this?

”Well, yeah. Look I’ve really got to get going. I—”

“I’ll walk with you,” Mr Lucas said. I shrugged. I really didn’t have time to argue anyway.

“How did you even know where I was working, anyway?” I asked as we walked out of the ward and into the corridor.

“I’m a personal friend of Nigel Derwent.” Jesus, Nige has his fingers in a lot of pies. “He told me where I could find you. I didn’t want to go through the boys.”

“Well, I’m sorry to keep you hanging around but I don’t really have much time to spare at work, so . . .”

“I came to say thank you.”

“What?” I almost tripped in shock. “Why are you—?”

“You saved my life,” he said dramatically. I snuck a look at him and saw that his face was deadly serious.

“I did?”

“I had a basal cell *carcinoma* on my hand. It’s been removed, thanks to you.”

“Right,” I said, drawing out the word. “You do know that BCCs are benign, don’t you? I mean best to get it whipped off, but I didn’t save your –”

“There is nothing benign about a *carcinoma*, in my opinion,” he told me. “I am now in the uncomfortable situation of owing my life to someone I have been unforgivably rude to.” We drew to a halt outside the medical assessment unit and I suppressed a smile.

“I *didn’t* save your life,” I told him. “Honestly. You weren’t–”

“That man back there,” Mr Lucas waved off my protestations and changed the subject with the deft experience of a professional lawyer. “He is your boss?”

“Simon?”

He nodded.

“He’s the consultant in charge of the unit, so . . .”

“You saved that patient’s life on the ward just now, didn’t you? Your boss had no idea what to do and you saved him.”

“I just did what I’m trained to do. It’s all protocols with emergencies like that – you just follow them and hope everything works.”

“The other consultant . . . Tim? He didn’t think you’d just ‘followed a protocol’. He was impressed with you.”

I shrugged, not sure how to answer him. His one-eighty change in attitude was confusing the hell out of me.

“I’ve misjudged you and I’m sorry.” His expression was serious. I got the impression this man did not make a habit of apologising. “And I can’t thank you enough for saving me.”

“I didn’t save–”

“Kira?” the SHO cut me off and we both looked at her harried face through the open doorway. “I need you to review this patient. The registrar who was on for the day was a right dick and left me to it. I’m sorry, but I’m sinking a bit.”

“Deep breath, hun,” I told her. “I promise I’ll stay on the unit tonight, okay?”

She let out a relieved breath. “I’m so glad it’s you on-call tonight,” she said.

“I had better leave you to it,” Mr Lucas told me after watching that exchange. “Yes, I definitely misjudged you,” he added softly as he watched

the SHO move away to talk to one of the nurses.

“Mr Lucas, I—”

“Watch out for that boss of yours. I was a criminal defence lawyer for ten years before I became a judge. I can spot a nasty piece of work when I see one. There’s something about him . . . just be careful.”

“Uh, okay?” I said.

“And call me Fergus.” He smiled at me before he spun on his heel and strode away down the corridor.

Chapter 30

Aren't you happy, darling?

Barclay

It wasn't my first appearance on *Question Time*, but I knew it would be the most significant. I tended to use words sparingly in these situations. Words were weapons: the right ones used in the right way could annihilate the competition; use too many and they lost meaning. And more than anything I needed my words to have meaning, for them to carry weight, for the country to be behind what I was proposing. I needed to unite the right, the left, and the centre ground on this. There was no other option.

For the last half hour, the panel had been pitted against each other, tussling over the usual political hot potatoes, and loving the sound of their own voices. Fiona Bruce was doing an admirable job of keeping them in check but, as always, the same old blowhards tried to take over the debate by filibustering and forgetting that the public *hate* blowhards and *hate* filibustering. Now an (obviously ill-informed) columnist for one of the national newspapers was banging on about how fighting with the Labour party and even within my own party was the reason I wasn't able to transform the energy production in this country.

"That is a fair point," I said.

The columnist's mouth fell open in shock.

"What do you mean?"

"You see *this* issue, more than anything, should transcend politics completely," I went on, and a rare silence descended over the *Question Time* studio. "It needs to be taken *out* of the political arena. The public don't want to see a load of pompous stuffed shirts arguing just to score political points against each other and further their own careers. They want to see change – *real* change that will improve the quality of their lives. That's why I'm setting up a cross-party committee for this alongside the scientists, economists, business owners, civil servants and consultants that know how to make this happen. A committee that can make *real* decisions with the only objective of bringing *actual* benefit to the country."

"I doubt that you can—"

"With respect, John," I cut off one of the most painful MPs I had ever

come across (I tried not to cut people off, but this blowhard had been banging on for a good twenty minutes already), “I already have.”

“You’ve wh—?”

“I’ve already set up the committee. Your party members are on it. Your party leader had agreed to it. As has every other political party.”

“But there’ll have to be a vote to see whether—”

“Yes, there will, but I don’t need a vote to set up the committee and start making the hard decisions. By the time parliament agrees to give it the power to make change, we’ll have already formulated a solid plan. Our parliamentary democracy is important and I will abide by the decisions it makes, but the groundwork can be laid now. I’m not waiting for the cogs of Westminster to turn at a snail’s pace. The world is changing *now*. This is happening now. If we don’t act, our great nation will be consigned to also-ran status, and our people will suffer the consequences.”

“Okay,” Fiona Bruce put in to the ensuing silence. “Anyone got anything to—”

She was cut off by the applause. One lady in the front started clapping and everyone in the studio joined her. After a minute, they were all up on their feet. I’d never heard of a standing ovation on *Question Time* before, especially not for a *Conservative*. It took a full five minutes to calm everything down. All my hard work assembling the committee over the last few weeks was worth it. Everything I’d worked towards in my political career was coming together.

Why, then, did I still feel so empty?

“Don’t you think so, darling?”

“I’m sorry?” I asked, pulling my gaze away from the trees outside the back window and over to Mum’s face. She was smiling, beaming really – happy to be with both her sons and ecstatic about my performance on *Question Time*. The kitchen was full of people: my family, including a now very much together Kim and Henry, my Under Secretary, my press agent, lots of the staff from the ministry, and everyone was smiling. Everyone but me.

Mum maintained her smile but a small crease of confusion formed between her brows. “I said, I didn’t think a Tory MP had performed that well under pressure since Winston Churchill.”

I snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous, Mum.” Trust my mother to compare

me to one of the great political leaders of history. As if putting on a good show for a TV audience could compare to Churchill's achievements. "How many of those have you had?" I asked, nodding to the champagne glass in her hand. On further inspection, her smile was a little lopsided and she was a little too bright-eyed. She snorted – another out of character occurrence.

"You could do with a couple," she told me. "Maybe crack a smile even."

I gave her a tight, close-lipped smile and she sighed.

"Aren't you happy, darling?" It's bizarre, but coming from my mother that felt like a very personal question. My parents were not the type of people who encouraged open discussion of feelings and, as such, rarely asked after my emotional state. It was the first time I realised how deeply having a son suffer with severe depression had affected them, especially given Mum's history. I swear she hugged Kim for a full five minutes earlier, such was her relief at this evidence of Henry's recovery.

"I'm fine, Mum."

She stared at me for moment before hiccupping and leaning heavily onto the granite kitchen counter.

"It's Kira, isn't it?"

My eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"Kira. I know you miss her, darling. You never talk about her anymore, since she moved out. Did you have a fight?"

"It's nothing to do with Kira, Mum," I bit out, annoyed with Mum, Dad, Henry, the other MPs – in fact all the bastards crowding into my kitchen were pissing me off. None of them added colour. None of them made me feel like celebrating. I'd had a text from her (via Mark's phone obviously) earlier just after *Question Time* had aired on the BBC:

Well done. You smashed all those cockwombles (fist emoji, British flag emoji, firework emoji). The other panellists be like (cry-face emoji).

I'd smiled *then*. Reading that text, I'd smiled for the first time in days. My chest still ached thinking about it. It was so like Kira to rise above everything that had happened and wish me well in my moment of triumph. My reply had been so bloody formal I'd wanted to smash my new phone all over again. The added element of Mark reading it didn't make for very open discourse.

“What’s that about Kira?” Dad asked as he drew up next to Mum.

“Nothing. Mum’s just had too much champagne.”

“You’re not . . . well . . . involved with her anymore?”

I took my own full champagne glass, downed it in one and glared at my father. “No, Dad, we’re not involved. And if you say ‘*I told you so*’, I swear to God –”

“Why would I say that?” Dad asked, his bushy grey eyebrows going up.

“Well, I don’t know?” There was an edge to my voice now.

“Encouraging Henry to go public wasn’t exactly ideal. Nor were all the antics that followed.”

“Seems to have worked out though, doesn’t it?” he said, and it was my eyebrows that shot up.

“What?”

“For Henry,” Dad explained. “He seems to be much better since he came out with it all, and it hasn’t done your profile any harm either. Should have known really – just look what shaking hands with the blighters did for Princess Diana, and you’ve got one in the family.”

“What?!” There was so much wrong with what Dad had said I didn’t really know where to start.

“Your approval ratings *have* gone up since The Big Reveal, old bean,” put in Martin, my press officer, who’d come over to fill up his champagne glass.

“They like her too,” Mum said.

“Mum–”

“I didn’t realise she’d set up a charity, darling. You didn’t tell us that. And she’s nearly an NHS consultant, not some funny sexpert. Did you know she and her mother are friends with Bunty? Bunty and I have been on The Hurlingham Club committee together forever. She told me *all* about the Murphys at the last meeting.”

“And there is the small matter of her saving my life,” Dad put in, holding out his hand like the small scar on its back was proof of his brush with death. I knew very well that basal cell carcinomas were not deadly.

“She didn’t save your life, Dad. Christ, I never realised quite what a drama queen you are.”

“Car-ci-no-ma,” Dad said, over-enunciating every syllable. “Does that sound benign to you?”

I rolled my eyes.

“And anyway, I watched her save another life the other day so it’s not just me she’s sorting out, is it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Ah,” Dad broke off and his lips twisted to the side. “Hmm . . . damn, bit of a balls-up that. Wasn’t going to tell you actually, but—”

“What did you do, Dad?”

“I *had* to say thank you,” he explained, and I closed my eyes slowly. “And you wouldn’t give me her damn number. Nige and I go way back, so I just . . . sort of . . . pulled a few strings and —”

“Did you disturb her at work?” I snapped. Dad’s brows furrowed.

“Well,” he drew out the word. “Not disturb as such. Just approach.”

“Dad!”

“I had to say something! She saved my life!”

“She did not—”

“Anyway, she was too busy saving someone else’s life to really acknowledge me anyway. My God, Barclay, you should have seen her. She was born to do that. Some people are born to that work.”

I took a deep breath in through my mouth and out through my nose. The thought of Dad badgering Kira at work, somewhere that surely has enough stress as it is, was making me feel murderous. Hadn’t the Lucas family imposed on her enough already?

“You need to look into that though,” Dad said, confusing me. “There was a chap there, didn’t know his arse from his elbow, but seemed to be her boss. About as much use as a chocolate teapot. Dr Talbot or Tabard or something? Anyway, he was not happy for Kira to show him up. *Really* not happy. The look he gave her could have melted steel. I wouldn’t be comfortable with your mother working with someone like that. I’d want to look into it.”

I filled my glass up again and again downed the lot. I was beyond responding to Dad. His complete u-turn about Kira was making my head spin. Plus, the fact he now considered that I should be taking the same level of interest in her work as he would with Mum. As if Kira was any of my business anymore.

Which she wasn’t.

She *wasn’t*.

An image of the Dr Tabard I’d spoken to at the hospital when I went

looking for Kira swum into my mind. He'd been openly critical of her and I'd just accepted it. Maybe even doubted her. Because . . . I was an idiot.

Was he causing problems for her now?

Was it any of my business?

Probably not, but as I slammed back my fourth glass of champagne, the thought of making it my business made me feel more alive than anything else I'd done over the last two weeks.

Chapter 31

Force of nature

Barclay

Camilla Martakis opened the door a crack and blocked the entrance.

“What do you want?” she asked. It was as close to rude as I had ever heard her be, and from the slight tremor of her hands it was obviously causing her anxiety.

I tried to look around her but she stood her ground.

“Is she here?” I asked, impatience making my words clipped.

Camilla bit her lip and looked to the side.

“Y–you need to leave,” she managed to get out.

“Camilla, please . . . I –”

“My *name* is Millie,” she snapped and my eyes widened in shock. “I told you only my parents ever call me Camilla. And you must know better than most how I don’t need that reminder. I *had* thought you were different: the good kind of politician. But I guess I was wrong.” That blow found its target. I was not a fan of Millie’s father and definitely did not want to be compared to him.

“Millie, please,” I said, my foot coming out to keep the door open. “I just want to talk to her. I’m going crazy with worry. I need–”

Millie’s eyes flashed and I watched as anger replaced her nervousness.

“What *you* need?” she asked, her voice trembling with rage. “It’s all about you, isn’t it? I can’t say I’m surprised because Kira’s like that – she always sees others’ needs before her own. But it’s not just about you and what you need. She’s got her own sh . . . stuff going on as well. If you weren’t so wrapped up in *your* needs, maybe you would have noticed that something is wrong. But *no* . . .”

My eyes focused sharply on Millie and she snapped her mouth shut, likely realising how much she’d given away.

“What *stuff* is going on?” I asked. “Is this about her failing exams and being disciplined at work?”

Millie frowned. “What are you talking about? Kira’s passed all of her post graduate exams so far. She only has the HIV diploma left.”

“I thought she was . . . having some trouble with—”

“Absorbing that quantity of information doesn’t come easily to Kira, which is why it’s all the more impressive that she’s managed to keep going for all these years and get through the endless exams,” Millie told me, and again bit her lip as though she may have betrayed a confidence. “But she’s very determined and very dedicated. I should know – I helped her to revise last time. It’s one of the only ways she’ll let me help, which is frustrating when she’s done so much for me.”

“I just thought that—”

“I know you’re busy, but, tell me, have you ever worked a full time job – well actually *way* more hours than full time if you count all the on-calls and extra hours to keep a short-staffed department afloat – *and* completed a set of incredibly difficult exams with no study leave and no support from your employer? All the while making decisions daily, which could end your career or *worse* – end a life? Because that is being a junior doctor in the NHS for you. *Most* people have to take the exams more than once.”

I raked my fingers through my hair, before dropping my head to look down at my shoes.

“Kira is none of your business,” she said, pushing back on the door, which didn’t budge an inch. “Using your physical strength to detain somebody who does not want you in their home is rude and unacceptable,” she told me, looking first at my hand on her door and then down at my foot. Heat hit my face as I glanced down at Millie’s rounded stomach. I withdrew my hand and foot at lightning speed. Was I bullying pregnant women now? Had I sunk that low?

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice now having a slightly desperate edge and she sighed, surprising me by not slamming the door in my face.

“Leave her alone. She’s got a lot on her plate and a lot of . . . stuff to sort out. She doesn’t need to be crying over—” Millie broke off and her eyes went wide.

“I . . . *please*, Millie,” I said, that desperation more pronounced in my voice now. “I just need—” I snapped my mouth closed and closed my eyes tight for a second as the realisation that I was talking about *my* needs again hit me. “I can’t leave now if I know she’s upset. I—”

“Look,” Millie said, her tone softening just a bit as she took a step

outside the house and pulled the door to behind her. “I’m not going to let you see her now. If you care about her, you’ll give her some time.”

“Right,” I said, taking a step down the stone steps outside Millie’s house and rubbing the back of my neck. “But could you please tell her I was here at least? Tell her I was here and that I’m not giving up.” Millie surprised me then by taking a step after me and putting a hand on my arm.

“It was Kira who found me crying in my office six months ago when I found out I was pregnant,” she said in a soft voice. “She told me then that *any baby would be a lucky little badger* to have me as a mum. That my introversion and anxiety didn’t mean I couldn’t love a child. ‘*You love Pav, don’t you?*’ she’d asked. ‘*Anyone who can love, hug and kiss that big cockwomble can love a baby*’. That’s just one example of her kindness, her wisdom. She might seem flighty, but she’s the most reliable friend I have.” There was a pause before Millie focused on me more intently. “You know, I really did like you for her. Kira’s like a force of nature . . . a small tornado sweeping everything and everyone along with her on a wild ride, but keeping those close to her safe in the eye of the storm. She *needs* the ground to touch down on, to be a breeze across, to keep her from spinning herself out. I know you can be her ground. I can feel it. So I will tell her you were here and that you’re worried about her.”

“Thank you,” I breathed, my desperation giving way to hope and then shifting to resolve as I gave Millie a firm nod.

“Just don’t fuck it up,” Her swearing surprised a small smile out of me.

“You’re really different now than you were all those years ago at the political functions,” I told her, then rushed on. “Not that that’s a bad thing – it’s just . . .”

“Kira’s been a good influence.” She returned my smile very briefly.

“Yes.” I stared beyond Millie into the house, as if I could make Kira appear in the doorway. “Yes, she has.”

Kira

“Why are you still here?” I asked, staring up at the great big bodyguard that I still had trailing me around. I hadn’t seen Barclay for a month, but these persistent bastards kept following me, and the Kira who’d thought it was a bit of fun to have an entourage, *that* Kira, was long gone. This Kira just wanted to be left alone.

Sam sighed. “Kira.” At least he wasn’t calling me Dr Murphy anymore. “I’m being paid to be here. You’re still linked to Barclay. That won’t just go away overnight. He just wants—”

“Argh!” I stamped my foot. That’s the level I’d sunk to, then – actual stamping of feet, just like Rosie when she was five. But this was so frustrating. “Please! This is what I mean.”

The backs of my eyes started stinging and I felt stupid tears gathering. Horrified pity filled Sam’s expression. “I don’t want to hear his name. I don’t want to know what he wants. I w–want to move on.” The last few words were choked out as one single tear fell down my cheek and I swiped it away. “Now, if you haven’t noticed, I have a goddamn job to do in not the easiest of circumstances.”

Sam gave the prison an uneasy glance and then frowned down at me.

“You can’t come in there with me anyway,” I told him. “So, you may as well just *go*.”

He blew out a frustrated breath. “Okay, fuck Barclay,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. My eyes went wide. Sam had always kept up a formal veneer when on the job, even with me. “He’s obviously been a prick. But *I’m* not comfortable with you going in there on your own. Why would they send *you*, anyway?”

I bristled and crossed my own arms. “Why *shouldn’t* they send me?” I asked in a dangerous voice. He had the grace to look uncomfortable.

“Well . . .”

“Because I’m a girl? Is that it? My delicate flower sensibilities won’t be up to negotiating the inside of a secure facility with inmates that are, btw, *heavily guarded*?” He opened his mouth to speak then thought better of it and shut it again. Sensible man. “Do you think I haven’t been to this prison before? I go every month, you tosser.”

I was done with this conversation so I skirted around him and made for the entrance. When he went to follow me, the guards at the gate stopped him and asked if he had a visitors pass.

“I’m with her,” he told them.

“I’ve never seen that man before in my life,” I said as I breezed through the gates, and they locked behind me. I caught his glare before I turned the corner away from his view and returned it with one of my own. Just another man thinking he knew better than me, thinking he could control me.

Barclay

“She what?” I gripped the phone so tight that I could hear the plastic cover creak and had to force myself to loosen my hand – the last thing I needed was to have to replace yet another phone. “Why the fu– I mean, why aren’t you with her?”

“They wouldn’t let me in and she pretended not to know me.”

Sweat broke out on my neck as I pictured tiny Kira, her brightly coloured hair and her fairy movements sticking out like a bird of paradise in the grey prison environment. Surely she’d cause a riot? Who thought it was a good idea to send her for the genitourinary checks those guys needed?

“Get. Her. Out,”

“I have a fair few skills,” Sam returned in a dry voice. “Breaking into a maximum-security prison is not one of them. Anyway, she tells me this was always part of her job description. Apparently, she goes every month. How did you not know that?”

I sat down heavily in my leather desk chair and let my head fall into my hands. The reality was that I knew next to nothing about Kira’s actual job. And I was now convinced that Dr Tabard was *full* of shit. Kira had passed her postgraduate exams, even though she struggled with the academic side of things. Millie described her as determined and hard working. Dad’s account of her in action at work suggested that *she* was the competent one whilst Dr fucking Tabard was a bloody idiot.

When I really thought about it, Kira wasn’t flaky at all, not with the things that mattered. Not when she’d arranged huge charity events and all the work and organisation that they must have involved. Not even when it came to my brother: she’d made a commitment to Henry and she’d followed through, no matter how inconvenient for her.

She was never hung-over for work, never called in sick, always stayed late if her security team’s report was anything to go on. In fact, the only thing Kira seemed to be at all flaky about was her own safety. Something that I thought I had a handle on but, judging by the prison visit today, I’d been fooling myself. And now, because I was an unbelievable prick, I couldn’t even *ask* her about the prison work, or about the problems she was having at the hospital. A wholly unfamiliar sense of powerlessness overcame me as I leaned back against the leather. I didn’t even have the *right* to ask any of these questions now, and when I should have been asking them, I had been

sitting on my hands worrying about Kira being a distraction. Like she was some sort of negative influence. When actually, while we were together I had been less stressed, I'd slept better, I was happier and therefore more productive than I'd been in years. Yes, life with Kira was anything but easy, but in the most wonderful way.

I loved her.

It was pointless not to admit it now. Even if it wasn't going to do me any good. And it killed me that she was hurt and I couldn't comfort her. It killed me that there was something going on in her life (other than me being a total dick) that was upsetting her and I didn't even have the right to ask her about it.

"Barclay?" I heard Sam ask in my ear and realised I'd been sitting in moody silence for a full minute. My mind flashed back to that smug smile Dr Tabard had given me last week and my back shot straight. I'd been an idiot not to look into that sooner, but first I had to do something about the situation at hand.

"Let me make a call."

Chapter 32

Job's worth

Kira

“Alright, Gazza,” I said as I walked into the clinic room. Gary was the only healthcare assistant at the prison clinic and I relied on him totally. He knew the prisoners and had a way of interacting with them that put everyone at ease. Some of these guys were convicted of rape, domestic violence, assault and all sorts of violent crime. They were not to be underestimated. But a lot of them had mental health and substance abuse problems that meant an issue with sexual health was usually either put on the back burner, or forgotten about completely – until they were caged and realised what was going on. So, my clinics here were busy and Gary helped them be as streamlined as possible.

“Okay, short stuff,” he said. “We’ve got a motley crew for you today. Terry’s first up – wants his warts dealing with before he gets let out to his missus.”

After dealing with Terry and a couple of other regulars, we called in a new patient. He was huge – well over six feet and covered in tats.

“Hi there, Mr Oakdale,” I said as he lowered his massive bulk into the small plastic chair across from me.

“It’s Dave, doc,” he muttered.

“Okay Dave, how can I help?”

He flicked a glance over to Gary and then scowled down at his feet, pressing his lips together.

“I can’t–” he broke off and gave Gary another uncomfortable glance. “Shit. Never mind,” he said, pushing himself up from the chair.

“Dave,” I said softly, rising with him. “Would you prefer to talk to me alone?”

He looked at Gary again and gave a brief nod.

“You mind, Gazza?” I asked, and Gary moved to the door.

“I’ll be right outside,” he said as he closed it behind him. Dave and I lowered back to our seats.

“Okay. What can I help you with, Dave?”

“My dick . . .” he started, then broke eye contact to look over at a poster for Hepatitis B. I waited as he took a deep breath in and let it out slowly. “My dick don’t work, doc.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. “In what way?”

“I can’t . . . I can’t get it up,” he whispered, the skin I could see of his face that wasn’t covered with bushy beard was bright red.

“Right, so you can’t get an erection?”

He nodded, then paused and shook his head. “No . . . I . . . um . . .”

He trailed off. “Dave, do you ever get erections?”

“Yes, when I’m on my own, but not – not when . . .”

“Not when you’re with your partner?”

“No.”

“Are you being released soon, Dave?”

He nodded and swallowed. “My missus . . . she . . .” he broke off and I saw his eyes fill with unshed tears. “Last time it happened I shouted at her. I . . .” he swallowed and looked away from me. He was in here for theft, but I knew he also had a history of domestic violence.

“Okay, so, with erectile dysfunction there’s blood tests we need to do and we need to take your blood pressure to rule out physical causes, but there are other psychological causes for erectile dysfunction.”

“What? So, if you fix my head then you can fix my dick?”

“Something like that. But also, Dave, if you drank alcohol, used drugs, that could have had an effect. If you’re clean when you’re on the outside this time, you might find things are better.”

He sniffed and a tear rolled down his cheek. “Don’t want to fuck things up with her again,” he said, so low I almost didn’t hear it. “Don’t want to hurt her, ever again.”

“Being off the booze might help with that too, Dave.”

“I don’t –”

The door flew open and one of the guards walked in with a furious Gary following him.

“Hey, doc,” the guard said. “New rules: I’m staying in the clinic room with you whilst you do your stuff.”

Dave stiffened and swiped at his cheeks before he shot to his feet. His angry vibe filled the room, making the atmosphere thick with tension.

“Fuck this,” he said, and for a moment I thought he was going to

punch Gary or the guard. I did not imagine Dave was a man who relished having witnesses to an emotional outburst. Unfortunately, it was Gary that was blocking the door. Dave put a large hand to his chest and shoved him clear of it so he could storm through. Another prison guard chased after him and I could hear Dave swearing at him in the corridor.

“What *is* going on?” I asked, fuming that this guard had interrupted a sensitive consultation. If I’d had more time with Dave, I might have been able to delve a bit further into what was going on. It was obvious he felt remorse. He could have even been a candidate for the Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Programme, which could have helped keep his partner safe. I was furious. “You can’t be in here. There’s such a thing as patient confidentiality. Any guard in my room compromises that and you know it.”

“Not my call, doc,” he said. “And by the looks of Dave, maybe not a bad thing.”

“Dave was *fine* until you stormed in here,” I said through gritted teeth and the guard just shrugged.

“Sorry, more than my job’s worth to leave you alone now, doc.”

I let out a frustrated sound from the back of my throat and looked to Gary who seemed about as annoyed as me.

And so, the clinic continued with a guard in the room for the consultations. That was until all the prisoners in the waiting room got wind of what was going on and started to leave. I finished an hour early and I was fuming.

And then, I had two guards escort me to the front gate (it was usually just me and Gazza pootling through all the locked doors and key card requiring pads), and I couldn’t for the life of me understand why – until I made it outside to the car park and saw who was leaning against my car.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped as I made it over to him in short but rapid strides.

Barclay glanced up at the prison with an unhappy look on his face then back down at me. “I didn’t know you worked here,” he said, as if that explained why he was blocking my car door in a prison car park in the middle of the day.

I looked from the prison back to him and frowned in confusion. “What bloody difference does it make?” I threw up my arms and let my hands slap down on my sides. “Lots of doctors go into prisons. Prisoners need healthcare just like the rest of the population.”

“But why do *you* have to go there?”

“Why not?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

He shifted his feet and pulled his hand through his hair. “Kira, there are dangerous criminals in there. You’re five foot nothing and weigh one hundred pounds soaking wet. It’s not safe.”

My hands went to my hips and I could feel my blood boil. “Did you have anything to do with a guard insisting on being with me today?”

“You don’t normally have a guard with you?” his voice had risen and he pushed away from the car to enter my personal space. I took a step back.

“No. I don’t *need* a guard. The prisoners don’t consider me a threat – they need my help. Having a guard means there’s no patient confidentiality and it also means that half my clinic left before being seen today.”

“Look, Kira–”

“That’s at least ten blokes who might have a communicable disease not seen today to the detriment of their health and the health of the public. I know how to do my own bloody job. I don’t tell you how to do yours and you sure as fuck shouldn’t tell me how to do mine. Have some bloody respect.”

He groaned. “I do respect you. Please Kira, I don’t want to argue about this. I came here to try to–”

“I’ve heard all I want to hear from you,” I told him. “You . . . you hurt me.” My stupid voice broke over the words and I swallowed to stop myself from crying again.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice aching with regret. “So sorry. When Sam told me you were here I had to come. I had to see you. I thought . . . I mean, I got your text and I thought, maybe–”

“I wanted to say well done. I know how much all of that means to you and I thought you kicked political butt. That doesn’t mean I want any more contact with you. You’re not healthy for me. Stay away and don’t interfere with how I do my job. I don’t care if you’re bezzie mates with the Prisons Minster and can pull strings to ruin my clinic. Stay out of my business and get out of the way of my car. I don’t need your help.”

He stared at me for a moment, then his shoulders sagged in defeat before he stepped aside. I wasted no time hopping into the driver’s seat.

As I drove away, I tried not to look in the rear-view mirror but the temptation was too great. He stood watching me with his hands in his pockets until I turned the corner and was no longer in view. I shook my head to clear it and gripped the steering wheel, hard. But I knew that in the traitorous back

of my mind all I had wanted to do in that car park was fall into him. And that scared me more than anything.

Chapter 33

I thought I was handling It

Kira

I stared at the computer screen for a full five minutes after I'd read the report. Every competency had been marked as either 'Needs improvement' or merely 'Unacceptable'. And the comments . . .

'Overfamiliar manner with patients.'

'Poor clinical decision making.'

'Risk taking practices in clinical work.'

'Poor knowledge base.'

It wasn't just bad: it was *terrible*. That bloody wankpuffin had completely bugged my chances of passing my upcoming ARCP. I would have to have my training extended, go into special measures, maybe even be kicked off the training scheme altogether with a report this damning. I was so engrossed in my own morbid thoughts that I didn't hear the door to the registrar office open, and I leapt about a foot in the air when two large hands landed on my shoulders.

"Staring at it's not going to change it, Kira," his smug, smarmy voice told me. I tried to shake him off but he just tightened his grip. A moment ago, I'd been glad the registrar's office was deserted, now I would give anything to have some other nosy bastard walk through that door. "I *had* to be honest," Simon continued. I twisted my neck to look up at him – the prick was smiling. For once in my life, I really, really minded my size. I wished I had the physical strength to forcibly remove his hands and punch him in his smug face.

"Fuck you," I spat out as I twisted again to no avail.

He leaned over me so that his breath fanned my cheek and I fought an urge to vomit. "Well, if you'd done that in the first place there wouldn't be a problem now, would there?" His hands left my shoulders and made their way down the front of my chest, prompting a violent struggle from me, which he controlled with ease.

Right. That was it. This bloody man was *not* going to touch my

breasts. I took a deep breath in and screamed. His hand came up to cover my mouth and I bit down on it until I tasted blood. He grabbed my hair and slammed my head down onto the desk in front of me so hard that my vision clouded for a moment, and then ... he was gone. I blinked at the tabletop as I heard a body slam hard against a wall. Holding my forehead and turning slowly in my chair, I was shocked to see Barclay pinning Simon up against the plasterboard by his throat.

“*Don’t you fucking touch her,*” he roared as Simon’s face started to turn red. I stood on shaky legs and made my way over to the two men. Yeah, Barclay was well and truly on my shit list, but that didn’t mean I wanted him to lose everything and gain a criminal record for killing a wankpuffin, even if he did deserve it.

“Barclay, stop it,” I called as I took a step towards them.

“You hurt her,” he said, his tone a mixture of absolute rage and total disbelief. “You’ve *been* hurting her, haven’t you?”

Barclay released Simon’s throat, thank the badgers, but both his hands curled into his shirt, keeping him pinned to the wall.

“*You’re* the problem at work. *You* are. And to think I bloody well listened to your shit about Kira. How could you hurt her? How could *anyone* hurt her?” his voice was hollow now. I could hear the pain and regret in it, but still I took a step back. Barclay had spoken to Simon before? He’d listened to his ‘shit’? Had he believed it?

“Yo, Lucas,” Mark called from across the room, but Barclay was still focused on Simon. “Let the dickhead go now, mate.” Mark started walking slowly towards him with his hands up.

“Get this lunatic off me!” Simon choked out, his voice shaking.

“Shut up,” Barclay barked out and gave him another shake. “Just shut up.”

That was when I moved. I crossed the room and put my hand on Barclay’s arm. I could feel the muscles under his skin vibrating with tension.

“Let him go,” I said in a low voice. “This isn’t helping. He’s not touching me anymore. He’s never going to touch me again. If you hurt him, I won’t be able to press charges.” And I was pressing charges – I was pressing *all* the charges.

“Barclay,” Mark put in. “She’s bleeding, mate. Let him go so we can sort her out, yeah?” Barclay flinched, then glanced at me. I could feel a trickle of blood slowly making its way from my hairline.

“Christ,” he breathed as he dropped Simon’s shirt and turned to me, before cupping my face in his hands and tilting my head to the side so he could inspect my bruised and bloodied temple. Wankpuffin wasted no time in storming out of the room, pushing past Mark to do it.

“I’ve called the police,” Sandra, the staff nurse called from the door. “We saw him slam your head on the desk, Kira. We all saw what happened.” Fury vibrated through her tone and, when I glanced over, I could see she was shaking with it.

“Kira, darling. I think that’s going to need a couple of stitches or at least some steristrips,” Mark told me softly. “We’d . . . uh . . . better get you up to A&E.”

“I’ll call down Christy to run the clinic,” another staff nurse said from the entrance. I turned to see that a small crowd had gathered outside the door behind Sandra.

I looked back into Barclay’s concerned face and I blinked away the rest of the tears that were forming in my eyes. Then, I reached up to grip his forearms with both of my hands and pulled them down so that his hands fell from my cheeks. After that, I took a big step back.

“I want you to leave,” I told Barclay. My voice was steady, firm, almost unrecognisable from my normal tone no doubt, but I was done with being pushed about by arrogant, self-absorbed men. “Thank you for pulling him off me, although I was about to go for his balls like Sam taught me, but now I would like you to *go*.”

His face paled and, to my shock, he actually brought both his hands in front of him and clasped them together as he leaned towards me.

“Please, Kira,” he choked out, his tone was almost tortured and his eyes were alive with that desperation again. “Please, I need to see that you’re okay. I . . .”

I took another step back and felt Mark’s big body slide in next to mine as his arm went around my shoulders and he tucked me into his side.

“Barclay, you heard her,” Mark said, his voice was soft but there was a hint of warning there too. “*She* needs you to leave and that’s what you’re going to do.”

Barclay’s hands went into his hair before they clasped the back of his neck. I felt another trickle of blood settle into the hollow of my collarbone and saw his eyes track its progress.

“Yes,” he said. “Of course. Of *course*. Whatever you need, Kira. I’ll

be waiting to hear.”

I was shocked anew as I saw a sheen of moisture gloss across the blue of his eyes for a moment before he blinked it away.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, reaching towards me in a way that made it seem as though he didn’t have full control of his hand, before he snatched it back and turned away to walk out of the room. When I knew he was gone, I took a deep breath in through my nose, blew it out through my mouth, and only then did I let a small sob escape. Turning into the safety of Mark’s chest, I let go completely, soaking his shirt with blood and tears as my body shook with misery. A pad of gauze was pressed to my temple by someone and Mark held it there. The others must have all left then, because by the time I’d managed to get a hold of myself, five minutes later it was just me and Mark.

“You ready, looney toon?” he asked, his voice gentle as he gave me another full body squeeze.

I cleared my throat, straightened my spine and blinked away the last of my tears. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“You know, it’s not weakness to ask for help,” Mark said as he turned me towards the door.

“I was . . . I mean, I thought I was handling it,” I said. “And at first it wasn’t. . . .” I sighed. “It was insidious. I would have looked like a pillock complaining about him at the start. Like a special snowflake. And I’d had all that trouble with the exams. I didn’t want to look like the *problem trainee*.”

Mark huffed. “This department is bloody lucky to have you and they know it. Ever thought that perhaps Wankpuffin is the *problem trainer*, not the other way around?”

“I guess . . .” I closed my eyes to avoid Mark’s accusing gaze, my voice was small which I hated, but for once I didn’t seem to be able to turn up the volume, “I guess I didn’t think people would take me seriously. I know I can be a bit . . . out-there. And I know people think I’m super-confident. I just . . . I just didn’t think anyone would believe me.”

“Anyone who thinks quirky, a bit out-there, and a lot weird constitute an unreliable person is an idiot. Sometimes it’s the most serious people who are the least reliable, the least likely to follow through on any of the crap they spout off.”

Barclay

I didn’t think I would ever get over hearing Kira sob like that and not

be able to comfort her; not even be able to stay in the same room. A heavy weight sat on my chest as I tried to work through my worry and anger. The looks I was getting from the people moving around the busy department were a mixture of confusion and contempt. Everyone here loved Kira. Everyone everywhere seemed to love Kira.

'I asked you again and again what was wrong.'

Mark's words echoed through my head, mocking me and my self-involved, bullshit attitude. Had I even asked Kira *once* what was wrong? Had I ever asked her *anything* about her work? Well, that was all going to change now. I was earning back Kira's trust and then *I* was going to be the one she would cry on if she needed. Not that she was going to be doing any more crying, because I was also going to make damn sure there was nothing for her to cry about.

Movement from inside the room caught my attention. I knew she wouldn't want to see me now and maybe, for once, I should bloody well listen. So, as the door handle started to turn, I pushed off from the wall and jogged away. Sam met me outside the main entrance. I'd made him wait outside the hospital so that I could catch Kira on her own before she started her clinic – yet another example of my selfishness. She'd said she didn't want to see me. But for some reason, just like my father, I'd felt it was appropriate to go and interrupt her at her place of work because I couldn't get access to her any other way and I needed to see her.

"How-?" Sam started, but I cut him off.

"Can you send someone else to watch her and keep the press away?" I asked. "Someone she doesn't know. I don't want her to feel . . ." I swallowed, my throat felt tight. "I don't want her to feel . . . pushed into a corner. She's had enough of that."

"What happened?" Sam asked. "Did that twat she works with give her a hard time again?" Sam knew? This just got worse and worse.

For what felt like the hundredth time that week, I scrubbed both hands down my face and took in a deep, frustrated breath before I met Sam's accusing stare. Sam liked Kira. Of course he did. Just like everyone else. I sighed.

"I'll tell you everything," I said, my tone defeated. "Just get someone down here now that can watch her *discretely*. I-I need to know she's okay."

Chapter 34

I will discredit you

Kira

I sat outside my ARCP staring at the wall opposite me. I'd done a lot of that over the last few days. A lot of staring at walls. In an unprecedented move, an actual NHS department had insisted that I take these last few days off work. Any NHS doctor will tell you that that particular pill is bittersweet as you know that the hospital will not replace you with a locum, but that your colleagues will be covering your work. As for me, I was confused as to why I needed time off at all. I thought I'd probably function well at work at the moment. I felt like all my emotions were switched off – like someone had flipped a switch. I would be a machine on the wards and in clinics. Without my normal relentless banter, I'd probably be a hell of a lot more productive. However, today was the first day I'd left Millie's house, and the fact my palms had been sweating and my heart had felt like it was beating outside my chest as I walked through the hospital, was an indication that it might take longer than I thought to start functioning normally.

After I'd been patched up in A&E (the cut was deep but only needed two stitches – it was the bruising and swelling that really made me look like a poster girl for domestic violence) and then endured what seemed like an endless amount of time talking to the police, it was Millie who took me home.

If I had been capable of registering emotion over the last few days, I have to say that most of it when it came to Millie would have been surprise. She rocked up at the emergency department minutes after I arrived there, launched herself at the hospital bed and wrapped me up in a tight, extremely un-Millie-like hug. It was the first spontaneous hug I'd ever received from her. Of course, I'd squeezed the life out of her loads of times, but Millie very rarely initiated physical contact herself.

Even more shocking was that she stayed with me and took me home once everything was done, skipping an entire afternoon of work (Millie rarely took even bathroom breaks from her job as a radiologist). After that Millie

and Pav fielded my visitors – only letting Libby, Jamie and Mark in to see me – not that I spoke much, what with all the wall staring. I knew I was starting to freak everyone out, but I just didn't know how to snap out of it. The only emotion I seemed to be capable of at the moment was fear. For the first time in my life, I was waking up sweating with nightmares. Even during the day, images of Simon would flit through my brain and it was like I was back there again – feeling the impact of the wood on my temple again. Anxiety had never been a problem for me before, and now it seemed like it was consuming me.

So, Millie was here, sitting next to me outside my ARCP. She'd told me that morning that she'd already booked leave for my ARCP even before The Incident. Why Millie would take leave for an appraisal of *my* career was a mystery. I would normally have peppered her with questions / sung eighties classics until she'd have told me why she was coming with me, but this morning I just found myself nodding and agreeing with her like it was perfectly normal for her to be in attendance. To be honest, I was happy to carry on staring at the wall and block everything out. The less I said, the less I had to interact with others.

“Dr Murphy?” I heard a male voice, call and tore my eyes away from the wall to see Prof standing in the doorway to the conference room. What was he doing here? He never came to these things. I nodded once and pushed up from the chair, touching the gauze on my temple self-consciously as I followed him into the room to face the panel. There were three others there: a man from the Deanery, the director of education for the GU registrars, and Nigel Derwent as a management representative. Prof rounded the long table and sat down next to Nigel, before giving me an encouraging smile. I blinked. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd seen Prof smile, and I'd never seen him give anyone an *encouraging* one. The man from the Deanery gave my face a quick scan, before he darted his eyes back to his papers in front of him and shifted uncomfortably on his chair.

“So, Dr Murphy,” he began. “This is your second ARCP as a GU registrar. I hope you understand that we have to be *very* thorough in our assessment today.”

I dragged my eyes away from the wall to glance at him briefly, managed another nod and then resumed my contemplation of the peeling paintwork.

“Up until now, you've always had decent reports from your appraisers

and met all the competencies. I—I understand there’ve been some difficulties over the last few months.” He shifted again in his chair and the corner of one of his eyes started twitching. “And . . . well, that was all very unfortunate.” I felt Millie tense next to me, and when I glanced over I saw she was gripping the armrests of her chair so tightly her knuckles were white. “But,” he cleared his throat, “I’m afraid we won’t be able to sign off this portion of the training, as things stand. The appraiser’s report was . . . a problem.”

My head was throbbing again as I leant back in my chair. There was a pregnant pause. Everyone was waiting for me to speak, to make my case. But that just wasn’t going to happen. I’d been fighting my own battles for so long you’d think it would be ingrained in me to respond. During my other ARCPs, the panel had been lucky to get a word in edgeways. But now, I just wanted to stare at the peeling paint. I wanted to disappear.

“I’m going to start by focusing on Dr Murphy’s three-hundred-and-sixty degree appraisal dated three weeks ago,” Millie said in a clear and confident voice, and I darted her a surprised look. “Dr Murphy’s appraisal is very comprehensive, providing numerous evaluations from her clinical and non clinical colleagues. She had a much higher response rate than the average.”

“We’ve read the appraisal, Dr Martakis,” Deanery Man said. He opened his mouth to speak again but Millie got there first and began reading aloud.

“Dr Murphy is one of the most dedicated genitourinary registrars I have ever come across. Her attitude towards patients and staff alike is second to none”; ‘Clinically, Dr Murphy is exceptionally competent for her grade. No other registrars can handle the busier clinics like her. She lights up the department’; ‘Kira makes me laugh every day. Before she joined the team, I hadn’t laughed at work in over a decade. She puts patients at ease and her diagnostic skills are excellent . . .’ Shall I go on? You should know: I have a photographic memory so I could recite her entire 360 appraisal – all twenty-three entries, and let me tell you, some of them go on for a loooonng time.”

“The 360 is not the only thing we’re looking for in order for her to pass. As I said, it’s unfort–”

“If you say that my friend being sexually harassed for months and then physically assaulted is ‘unfortunate’ *one more time . . .*” Millie leaned forward as far as she could over her bump and lowered her voice, “I will pay for a barrister to represent Dr Murphy and we will sue the trust – be assured I

have pretty much bottomless funds to accomplish this. Then, I will go to the press and tell them the true story of how a sexual predator with numerous previous complaints made against him was allowed to continue in an educational role. I have at least five women willing to speak up. After that, I'll go the GMC, BMA and any other body I can find and I *will* discredit you." She turned to the rest of the panel, her voice now ice cold. "I'll discredit *all* of you." The colour drained from all the faces of the panel apart from Prof, who was beaming at Millie, even though I was pretty sure she'd just threatened to discredit him.

"Listen, Dr Martakis," Deanery Man began. He sat forward in a sudden movement and his chair scrapped back against the floor. The sharp noise felt like it snapped through my entire being and I flinched violently in my chair. The room fell silent and all eyes came to me. Millie laid her hand over mine and I realised how tightly I was gripping the armrests of the chair.

"You okay?" she whispered, and I gave a short, jerky nod, willing my heart rate to slow. I managed to loosen my grip on the chair so that the hand Millie wasn't holding could come up to push some loose hair back behind my ear. To my annoyance, my hand was shaking so badly that even that small movement was an effort. There was an uncomfortable silence before Deanery Man cleared his throat.

He went on, now in a softer voice. "I'm sorry about what happened, but—"

"Oh, do shut up, Phil," Prof said, cutting him off. He now looked absolutely furious. "I can't say I usually take much interest in these things. Load of red tape and bollocks, if you ask me. We all know that Dr Shipman would have got all his sign-ups done in triplicate, and that this means absolutely sod all in the great scheme of things."

"Well, I . . ." Deanery Man, aka Phil, spluttered, but Prof put his hand up to silence him and his mouth snapped shut.

"I've written up an appraisal for Dr Murphy. A very comprehensive one, containing all the relevant information. None of this box ticking." He slid a couple of sheets of paper over to Deanery Man who took them and glanced over the content.

"But . . . but this should be in her digital appraisal record otherwise—"

"Jesus Christ, Philip, just listen to yourself," Nigel's voice surprised me enough to snap me out of my daze and glance across at him. Just like Prof's, his expression was less than pleased. "We bugged up and exposed

another trainee to that dangerous, disgusting predator. Have you got any idea of the ramifications of that? And you want to set back one of the best trainees we've ever had in the department so that she can't qualify to fill the consultant job that we'll need in three years time? Are you crazy? You do know there's a recruitment problem across the board at the moment? Fill in the *goddamn* digital appraisal yourself."

If I was honest, I'd always regarded managers as a malevolent force in the hospital – only interested in efficiencies and budgets. But in that moment, I felt bad for my assumptions. They could probably rake in a lot more money in the private sector. They *chose* to work for the NHS. It wasn't their fault the budget was limited. It didn't mean that they didn't care.

"Dr Murphy," Nigel addressed me now, and I blinked at him but managed eye contact. "It's clear to me that you're not yourself. Given that you were attacked two days ago, that is hardly surprising." He turned to Millie. "Dr Martakis, thank you for accompanying Kira today. I would appreciate it if you could make sure she gets home alright. She's taking the next two weeks off." I opened my mouth to tell him that was impossible, but he got there first. "I've got a locum, Kira," he said, his voice now so gentle it almost brought tears to my eyes. "I know you were about to say that you didn't need the time, and I know that's because you'd be worried about your colleagues, but we won't be dumping all your work on them. Someone will be covering all your clinics and on-calls. For once, you should try looking after yourself and not everyone else."

I looked down at my shoes for a moment and blinked away the wet in my eyes, before looking up again.

"Thank you," I whispered in a broken little voice that was so far from my usual Kira volume I could see everyone wince at the sound of it.

"Come on, Ki Ki," Millie said. Her hand slipped into mine and she tugged me to standing. I gave the panel one last sweep, nodding at Prof and Nigel before I turned to leave. Deanery Man was looking a little pale and avoiding eye contact to shuffle through his papers on the table in front of him.

As Millie led me away, I heard Prof call my name and I turned to look at him again.

"Don't let that bastard dim your light, Kira. You take a break, but don't forget what I've said today: you're the best trainee I've ever worked with – no jumped-up sad excuse for a man can take that from you."

Chapter 35

I had to try your way

Barclay

“Uh . . . hello, Mrs Murphy,” I said after I’d recovered my composure. “Is Kira alright?”

She rolled her eyes as I opened the door wider to invite her into my house. “No, she’s not bloody well alright, is she?” Mrs Murphy snapped as she bustled past me, the little bells and small mirrors on her gypsy skirt tinkling.

I was about to shut the door when I did a double take. My own mother was out there as well, and she looked just as pissed off with me as Kira’s.

“Well, don’t just stand there, care bear,” Mum told me as she too pushed past me in the direction of the kitchen, using the nickname she hadn’t employed in over thirty years. “Get that kettle on for a start. We could all do with some tea before I strangle you, I’m sure.”

I thought it best to just nod and keep my mouth shut. By the time I’d made it to the kitchen, Mum was putting the kettle on and pulling down the teabags whilst telling Henry that his shirt needed ‘a good iron’. Henry was sitting at the kitchen island eating his Rice Krispies and looking about as shocked at the influx of women in their sixties as I felt. Over the last month, Henry and I had totally swapped roles. Now I was the morose one, barely eating or sleeping, surviving on caffeine, adrenaline and misery; Henry was the one trying to make sure I ate actual meals, checking up on me in my office, trying to talk to me about my ‘feelings’. It was surreal. If I were in a better state of mind, I’d be pleased to see how far Henry had come, but at the moment I couldn’t see past my own misery. Once the kettle was on, Mum moved to Henry and kissed him on his cheek, before reaching under his chin to push up and close his mouth.

“Er . . .” Henry darted me a confused look, to which I shrugged in response. “Hi, Mum. Hi. . . lady.”

“I’m Sheena, Kira’s mum.” She walked around the kitchen island and patted his cheek. “And you must be Henry. I’ve heard a lot about you,

sweetie.”

Henry smiled at her. “Hi Sheena, great to meet you. Kira’s a cracking girl.”

“I like to think so.”

I cleared my throat and all eyes swung to me. I’d noticed the lack of cheek pats and temple kisses for me, but I guessed that was understandable, given that I’d been a huge dick. Sheena turned to me and narrowed her eyes.

“I want you to fix my daughter,” she told me.

I blinked.

“Sorry? You . . . I mean . . . wha—”

“I’m not saying it’s *all* your fault,” she continued. “That bloody tiny-di – whoops! Sorry Laura. I mean small-penised man harassing her and then . . . well . . .” she trailed off and swallowed, her eyes going down to look at her feet. “Well *that* would affect anyone. But . . .” She looked me in the eye and put her hands on her hips. “I don’t know what happened between you, but I know you hurt my daughter too. And she’s . . .” her eyes were glassy now and she swallowed again, “she’s not the same. It’s like she’s been switched off. I want you to switch her back *on*.”

“Now, now Sheena,” Mum said softly, guiding Sheena over to her cup of tea. “We’ll sort it out. Don’t you go getting upset again.”

“How did you two . . .?” I rubbed the back of my neck, my brows drawing together. “I mean how are you even in contact? I thought . . .”

“I told you – Sheena is friends with Bunty. It wasn’t hard to get her number. And after I learned what happened to Kira, I had to contact her. Besides, it’s been *wonderful* opening up my social circle. I’d never been to a naturalist campsite before, never even—” she whispered as if the police were bugging her every sentence, “—never partaken in *special brownies*. Not until I met Sheena.”

My eyebrows went up into my hairline. The idea that my own unwaveringly sensible mother could ever be a potential source of political scandal was not something that would have crossed my mind before Kira.

“Look at you,” Mum’s tone was now soft as she stirred her tea and contemplated my expression. “So shocked. Always so serious. Always doing the right thing, the sensible thing. And you see, I know it’s my fault. I let you take on too much when I was ill.” She turned to Henry. “You’re not the only one to have suffered with depression, darling. The difference is, when I went down that black hole my husband was working all the hours God sends, and I

left a nine-year-old to look after his four-year-old brother.” She turned to Sheena. “I lost a baby, you see. Still birth. It was a little girl. Things were . . . difficult afterwards. Fergus went back to work too soon. I was too proud to ask for help – too much pressure for a nine-year-old boy. I let him down.”

“Mum, that’s not true. You–”

“Oh, I might have been there physically. I might have been putting meals on the table, but you were the one that woke up with Henry’s night terrors. You were the one signing his permission slips so he could go on the school trips. You taught him to read, for goodness sake. You always were so earnest, so good at taking care of everyone else, even wanting to save the world. But along the way, you forgot to find *your* joy. And I forgot what was important. I thought success in your career would make you happy, but you’ve been anything but happy over the last two months. I have a feeling this girl was helping you find joy, and your father (who I might add is still banging on about her saving his life) feels terrible that he might have got in the way of that. So, I want you to listen to Sheena, and then you’re going to fix Kira, just like you’ve fixed everything else you’ve ever come across that’s broken. Just like you did when you were nine years old.”

Kira

“I really don’t think I’m up to this,” I said under my breath as I trudged through the undergrowth towards an out-of-the-way part of Epping Forrest.

“Come on, Ki Ki,” said Libby, giving me a little push from behind. “You’re always telling me how awesome this thing is, you can’t flake out on us now.”

“Okay, fine,” I said. “But I don’t know why you’re so bloody keen to go this year. Whenever I’ve asked you before, you’ve told me you had better things to do than ponce about with a load of hippy weirdos in the forest.”

“Well,” she said, putting her arm around me with a little difficulty, seeing as a baby was strapped to her chest. “I love *this* hippy weirdo, so maybe I thought it was time to suck up a bit of Wiccan forest action.”

“I’ve always secretly wanted to come,” she said in a quiet voice. “But . . . I didn’t really have the – how would you term it, Kira? The lady-balls to make myself do it when you asked me. You know what I’m like with new people, and I’m not so keen on . . . well . . .” she lowered her voice to a whisper, “public nudity.”

I rolled my eyes. “X, you know I made that up, right? My mum and her peeps don’t really prance about the fire singing in their birthday suits.”

“Oh well, I must say that’s a bit of a relief.”

“The only one that takes anything off is the poor bastard they’ve dragged in this year to chant around.”

“Oh! What fun,” Libby said, “bit of eye candy.”

“Last year it was Bev’s husband Geoff, so I wouldn’t get your hopes up – it’s not exactly *Love Island*.”

“You said ‘bastard’, Auntie Kira,” Rosie put in. She’d insisted on coming along and, after Jamie had been reassured that it was all PG rated activities, he’d allowed it. Although I wasn’t sure how sensible a decision that was. The whole point of tonight was female empowerment – Rosie was empowered enough, in my opinion. “That’s one pound.”

“Badgering hell, Rose Pose, that’s a bit steep, isn’t it?”

“I wish Jamie had never suggested the fricking swearing jar – it’s turned her into a right little Alan Sugar. She’ll be able to buy her own flat screen telly soon the way she’s going.”

“Another two pounds, Auntie Ki Ki, and one pound from you, Mummy.”

“I didn’t swear!” I protested, giving her little shoulder a small shove. She shoved me back twice as hard, nearly sending me into an oncoming tree.

“Badger is a swear word *to you*, and hell is *definitely* a swear word – a blasphemous one.”

“Badger is not a swear word.”

“It is when *you* say it – it’s all about context.”

“Who’s teaching you this stuff? You’re eleven, for God’s sake.”

A small sound came from Millie and I glanced over at her to see her biting her lip. This is what you get when geniuses spend too much time with other geniuses. Millie and Rosie should be separated at all times.

“That’s another pound, Auntie Ki Ki.”

“Look, just take a twenty and shut up.”

“Shut up’s fifty pence.”

I grabbed the little madam and used one of my arms to put her in a headlock whilst tickling her with the other. She squealed and her little hand made its way into my side, right where I was most sensitive. Before I knew it, we’d fallen into the leaves and I was laughing. Rosie was laughing too, until she saw my face and froze. My smile faded and my chuckle died slowly as I

saw her serious expression.

“Hey. You okay, kid?”

She launched herself at me and hugged me so fiercely it knocked the wind out of me for a moment. When she pulled back, her face was still serious.

“I’ve missed you,” she told me.

I frowned.

“But I’ve been right here. I see you all the time.”

“No, you haven’t.” She shook her head. “Not my real Auntie Ki Ki – the cheeky one that giggles and swears and tickles me. You’ve been gone for *ages*.”

“Ah.” I kissed her cheek and felt my eyes sting. “Sorry, little louse,” I said, my voice a little choked, but I managed not to let any tears fall. I knew I hadn’t been myself since the attack. I’d tried to hide it from the kids, but of course a child as intuitive as Rosie was bound to notice. I was no longer staring at walls and flinching at every small sound, but I still wasn’t back to being me. To be honest, I was starting to think I’d never be back to the self I was before. I suspected there was a new version of Kira Murphy ready to come out now. Maybe that wasn’t altogether a bad thing.

And, try as I might, I couldn’t get Barclay out of my head. I missed the bloody cockwomble. As the shock of the attack faded and my emotions began to return I started to realise just how much. But I couldn’t reply to his emails. I couldn’t bring myself to trust him again. I knew he rang Mark and Millie to check up on me. I knew he hadn’t given up, but I just wasn’t sure I could take that risk again. Maybe that was part of the new more cautious Kira now. Maybe I’d lost *my lady balls*.

“I don’t want you worrying about me, okay?”

“Come on, you two,” Libby said, grabbing both our hands and hauling us both to our feet with her superhuman mum strength. Her eyes were a little glassy, and when I looked over at Millie, I saw she was the same.

“Soppy freaks,” I grumbled, but as soon as I was on my feet I was pulled into a fierce group hug instigated by Millie – not that she could even physically make it that close to us with how big her bump was now. I was almost proud of her. My inappropriate hugs were definitely rubbing off on her.

“No time for that, my darlings,” Mum’s voice came through the trees and then the woman herself appeared from behind a large horse chestnut.

“We’re about to start.”

Mum was barefoot and, seeing as it was mid-summer in England, of course the forest was a bog – but muddy feet had never fazed my mother.

“Here we are,” she told us as she dragged us through to the clearing. Maureen from Mum’s rambling group came up to us and threw flower garlands around our necks. I’d been one of the mugs Mum had forced into making the damn things, so I did not appreciate them being ‘thrown’, but whatever. I settled for giving Maureen a dark look. Mum hustled us into the large circle of people, all holding hands to form a ring around the clearing. It was mostly women dressed like Mum (flowery garlands, flowing maxi-dresses and bare feet), but there was a smattering of men in the mix: the usual suspects – husbands like Geoff who’d been dragged along and forced into linen trousers, which was about as New Age as he was prepared to get.

My hand was gripped by a surprisingly large one to my left as Rosie took my other one. I turned to see Henry smiling down at me.

“What the–?” I broke off when I saw Mrs Lucas the other side of him, holding hands with an excited Kim. Mrs Lucas gave me a small wave and a wink. She was still wearing her twinset with matching neck scarf, but I saw Mum had managed to get a couple of wildflowers into her hair. “I–I . . . what’s going on?”

Henry gave my hand a squeeze, chuckled and then looked into the centre of the circle. Okay then. I turned my head to follow the direction of his gaze and I froze.

Mum had flounced into the centre and picked up a tambourine, (Margot was on the ukulele, Sue the recorder), but that’s not what short-circuited my brain.

Barclay.

Jeans, bare feet, t-shirt, flower garland . . . holding a triangle. My eyes went wide and my mouth dropped open. Mum shook her tambourine to get everyone’s attention.

“Eyes on me, ladies,” she told everyone. “And gentlemen. I must say I’m pleased we managed to encourage so many chaps this year. We’ll start with *An Ode to the Forest*.”

Barclay and I were staring at each other. I frowned at him, my eyes flicking down to his triangle. His face split into a wide grin and, just like his brother, he *winked* at me. Everyone started singing the natty folk song that we kicked things off with every year. Even Barclay was singing.

Barclay . . . was singing a folk song.

And playing his triangle. In fact, he had a white-knuckle grip on said triangle and a look of fierce concentration every time he struck it. Seeing that look on his face was enough to break through the shock and tension. Of course Barclay would take playing a goddamn triangle seriously. Of course he'd want to do it perfectly. I felt my own grin forming, and it wasn't long before I was shaking with laughter. The serious look on Barclay's face gave way to another grin. Something that looked strangely like relief flashed through his features.

"So, my darlings," said Mum as the song drew to a close. "This year we have another man wanting to bond with Mother Earth, wanting to free himself of his misogyny and step forward into the light of feminism."

I had a very bad feeling about what was coming next. Last year, Geoff had been 'freed from his misogyny' (likely because he'd been having it away with his secretary for the last few years and his wife, Bev, had found out and threatened to divorce him). This had involved Geoff stripping off to the waist (not something to ever be encouraged in Geoff's case) and being 'cleansed with Mother Nature' – or, in other words, covered in mud and 'lightly brushed' with foliage. Bev's light brushing had been enough to leave welts on poor Geoff, but then the bastard probably deserved it and, to be fair to him, he took it like a man.

"Barclay," she said. My heart sank. "Over to you."

"Thanks, Sheena," Barclay said as he started undoing the buttons on his shirt. I heard a collective intake of breath from the assembled women. As far as they were concerned, this was a much better turn of events than pot-bellied, sixty-five-year-old Geoff shedding his clothes.

"I've always been worried about doing the right thing, about being in complete control, about appearing a certain way, and I've always been a proud, stubborn bugger," he said, starting on the rest of his buttons. "But then I lost the woman I love – someone who doesn't give a toss about appearances, someone who's happy to be out of control once in a while, someone who taught me how to live in the moment and just *be*. I bugged it up because I let pride and my rules get in the way of my feelings. I took a free spirit and I tried to make her my kind of controlled – the kind that I thought she should have been. I tried to squash her personality to suit me. I confused her free spirit with being aimless, and I let it blind me to the determined, hard-working, kind, altruistic woman she is." He looked up at

me, his eyes burning into mine and his expression fierce.

“I used to think that only *my* way of saving the world was the right way. But there are lots of ways to make a difference. They don’t all have to come in a suit and be able to vote in the Houses of Parliament. So, I’m begging her . . .” he fell to his knees and his shirt fluttered to the ground. His muscular chest and six-pack had the whole circle riveted. I saw Bev start to drag a huge bundle of foliage towards him, including some alarmingly large branches. He focused his blue gaze on me. “I’m begging you, Kira, to forgive me. Even if it’s just so that we can be friends. I won’t ask for more.”

“Lovely speech, dear,” Mum said, giving him a pat on the shoulder. “Now we can progress to the mud cleanse.”

Barclay picked up the bucket in front of him and dumped the contents over his head. Thick mud saturated his perfect hair and down his face onto his chest and back. Bev had picked up the nearest branch, which looked suspiciously like part of a blackberry bush, thorns and all.

That was it for me.

Nobody was going to bash *my* Barclay with a bloody blackberry bush.

I dropped Henry’s and Rosie’s hands and shot forward into the centre of the circle, skidding to my knees in front of Barclay.

“SB, what are you doing, you daft article?” I lifted my hands to his muddy face and pushed the gunk back from his eyes and mouth. “Back off, Bev,” I snapped as I saw her approach from the corner of my eye. He smiled at me, his teeth bright white against the dark brown of the mud.

“I’m trying to apologise.”

“There are other ways to say sorry than stripping half-naked, covering yourself in mud, and letting a load of ageing hippies beat you with undergrowth.”

“I tried the other ways,” he said, looking so vulnerable that I couldn’t help but rest my forehead on his, despite the mud. “None of my ways were working. I had to try *your* way. This is the most Kira-esque apology I could think of.”

I let out a short laugh and rolled my eyes. “You mean this is the most fucking nuts way of apologising you can think of?”

“Yes, that too.”

“You hurt me,” I whispered. He closed his eyes slowly. When he opened them again, the pain there was so stark I almost regretted telling him the truth. But he *had* hurt me. I couldn’t leave it unsaid.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered back, his voice aching with regret.

“Don’t do it again,” I whispered back. Then, in spite of the mud, the hordes of post-menopausal ladies armed with foliage around us, or the fact that his mother was standing right next to us, I collapsed into him and he kissed me. The forest faded away, the cheers around us were blocked out – there was nothing but him. When we finally did break apart, he hauled me up to my feet and was grinning.

“You know I heard some camera phones going off,” I told him out of the side of my mouth. This was another side to New Kira – I was more wary now. “Maybe we should . . .”

“If the press want to print a picture of me and my girlfriend covered in mud in the middle of a feminist Wiccan rally, then they can have at it,” he told me, and he sounded so happy about the prospect that I believed him. He kept hold of me as we were swamped on both sides by friends and family, and he tried to get as much mud as possible onto his brother. In the middle of the crush he whispered in my ear again.

“You are . . . you are my girlfriend, aren’t you?” he asked, and his voice was so unsure, so hopeful, that my heart melted just that little bit more. I turned to him again, went up on tiptoes to kiss his muddy cheek then whispered into his ear.

“You betcha, Sex Badger.”

Epilogue

Start as we mean to go on

Kira

“I have just been to Buckingham Palace, where Her Majesty the Queen has asked me to form a new government, and I accepted.”

I could feel the huge grin stretching across my face as I listened to my husband, the new Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. We’d done some prep work for this last night – watched other new prime ministers’ first speeches. Not so that Barclay could be prepared (his speeches were always perfect – that was a given, despite his dislike of the spotlight), but so that *I* could see how wives/husbands conducted themselves during the speech. Most of them wore cool little smiles, they stood a respectable few paces to the side and back from their leader-of-the-fucking-country other halves, and generally acted like it was all the same to them.

I told Barclay I would try. He’d smiled and kissed me. He knew I wouldn’t be able to behave like I was just in a queue at Waitrose whilst he made his speech to the nation, and he didn’t care. After everything that had happened, I *had* become more cautious, more reserved, and just a little bit more conservative, but I *was* still Kira Murphy. Ah, actually, it was Kira Lucas now, but you get the idea. Anyway, the public knew me by now and, by all accounts, they only bloody loved me. Part of that was the great PR job courtesy of Martin – ‘weird’ became ‘quirky’, ‘hippy nonsense clothing’ became ‘high fashion’ (it helped that I toned down the amount of side boob and upper thighs I was prepared to show – only SB got full access to my side boob now), and ‘boundary pushing, dodgy festivals and strip club parties’ became ‘important money and awareness-raising events’.

One massive advantage was that I’d served half of all the political journalists tea at one time or another. There was a tea stand set up outside Number 10 now – and they all knew that was down to me. People – British people – remember who’s made them a decent brew in the past, and it always lifts their opinion of you. So now the British public thought I was a wacky national treasure. Apparently, I’d ‘humanised’ Barclay in their eyes; made

him look like less of a perfect, emotionless robot – he'd certainly won a convincing majority in this election.

“This will be a government of quality, social justice, and clean energy reducing living costs.” He looked up then, directly at the camera, and I could feel the tension as those piercing blue eyes bored into the eyes of the nation. “The government I lead will be driven, not by the interests of the privileged few, but by yours. We will do everything we can to give you more control over your lives. When we take the big calls, we'll think not of the powerful, but of you.” His voice rang with so much confidence, so much authority, that everyone held completely still to hear what he had to say. You could have heard a pin drop as he paused.

“When we pass new laws, we'll listen not to the mighty, but to you. When it comes to taxes, we'll prioritize not the wealthy, but you. When it comes to opportunity, we won't entrench the advantages of the fortunate few, we will do everything we can to help everybody, whatever your background, to go as far as your talents will take you.” It wasn't the first time I'd heard his speech, but I still got a tingle down my spine at his words and the conviction I knew was behind them.

“We don't have to choose between our environment and our standard of living any more – the new energy bill has seen to that. We can concentrate on building this country up to be a standard of hard working decency that the rest of the world can aspire to. For you, for your children and for your children's children.”

He nodded and the cameras around us went crazy.

“Thank you.” He lifted his hand and started to turn on his heel. Applause had broken out in the crowd. His eyes flashed to me and he flinched as people started crying out his name like he was their new Messiah. He wasn't, he was just a man – *my* man: one who worried about living up to the high expectations on his broad shoulders, and in that moment, I forgot all about decorum. All I saw was him and the uncertainty in his eyes. I rocked forward and launched myself at him like a human missile. He grunted on impact as I jumped, threw my arms around his neck, and wrapped my legs around his waist.

“Christ,” he huffed as he hugged me back, supporting me against him. Luckily, I'd worn a full-skirted polka dot dress or the nation would be getting mid-morning crotch and thigh shots. “You and mini-badger weigh a tonne.”

“Shut your face,” I told him, moving out from his neck to kiss him

right on the lips. Mini-badger was the name Barclay had given the tiny bean growing inside me. I'd found out that week, and my security had doubled overnight – overkill in my opinion, but I'd learnt over the last four years to pick my battles. Barclay went along with most of my crazy, but he wouldn't compromise on safety – even if I had more bodyguards than the average mafia boss. Anyway, I'd found ways to make use of them. Steve handed out the condoms at the sexual health clinic, like a huge contraception meter-and-greeter. Granted the man could have tried to crack the occasional smile, but his stern appearance did mean that most people actually took the rubbers rather than just brushing him off.

Barclay grinned at me then started walking forward. The new deputy prime minister opened the door for us and that was how we walked into Number 10 – with me wrapped around Barclay like a spider monkey.

Well, may as well start as we mean to go on.

Snow Ball Fighting Prime Minister

Barclay Lucas, arguably the most universally liked Prime Minister of this century, just upped his approval ratings today in the most unusual way. During a visit to a school in Scotland, which has been pioneering new techniques to engage its underprivileged pupils, eleven-year-old Marty McWilliam threw a snow ball at the Prime Minister's wife, Kira Lucas, hitting her on the back of her head. As her close protection officers mobilised to neutralize the perceived threat, Dr Lucas bent down to scoop up enough snow for her own snowball and pelted it back at Marty McWilliam in an impressive overhand throw. It hit Marty right in the face.

'Come one then, losers!' Kira had shouted at the kids through a wide smile. 'Is that the best you've got?' She then proceeded to make more snowballs and elbowed her husband to do the same, whilst shouting at their security team to 'Get off your arses and make yourselves useful. This is war!'

The ensuing snowball fight lasted for a good half hour and pitted the Lucases, their entire entourage and the teachers against all the children. Outnumbered and soaking wet, the Prime Minister's side eventually surrendered, but not before Kira Lucas had turned on her own husband to stuff snow down the back of his shirt collar.

The photograph below shows the moment a laughing Barclay Lucas picked up his wife and carried her to the waiting government car. She can be seen waving to the kids over his shoulder and making an 'L' sign at them

with her other hand.

Marty McWilliam, when asked to comment, said it had been, 'Bloody brilliant', and that Kira Lucas was, 'A bit mad, but still a legend'.

Kira Lucas Dancing Away Political Tension in India

There was some light relief during the tense negotiations between the Prime Minister Barclay Lucas and the Indian government regarding energy reforms. India has long relied on its coal industry to provide most of its energy and is finding the shift to nuclear fusion and renewable energy more challenging than most. The Prime Minister and his Indian counterpart have been grim-faced throughout most of the week long talks, but that tension was broken tonight during a state dinner where a Punjabi folk dancing group took to the stage.

After the first couple of performances, the dancers encouraged some of their audience to join them. Kira Lucas was the first to volunteer and gave a vigorous, if somewhat rhythm-free, attempt. The performers and the audience alike were in fits of laughter over the enthusiastic redhead's Bhangra moves. It was the first time that many of the politicians involved had cracked a smile all week. And, if the Indian press today is any indication, she has captured hearts across the country, as has her Prime Minister husband – pictured below laughing into her neck before kissing her when she finally made it back off the stage at the end of the dance.

Prime Minister Bowled Over After Second Term Victory

Barclay Lucas was brought to his knees last night after the announcement that he would be Prime Minister for a second term. He was in his constituency when he heard the result of the election and, as he walked up to the podium to make his victory speech, his wife Kira Lucas and their two children, Henry, aged four and Lily, aged two, ran at him full pelt. The impact of his excited family took him off guard and they all went crashing to the floor. Then, his three-year-old niece, Lottie, broke away from Henry and Kim Lucas to join the pile up, and it was several moments until the Prime Minister could be disentangled from them. He made his acceptance speech with a two-year-old sitting on his shoulders, two other children wrapped around each leg, and his wife holding his hand.

Thank you so much for reading *Anything but Easy*. If you have a moment, please leave a review: they are so unbelievably important and really appreciated.

Millie's story *Limits* and Libby's story *Beg Borrow or Steal* are both available to buy on Amazon or on Kindle Unlimited now.

Read on for the first chapter of *Beg, Borrow or Steal*.

Beg, Borrow or Steal

Chapter 1

Sleepy Girl

Jamie's gaze swept through the young, eager faces of the medical students in front of him, and he grinned. He loved teaching the newbies. Straight from their first two pre-clinical years, with no practical experience yet and barely out of their teens, they were generally keen as mustard to be in the thick of it. His smile faded as he caught sight of a girl near the back; like the other students, she was facing him and sitting upright in expectation, her pen poised over her notes; the only difference was that her eyes ... seemed to be closed.

He frowned and cocked his head to the side. After a few more seconds had passed he realized that she wasn't just looking down at her paper or taking a long blink; she was asleep. Jamie wound his way through the students' chairs to get to her, and the excitement on their faces faded to confusion as they followed his progress to the back of the room. Once he reached Sleepy Girl he squatted down so his face was level with hers, and held up his hand to the student next to her, who was about to nudge her awake.

He studied her for a moment: long, dark lashes casting shadows over her high cheekbones, an enormous amount of dark hair piled on top of her head and secured with what looked like a rubber band and various hair grips (almost as though some sort of battle had been waged against it to keep it in check), no make-up whatsoever (unusual, in his experience, in that age group), loose-fitting jumper over what looked to be a slim frame, dark smudges under her eyes, heart-shaped face surrounded by tendrils of the dark hair that had won their battle and escaped from their confines.

She looked too young to be out of school – and the most naturally pretty girl he had ever seen. He cleared his throat and her eyelids fluttered for a moment, but then settled back down.

'These are not the droids you're looking for,' she muttered bizarrely under her breath as she shifted to a more comfortable position in her seat, her

head gradually falling towards her friend's shoulder. The friend had a fair few actual dreadlocks in her hair, threaded with brightly coloured material. Jamie made a mental note to have one of the ward sisters give their 'appropriate appearance for clinical medicine' lecture – in all honesty both these girls looked like they needed it, but more would be achieved if they were both awake at the time of delivery. Jamie's hand reached forward to touch the sleeping girl's arm, but he thought better of it at the last moment and pulled away to rub the back of his neck.

'If it's not too much trouble,' he said, his deep voice sounding directly in front of her, causing her to start in her sleep, 'I might not be a hard-arse,' Jamie lied, 'but I do at least require my students to be conscious.'

She blinked twice, and he sucked in a breath when her gorgeous bright blue eyes snapped to his. This girl wasn't just pretty; she was almost breathtakingly beautiful. He felt like he had been punched in the stomach. Her mouth dropped open for a moment before her perfect small white teeth bit into her bottom lip.

'What the varp?' she whispered, sitting up a little straighter in her chair and glancing around the room at the other students, before her gaze came back to his. 'Um ... sorry, what was that?'

Her voice was soft and still a little gravelly from sleep, making him think about how she would sound in the morning ... He shook his head to clear it, reminding himself that he was *not* a pervert that lusted after the medical students, and rose back to standing so that he was no longer at her eye level. She was so attractive he actually felt a little shaken by it. Jamie made it a rule *never* to even flirt with the med students. He was thirty-three and a consultant. The age gap alone would make it inappropriate, but the fact that he was in charge of the medical student training for anaesthetics at St George's Hospital made it downright wrong. And Jamie never, ever did anything to risk his career; work and his reputation meant everything to him.

He turned away and stalked back to the front of the room, now even more annoyed with this girl, not only for falling asleep in the middle of his teaching (he was charismatic, funny – a bloody great teacher, goddamn it), but also for making him inappropriately horny while at least twenty sets of eyes focused on his every move.

'Right, well,' he snapped, dragging Sim-Man (the life-sized plastic 'patient' they used for simulated clinical scenario training) up the bed and dumping him with a loud thud down at the end. (Probably ill-advised, seeing

as Sim-Man cost at least £70,000, but Jamie was beyond clear thinking at this point.) ‘If we are all now fully conscious, I’d quite like to move this along. Who’s keen to try their hand at the first one?’

Silence.

Jamie wasn’t surprised. Simulation training was intimidating and potentially embarrassing; but it was by far the best way to learn. Better a solid fuck-up with a plastic dummy than a live patient. The days of see one, do one, teach one were on the way out in this generation.

He sighed – then caught sight of Sleepy Girl stretching in her chair. At this stage he would have hoped that the students would have grown out of the selfish-brat mindset enough not to party all night and come in hung-over and tired.

Suddenly a hand in the front row shot up and Jamie dropped his gaze to the stocky guy who had volunteered, giving him an encouraging smile. ‘Okay ...’ Jamie glanced at the chap’s ID, ‘Toby. Well volunteered. Come up here, mate.’ Toby stood next to Jamie, then crossed his arms over his chest, exuding confident-little-shit vibes in abundance.

‘I just need one more ...’ Jamie trailed off, and then a slow grin spread across his face as his gaze came to rest on Sleepy Girl. ‘You,’ he barked suddenly, causing most of the room to start in their chairs. He took in the horrified look on Sleepy Girl’s face with satisfaction as she realized he was pointing straight at her. ‘Yup, you; semi-conscious burning-the-candle-at-both-ends girl. Up you come. Time to learn medicine now.’

At the back of his mind Jamie knew he was being a bit of a knob, but somehow he didn’t seem to be able to claw back his normal controlled attitude. Sleepy Girl stood up slowly and made her way to the front of the room with obvious reluctance. She wasn’t that short, but next to Toby, and swallowed by that awful jumper, she looked tiny.

‘Okay, guys,’ Jamie said, laying his hand on Sim-Man’s shoulder and dragging his gaze away from Sleepy Girl. ‘This fella here is going to be our patient. He’s not like the Resus Annies you’re used to: he can breathe, he can talk, he can demonstrate clinical signs, and we use him to train you lot; because if you’re going to make mistakes it’s better that they’re with this chap than on the real thing.’ He moved to the computer monitor by Sim-Man’s head and started programming in the first scenario. An image of Sleepy girl’s serene unconscious face flashed through his mind, making him clench his jaw in frustration. Unfortunately he let his anger choose the

scenario for him. *Let her try and sleep through this one*, he thought to himself with an evil smile.

‘Right. Toby. And ...’ Jamie looked for Sleepy Girl’s ID.

‘I’m Libby,’ she said, tucking some of her hair behind her ears and shifting nervously on her flat shoes. Toby a.k.a. Cocky Little Shit was still cool as a cucumber.

‘Okay, Libby and Toby. I’m the ward nurse and I’ve fast-bleeped you to the acute medical unit. It’s two in the morning. You come into the cubicle and this is your patient.’

Jamie pressed the button on the monitor and Sim-Man started convulsing on the bed, causing even Cocky Little Shit to jump with surprise. Libby blinked, before looking at Jamie with a panicked expression. An uncomfortable ten seconds passed whilst Jamie suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

‘It’s shaking,’ Toby said, frowning down at Sim-Man. Jamie pressed another few buttons and foam started coming from Sim-Man’s plastic mouth. ‘What the fu – ’

‘Age? Medical history?’ Libby’s now-alert voice cut Toby off. She had come to stand next to Sim-Man’s head, opposite Jamie, and had started to check the airway.

‘Forty, diabetic, alcoholic,’ Jamie rattled off, watching as she efficiently tilted Sim-Man’s head back and lifted his chin.

‘Um ...’ Libby hesitated for a moment and colour swept high across her cheekbones as she bit her lip. Jamie’s breath left him in a sudden whoosh as he took her in; she was insanely beautiful. Control was important to Jamie and he was annoyed to feel it slipping as he looked at her. Coming out of her trance, she felt in Sim-Man’s neck for his carotid pulse. ‘We need to do a BM and I need some rectal diazepam.’ She turned to a frozen Toby. ‘Can you help me roll him?’

Toby snapped out of his inertia and stepped forward to help roll Sim-Man so that Libby could give the rectal diazepam.

‘Okay that was a good start, you two,’ Jamie said after they had both been working on Sim-Man for a few more minutes: he had stopped fitting and had a Gudel airway in place. ‘Libby, nice effort for your first time. Toby, don’t worry, a lot of people freeze up in the first scenario with Sim-Man; you’ll get used to him.’ Toby’s face was flushed and his mouth was set in a hard line, but he gave a short nod. ‘Can one of you tell me what you forgot

though? What do you want to be happening now?’

‘We should have intubated him,’ Toby said quickly, eager to make up for the last ten minutes.

‘Give him a chance, slugger,’ Jamie replied with a small smile. ‘And remember you’re only an F1 in this scenario, you wouldn’t be going around tubing people.’

‘Call for help,’ Libby cut in. ‘We didn’t call for help.’

‘Yes!’ Jamie smiled across at Libby and then watched in fascination as her gorgeous face broke into a wide grin. In contrast to her perfect features, her smile was just slightly off balance, with one side of her mouth hitching up a touch more than the other. Strangely, that added even more to her appeal. ‘You guys need a senior review and possibly an anaesthetist – like *me* – as everyone knows we’re the best at handling acutely unwell patients.’

What? Why was he boasting about his specialty like some sort of insecure wanker? He cleared his throat to continue. ‘In this scenario I wouldn’t even have blamed you for putting out a crash call.’

Jamie tore his eyes away from Libby’s wonky smile when he heard a muffled snort from the other end of the bed. He turned to see Toby stalking back to his seat, red-faced and with his jaw clenched so tight that a muscle was ticking in his cheek. He heard a small sigh from Libby as she returned to hers. Jamie was still watching Toby’s face as she walked past him, and frowned when he caught a surprisingly fierce expression – one of actual rage and loathing – flash across the boy’s features.

‘Libby-Lou.’ Libby heard Kira hiss and felt her shoulder being shaken. She pulled away slightly and burrowed her face further into her arms on the table. ‘Come on, Libs. I have cancer-laden processed food of Satan, plus evil corporate-giant caffeinated drinks.’

Libby’s eyes flickered as the delicious smell of bacon wafted up to her nose. Before she could manage to open them fully however, her eyelids were both forcibly pulled back Clockwork Orange-style, so she was made to look at Kira’s frustrated little freckle-covered face. Those green eyes stared back at her with concern. ‘Come on, loser. I had to set aside nearly all my principles to buy you this stuff. You know I’m a vegan this month and I’m boycotting all big corporate products.’ Libby managed to push up to her elbows and laid her head on Kira’s shoulder, on top of her dark red, partially

dreadlocked hair.

‘Ugh,’ Libby grunted, stretching out feebly towards the bacon bap just out of her reach. Kira rolled her eyes and gave the bap a shove in Libby’s direction.

‘Are you totally non-verbal today or what?’ Kira asked. Libby was attempting to open the bottle of Fat Coke, prompting Kira to sigh, snag it from her and twist off the top before passing it back.

Libby nodded and took a life-restoring swig of the good stuff. She’d feel better in about ten minutes after the sugar and caffeine kicked in, and then she’d have about an hour before crashing.

‘I love you, Ki-Ki,’ she said as her teeth sunk into the soft bread and bacon with just the right amount of ketchup. ‘I wish we were lesbians and we could live together in a lesbian commune for the rest of our lives.’

‘Libs, we all wish we were lesbians. But I’d like to point out that that wasn’t what you were saying earlier after your little sesh with Triple G.’

‘Bugger off,’ Libby muttered, her mouth still full.

‘I’d like to show him a scenario or two,’ Kira said through a smirk. ‘I’d scenario that boy’s arse off.’

‘He’s hardly a boy, Ki-Ki,’ Libby put in, frowning down at her bacon. ‘He’s ... I don’t know ... thirty or something. And he’s in charge of training. You shouldn’t be inappropri – ’

‘Oh come on, goody-two-shoes. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it? Those smoldering eyes, that strong jaw, ripped body. If he’d have got me up there I’d have been bent over Sim-Man crying “Oh teacher please help me save the patient. Let’s save him *real* good.”’

Libby choked on her Coke, trying to stifle her laughter. ‘Shut up, Kira,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘The whole bloody canteen can hear you.’

Kira rolled her eyes. ‘Lighten up, loser. I’m trying to inject some life into your zombie-self with my hilarious banter.’ She turned to Libby and raised her eyebrows. ‘I suppose it’s a lost cause asking if you’d come out tonight?’

Libby grimaced at even the thought of a night out in her sleep-deprived state and shook her head so vigorously that the elastic straining to contain her hair popped free, leaving the heavy mass to settle down her back, across her shoulders and around her face. She growled as she looked under the table for the elastic, wishing, not for the first time, that she could just cut

the whole sodding ridiculous lot off; but for Libby, as with a lot of other things in her life, that was not going to happen.

‘Where did it ... ?’ she trailed off as she noticed that Kira now had her hand over her mouth in horror. ‘What?’ Libby asked, tucking her hair behind her ears. Kira widened her eyes at Libby to almost comical proportions; then she jerked her head to the side, towards the next-but-one table. Libby looked across and saw her hair band resting on the top of a plate of pasta. The fork that was suspended over it, held by a large, male hand, slowly lowered. When she finally dragged her gaze up to see whose food she had contaminated, she froze. Familiar hazel eyes stared back at her and she took in a sharp breath of surprise. It was him: Dr Grantham, the anaesthetist from this morning, who had already been labelled Triple G: ‘Gorgeous Grantham the Gasman’. She stood up from her chair, feeling her face heat and wishing fervently that the floor would swallow her up. Kira snorted a suppressed laugh.

‘Uh ... hi, Trip ... I mean, Dr Grantham,’ she said once she had reached his table. ‘I’m so sorry but ...’ She trailed off as he hooked her hair band with his fork and held it up. She snatched it off and screwed it up into a tight fist despite the pasta sauce covering its underside. ‘Sorry,’ she whispered.

‘It’s fine,’ he clipped in that cut-glass accent of his. Libby had done a fairly good job of neutralizing her own accent over the last two years but she knew it still held a slight, unmistakable Cockney vibe. For a moment she couldn’t move. Maybe it was the sleep deprivation, but she became hypnotized by the sight of a small muscle ticking on his tanned and stubble-covered jaw.

‘I’m sorry but do I know you?’

Libby turned her head sharply and took in the attractive Mediterranean-looking man sitting opposite Triple G who had asked the question and was looking up at her with curious eyes and a wide, bright, dazzlingly white smile. Libby stiffened.

‘No.’ She forced a smile. ‘No, we’ve not met.’

‘But I could swear I ...’ The man trailed off, his dark eyes narrowing.

‘Um ... thanks,’ Libby said, frantically gathering up her hair and trying to stuff it back into the band. ‘I’d better get – ’

‘Oh ... that’s it!’ Mediterranean Man said suddenly as she was turning away, and a cold feeling of dread swept over her. ‘I know where I’ve

seen you!’ He was excited now, his finger raised and pointing at her. Her hands dropped down from her hair-wrangling and she turned to him. She gave a tiny shake of her head and her wide eyes pleaded with him to stop. The grin on the guy’s face slowly dimmed and he blinked once.

‘Sorry,’ he said quietly. ‘My mistake, okay?’

Her eyes closed briefly in relief before she gave a quick nod and rushed back to her table. Once she had sat back down she found that she had lost all appetite for the now rather sad-looking bacon sandwich, and pushed her tray away. She glanced to the side as she continued to bundle her hair up into the elastic, stuffing hairpins in as she went for good measure. Triple G was frowning across at Mediterranean Guy, asking him something. Luckily for Libby, the man just shook his head and avoided eye contact. Whether he didn’t want to admit where he had seen her before, or whether he had taken pity on her, she wasn’t sure.

Some men could be decent.

Most were scum.

She should know.

***Beg, Borrow or Steal* is available to buy on Amazon and also to read on Kindle Unlimited now.**

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About the author

Susie is a general practitioner in Dorset. Things have been a little crazy in the NHS of late for both her and her husband (also a doctor working in anaesthetics). Reading and writing has kept her sane. She is so grateful to all her fab readers and reviewers for their ongoing support - it really has meant the world to her.

When she's not working or writing she's looking after her four scrummy little boys (well, one might not be so little but it's the mental age that counts!).

Please use any of the links below to connect with Susie. She really appreciates any feedback on her writing and would love to hear from anyone who has taken the time to read her books.

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