

Jenn Matthews

*Hooked  
on  
You*



# Prologue

## CHALK & SILENCE

“SAMI.” OLLIE IGNORED THE SMELL of burning rubbish that, as usual, hung in the air. She held up her hand to the dark grey, scratched wall behind her. Who needed a blackboard when the walls themselves were just fine? “Can you complete these sums?”

Sami rounded his desk, grinning at his friends. He rubbed his hands together.

Ollie swept her arm outwards across the wall, as if the sums were a grand painting that Sami was allowed to add to. The rest of the children whooped as he arrived in front of the numbers and saluted Ollie, who returned the gesture.

She was glad she was able to treat the children with such enthusiasm—Iraq wasn't the most peaceful place, and she hoped she could bring some joy to their lives, even if it was just during school hours. The dwindling number of children each week made it difficult to retain her sunny attitude some days though—the boys collected into gangs as soon as they could hold a rifle, the girls lost to marriage to a man twice their age.

*Why can't I do more? They deserve to be taught everything.* Ollie supposed she would have to stick to maths and English as the British Army had prescribed. Some small dribbles of science where it didn't interfere with their beliefs. *I wish I could take them all home.* The collection of children, from the ages of five to twelve, all learned the same things at the same time. Sometimes, teaching such a mixture of ages was difficult, but it worked well. Ollie made sure she gave each child work they were able to do, and she

encouraged the older children to help the younger ones in a sort of buddy scheme. The older kids got to express what they had learned, and the little ones had one-to-one tuition, something they usually would not be able to afford.

One of the oldest pupils, Sami stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth and completed the maths problems on the wall. When he finished, all the children clapped, a response Ollie had encouraged from the first day, and something she made sure each child got in an equal measure, a collective appreciation of anyone who made an effort.

“Very good job,” Ollie said, giving them all her widest smile. As inadequate as their curriculum was, they at least took joy from what little she was giving them.

Sami skipped back to his seat.

All her children looked at her with curious eyes, eager to learn. She explained the results Sami had chalked up and then looked across the class. A field of confident faces shone back at her.

*I did that.*

When the lesson was complete, Ollie sent all the children outside to play and dig up worms from the dusty ground. Their next lesson would be to study them and see who could find the longest one. Using things they could find in nature was a good way to get something simple like using a ruler into a lesson. She stood in her classroom, taking in her surroundings anew: a cement building with no glass in the windows and no doors in the frames. The sky out the window was cloudy today, and the hills in the distance were more grey than green. The little town of tents, old caravans, and makeshift huts sprawled across the valley, power lines stretching overhead.

Ollie startled at the sight of Zoe hanging around just outside the classroom doorway.

She entered the classroom and strode up to where Ollie stood trying not to smile too brightly. Her heart thudded in her ears, louder than the tatty football the kids were bouncing against the exterior wall of her classroom.

Zoe wore beige linen trousers and a plain white polo shirt. Her sturdy boots, the colour of the sand floor, had frayed laces. There was a smudge of mud on her face. Her hair was scraped back into a ponytail, a few wisps of it tickling her face.

Ollie kept her distance and relaxed a little as she realised Zoe was doing the same. She reached out, wanting to rub the mud from Zoe's face, but they were too far apart.

Zoe tilted her head to one side, her eyes shining.

*We can't.* Ollie dropped her hand.

"Great lesson." Zoe leaned against one of the more sturdy-looking desks. "They really respond so well to you."

A shy look passed between them.

"I know." Ollie flicked her hair back.

"Mad isn't it? You a PE teacher and now look at you." Zoe's eyes shone. "Teaching maths and spelling."

Ollie shrugged. "They don't need to learn the finer rules of netball or how to run to a bleep test. They need the basics."

In the moment of quiet, Ollie continued to wish she could take them all away—Zoe, Sami, all the kids outside on the concrete somehow finding a way to still be kids in a place like this—to somewhere where 2 a.m. raids didn't happen.

Zoe shook her head. It was as if she knew where Ollie's thoughts were. "The radio said there was an airstrike this morning. Not far away." Her face was tight.

Ollie's gaze travelled down her body. Zoe's knuckles were white as she gripped the desk. It made her reach automatically for Zoe again. Huffing to herself, Ollie dropped her hand. "It's all right. Fadhil said they won't go near the schools. Not the new ones, anyway. Some kind of unspoken rule, apparently."

"I know." But she folded her arms over her chest.

Silence spread between them. Ollie leant against the opposite desk.

The loud, exuberant voices of a group of children playing on the concrete courtyard caught her attention. They had no need for unbroken toys, or mobile phones, not like Kieran and Helen, who had always wanted the next new thing growing up and who now relied on tablets and smartphones to entertain themselves. They seemed overly privileged compared to the children here.

Zoe shuffled closer until the side of her boot touched Ollie's. Ollie dropped her head and looked at her own boots—army issue and the only

part of her uniform she wore while in her teaching role. When she looked up again, Zoe's eyes were dark.

"Tonight?"

Ollie's mouth opened but no sound came out.

"I've missed you." Zoe chewed her lip.

"I've..." Ollie toed the floor. "I've missed you too." Then she shook her head and stared straight at her. "But it's... I shouldn't."

Zoe pressed her lips together and closed her eyes for a beat. "I feel like the bubble's bursting around us. Snapshots of your husband and family keep breaking through."

Ollie winced and nodded. She didn't trust herself to speak.

"It's not the same for me. I know it isn't. I don't have a spouse or kids or..." Exhaling, Zoe gestured in the dusty air "And I've never cheated on anyone. Not in my whole life. But I can imagine, at least."

"I love our bubble." Ollie's voice was thin, breathy, as if she had no energy to push it out of her. "But you're right. Things keep getting through." She pushed her fringe back out of her eyes. "Every time I think of my kids..." Tears squeezed her throat.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry we got into this mess. But I can't help the way I feel about you."

"I can't help the way I feel about you." She felt stronger these days, like Zoe's presence was building her up, brick by brick.

*It's wrong, though. All this lying. All this deceit. But she makes me feel like I'm actually alive. I've never felt like this at home.* Ollie studied the woman across the space between them. *Maybe I'm at home when I'm with her.*

"All right," she said in the end, tremors washing over her as she felt sick for a heartbeat. She gripped the side of the desk and closed her eyes. "Tonight."

The old football thumped against the wall. Kids laughed.

"Those textbooks will be here tomorrow," Zoe's tone brightened.

*I feel better, too, knowing we'll be together tonight.* "That's fan—fantastic. The kids will be so excited."

"They will. Tota was telling me yesterday that she's never held a new book—always old, scrappy ones with half the pages missing." Zoe rubbed the rubber sole of her boot against Ollie's.

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They couldn't. Not here. Ollie was about to speak, but her thoughts were interrupted by a low moan.

"What is...?" She lifted her head.

The noise was continuous and getting louder. The walls began to shake, the floor too, and they both stood properly. This was all too familiar.

It felt like slow motion, the missile hitting the town the school nestled inside. The noise that erupted and then the screams. And then such silence.

*I'm looking down at the sky. Something hurts.*

Then there was only blackness. Then, a bit later maybe, the feeling of being carried. She heard the unmistakable whirring of army helicopter blades. *What time is it? Why don't I hear the kids anymore? Where am I?*

Ollie felt herself being turned sideways, hands skimming her spine from top to bottom. Her eyes focused finally. The school was no longer there. In its place concrete pieces blocking the view of the grey hills. *Where am I?*

She was turned onto her back once more. A warm, soft hand held hers and pressed her fingers against a wet cheek as they rose into the air, heading for safety.

# Chapter 1

CHAIN STITCH (CH)

## *Five years later*

ANNA PULLED INTO THE DRIVEWAY and smoothed her hair down against the back of her head. *A good day at school. And perhaps a lovely meal out tonight.* Her heart beat quickly and she checked her make-up in the rear-view mirror. *Twenty minutes until dinner. Just enough time to get those less-than-hardy begonias into the greenhouse.*

As she swung into the house, Bethany appeared from the living room. “Mum, seriously, Timothy’s gonna do his nut in. You’re ten minutes late.”

“Oh shush, will you?” Anna hung up her coat and exchanged her work shoes for her gardening shoes. “It’ll be ready in a few minutes. So long as his fish and chips are on the table at six, he won’t ‘do his nut in’, as you put it.”

Bethany scowled and shuffled into the garden with her mother, her mousy-brown long hair catching the fading sunlight. “Gardening? Again?”

Chuckling, Anna set about lugging the hefty pots with various plants in them over the lawn to the greenhouse, moving them one by one inside. “Darling, I like to garden. And these little sweeties won’t survive unless they’re somewhere a bit warmer.”

“You literally just finished book club. Can’t you sit down for five minutes?” Bethany had her arms folded. She scuffed a concrete paving slab with her slippered toe.

“Things to do, plants to move.” Anna groaned, and her back ached as she pulled a particularly heavy pot over the threshold.

Bethany made no move to help her. “Why don’t you go out? Call some of your friends? Don’t you have any friends? What about Jack? Or Patricia? Meet up with one of them.”

“Jack will be happily at home on his backside with a beer. And Patricia is busy, and too far away for any kind of impromptu get-together.” She thought about her best friend, living so far away these days. And then Jack, her gentle colleague, with fondness. *Actually I had better text him and remind him about tomorrow’s staff meeting.*

“You’re as bad as one another.” Bethany tilted her head to one side, and her long hair dropped forward over her shoulder. “And Liam?” Her nostrils flared.

“Liam is on training, away for the week.” Anna looked up and brushed her hands together to rid them of the dust she’d collected. “I told you that.”

“Oh. Right.” Bethany looked out over the garden. “I must have forgotten.” When she turned back to Anna, her gaze had softened. “I usually zone out when you talk about him.”

Anna pretended to smack her around the back of the head as she passed her on the garden path, and they grinned at one another.

“So, fish and chips, and then what?”

“More Agatha Christie tonight, I think.”

Bethany rolled her eyes. “I’m going to go out on a limb and reckon you’ve read whatever book it is at least...” her hand flew through the air as if in search of something, “...eight times?”

“Nine.” Anna poked her tongue out.

Bethany returned the gesture. “You really need to get a life.”

“I don’t.” Anna continued into the house and went to the kitchen to turn on the oven. She stooped down for a moment. Her knees needed a heartbeat or two to gather themselves. She rose with a half-grimace.

Precisely ten minutes before teatime, Timothy arrived in the kitchen to set the table. He did this every night they ate together. It was his way.

“Anna,” he said, “you look happy. Did you have a nice time at the book club?”

“I did, thank you, Timothy.” Her hand hovered by his shoulder waiting for permission, which he gave with a nod. Their silent language. She squeezed his shoulder and then moved away.

“What books are the kids reading at the moment?”



She smiled more broadly. *He's making small talk. How very polite of him.* "Some C.S. Lewis. We started where you're supposed to, and that is, of course, the first book he wrote, not the first in the series."

*"The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe."* Timothy placed the mats, cutlery, and glasses on the table with pinpoint accuracy. *I never had such a neat table before he moved in.*

"That's right."

"You really do need to get a life." Bethany still had her arms folded.

Anna tipped chips and fish onto two trays and slid them into the oven. She checked the temperature quickly, then leaned against the work surface. "My life is just fine."

"Aren't you bored?" Some of the derision had faded from her eyes. She seemed genuinely curious.

Anna pulled at her bottom lip. She sighed deeply. "Maybe. I don't know. I just have so much on, what with the book clubs and work and the garden..."

"Get a man in. And Jack could do half the book clubs. He's English, too, you know. He does know books."

"I don't know." Anna pushed her fingers through her short hair. *It would take hours to explain how I run my things. I might as well simply carry on doing them myself.*

"At least think about actually leaving the house and going to do something that involves people your own age."

Anna narrowed her eyes at her daughter, only half-jokingly.

"You know what I mean." Bethany threw up her hands. "Or at least... maybe learn something new? Go do a craft or...buy a kit." Their eyes locked. A standoff. Bethany stepped into Anna's arms and wrapped her own around her. "Please, Mum. Just...find something that isn't work."

With her nose buried in her daughter's hair, Anna allowed the familiar scent of hair dye and hairspray to flow through her. When she pulled back, she plastered her best serious-mother look onto her face. "You've been on about this for weeks. If I say yes, will you be quiet about it?"

"I will." Bethany squeezed her triumphantly.

"I'll try, okay?" *Perhaps I do need something new. Something to instil a sparkle of something exciting into my life again. It's been nicely quiet, but it does feel like things have been dragging the last few years.*

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When Anna properly pulled back, Timothy was seated at the table, turning from one to the other with a quizzical look. "It's seven minutes to six and you haven't poured your wine yet."

She smiled fondly at him and went to the cupboard for a bottle. She could practically hear Bethany's eyes rolling behind her.

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The hedgehog key ring Ollie was constructing stared up at her with large friendly eyes. She plumped it up and attached the key ring finding to the small hoop she'd made in the top. *Some kid is going to love this.*

With a sigh, she looked around her shop. For over two hours no one had come in. *I suppose no one has extra money at the end of the month.*

The bell over the door tinkled.

Maybe if it was one of her regulars she could engage in some kind of conversation. Ollie looked up. Nope, nobody she knew. She relaxed back in her chair. *No one wants to be bothered the minute they come in.* The shop was a little overwhelming to some people. *I'll offer my assistance if she looks lost.*

The redheaded customer was standing stock-still with her chin in her hand, gazing around the floor-to-ceiling shelves, looking like she'd stepped into Aladdin's cave. Ollie reckoned the woman was about her height, perhaps an inch or so shorter. She looked curvy under her big red coat, and her hair was short but neat. Cinnamon-coloured freckles dusted her cheeks and her neck. Ollie blinked when her gaze trailed lower, and she stared out of the window for a moment to gather herself.

The shop was small, but Ollie tried to keep it well stocked with colourful things stacked high. She had a collection of regular customers who wanted a whole variety of activities, usually involving yarn. She was not going to call it "wool" as most of her products didn't contain ingredients from a sheep. Acrylic and nylon were easy to wash and cheap to purchase; cotton and mohair were more luxurious, but a little more expensive. Ollie had even heard of yarn being made from ostrich feathers, but had never been inclined to buy any.

She went back to watching the woman, who seemed to be about Ollie's age, as she looked around the shop. Ollie smiled at the curiosity that seemed to have ignited.

The woman turned full circle and caught Ollie's eye. Ollie widened her smile and tried to appear approachable until it got awkward and she broke the woman's gaze and attached a price tag to the hedgehog. When she looked back up, the woman was still standing there, one eyebrow cocked at the hedgehog.

"The kids go nuts for these." She stood, her hands flat on the desk. Time ticked by, and the woman still didn't speak. *Come on. I haven't got all day.* She tapped her finger against the desk. "What can I help you with?"

"I wanted some wool."

Ollie pushed away a grimace at the word. "Hundred percent or a blend?"

The woman blinked.

"What's it for?"

"Knitting," the woman said. "I want to make a present for someone."

"Okay." She rounded the counter and stopped next to her. While they both looked up at the shelves, Ollie snuck another glance at the woman and noted her tense stance. "Colour? Project?" she asked with growing curiosity. *Why does choosing yarn make her stressed?*

"Red," the woman said. "Maybe a scarf. Would that be easy?"

"Have you knitted before?"

The woman shook her head. "Figured it can't be that difficult. Was just going to find a how-to on YouTube."

Ollie held back her opinion on that idea "I prefer crochet myself. Bit more flexible."

"Is it easier?" The woman started to play with her fingers.

"I think it is, but I'm biased."

The woman eyed the hedgehog amid the collection of various other small animals with key rings sticking out of their heads. "Maybe I'll do that, then." She fingered a ball of yarn at eye level.

Ollie nodded. "That one would work for a scarf," she said. "Hooks?"

"Excuse me?" The corners of her mouth pulled upwards.

"D'you have a set of hooks? You'd need a five, maybe a five-and-a-half, for that thickness."

"No. I don't have hooks."

"This just going to be a one-project event, or are you planning on making a hobby out of it?"

The woman shrugged but took the ball of yarn and squished it with her fingers. “Not sure. My daughter is trying to push me into developing a hobby. She said crafty things are very *in* at the moment.” She smiled. “I’m not sure I’m that bothered about what’s *in* exactly.”

Ollie snorted and shrugged. “Me neither. I just do things I enjoy.”

“Well apparently I don’t have too many of those. I like to garden, read books. Wine. I like wine. But a woman cannot live on wine alone.” She continued to squish the ball. “Bethany says I need a hobby, something I can do when I’m not guzzling Merlot. Or perhaps instead of.”

“Sounds good to me,” Ollie said. “Crochet, then?”

“Okay.” She took another ball in the same colour from the little cubbyhole shelf and brought them to the till. “These, then. You think?”

“Great choice,” Ollie replied. “Hooks, though?”

“Hmm. Suppose I’d better.”

“Any trouble using your hands? Arthritis?”

Her arms folded with an indignant air.

“I have a regular customer in her thirties that uses padded hooks because her knuckle joints are painful.”

“Oh. Well, in that case, no.”

“I’d be out of a job if I couldn’t use my hands.” Ollie held out the pack of crochet hooks.

The woman took out her purse.

She rang through the items and put them in a paper bag. Money was exchanged. “What do you do?” Ollie asked.

“English teacher. Reams of marking and lesson planning. Book clubs after school.”

“Ah. Yes, I can’t imagine having arthritis with that career.”

“No.”

“YouTube, though?” Ollie’s lips squished into a tight O shape.

The woman nodded.

“No good. You should learn properly. Face-to-face lessons.”

“Are you offering?” Her eyebrows flicked up.

Olli smiled at the obvious tease. *Is she flirting with me?* No, she couldn’t be. “Well, I run a couple of classes. Tuesdays and Thursdays. Only a fiver a pop, and you get free cups of tea.”

The woman tilted her head to one side.

“No need to decide now,” Ollie said, grabbing one of her business cards from the counter. “Give me a ring if you’re interested.”

The woman took the card and looked at it for a moment. “I’ll have a go with YouTube first. If I need you, I’ll call.”

Ollie held a finger to her forehead in a tiny salute. “Speak to you soon, then.”

The woman pursed her lips but then smiled as she took her bag to the door.

Ollie allowed the grin she was holding back to spread.

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Anna put the paper bag beside the sofa and opened the box containing her dinner. The aroma set her mouth watering.

*Chicken chow mein. How naughty.* Her stomach made an impolite noise as she plated the food up and put Timothy’s portion in the microwave for later. She sat at her large oak table to eat, a glass of red wine set close by as she stared into space. *That woman is wrong; I’ll be fine with YouTube.* The Internet was an endless resource for things like crochet, how to re-grout the bathroom, how to wire a plug...

The first finished, she poured herself another glass and brought it into her cosy living room. Timothy was out at chess club and Bethany was out with friends—who knew what time that one would be home? Arthur was curled up in the other chair, his eyes closed in a content sort of way, his bushy tail twisted around his feet. On occasion, his pointy ears swivelled at some noise or other that she couldn’t hear.

Peace and quiet for once. Anna sighed deeply, fired up her laptop, and tapped *how to crochet* into the search bar on the YouTube website. While it loaded, she took out her ball of wool and fingered the softness.

Arthur lifted his head and wandered over. She scratched his ears as he purred. “Don’t even think about chasing my wool, mister.”

He purred some more.

She got out a hook and held it like a pen. “Right. Here goes.”

An hour later, she was about to throw the wool, hook, and laptop across the room. “What? What do you mean?” she shouted at the American woman on the screen. “Do what with *what?*”

Arthur was hunkered down with his backside in the air, his back legs ready. He sprang, but she managed to pull the wool and hook away just in time. She swept the back of her hand into his face. He hopped backwards. “No,” she said firmly.

His eyes were wide, as if he were admonishing her, not the other way around.

“This is not yours.”

He sat down, but his gaze snapped back to her wool. She huffed and closed the computer window. So far she had managed to make a very sloppy-looking knot in the soft red yarn. *Well, that’s no good.*

With his tail primly around his paws again, Arthur lifted one of them and patted Anna’s hand.

She pushed him away, then spent a while trying to unpick the mess on her hook before tying it tightly into a ball before snapping the end off and then throwing it to the floor. “Fine. Here.”

He chased the knot for a moment, then, when it didn’t move by itself, sloped indignantly back to his armchair.

“There’s just no pleasing some people.”

The woman on YouTube made it look so easy. *Why can’t my brain communicate the information to my fingers?* Anna couldn’t even keep the yarn straight, and she kept dropping the strand.

She drank a large amount from her glass, then plopped it down on the coffee table. Her handbag was calling to her. The business card was still inside. Darn That Yarn. She got the card out and placed it on the table. Did everyone feel like this when they started to learn?

*Arrogant woman.* She opened another window on her computer, searching for the same thing, but this time in Google. *Maybe written instructions will be easier.*

They weren’t.

She picked up her phone and found the number she wanted.

Liam answered. “Hi, Anna.”

“Do you happen to know of anyone who knows how to crochet?” she asked without preamble. “Or knit, for that matter?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think so. Odd question, though. How are you?”

“Frustrated. Annoyed. Trying to teach myself to crochet but failing miserably.”

He hummed, which made her smile. “Want me to come over? I have a bottle that is just begging to be drunk.”

“Tempting offer.” She snuggled into the cushions of her sofa. “But I do have marking to do. And Timothy will be back in a while. Just needed to offload. Sorry.”

“No probs. Always here for you if you need me.”

“Thanks. So, how’s your day been?”

They chatted for a while until he said he had to go: the football was about to begin. Her stomach felt warm at that—he would have missed it for her had he come over. *He would have enjoyed a visit with me much more than football.* Maybe she should have just invited him. An orgasm always made her feel less frustrated.

She put the TV on. A period drama was running but couldn’t really hold her interest. What was it with most TV shows being so boring nowadays? She put her wine down and snuggled deeper into the sofa.

The next thing she was aware of was a noise waking her up. When she opened her eyes, Timothy was staring down at her. *Wow, must have fallen asleep.*

“Are you ill?”

Anna shook her head. “No, I’m just tired.”

“Why aren’t you in bed, then?”

She smiled up at him. “I was trying to learn to crochet. But I suppose it’s simply not going to happen.”

“Why not?”

Arthur meowed, so Timothy went over to stroke his back.

“Maybe I don’t have a crochet brain. Or something.”

“What’s that?” He pointed at the card on the coffee table.

“The lady at the wool shop does classes,” she said. “It’s her card.”

“Are you going?”

“No.”

“Is it too expensive?”

“No.”

“Will you be working on the day it is scheduled?”

“No. She does them in the evening. Thursdays. No book clubs on Thursdays.”

“You should go to a class, then.”

Not for the first time, Timothy's way of seeing the world made her think more clearly. She nodded and sighed. *I really did want to prove the woman in the shop wrong. Damn.* "Okay."

He went into the kitchen, and the sliding noise of the bread bin opening carried through into the living room.

She took out her phone and stared at it for a while before dialling the number on the card.

"Hello?" said the woman on the other end, the last vowel drawn out.

Her shoulders relaxed somewhat. "Hi. My name's Anna. I'm... I came into the shop? Today?"

"Ah, yes." There was a pause. "Have you given up with YouTube, then?"

Anna laughed a bit and nodded even though the other woman couldn't see her. "I have. Could I book in for this Thursday coming?"

"Of course." The noise of shuffling and the click of a pen echoed in the background. "So you're Anna?"

"Anna Rose. Like the flower."

"Right. Okay. I'm Ollie, by the way. Williams. The class starts at seven. Well it's more a group, really. Some people bring in their own stuff to do. Most do actually."

Ollie sounded more friendly than arrogant now.

"And we're hoping to make a huge throw for the church hall. Everyone's started bringing in squares to contribute. We have a new project each week on top of that. But don't worry about that, not when you're a new starter. You'll be my only beginner, so I'll have plenty of time to go through everything."

"Great. Thanks." Anna touched the end of her chin with her finger. *I'd better be a good pupil.*

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The greasy-spoon café was somewhere simple and neutral to meet. It didn't serve alcohol. *No need to make them think I have more problems than I already do.* She tapped her fingers against the table. *Could do with a beer, though, to settle my nerves.* She shook her head vigorously until her brain felt like it was wagging around in her skull. *No. I just need to be calm, collected, and honest.*



When Helen and Kieran entered, Ollie sat up straight and then started to stand. Kieran laid a hand on her shoulder. “It’s fine, Mum. Stay sitting down.”

Ollie’s chest tightened, and she hesitated but stood anyway. “No, that’s okay.” She stepped up to Kieran and held one arm open for him. “I was hoping for a hug. That too much?”

Kieran glanced at his sister with worry in his eyes but stepped into Ollie’s arms despite Helen’s hard look. “Course not.”

At her son’s clean and familiar scent, Ollie’s whole body surged. *It’s been so long since I’ve held him this close. Since he was a kid, really. He never let me hug him when he was a teenager, and then all the business with the divorce.* She sank into him and tried not to cry when his long arms enclosed her.

Patting her back, he chuckled and moved away. “All right, no need to overdo it.” Ollie was glad he was nervous, because she felt like she was going to vibrate out of her boots any minute.

“It’s wonderful to see you both, really it is.” Her mouth clamped shut, and she inwardly rolled her eyes. *Calm and collected.*

Helen eyed her with a blank expression. She was an adult now, and Ollie could barely believe it. Apart from passing greetings, she’d last properly spoken to her daughter when she was fifteen. Ollie’s stomach clenched as she remembered the summer holiday she’d tried to take them both on three years ago. Images of Helen folding her arms and turning her back on her still haunted her every now and then.

*I can’t believe they’re both here.*

Ollie held out a hand to Helen, realising that a hug was too much to ask. Helen stared at her for a moment but then rolled her eyes and gripped Ollie’s hand firmly. They shook hands like business acquaintances.

*Better than enemies, I suppose.*

The kids sat, and Ollie went to the counter to get them cups of tea. She splashed out on a slice of cake for each of her children and a granola bar for herself.

Back at the table, she sat with her back like a plank of wood. Her hands stayed clasped on the table. “So...h-how are you both?”

Kieran, always the more talkative of the two, dived right into a story about his work. Then he complained about his new flat and how much his father had had to fix. *Things I could have fixed for him.* Ollie bit her lip and

chose not to comment. Her ex-husband deserved the privilege of being able to help their son. He hadn't caused all the mess—she had.

A stone of cool expression, Helen sat silently until the waitress arrived. Ollie watched her nervously as the waitress slid the chocolate cake in front of her. Helen looked down at it, and something resembling warmth passed across her face.

Ollie took a slow breath. "You always liked chocolate."

It took a long moment, but Helen's eyes lifted to her own. She said nothing, however.

"Aren't you going to speak to me?" Ollie asked, the pressure in her throat making the words sound like a plea.

Helen's shoulders sagged. "I am. I just..." She picked up her fork, her gaze intently on her cake. "I'm just not sure what to say."

*She hates me.* "I'm sorry about everything," Ollie whispered and blinked back the tears that gathered.

"You've said it a hundred times, Mum." Helen shook her head. "I just don't think it's worth saying it anymore. I know you're sorry. It doesn't mean anything yet."

"I know. I know." Ollie picked up her teacup, if only for something to do that didn't involve crying. She felt like she was breaking. *This isn't going to work. I'm never going to be the kind of mum I've always wanted to be, not now.* "I wish it would just all go away."

"What I don't understand," Helen said slowly, "is why you stayed with Dad for twenty years if you didn't love him."

"I did, sweetheart." Ollie sighed. "I did love him, whatever anyone thinks. I certainly did in the beginning."

"But then you fell in love with someone else?" Kieran asked carefully.

Ollie nodded. "It was over, romantically, with your father, before that. But yes."

Helen's head rocked from side to side, and her eyes darted about the space between her nose and her cake, as if Ollie's words were too much to process. "Why did you stay with him, though?"

"It was easy." Ollie decided to be honest. *There have been too many lies.* "I was away so much, it didn't seem to matter. When we were together, we were great, weren't we? Like a happy family."

Kieran smiled at her and placed his big hand over hers. She smiled back, and he squeezed her fingers.

“Reasonably.” Helen was still staring at her cake. She hadn’t taken a bite yet.

“I wanted to be home, but I wanted to be at work too. You know what my job meant to me.”

“You were always there, though. Never with us.” Helen picked up her fork and stabbed at the cake as if it might be alive.

“I know. Well, now I’m here, and I’m available. So long as I’m not teaching, or in the shop... You should come see the shop. I’d hope you’d like it.” She directed her words at Helen. “You always liked art, didn’t you? Not like Mister Monkey here.” She grinned at her son, who blushed modestly. Images of him up a tree with muck all over his face flashed in front of her eyes. The tears hiding on the brink receded just a bit.

“True.” Helen bit her lip and then took a forkful of cake. She hesitated, her gaze flicking up to Ollie before she ate it. Her face relaxed, even, and her mouth turned up ever so slightly at the corners.

Everything seemed to flop into a mess of relief in Ollie’s body. *Progress, indeed.* “We have card-making supplies, and little kits to make fabric animals. If you like one, you’ll definitely get a family discount.”

“I don’t want any handouts from you.” Helen’s fork clattered to her plate. She sat back in her chair. “It’s not going to make up for it. Any of it.”

“I just meant...” Ollie reached out to her, but Helen was out of her chair in a heartbeat.

“No, Mum. You can’t buy me off with promises of pretty things like I’m still ten years old. It doesn’t work like that.” Her hair bounced about her shoulders as she left the café.

Ollie slumped on one hand, her fingers sinking into her hair. A tear dripped down her wrist and into the shirtsleeve she had rolled up to her elbow.

A warm hand on her back made her relax somewhat. *At least my boy is still here.* She turned her head to one side on her hand and smiled sadly at him.

His hand smoothed up and down her spine. “You just need to give her time.”

“Where’s my little girl gone? The one that used to jump up and down when I came home from work? That terrific little girl that hung onto my legs when I was leaving on assignment?” She leaned heavily towards her son, and his arm circled her shoulders.

“She’ll come round, I promise. Just you see.”

“Kieran, I can’t do any more to make it right.” She sat up then, away from his embrace. “I didn’t mean to offend her. The family discount; I’d give it to any of our relatives if they’d just talk to me, or visit.”

Kieran nodded, his dark eyes soft. He looked so much like his father, who was a good man despite all he had been through. *All I’ve put him through.* Ollie swallowed and shook the tears away.

“Eat your cake, drink your tea.” She eyed Helen’s cake and pushed it into the middle of the table. “If she comes back, she can continue with hers.”

Kieran sipped his tea and started to munch on his cake. It made her stomach unclench just a bit as she watched him.

*One down, perhaps. One to go.*

\* \* \*

Red and orange leaves blew around Anna’s feet as she strode up the street towards the shop. She had arrived early with a crisp new five-pound note ready. The yarn she had bought and all her shiny new hooks were tied with an elastic band and stuffed in an old fabric shopping bag. The front door to the shop was locked, so she found a door to the side, with a sign on it reading: *Crochet Groups.*

A man in his late twenties let her in. He had sandy-coloured hair and a large grin. “Evening. You must be Anna.”

“Yes.” She blinked. “How did you know?”

“I come every week, been coming since it started. I’m practically Ollie’s right-hand man.” His grin widened. “She told me you would be joining us. And she described you.”

“Described me?” Anna looked at him in confusion, then settled her face into a more relaxed expression. She followed him into a dark corridor. “All good, I hope?”

“Oh, definitely. Very much so.” The man pursed his lips as if holding back more.

“Let me guess. She told you about my foray into the world of online crochet, did she?”

There was a pause while he looked at her, his gaze steady. Then his face relaxed, and he held a hand out, showed her into a large airy room with tables and chairs. “Yes, that’s it. Oh,” he said chuckling, “my name is Matthew.”

“Nice to meet you. Anna Rose.”

They shook hands, and he left her standing in the classroom.

She put her cloth bag atop one of the tables. The room was covered on two sides with shelves full of patterns, books and materials. Handmade items hung all over the walls, and a stereo stood in one corner. In another corner was a countertop with a sink, a kettle, and a mini fridge. When Ollie came in, Anna turned to give her a smile.

“Hi, Anna,” Ollie said. “Welcome. It’s nice to have a fresh face joining us.”

“I’ll need a lot of help.” Anna rolled her eyes.

“It’s okay. We’ll get you there.” They locked gazes for a moment.

There was a warmth in Ollie’s eyes that Anna liked. She sat down, her cloth bag on the table in front of her.

More people filed into the classroom. They seemed like a good mix of ages and genders—mostly women, but Anna had expected that. A couple of teenagers were whispering between themselves. An old man shuffled inside in what looked like an old pair of leather slippers.

Ollie greeted every person with a pat or a hug. Some people handed her crocheted squares in a variety of colours. Ollie placed them into a shallow wicker basket on the counter. She held on to the old man’s elbow as he took his seat. She smiled at everyone who smiled at her.

*Everyone likes her.* Anna watched people pull out their projects. One older lady had a huge blanket that would probably cover a king-sized bed. It flowed down her knees and onto the floor. Ollie approached and said something quietly to her. The lady wrapped her arms around Ollie, patted her cheek, and then kissed it. Ollie seemed to shine with affection. Anna thought she saw them exchange a knowing smile, as if they shared a secret.

A teenage girl took out the striped head, legs, and tail of something that resembled a cat.

*It looks like Arthur.*

Matthew came to sit next to her and laid his pieces out on the table. He aligned everything together on the smooth surface and smiled at Anna as she peered at his work. He gestured to the pieces before him. "What do you think?" he asked, his eyebrows knitting together.

They were pale blue, flecked with navy. Neat stitches with little bubbles across in a pattern. "Um. It's lovely." She looked up at him. "What is it?"

He frowned. "A cardigan. Can't you tell?" His hand went over his mouth, and she took another look.

"Of course I can." She touched his arm. "I was thrown by the lack of buttons. Very nice."

"Spent a fortune on the yarn." He sighed. "It's for my mum. She's lovely." He shrugged. "Dippy, but lovely."

"I'm sure she'll love it," Anna said.

He beamed at her. "Usually I don't try anything so difficult. More of a quick-and-easy kind of guy. I'm never making anything like this again; it's been an absolute nightmare." He looked Anna up and down. "I expect you're not as lazy as me."

"I don't know yet," Anna replied. "I've never done anything like this before."

"Right, everyone," Ollie said, standing up at the front and clasping a bunch of papers. "We'll be making chickens today."

"Chickens?" Anna hissed. She pressed her lips together obediently as Matthew flapped his hand at her.

"The head and body are made in one, the legs are one row of doubles, and the beak is just a cone. Who'd like one?"

A few people put their hands up.

Ollie handed the patterns out. When she passed Anna's table, she leaned down, her loose blond curls swinging by her eyes. "Don't worry, I'll sit down with you in a minute." She placed a pattern on the desk. "Take one, though. For when you've learned enough."

"Okay," Anna said.

When Ollie offered him a pattern, Matthew held up his hand. "No thanks. Looks too complicated." He indicated his cardigan.

Ollie looked carefully at his work before giving him a thumbs up. She turned on the stereo, a popular channel but at a low volume. "And keep those squares coming, guys. The Women's Institute is rather lacking in

crocheters, and Sandra is continually telling me how awfully grateful she is about the project. That back wall has been empty for months.”

So far, there were quite a few squares in the wicker basket. Anna wondered how big the wall hanging was going to be in the end. She unwound the elastic band from her hooks and arranged them by size on the table. The cloth bag got stuffed into her handbag. She stared at her hooks, then looked around. Everyone was getting to work.

Matthew had a hook and ball of wool and was continuing with what looked like a sleeve. His attention seemed to be repeatedly drawn towards someone behind them. Finally, she followed his gaze.

A dark, curly-haired man sat next to the teenager with the cat-shaped item. Anna looked back at Matthew and cleared her throat.

He feigned sudden concentrated interest in the pattern he had laid out, but underneath his bowed head, she saw a small smile.

Anna peered at the curly-haired man and his teenaged companion. *Interesting.* But before she could contemplate this discovery more, Ollie passed her to fill the kettle and collected together some mugs.

“Teas?” she asked.

Anna put up her hand.

“Coffees?”

Anna sat with her hands clasped, listening to the quiet murmurs and occasional chuckles that filled the room. The kettle rumbled on the counter as it boiled.

Once everyone had a drink, Ollie brought Anna’s over and slid into the seat next to her. “Right, then,” she said. “Let’s start with how to hold your hook and yarn.”

Anna felt all fingers and thumbs as Ollie demonstrated making a slip knot, then showed her how to maintain the correct tension. She copied her successfully, but had put the hook down onto the table. “I’m sorry. Show me again how to hold it?”

Ollie was obviously used to showing beginners how it was done. “Don’t worry, you’ll get it. Here, let’s try a chain stitch.”

Anna felt like there was yarn coming out of about six places on her hand, but after gentle coaxing and carefully placed encouragement, she shakily made her first chain. She let out a stuttering laugh.

“You’ll get it, I promise,” Ollie said.

“Thank you for being so patient.”

“You’re welcome.”

It felt strange being the object of Ollie’s kind and sparkly eyes. *She’s very pretty.*

Anna swallowed hard. *Where did that come from?* She made herself focus back on her slightly trembling hands. Ollie sat and watched her continue to work but didn’t interrupt.

Anna let out a slow breath, set her shoulders and finished another chain stitch. That earned her one of Ollie’s kind smiles.

“See? You’re doing it.”

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Anna continued to make a string of stitches around a foot long. As she worked and got used to how the stitches felt and she relaxed further. The stitches were getting neater and more uniform.

Anna reached for her tea and took a sip. “Mmm, perfect,” she said. “So...how long have you been crocheting for?”

“Five years,” Ollie said.

“Oh! I would have thought longer.”

“I started crocheting after I was in an accident.” Ollie sipped her coffee. “I was bored. My children pushed me to go do *something*. Anything to stop me watching daytime TV in my pyjamas. Had a neighbour who sat with me and showed me the ropes.” She smirked. “So to speak.”

“My daughter convinced me as well.”

“Yes, you said.”

Anna held out her chain. “So, what now?”

“Depends how much of a perfectionist you are.” Ollie smiled.

Anna rolled her eyes. “Um...am I that obvious?”

“If you want them really neat, you can undo them and start again.” Ollie made a sweeping gesture with her arm.

Anna pulled the end of her chain and the whole thing unravelled in small pops. The now-unused wool spread back and forth across the table.

“Try to make them about twice the thickness of the hook you’re using,” Ollie said.

Carefully, Anna remade the slip knot.

Ollie gave her a thumbs up. “Brill.” She looked around. “Mind if I leave you to it?”



“Not at all,” Anna said, though that was a complete lie. She missed Ollie’s presence already.

“Let me know when you’re confident with the chains, then we’ll learn some doubles.”

She found herself suddenly determined to get confident with chains as quickly as possible.

As Ollie rounded the table and walked amongst the group, Anna noticed a slight limp on her right side. Perhaps from her accident. She peered at her for a moment more, before turning her attention back to her chain. *Why can’t she spend more time with me?* Anna blinked rapidly. *Because she’s here for everyone, you idiot.*

Around half of the group periodically called Ollie over to ask for help, and she moved between them with an energy that bubbled around her. Despite her determination to succeed at single chains, Anna was more than once caught up in watching Ollie help people. *She’s a born teacher.*

Matthew paid alternating attention to the man across the room and his own pattern. Anna wondered how he could focus on two things like that, but asking would make him lose his place.

She nodded towards the curly-haired man. “Who’s that?”

His cheeks reddened. “Um. Just someone that came in a few weeks ago.”

Matthew reminded her of the girls in her form when a new, rather attractive male teacher had started at the beginning of term. “And you’re interested in him because...?”

Matthew swallowed, but then grinned sheepishly and shrugged. “Oh, I’m really not. He’s just...” He looked carefully over his shoulder. “He’s nice to look at.”

“Right.” She tried not to smile. It was sweet, really, watching someone with such obvious confidence get shy over another human being. “Why not go over to him?”

“I thought about it. Usually I’m not one to shy away from introducing myself, but...” His gaze lingered on Ollie, who was helping out somebody close to Curly Locks.

“Have you been warned off?” *Is he spoken for? Are Curly Locks and Ollie an item?* But she hadn’t seen her spend any inordinate amount of time with

the man, no more than with Anna. Maybe even a bit less. And they didn't seem to have that flirting spark a couple usually had.

"Of a fashion." He huffed and went back to his sleeve. "Nothing like Mother Hen reminding me that if I do with Harry what I usually do with men, I'll then have to see him every week afterwards. And Ollie wouldn't forgive me for tainting such a lovely atmosphere with the *consequences* of my escapades."

"Ah." Anna tried not to laugh. *Not an item, then.* "So you're the fancy-free type, hmm?"

"That's me." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively at her and she giggled. No wonder he was so devoted to his mother. Anna bet she had let him get away with murder as a child.

"So, you obviously enjoy coming here." Anna returned her gaze to her doubles.

"I do." His voice was silky, affectionate and settled, as if he were enclosed in a big fluffy blanket someone had tucked around his shoulders as they stirred the sugar into his cup of tea for him.

"What is it about the group that you like?"

"I like that I'm part of something. Something fairly normal. If you can call crochet normal, I don't know. I like the people. And Ollie's a friend." He snorted. "If I didn't come to her classes, I probably wouldn't see her sober."

"Sounds like you two are close."

He sighed. "Best mates."

She concentrated on her chain, on making each stitch exactly the same size with the exact same tension in her yarn. The room seemed to grow quiet around her, and her shoulders slowly dropped. When she looked up, Ollie was leaning against the sideboard watching her.

"Knew you'd want to make them all perfect," she said.

Anna suppressed the urge to beam. "Well, if you're going to do something, might as well get it right," she said modestly.

"Ready to learn some doubles?"

"Goodness yes."

Ollie immediately slid back into the chair beside her, like she'd just been waiting for an excuse. "Okay. So we stick the hook into the chain just

there..." Ollie pointed with her little finger. "Then yarn over." She plucked Anna's yarn gently and pulled it over her hook. "Pull a loop through."

Anna pulled the loop through the chain stitch herself.

"Yarn over again, then pull a loop through both hoops."

"Right."

Ollie's blond hair fell forward as she leaned closer. A small waft of chlorine and lavender tickled Anna's nose.

By the time Anna looked at the stitch again, Ollie's instructions had disappeared from her memory.

But Ollie just smiled and went over it four more times with her. "Keep going across. When you get to the end, give me a shout." She stood to put the kettle on again.

*That top looks so nice on her.* It was grey and well worn. Anna wished she could wear something so casual to work, but it wouldn't be appropriate at school.

Matthew nudged her and held out his sleeve. "Nearly done," he sang.

"So quick! It's a very nice colour. May I?" At his nod, she ran her fingertips along a row of stitches. "Lovely and soft. Your mum's going to love that. Perfect for winter."

"I've been working on it for ages," Matthew said. "I didn't think I'd get it finished in time." He paused. "Or at all."

"How long have you got left?"

"Two weeks until her birthday. At least she only turns sixty once. I won't have to make anything this extravagant for at least ten years." He pointed to the neck. "Just the edging here to do, and to sew it together."

"Wonderful." Anna gestured at her dozen stitches. "This, I feel, will take a lot longer." She looked at her work again, and her heart sank. "Damn. I've already completely forgotten how to do it."

"Hook in the chain," Matthew said. "Yarn over, pull through, yarn over, pull through."

"Thanks," Anna replied, her nose almost touching her hands as she continued. She got to the end of the row just as people were starting to pack up.

Ollie came over and indicated the second untouched cup of tea she'd made for Anna, who stared at the cold drink and winced.

"Sorry."

“I’ve never seen anyone so focused.”

Anna huffed and held out the row. “It’s gone all curly.”

“That’s okay.” Ollie pulled on the curl gently, like a spring, and her smile broadened as it bounced into the air. “That means your tension is okay.”

“It does?”

“Once you’ve finished one row, you do a chain stitch, and that counts as the first double for the next row.”

People were leaving, putting their five pounds into a box at the door. Matthew smiled at Harry but didn’t speak to him. She probably shouldn’t keep Ollie. She and Matthew probably had plans for the evening. She gazed over at her cloth bag.

“It’s fine,” Ollie said. “Stay until you’ve done another few stitches.”

“So I go back and forth?” Anna did a careful chain stitch before turning the piece and slipping her hook into the next stitch. *I like Ollie, and she doesn’t seem to dislike me. Maybe she’d like to go for a drink.*

“Yep.”

Anna nodded, but decided against making the invitation. *She barely knows me, and this is a business arrangement.* Ollie and Matthew saw one another socially, but butterflies crumpled Anna’s stomach when she considered asking her herself. She wasn’t sure why she felt awkward about it. She wasn’t usually so nervous with other people.

Ollie had gathered several cups onto one table and was moving them, one in each hand at a time, to the sink. Matthew walked past and didn’t offer to help. As he held a hand up, Anna mirrored his gesture as a goodbye. *So, no plans, then.*

“I don’t want to keep you,” Anna said.

“It’s fine. I’ve got to wash up anyway.” Ollie moved the last couple of cups to the sink. They clattered noisily.

Anna looked up. “So, how long have you worked here?” she asked as the room emptied.

“Actually I own it. Two years now.” Ollie ran the tap and filled the bowl. “Bought it with some inheritance. And a divorce settlement.”

“Ah. Part of the angry ex-wives club too?”

A quick breath of air huffed from Ollie as she wiped round the inside of a mug. “Something like that.”

“It’s nice. The shop.”

"I never thought it would do well but...I suppose your daughter is right. Crafts are the *in* thing."

Anna chuckled. "Yes. Sometimes my darling daughter is right."

"Teenager?"

"Absolutely."

"I've got one of those." Ollie turned her full attention onto Anna.

"How old?" The sudden focus on her was surprising, though it was nice; but it was also a bit disconcerting somehow. She looked back down at her doubles.

"Eighteen."

"Mine's twenty."

"Technically, twenty years old isn't a teenager." Ollie's voice had a teasing lilt.

Anna found the flow of her fingers and the tightened wool was a little more fluid and less disjointed. Her retort was deliberately tinged with amusement. "Yes, well, she often acts like one. What about yours? Uni?"

"Chemistry. Yours?"

"Italian and politics."

"*Molto bene.*"

That lilt again in her voice captured Anna's attention, and she found Ollie's smile waiting for her.

"Just the one daughter?" Anna asked a bit shakily.

"I have a son too—Kieran. Grown-up but can't tie his own shoelaces."

"Hmmm," Anna replied, relieved to be on more familiar ground. She fell easily into the comfort of grousing with another mother. "Even when they've left home and moved on they still want you to look after them, don't they?"

"At some point he's going to have to learn how to look after himself. I remember when he went away to university, I told him it wasn't up to anyone else to cook his meals or wash his clothes."

"I have an adopted son too. He has autism, lives with Bethany and I. He was a pupil of mine, very bright, desperate to be welcomed into society. His mum died a few years ago. He's tried living in a few shared flats but... they've never worked out for him. So I suggested he move in with us."

"That's kind." Ollie started placing the clean cups in the drainer.

"He was always so lovely at school. And I couldn't let him carry on living like that."

“How’s it working out?” Ollie asked as she dried her hands. She sloshed bubbly water out of the bowl.

“Okay. I think the fact that he’s a boy is stranger than his diagnosis.”

“He and your daughter get on?”

“Fairly well. They have their moments.” She got to the end of her next row, laid her crochet down on the table, and pushed up from her seat. “All right. I’ve kept you long enough.”

It took a moment longer than normal for Ollie to answer. “Been nice to get to know you.”

Anna nodded, pushed her yarn and hook into her bag, gathered up the remaining hooks, and stretched the elastic round them. She took out the five-pound note from her purse and held it out.

Ollie shook her head. “First class is free.”

Anna folded her arms and regarded Ollie with amusement. She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes, her usual instinct to flirt taking over. “What’s your game?”

“I’m not playing a game.” Ollie put up her hands as if Anna were pointing a gun at her. “Just want you to come back next week.”

Anna paused. *Why am I flirting with her? At least she doesn’t seem too uncomfortable with it.* Her arms dropped to her sides. “Okay, then.” She put the note back and snapped her purse closed. “I’ll have to come back, make sure your efforts aren’t all for nothing.”

“Practice makes permanent.”

“Isn’t it ‘perfect’?”

“Only if you practise correctly. If you practise something wrong, it won’t be perfect.”

“Good point.”

Ollie lowered her gaze.

*She looks sad. Maybe I should ask if she’s okay. Or perhaps out for a drink?* But, no, she was still too intimidated by that idea for some reason.

“See if you can make it a square,” Ollie said before Anna could speak, pointing to the cloth bag.

“Okay.” She was relieved to see that the sadness had disappeared. She followed Ollie into the dark corridor and moved past her onto the street when Ollie held the door open for her.

“See you next week, Anna.”

Anna nodded and walked away, her cloth bag firmly under her arm.

## Chapter 2

### DOUBLE CROCHET (DC)

THE ATTEMPTED SQUARE MOCKED ANNA as she held it up before her. Her throat tightened, and her jaw ached from grinding her teeth. “Damn. How have I managed that?”

Bethany’s raised eyebrow nearly gained the power of speech from across the room. “How would I know?” she said. “You’re the one that went to the class.” She promptly went back to her magazine.

Anna huffed and stared at the neat row of double crochet stitches she had begun with. “I don’t understand.” She frowned and started again. Ten minutes later, she found herself in the same situation. She sighed, put the almost-triangular piece onto her lap, and folded her hands on top of it.

Timothy wandered in with his laptop and sat in the armchair. “Dinner was an eight out of ten,” he said. “As good as last night, but not as nice as the pie you made on Monday.”

“Thank you, Timothy,” Anna said.

He smiled at her. “What’s the matter? You’re frowning.”

“I’m having yet more trouble with crochet.” She pouted at her work.

Bethany sighed loudly and rolled her eyes.

“Hey, miss,” Anna said. “You’re the one who decided I needed a new hobby.”

“Yeah, to meet people and get you out of the house,” Bethany said. “Not to be all moody and ask *me* how it’s done when you’ve got some new friend who should be teaching you.” She shrugged and rolled her eyes again. “Ask her tomorrow.”

"I'm not sure I could show my face in there with a square like this." She held the piece so it dangled from her hook.

Arthur rolled onto his back and looked up at her from the carpet. He stretched his white-socked legs out and purred. His gaze moved to the mess in her hands.

"You are not having it," Anna said. "I don't care how awful it looks."

"Why do you call it a square? That's not a square shape," Timothy said.

"No." Anna wiped at the tears of frustration that had gathered in her eyes. "It's not, is it?"

"You must be making fewer stitches at the end than at the beginning."

She stared at him. "How do you figure that?"

"If you start with twenty stitches, for example," he said, "and you accidentally do one less stitch each row, you will end up with a very neat, if unintentional, triangle. Like you have there."

"Timothy." Her eyes were suddenly alight, and she sat up a little straighter. "You're a genius."

"No, I'm not. Just remarkably intelligent, statistically speaking." He pointed at her work. "You should count the stitches for each row you do. Maybe you are missing one each time."

She followed his finger, then undid the same rows she had done incorrectly and began again, mouthing the numbers to herself as she went and making sure she had the same amount of stitches on each row. Timothy was right. She had been missing out the last stitch of each row. She exhaled into the quiet room.

Bethany was engrossed in her magazine.

Timothy had his headphones on, watching something on his laptop.

The tension dropped from Anna's stomach. She could do this.

Arthur continued to purr.

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Ollie picked up another key ring to attach to the tiny unicorn she was making. She shook her head at the yellow-and-green toy and looked over at the cluster of unicorns on the desk. It simply didn't look as cute as the pink, purple, and sparkly baby-blue ones. *So much for non-gender-binary toys.*

The bell jingled and she glanced up. Matthew was sauntering towards her.

"All right?" she said.



"I've finished my cardigan," he announced. "Which means I'm allowed to go out for a drink. What do you say?"

She looked at her watch. "I say: 'an hour left until I close'."

"Not too long, then." He perched on the arm of the sofa and fingered the handmade rainbow throw slung over the back. "So, looking forward to tomorrow?"

Why were his eyes glinting? She turned her attention back to her unicorn. "What's happening tomorrow?"

He smirked. "Crochet class. With the lovely Anna."

That deserved a snort. A snort and a pointed look. "There are other people at the class, you know."

"And?" He continued to examine her.

She tilted her head. "And it'll be nice to see her again, yes."

"You did plenty of *seeing* her last week." Matthew threw his head to one side. "I'm surprised she didn't notice."

"She was too engrossed in crocheting. She barely noticed me."

He just gave her a smile and shook his head.

"Anyway, what about you and your eternal passive interest in Harry?"

He twisted his lips and clutched at a fistful of the throw. "Just a passing fancy."

"Is it?"

"Very much so." He turned back to her. "Anyway. Anna."

She cut him off before he could go there. "She's divorced. Blatantly straight."

"You're divorced. You're not straight."

"Hmm."

A moment of silence passed. Matthew bounced from the sofa and squeezed her arm. "The Cock and Duck?" he asked. "Just for one, perhaps?"

"When we close." She batted his hand away. "And it will be just one. Some of us have a shop to run."

"Course," he said with a bright look.

"I've got some boxes to move into the storeroom."

"All right, then. I'll be back in an hour to whisk you away from this drudgery, m'lady."

She rolled her eyes as he promenaded out the door.

\* \* \*

Anna had a free period on Thursday afternoon, so she got home early, applied a tad more make-up than usual, and waited for the sound of her doorbell. It rang at four o'clock sharp.

Liam's smiling face emerged as she opened the door. He hadn't changed out of his 'school clothes', but then, neither had she. "Evening," he said.

"Not quite," she said, looking at her watch. "But near enough." She took her handbag from the hook and followed him to his car.

Her stomach fluttered as they drove into town, but when they pulled into the car park of the same old pub they'd been to countless times before, her heart sank just a touch. *Never mind. One day, when we have more time together, or something to celebrate, he'll take me somewhere a bit more posh.* He parked carefully, and she did admire the way he made sure his car was just perfect in the space.

*I don't know why he and Timothy don't get on. They both care so much about detail.* She was glad he had driven. Her parking wasn't dangerous, but he always commented if she was an inch this way or that. It made her grit her teeth.

His hand felt heavy against the small of her back as he steered them into the pub and guided her towards a small table by the window. She sat and gave him a grateful smile. He was being chivalrous, and there was nothing wrong with that. She liked being treated as if she was special. As if she was someone to be worshipped. It made her stomach tingle.

"Thank you." She took the menu from its holder. "Just a red wine, please?"

He stood with a scrape of his chair and went to the bar. She took in the roundness of his backside in his dress trousers as he left, and then leant forward over the menu to peruse her options.

Their dinner was pleasant enough. A bundle of kids raced around the pub, and she watched them with joy. They looked about ten or eleven. Soon, they would be coming to her school, fresh-faced and hopefully eager to learn. She loved that look, the bright and huge eyes, the quick wit and the pureness the eleven-year-olds brought on that first day. *Next year. A whole year away, in fact.* Returning her attention to Liam, she noticed his hard gaze on the children.

"You watch. One of them will fall, running around like that in an enclosed space. Don't their parents know how to control them?"

She sighed. “I expect they’re just letting off some steam from a boring day at juniors.”

“Well, they should sit down and be quiet. Especially at a place like this—somewhere so nice. I don’t pay good money to have kids running all around me screaming. Get enough of that at work.”

She held back from rolling her eyes and instead chose to take his hand. She squeezed until he looked at her, and then she sent him a warm smile. “There are places we could go where the atmosphere is a little more... romantic.” She tried to keep her tone light, but the swirling annoyance in her stomach made it a bit hard.

He seemed not to notice, thankfully. “Next time we go out, when we have a proper night off together, we’ll go to the theatre, hmm?”

A flash of Liam in a suave suit, holding his arm out to her as they ascended the steps into the local theatre made her smile. Hope shone from his eyes, and she felt her whole body soften. “That sounds marvellous.”

As they ate, she watched the precise movements of his knife and fork. He really was quite handsome, and he did scrub up well. His job, as boring as it probably sounded to everyone else, sometimes fascinated her. What he didn’t know about health and safety, policies and procedures, was nobody’s business. She liked hearing the stories about scrapes he’d had to clear up when he was just starting out in the job, and the way he spoke about some of the managers he had worked with sometimes made her howl with laughter.

“How are the kids?” Liam took a perfectly cut sliver of steak from his fork and chewed it with precise movements.

“They’re okay. Bethany seems to be doing well at uni. She’s not asked me for help, not that I have the time. But she seems happy. Pleased that I’m broadening my horizons when it comes to non-work-related activities.”

They exchanged a smile.

“And Timothy?”

“He’s well. Enjoyed the recent stock take they did at the shop. He really is exceptionally good at counting things. He’d do it all day if they let him.”

He swallowed. “I can imagine. He wouldn’t get far, though, would he? If he wasn’t diagnosed as retarded?”

Anna’s stomach twisted at that word. She narrowed her eyes at him. “Please, Liam.”

“Please *what?*” Liam shrugged and put his knife down perpendicular to his plate and then picked up his glass. “It isn’t as if it isn’t true.” He took a sip. “Or am I using the *wrong word* again?”

Anna continued to stare at him, her hands curling into fists. If she spoke she’d say something she would later regret.

“Oh, it is that? Okay. I clearly need to write some kind of list and carry it around with me. ‘Words I’m Not Allowed to Use to Describe Timothy’ or something.” Liam sighed. “He’s not even here to catch me. What difference does it make?”

“Why call him anything but Timothy?” Anna bit her lip and considered her plate, unsure whether she was hungry anymore. “Why use adjectives that might make me annoyed with you? You know how I feel about it.”

Liam huffed and rubbed the back of his cropped hair. “I just don’t know the right language to use.”

“I know.” *It doesn’t make it any less annoying.* She sighed deeply and chose to let it drop. *What’s the point? He’s been making mistakes like these since we started dating. It’s not like I’m going to change him and I suppose he doesn’t do it maliciously.* She was thankful Liam and Timothy had barely interacted back at the house.

Their main courses were over. She placed a hand on her belly and pondered having a dessert. *I have crochet at seven. And I could do with refraining from anything too fattening, especially as I’ll probably indulge hugely when it comes to Christmas.* She didn’t much like her tummy, which protruded a bit more than she cared for and made her feel shy when she undressed in front of Liam.

By the time the waiter arrived and handed them each a dessert menu, Anna lifted a hand in a definite “no” gesture.

Liam smiled at her and pushed her hand back to the table. “We’ll both have a crème caramel each.” He nodded reassuringly at Anna and sipped from his glass of water. “We always have the crème caramel. You love it.”

She pushed away a pout and stared at her napkin for a moment. It took a measured moment before she could lift her head to return the smile. “That’s true. It is nice.” *He doesn’t mind, I suppose, if I carry a bit of extra weight. And it is nice to have a treat now and then.*

On the way from the pub to Ollie’s shop, she glanced towards the cloth bag in the footwell of the passenger’s seat, pleased with the three squares

she had managed to crochet during the last two days. She'd had to Google how to fasten off, and it had taken Timothy's help to figure it out, but still.

"Who'd have thought you'd enjoy crocheting so much?" Liam said with a wide smile. He placed his hand on her thigh as he drove.

Anna nodded. "You're right in your assumption that I really didn't think much of the whole craft-hobby idea at first. I've surprised myself."

"Glad you've found something you like—and maybe some new friends in the group?"

She nodded. "Matthew seems sweet, and Ollie, the woman that's teaching me, she's really very lovely." Anna closed her mouth tightly. *The crochet group is my thing, nothing to do with you.* She'd never had anything that was just for her alone.

"Brilliant." Liam pulled up outside the shop and leant over to kiss her. She smiled against his lips, the rough of his stubble against her face, his hand under her chin. His aftershave filled her nostrils.

"I'll see you," he said with a wink.

"See you."

He let her get out before giving her a little finger wave that she returned.

Her stomach felt a little fluttery. It wasn't from the kiss. What then, she wondered? It was probably because she was excited about learning a new skill and meeting new people.

She knocked. When the door opened, Ollie was standing there.

Anna grinned. "Hi."

"Hello." Ollie stepped back to let her in.

They stood in front of one another for a moment. Anna fumbled in her cloth bag. "Oh, I have things to show you."

They moved into the corridor, then further into the classroom. The room was half-full already, and most people looked up from their conversations to wave at her.

Anna waved back. The young woman with the soft toys was there, as were the older lady with the huge blanket and the old man with his leather slippers.

"Don't tell me, you've made a filigree blanket all by yourself and you no longer need lessons."

"Oh no. I do still need you. But look." She put her bag atop the table and pulled out three squares.

“Well done.” Ollie smiled at her. “You must have worked hard.”

Anna shrugged and looked at the floor for a moment. “Many slip-ups along the way. But I got it sorted in the end.”

Ollie held up the squares, one on top of the other. “You could easily make a scarf out of these. Maybe do six more? Sew them together.”

“Ah.” Warmth flowed into Anna’s stomach, settling down the fluttering feeling. “A little sewing I can do.”

“Good.”

“What’s this week’s project?”

Ollie handed back the squares and pointed at a seat for Anna.

“Granny-square coasters,” Ollie replied. “Don’t worry, though, if you want to continue with your scarf.”

“I think I will. Might as well finish a project before I start a new one.”

“Good thinking,” Matthew said as Anna took the seat next to him. “The number of unfinished bits and pieces I have at home...”

“Yes, you really do need to finish some of them.” Ollie pointed a finger towards him. Her eyes crinkled in the corners.

“I know. Now I’m done with Mum’s cardigan, I thought...” He fished out something white, green and yellow.

Ollie snorted. Anna peered between them at an unfinished rectangular project in Matthew’s lap. “How old is the baby that blanket was intended for, Matthew?”

He lowered his head slightly. “Four?”

“Months?” Anna asked.

“Years,” he replied on a moan.

“I’m sure he’ll like it still,” Anna said.

At another knock, Ollie moved away to answer the door.

“Or maybe you could find someone else that would like it?” Anna added.

“Maybe.” Matthew sighed and folded his arms. “Or maybe I will just keep it for myself. I could make it bigger and perhaps keep it for cold nights in.”

“I think that’s a great idea. I don’t know about you, but I don’t treat myself as often as I should.” She indicated her squares. “I’m making this scarf for myself,” she announced and cuddled one of the squares to her neck. “And I rather think I’m going to like it.”

As the last of the group wandered in, Ollie stood at the head of the table and waved around the new patterns. “Coasters. You’ll need some Aran or cotton yarn in two colours and a four-millimetre hook. I’ve translated it back to British; the original was in American. And we all know how annoying that is.”

Everyone tittered except for Anna, who frowned in slight confusion.

Ollie handed Matthew the pile of patterns and he gaped at her, then studied the copies in his hands. “I don’t understand. What am I supposed to do with these?”

It was a struggle for Anna to hold in her laughter. He sounded genuinely befuddled. *Yep, his mum must have spoiled him rotten.*

“What else? Hand them out for me while I get the kettle boiling.”

He wasn’t quite ready to leave behind the gaping. But then he stood and obliged her. Meanwhile, everyone proceeded to the main area of the shop to choose yarn. Anna watched them go, then took out her significantly decreased ball and started with a row of chain stitches. She looked up towards the counter.

Ollie leant there, arms folded loosely, watching her from behind her floppy fringe.

Anna made careful and slow double crochet stitches, her fingers a little clumsy at being watched.

For another long while, the radio quietly played popular songs Anna recognised but couldn’t name. The light chatter around them continued. Someone scraped their chair back and moaned as they stretched.

When Anna looked up again, Ollie was looking down at her right knee, her hand rubbing the side of it. Her other fist was clenched and her shoulders were tense. Dark brown eyes eventually looked her way, and Anna smiled. With a smile, Ollie stepped towards Anna’s table, dropping to one knee to inspect her row of stitches.

Anna willingly held out her work, eyes bright and hopeful.

“I can’t believe you’ve picked it up so quickly,” Ollie said. “Very neat.”

“Thank you.” Anna felt herself beam this time, then instantly felt a bit silly about it and made herself glance to her side, where she caught a glimpse of Matthew next to her, his head bowed over his blanket.

Someone guffawed from across the room, and everyone turned to see. The old man closed his mouth immediately and looked wide-eyed before

everyone settled back down to their conversations and crochet. The joke seemed to have been in his own head.

Ollie's fingertip smoothed along each stitch of the neat row of doubles as if she were reading Braille. Her hand stopped at the end of the row, a millimetre away from Anna's. She took it away. "Have the coaster pattern, though." Her voice seemed a bit wobbly.

"Okay."

Ollie gripped the table edge to haul herself up and went to the front to collect a pattern.

"I feel I'm going to create quite a collection," Anna said.

After she laid the pattern on the table, Ollie moved back to the front of the room.

Matthew was, as usual, splitting his attention between his baby blanket and Harry, who seemed deep in conversation with the woman with the big blanket. The woman was rubbing his back and leaning close to him, and Anna thought there was something grandmotherly about her. She thought back to the way the lady had been affectionate with Ollie the week before. Harry rested his cheek on her shoulder for a brief moment, then smiled and continued crocheting.

She nudged Matthew. "Come on, spill," she said quietly. "What is it with him?"

Shaking his head, Matthew stared down at his hands. "I've seen him out. He was with a whole group of friends at The Cock and Duck. Current feeling is that he's at least interested in guys but perhaps not interested in me."

She carefully watched the man from over her shoulder. "Hmm. Why don't you strike up a conversation? I know Ollie's told you not to go in for the kill, as it were, but at least you have something in common. Just talk to him."

He fiddled with his hook. "I don't know. Not sure I want to be disappointed."

"Ah. I understand. So it's more fun to watch him from afar than to actually see whether he's interested."

Matthew sat up straight. "It's fine. Not like there aren't plenty more out there who are interested. It's fine. I'm sure he's lovely, but probably not what I'm looking for."



“What are you looking for?”

“I’m far too young to be settling down. And he seems like the stay-at-home-with-a-cocoa type. Might as well leave him to it.” There was a deep spark in his eyes, though.

She decided to leave it and continued with her doubles. Various people asked Ollie for help, but otherwise, she leant against the counter at the front, her gaze drifting around the room, as though she were a teacher watching her students complete an exercise, keeping an eye out for the confused or distressed.

*I hope she can spend more time with me this week.* But then she scolded herself. *She’s not my personal tutor. I haven’t even paid for her services yet.* Anna tried to focus on her squares, rather than lifting her gaze to Ollie’s quite so often. However, once Anna had finished one square, she gave herself permission to look up.

Ollie blinked rapidly. Her gaze flashed away, then someone close by Ollie caught her attention and pointed to the kettle. She looked startled, but pushed herself up from leaning against the counter and immediately grabbed the kettle to fill it and set it to boil. Standing with her back turned, she laid her hands on the counter in front of her.

Anna watched her.

As steam rose from the spout and the kettle clicked off, Ollie got twelve mugs from the cupboard above the counter and everyone put in their orders. Ollie made the drinks, still with her back turned.

When Ollie brought her cup over, Anna sighed as she took a sip. *Nothing like a good cup of tea.*

Ollie handed out the remaining drinks, saying something encouraging to each person about their work. She was so gentle and kind with everyone.

Halfway through the session, Amy—the young girl with the soft toys—called Ollie over, her voice frantic. “I can’t get the hook in the stitch here!”

Ollie was by her side in a moment and knelt down. “Let me see, soldier. It’s okay.” The lady sitting next to Amy was touching her forehead in frustration.

“Ah, I see what you’ve done, Amy. You need to slacken off a bit, and remember those chain stitches in the corners, yeah? You’ve chosen a really thick cotton, so I’m not surprised you’re having trouble.”

Amy’s face fell.

“It’s all right, you’ll be fine. I might suggest you use a six, though, rather than a four. That’s Aran you’ve got there.”

They sorted it out together, with the young girl visibly calming under Ollie’s instruction. Anna turned back to chat with Matthew and worked through her squares.

“Other than that,” Ollie said, “you’ve done really well. Keep at it, soldier. You’ll get it.”

“D’you reckon?”

“Of course.” A chuckle. “Have I ever been wrong?”

Amy laughed. Ollie appeared in front of them again. Matthew suddenly showed a suspicious amount of concentration on his work. Not that Anna minded.

Ollie smiled. “You’re doing all right, then?” she asked, her voice quiet.

Anna nodded and drained the tea from her mug. She had laid her squares out on the table in a long row. “What do you think? Three more squares?”

“I reckon so.”

“Okay.” Anna settled back into her doubles, but looked round when she noticed Ollie sliding into the seat next to her. *Where did we get to when we spoke before? Ah yes.* “So, you’ve been here two years?” Anna’s gaze was trained back on her crochet.

“That’s right.”

“What did you do before running a shop?”

“I was in the army.”

Anna’s head popped up.

Ollie snorted. “What?”

“Nothing. You don’t seem the sort.”

Ollie said nothing.

Anna froze and then laughed. “Not that I suppose there is a sort of person that *should* be in the army. Or could. I don’t know why I said that.”

“It’s okay, I get that a lot.”

“Big jump—army to crochet.”

“Well, it wasn’t really in my master plan.” Ollie’s eyes glazed over for half a heartbeat. “My accident happened while I was in Iraq.”

Anna placed unfinished square onto the table. This conversation should have her full attention. “What happened?”

“The building I was working in was bombed.” Ollie fiddled with her fingers and looked down at her knees.

Anna winced. Her hand hovered for a while, right near Ollie’s fingers. *I barely know her.* It dropped to her lap. “Injuries?”

“Cuts and abrasions, mostly. They thought I’d broken my back, but turned out my knee was worse. Didn’t notice that until they got me to a hospital.”

“Blimey.” Anna nodded. “That’s bad luck, Private Williams.”

“Sergeant.” Ollie blushed and cleared her throat. “Although I haven’t been called that in... I’m a teacher. Was.”

“Oh.” *That explains an awful lot.* Anna relaxed at the revelation. “You didn’t say.”

“I know.” Ollie tucked her hair behind her ear, then set her jaw and lifted her gaze to Anna’s. “Sorry. It feels weird to say, just because it’s been nearly six years.”

“Subject?”

Her shoulders softened. “Physical education. Running around sport halls and fields. Got my teacher training through the army; worked in a few schools over here but owed the army some time, so ended up in Iraq teaching kids to read and write. That’s what I was doing when...” Ollie’s hand moved in a pattern through the air.

“Medical discharge?”

She gave Anna a short, sharp nod.

“That must have been hard.” *I can’t even imagine. One’s entire life changing so much, in such a short space of time.* Anna leaned a little closer and accidentally knocked her foot against Ollie’s.

Ollie moved her foot away. Her shoulders had gone tense again.

She lifted her hand again and moved it towards Ollie’s hands, clasped on the table. Before she could touch her, however, Amy called out for help and Ollie pushed back the chair with a scrape and stood.

An overwhelming feeling of sadness about Ollie’s past gripped Anna’s insides. She grasped her hook and felt the cool of the metal against her fingertips. Matthew shifted next to her and leant close as Ollie went to help Amy. He put his hand over hers and squeezed her fingers.

“She doesn’t like to talk about her army days,” he said.

Anna's gaze drifted back to her half-finished square. "No, I can imagine she doesn't."

"And she wouldn't talk about them unless she really wanted to."

Anna turned and looked at him. "She wouldn't?"

He smiled, squeezed her hands again, and then went back to his blanket.

Anna stared at the table. She pushed away the ache in her stomach and picked up her square.

By the end of the session, the sadness had cleared enough so she could chat with Matthew again. She found him an easy person to talk to—a little sarcastic but otherwise kind and thoughtful. And very funny. He had many stories about previous members of the crochet group. She found herself drifting back into humour and enjoyment.

Ollie didn't come back over apart from to set another cup of tea on the table in front of her, so Anna hung around as everyone else packed up, pretending she had tea to finish off, which wasn't strictly a lie—her cup had sat neglected while she finished the squares. She folded the crocheted pieces up and settled them neatly in her cloth bag, ready to be sewn together at home.

Amy passed her with an awkward teenaged grin. "Hi."

"Hi. Amy, right?"

"Yes, Miss."

Anna squinted at her. "Oh, you're in Mr Jones's Year 11 class, aren't you?"

She nodded.

*Thank goodness she's not in one of my classes.* "Well, you don't need to call me 'Miss' here. 'Anna' is fine." She indicated the cat head clutched in Amy's hand. "He's looking marvellous."

"Thanks, Mi—um. I mean, Anna."

"You been coming long?"

Amy shrugged. "Couple of years. My mum used to come but she's ill so...I look after her. But she can manage a couple of hours on her own in the evening, once a week."

"You're a young carer?" Despite Anna's insistence on informality between them, the teacher in her pushed through.

"Yeah."

Anna nodded. "That's a very grown-up thing to do."

“Anna, can I ask you something?” Amy’s cheeks reddened at using Anna’s first name.

“So long as it isn’t advice about crochet, of course.”

Amy giggled. “Do you think everyone should go to university?”

“Hmm. Good question.” Anna tilted her head. “I think it depends what you want out of life, doesn’t it? If going to uni means you’ll get the degree you want, so you can do the job you want to do, then yes. But if your dream is to work as something that doesn’t require going to university, I think there’s really no need.” She smiled at Amy. “What do you think?”

Amy perched on the edge of Anna’s table.

“I agree. I think some people should and some people shouldn’t.” She bit her lip. “My dad thinks I should. But Mum says I should do whatever makes me happy.”

“I think doing things that make you happy are very important.”

“Me too. But what if I don’t go to uni and then I miss out? Like, with a degree, you have more choices, don’t you?”

“You can go later. There’s nothing stopping you from seeing some of the world for a while first.”

“I can’t afford to have a gap year.”

“I don’t mean travelling,” Anna said gently. “If you’re not sure what job you’d like to do, you could try a few, see what floats your boat.”

Amy brightened. “That’s a good idea.”

“You doing A levels?”

She nodded.

“I expect you’ve chosen your subjects.”

Another nod. Amy swung her legs back and forth a bit.

“You have so much time to decide. I remember being your age and trying to figure out what to do. When I was young, you either became a secretary or a teacher. Guess which I chose?”

Amy’s eyes sparkled. “A secretary?”

“Indeed.” Anna laughed.

“You like it, though?”

“I do. Very much.”

Amy pushed her shoulders up happily and then slipped from the table. She went back to her own table and sent Anna sparkly little smiles from her seat. Anna returned them. *I hope she has enough support with her mum.*

*She seems happy enough.* She made a mental note to ask Mr Jones about her, make sure he knew about the young-carer thing.

Busy with her hands in the sink washing up, Ollie didn't seem to notice Anna's lingering presence until Matthew swept past her and touched her arm. Ollie glanced over but finished washing up before turning around.

"Nowhere to be?" Her voice was light and amused.

"Not tonight. Timothy is at his girlfriend's house and Bethany is, as usual, out." Anna brought her mug over. "You didn't have a drink." She lifted Ollie's mug—a brightly coloured thing with a rainbow across it—and held it out so Ollie could look inside.

The mug was clean, and a dry tea bag sat at the bottom of it. Ollie frowned. "Um, it's okay."

Anna put the mug down. *It's now or never.* "Maybe I could buy you a coffee." She lowered her lashes, one hand held out towards the door. "I'm sure that little greasy-spoon place round the corner is still open."

"I don't think it ever closes, does it?" Ollie's eyes seemed to be searching Anna's.

*That wasn't a rejection. Good.* "Come on, then. I'll wait for you to do whatever you need to do here."

"That would be...that would be great."

Anna waited outside while Ollie did the necessary routines to lock up the shop. When she came out, Anna was holding up a five-pound note. "And this time, you have to take it," she said.

Ollie stuffed it into her jeans pocket. "Fine. Twist my arm."

They walked down the darkened side street the shop stood on, crossed the road, and turned left onto the main street of shops.

"I finished my squares," Anna said.

"Great." Ollie smiled at her.

A few people were hanging around outside the local pub or smoking outside their flats. The town was bustling, the halfway pleasant early evening coaxing people outside to chat.

"Is there something you'd like to make next?"

Anna paused and thought. "I liked the blanket Matthew was making. I'm not saying I could even attempt anything as complicated as that but..."

"I'll make you up the pattern." As they approached the café, she held the door open, allowing Anna to go in first. "It's simple enough. I've done it a few times, and it's sort of tattooed onto my brain."

Anna found them a table. Once Ollie was seated, she sat across from her and clasped her hands tightly in her lap. What to say? She wanted to ask Ollie more about her past, but how to do it gracefully?

The waitress took their orders and offered them free slices of cake, which Anna accepted but Ollie declined.

"I try not to eat too late," she explained. "Gives me a stomach ache." She rested her forearms on the tabletop.

Anna fished a napkin gingerly out of the holder and took a fork from the little pot. She lay them down carefully in front of her. She watched the cake being sliced and listened to the coffee machine whirring. Two men dressed in high-vis jackets and cement-smeared trousers made their way to the counter, paid, and left.

Only a young couple remained in the café, behind their table. Their joined hands and lowered voices made it obvious what they were. *They look like they're on a date.*

She turned back to Ollie and kept her voice low when she spoke. "So, tell me about your family. Are you in touch with your children's father or...?"

Ollie's lips pursed for a moment. "We communicate. Usually amicably. But we've been separated for nearly five years. Divorced for three."

They both leaned backwards as the waitress brought their drinks over. Once she was out of earshot, Anna asked, "Rough divorce?"

With a glance at the couple behind them, Ollie replied, "Yes. Quite rough." She sipped her coffee.

Anna nodded. "You ended it?"

"No. He did." She sighed, then smiled weakly up at Anna. "You don't want to know all the ins and outs..."

"I do if you want to tell me."

The young couple giggled behind them. Anna shot them an annoyed look over her shoulder, wishing they were alone.

As if they'd noticed, the couple gathered their things. They paid and walked out hand in hand. The waitress moved out the back, and the sound of cupboards opening and clinking china drifted through.

"It's part of the club." Anna poked her Victoria sponge with her fork. "Angry ex-wives. Nothing you say leaves the room."

"Okay." Ollie's gaze swung away though.

*Perhaps she needs the distance.*

“I had been offered another ten years in the army, teaching in one of the new schools in Iraq. My ex wasn’t happy. Wanted me home. Kids missed me.”

“Seems a little unfair. Was he not supportive of your career?”

Ollie slid her hands around her coffee cup, looking into its depths. “After twenty years, you’d think he would have been. There was more, though. I was seriously hurt in the explosion. Lots of recovery time at home. I wasn’t happy. And I’d...” Ollie sighed sadly and looked up at Anna. “I had done something very...awful. While I was in Iraq.”

“What did you do?” Anna’s fingers twitched on the table.

“There was...someone else. Someone I taught with. We got... We became intimate.”

Anna ate some more cake but didn’t break eye contact with Ollie.

Ollie looked away. “One of our mutual friends found out. He was working with us in Iraq and...he must have seen us. Sent my ex a letter, explaining my shortfalls. Awful, really.”

“Were you in love?” Anna’s voice was close to a whisper.

“At the time?” Ollie shrugged, but then, after a long moment, she nodded.

“Well, usually I would say cheating was a definite no-no.” Anna’s fingertips touched Ollie’s knuckles where they wrapped around her coffee cup. She spoke slowly. “But I can tell from your expression it wasn’t something you did lightly, or without thought. Am I right?”

Ollie nodded again. Her hand loosened from the mug.

“Not like what my ex did to me,” Anna continued. “Any young TA that took his fancy. The pupils all knew. He never hid it.” She shook her head.

“Canoodling at work?” Ollie’s knuckles tightened around her mug again.

“Yep.”

“What a tosser.”

“Tell me about it.” Anna put her fingertips to her temple. “And the worst thing was my colleagues all told me he was playing away from home. I just shrugged it off. Then he royally bugged up, got caught by the Head shagging the cleaner in the storage room—clichéd, I know. Embarrassed me in front of everyone. I nearly killed him.” Her eyes burned at the memory.



“If you still want to, I could probably find a guy.” Ollie’s lips were curling upwards.

With a loud laugh, Anna squeezed her fingers, then removed her hand from Ollie’s. “That’s very sweet of you, but he’s my daughter’s father. They still see one another.”

“At least my ex-husband was reasonably civil during the whole thing. Well, you know, considering. He was angry and hurt, of course.”

“Of course.” She sipped her coffee. *Why do I feel sorry for her?* Ollie had cheated on her husband. That was usually on Anna’s list of unforgivable offences.

“You’ve been practising hard.”

She frowned in confusion. “Hmm?”

“Crochet.” Ollie pointed at Anna’s forefinger where it curled around her mug. “You have a sore line here. You’re pulling the yarn over it too tightly.”

Anna took her hand from her cup and looked at her forefinger. “Ah. Is that where I’m going wrong?”

“I got the same thing when I first started. I remember feeling like I was going to drop everything if I didn’t hold on tight to it.”

“Sounds familiar.” Anna rubbed her finger and grimaced.

Ollie bent down to fumble in her bag. “I’m sure you have your own hand cream, but... Here. Try this.”

Anna read the label on the small bottle. It seemed to contain nothing she was allergic to. She opened the cap and sniffed. Herb scents filled her nose and she felt the hairs standing up on the back of her neck. “That’s rather nice.”

“Keep it.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t.” Anna tried to give it back.

“I buy in bulk. The chlorine in the water at the baths makes my skin sore. I teach swimming to kids. So I have about twenty bottles at home.”

“I’m sure I can find some...”

“Honestly, its fine. It’s good stuff, I promise.”

Anna still held out the bottle, her gaze steady. Ollie took a deep breath and then grasped Anna’s fingers, pushing the bottle away.

Her chivalry about it made Anna smile despite herself. “Fine. Thank you, Ollie.”

“It’s got...rosemary and mint. Or something.” Ollie slotted her fingers together on the table again.

After decanting some into her palm, Anna rubbed it in. “Thank you.” She slipped the bottle into her handbag.

They sipped their coffees and Anna realised she didn’t have much of her cake left. When there was just a mouthful remaining, she took a clean fork from the pot and held it out, handle first, to Ollie. “It’s lovely cake. And I’m sure one mouthful won’t hurt.”

Ollie looked at her for a few heartbeats. *Was the cake question really that big a deal?* But then she took the fork from Anna and scooped up the last piece. She pushed up her shoulders and hummed in pleasure.

Suddenly aware of Ollie’s mouth, more specifically the way her tongue darted over her lips to lick away a stray crumb, Anna felt her stomach go fluttery—similar to when Liam kissed her but a lot more intense. Startled, she stared into her coffee mug and watched a small bubble float across the surface. She drank the remainder, before sighing as the warm liquid heated up her stomach and relaxed her.

By the time she managed to look up again, she realised they’d both finished their coffees. *So I suppose we’ll be leaving soon. Damn.*

“So, how’s the love life?” Strangely, it took a while for Ollie to look at her after saying that.

“I’m currently dating a lovely health and safety officer called Liam,” she replied. “You?”

There was a pause. “Free and single currently,” she said eventually.

Anna waited for some kind of embellishment, but none came.

“So ‘dating’, hmm?” Ollie continued, again not meeting Anna’s eye. “Serious? Or...” She made a vague waving gesture with her hand as if to fill the space of that sentence.

“So far reasonably casual. I’m sure he’d like more though.”

Ollie seemed to relax a touch. “I bet. Attractive woman with a great mind too.” She winked. “What’s not to like?”

Anna’s smile broadened and she shuttered her eyes. She felt quite breathless for a moment. “There’s just one problem.”

“Oh?”

“A stupid one, really.” Anna rolled her eyes and leant an elbow on the table, her fingers combing through her own hair.

“Do tell.”

“Timothy. Liam isn’t comfortable with him.”

“Your adopted son? Why not?” Ollie sat back in her chair, her arms folded across her chest and her eyebrows furrowed.

Anna looked up from under her own wrist. “Liam is easily irritated by him. Timothy’s odd, he says odd things, does odd things. Liam can’t handle that.”

“How long have you been together?”

“Six...seven months.”

“And he’s not suggested he’d like it to become more serious?” Ollie leant her head to one side.

“Oh, he has. I’m the one who’s reluctant. What we have is comfortable and fun, and anything more wouldn’t work.”

“Because of Timothy?”

“Liam doesn’t stay over if Timothy’s at home. Which he usually is. And he complains when I have to leave early to make Timothy’s supper or... Timothy has a very strict routine and can’t deal with even the smallest change. He’s my priority—he and Bethany.”

Ollie’s gaze on Anna was steady. “Do you think Liam would make you choose—between him and Timothy—if he wanted it to become more serious?”

“He’s kind, kind to me at least. I don’t think he’d ask that sort of thing, which is a shame, actually.” Anna laughed. “If he did force me to choose, at least then I would know my answer.”

Ollie nodded and looked into her empty coffee cup. She cleared her throat and poked the cup away from herself with her fingertips. She seemed unsure what to say next.

“Until things change, casual is fine,” Anna said more to fill the silence than because she thought it needed saying. “I don’t mind getting some of my needs met at the sacrifice of the rest.” She blinked and realised how her words had sounded.

Ollie leant forward, chin in her hand. “He’s all right in the sack, then.”

It wasn’t a question. Anna laid her palm against her hot face, and her gaze slid away from Ollie’s. She rubbed at the back of her neck.

“There’s nothing wrong with fun,” Ollie said. “I suppose it depends what you’re looking for.”

“I suppose it does.”

“Are you looking for anything more?”

“I have no idea.” Anna lifted her eyes to Ollie’s again.

“Well, anyway.” Ollie stood and moved towards the counter. “I’ll get this.”

“No, don’t be silly. It was my idea.” She grabbed her purse from her bag and joined Ollie.

“It’s fine.”

She was so kind and gentle with the crochet class. Who knew she had this stubborn streak? “Honestly, Ollie.”

“All right, then. How about we split it?”

It wasn’t how she’d intended this to go. But it was a compromise she could live with, she supposed. “Okay.”

The waitress arrived, and they tumbled identical coins onto the countertop.

Anna pulled her coat close around her middle as they left. “Where do you live?” she asked as they weaved around groups of people outside the nearby pub. Music thrummed from inside, the orange glow from the electric lights spilling out onto the street.

“I have a flat above the shop. You?”

“Parson Street. Liam dropped me off, so I’m getting a taxi home.”

“Ah.”

The shop was on the way to the taxi rank, and it was early enough that Anna didn’t think she’d have any trouble just flagging one down. Ollie stopped when they reached the side door.

Anna held her hand out to Ollie. She felt very aware of the cold breeze brushing her fingers. Ollie grasped Anna’s hand in her own.

“Same time next week?” Ollie asked.

“You don’t get rid of me that easily.”

A group of people passing behind them forced Anna to step up close enough to Ollie that the fronts of their coats brushed. Ollie reached for her waist as the group passed them. It made Anna warm all over, despite the early winter chill.

When the group of people were clear, Anna did not move away. The single inch difference in their heights seemed huge. She held her breath as Ollie gazed down at her. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she saw Ollie’s

gaze flick down to her lips, then back up. Suddenly feeling shivery, she swallowed and stepped back.

Ollie let her go and fumbled in her pocket for her flat keys. “See you next week then.” She smiled at Anna over her shoulder, then turned back to her door.

Anna smiled back, then realised Ollie wasn’t looking at her anymore. “Don’t forget the pattern,” she said to get her attention back.

“I won’t.” Ollie glanced back at her but then pushed her door open with her body, before quickly closing it behind her.

For a moment, Anna stood staring at Ollie’s door, but wasn’t sure why. She gathered her coat around herself, pulled her cloth bag and handbag onto her shoulder more firmly, and made for the taxi.

# Chapter 3

## TREBLE CROCHET (TR)

WITH A BOUNCE IN HER stride and a smile on her face, Anna arrived at work on Friday right on time. She sauntered into the staff room, flicking the newly-sewn-together scarf over her shoulder.

Tally smiled up at her.

A whistle sounded from the far end of the staff room, where Jack was making a coffee. Warmth blossomed in Anna's stomach as she sat. "Well, what do you think?"

"Monsoon?" Tally asked.

"No. Guess again," Anna replied.

"Looks posh," Tally gestured with a pile of papers. "I give up."

"You give up far too easily, Tally." Anna laughed. "Okay. I'll make a confession. This scarf is part of a new hobby I've begun. Although I'm pleased to know you think it was professionally made."

Jack moved closer, putting his coffee down. "You actually made that yourself?"

"Don't seem so flabbergasted, young Jack." Anna leaned back in her chair cheerfully. "I'm reasonably good with my hands, you know."

"It's gorgeous." Tally touched the scarf with careful fingers. She pressed the end of it against her face and gave a little giggle.

Anna snuggled her cheek into the part around her neck. "I *am* rather pleased with myself."

Tally's fellow teaching assistant approached with a cup of tea and spent time fingering the scarf as well. "Aw, Ms Rose. Where did you learn to knit?"

“It’s not knitted actually, lovely Rachael. It is very much crocheted.”

“Is there a difference?”

“One hook versus two needles, I believe.” Anna relished in the attention as Rachael nodded. “I’ve started crochet lessons.”

They all complimented her work, and Anna felt like a teenager getting praise from a teacher for an essay. “I’m sure I’ll learn more stitches on Thursday.” She grimaced at the slip of her tongue. *Damn. Too much information.* They’d ask her about it the minute she got into work on Friday morning. Not that she was embarrassed about it. It was just something she would like to keep to herself for the moment.

She went into her classroom and then draped her coat on the back of her chair, the scarf joining it. Jack followed her, shutting the door behind him. He looked at her for a moment.

The smile fell from her. “You’re making me paranoid, Mr Holmes. Why the scrutiny?”

“I’m curious.” He perched on the edge of her desk. “I get that the crocheting is fun. I get that you’re probably meeting new folk and enjoying yourself. But I haven’t seen you quite so...”

“Yes?” Anna asked, voice lower. *Don’t patronise me. I’m two decades older than you.*

“Jovial?” He grimaced apologetically.

She put one hand on her hip.

“Giggly?”

Her jaw dropped. “Giggly?”

“Sorry.” He shrugged. “Just something I’ve noticed.”

“I am perfectly at liberty to be excited about a new hobby and a new friend...group of friends.”

He pounced on that. “Friend, eh?”

“There are other people at the group. They come and go each week, from what I can see.” Anna closed her eyes for a moment. Did she really have to explain herself to Jack? “And they all seem very nice.”

“But you have your eye set on one ‘friend’, hmm?”

She sighed. “Jack.”

“Come on,” he teased. “Give me something.”

“We’re just friends. *Absolutely* just friends.”

“What’s his name?”

She paused and then swallowed. "Ollie?" She tried to gauge his reaction.

"Modern name," he said, pressing his lips forward and nodding. "Bet he's younger than you. I'm told having a toy boy is *in* these days."

She laughed. "Ollie and I are the same age. I think."

"Want me to take on some of the book clubs?" Jack's face softened, and she relaxed too. He'd stop teasing now. "Doing five a week is a lot, you know. I only do one."

"I know. But you have a department to run."

Jack shrugged. "I know how hard you work." Something akin to concern shone from his eyes.

"I'm fine." She patted his arm. "I enjoy doing them. The kids love them, and I'd miss it."

"Even though I've seen you rush your lunch on at least ten occasions. You'll do some damage to your stomach, you know. Lunchtime is supposed to be for relaxation." He touched her hand where it now lay on his shoulder. His hand was warm, his face lined.

*Do I look tired? Is that why he's so concerned?* "What can I say? I'm a stickler for work."

Jack scrutinised her for a beat or two and then sighed. "Well, the offer remains. You need to relinquish some extracurricular, I'm here, and I have time. I don't have a family to run. Just an English department."

They exchanged another smile.

"So, this Ollie, hmm?" Jack's teasing grin had returned. "Your delightful new friend."

"What about Ollie?"

"What happened to Liam?"

She took a breath. "Liam's still in the picture. What? I'm not allowed to have other friends?"

"Hope this Ollie is something to look at." He headed towards the door, the bell for the beginning of registration ringing above his head.

"I suppose so," Anna said to herself.

*Actually, Ollie is rather beautiful.* She pressed her lips together and tried to smile as he left the classroom and her form began to filter in, pushing at each other in that way they had at the end of term.

"Okay, guys, come on. Usual drill."



Everyone smiled at her, even the difficult pupils. She smiled right back, and everyone settled. She called the register, and, despite some of the form joking around with it, they got through it quickly.

“Couple of notices. The quad is being repaired, so please be careful at break and lunch. Don’t go into the cordoned-off areas.” She looked up from the piece of paper from which she was reading and caught one teenager’s eye. “Yes, Dave, that means you. It means everyone. I doubt the school nurse would appreciate a load of my form arriving at her office with feet coated in concrete because they couldn’t follow simple instructions.”

“What about that fit building guy, though, Miss?” one of the girls piped up. Her eyes twinkled with something between innocent reverie and naughty sexuality.

Anna pulled a stern look onto her face “You keep your hands off the workmen, Charlotte. They don’t need your advances while they’re working.”

Charlotte smiled and nodded. “Okay, Miss.”

“He is well fit, though,” her friend interjected.

“How ‘well fit’ one of our workmen is, is absolutely nothing to do with you.” Anna pointed a finger at the table where both girls sat. “Sexual harassment is illegal, especially when someone’s at work.” She regarded the whole class. “Come on, guys, you know this.”

Murmurs of agreement came from the whole room. Anna felt pleased. Her form was good, on the whole. One last look around settled her worries, and she continued with the monotony of announcements on the paper in front of her.

\* \* \*

Ollie turned the television to something easy, a nature documentary. A glass of wine sat in her free hand as she leant back into her sofa cushions. It had been a busy Monday in the shop: All the kids on October half-term had been eager to spend their pocket money, hankering after a cute and *awesome* key ring. She’d completely sold out of the hedgehogs, and the unicorns too. And then there was her swim class of hyperactive ten-year-olds. Her brain was half thinking up other animals to make for tomorrow, half watching the meerkats on the screen jumping all over each other.

Takeaway packets stacked by the sink awaited a spark of renewed energy tomorrow morning. Her belly was full, and her body was tired after a whole

day of selling and interacting with children and their parents. She didn't mind the holidays so much; at least she turned a good profit.

Her eyes closed, tiredness taking over her mind until she had very little control over where her thoughts led her. She thought about a pair of green eyes, followed by freckled cheekbones, short red hair, and careful hands cupping a mug of hot tea. Full lips smiled at her and then laughed.

Ollie put her wine glass on the coffee table and relaxed back into her sofa, stretching her legs out. The sound of Anna's voice filled her mind, and she sighed, her hands stationary on her stomach.

She hadn't allowed herself the pleasure or freedom to think about anyone this deeply for a few years. Since Zoe, really. Actually, she hadn't thought about a *man* since way before that. She hadn't thought about anyone, male or female. Had she ever fancied a man? Had she even fancied her ex-husband, with whom she had spent twenty years?

*The kids needed some sense of normality with me away so much.*

She must have fancied him at one point. She married him, didn't she? But it was so long ago, she couldn't remember the feeling anymore. She was only attracted to women these days.

Mostly passing fancies, though: her first physiotherapist, the nurse who had changed her IV once when she got an infection in the wound in her knee. She'd considered them briefly, but her fantasies never went beyond a quick visualisation, something to get things going before blankness invaded her thoughts. Her hand was all she needed to find that type of release—until the niggling stab of guilt afterwards. How many months of psychological therapy had it taken for her to finally believe that she could fantasise about whomever she liked?

But she could, so she lay back and thought about Anna—although her hands stayed put—and she drifted off on her comfortable and reliable sofa with Anna's voice and those soft eyes playing like a movie in her thoughts.

When she awoke several hours later, the television was replaying BBC 2 trailers. She rolled off the sofa and went off to potter through her bedtime routine. In bed, she lay in her underwear, her exposed skin a little tingly against her cotton sheets.

She decided against any form of relief. She couldn't think about Anna while she did that, and if she touched herself, her brain would inevitably stray in that direction. She hoped they were becoming friends, especially

after their little trip to the greasy-spoon café and the warm look in Anna's eyes when she stayed so close outside Ollie's front door.

No. Friends didn't do *that* while they thought about each other. Definitely not.

She fell asleep a little achy and frustrated.

\* \* \*

Dinner was in the oven, and Bethany sat expectantly at the kitchen table, waiting for the timer to ping.

Anna sat across from her, nursing a lovely hot cup of tea. "Timothy will be home in about twenty minutes," she explained, her fingertip tracing idly along the handle of her mug. "He knows I'm going out, so there shouldn't be much hassle."

"Okay." Bethany lifted her own cup to her lips. "I love lasagne."

An affectionate chuckle rumbled through Anna. "Well, I thought I'd get you something nice, considering I'm abandoning you tonight."

Beth waited for a moment before reacting, as though she had to think about how she should do so. "That's okay. You go out, have fun." Her gaze flicked towards the front door.

Something similar to lead collected in Anna's stomach, and she looked more closely at her daughter. "I'm hoping Liam takes me somewhere romantic. Somewhere with candles, maybe. Nice music."

"That'd be awesome."

The doorbell rang, and Anna stood slowly, draining her mug. "My date has arrived," she announced in a whisper.

Bethany grinned and shook her head.

The way Liam shifted from foot to foot in his smart suit and tie was unusual for him. "Anna. So nice to see you." He leant in to kiss her cheek.

A flush tingled through Anna's body, but she eyed him cautiously. "Why the eager demeanour? What have you done?"

Liam's gaze bounced from side to side. It settled through the door and into Anna's house. With a flick of his eyebrows, he indicated he wanted to come in.

She stepped back and closed the door behind him. *He doesn't usually come in.* "What is it?"

A long mane of brown hair swished across Anna's field of vision as Bethany stepped into the hallway. She seemed to be pretending to have some kind of task to do. She rifled through the pockets of her own hung-up coat. Anna knew better—she was eavesdropping.

The neat creases in Liam's suit skewed as he shifted his feet. "Well... unfortunately my mother has had to come along tonight."

Anna stepped back. "You've brought your mother on our date?"

A snort from Bethany.

"She...she wasn't feeling well. She has a touch of vertigo and is worried about staying home alone. Especially since Dad died, she..." His large eyes were wet.

Emotions prickled through Anna, but she put them aside and settled on compassion. She stepped towards him and rubbed his arm. "Well, I suppose the romance will have to be put on hold for tonight, then. Your mother and I get on, don't we?" She patted him. "Stop looking so terribly forlorn."

He relaxed and nodded. "All right. Good."

When Anna turned to glance at Bethany, she found her stock-still, eyes like saucers, and with one eyebrow raised. "Really?" Bethany said, the word drawn out. "You're asking if your mum can be there on your date?"

"It's exceptional circumstances." His shoulders had hardened again.

Bethany scoffed. "Ace. Have a great time." Sarcasm dripped from her.

Anna collected her things and they headed out. Liam's hand planted itself at the small of her back. Anna's insides quivered, but not in a good way. *What a pain. I thought our evening would be just the two of us.*

"What a twat." Bethany's voice drifted through the closing door. Anna admitted she was thinking the same thing.

But, no. Liam hadn't caused his mother's health issues, and it was nice he cared enough to put her needs before his own. It would be nice for him to put Anna's needs before his own, sometimes, however.

Margaret was in the back of the car, looking significantly uncomfortable.

Anna turned in her seat once they'd pulled away from the kerb. "I'm so sorry you're feeling poorly."

"And I'm sorry I'm about to spoil your dinner."

"Don't worry about it, Mum. Anna's happy you're here."

Anna's stomach twisted again, and she had to close her eyes and turn back to the front to stop her true feelings from spilling into the car. "Of course I am." She let out a slow breath and nodded.

It was a shame they were accompanied. The restaurant was all sweet smells and soft music, a perfect place to take a romantic partner. Not so great a place to take your mother, unless she needed cheering up. Liam's mother really did seem to need cheering up, however. The way her eyes softened in the quiet, comfortable atmosphere of the restaurant made Anna feel bad about wishing they were alone. When Margaret wobbled a bit sitting down in her chair, Anna steadied her with a hand to her shoulder.

She allowed Liam to focus the conversation. He knew his mother much better, and she trusted him to guide the talk into areas where Margaret could contribute. Anna found she wanted Margaret to have a good time, and to see her as someone her son should be with. She found she cared what Margaret thought when it came to their relationship.

*I suppose everyone feels that about their in-laws. Not that Liam and I are married...or really that serious. Perhaps I hope Margaret thinks we're serious.*

*Why is that?* She considered her predicament. They weren't serious; they were just dating, weren't they? *What if Margaret thinks I'm stringing him along? I don't want her thinking that.* She tried not to slink down in her chair under the occasional glances from the older woman.

The conversation mostly consisted of Liam complaining about work, as usual. "I don't understand why people can't just follow policy. It's written out in black and white. I've made it as simple as it could ever be."

Margaret hummed sympathetically and took a sip of water. "Oh dear. It does sound like a quandary for you, Lee-lee."

Anna bit back a giggle. She'd never heard Liam's mother call him that. "I suppose people just don't have the time to read policies. Not that I can speak for anyone, really. I, of course, have read everything in the folder you have ever written." She fluttered her eyelashes at him and he smiled back. It was true: as his girlfriend, she'd felt obliged to set a good example and read the folder from cover to cover. It hadn't exactly got her heart beating, not like a good mystery novel, but she'd felt all the better for it. The look on his face afterwards had been glorious, as had the two orgasms he'd managed to give her the evening after.

The space between her legs fluttered just a tad. She felt her cheeks turning red. She was eternally grateful Margaret was not a mind reader.

“It’s the most important thing they can do,” Liam continued. “Really. Honestly. Nothing is more important than following the set of rules that depicts exactly how things should be done. All other things should follow on after.” He swirled the ice in his glass round thoughtfully. “I might bring it up, you know, at the next staff meeting. I’ve been thinking about it for a while: getting the new members of staff to start off with an induction week. They’d read the folder, then answer questions on it.” He grinned and chuckled. “I reckon it’d be a fun beginning to their teaching career.”

Even Margaret seemed to be hiding her disbelief. Anna felt better about her own amusement. She squeezed Liam’s hand and exchanged an eyebrow raise with his mother.

“That daughter of yours had an attitude this evening.” The change in subject made Anna look over.

She let out a slow breath. “Hmm. Yes. Isn’t it lovely that my twenty-year-old is able to express herself so freely?”

When she glanced at Margaret, she found her unreadable.

Liam drummed his fingers on the table. “Well, she seemed outright rude, if you ask me. Disrespecting me and how I do things.”

“She was just upset that we...” She glanced at Margaret apologetically. “Bethany was pleased we were having a nice meal out together. She worries about me. I think she had this image of a romantic date in her head and... she was disappointed we’d be a three, rather than a two.”

“I’m sorry I’ve ruined your evening.” Margaret looked at the napkin in her lap.

“Like I said, it’s absolutely fine. Your health is far more important than Liam and I having time alone. And it’s been lovely, it truly has.” She was overdoing it with the gushing, but she didn’t care. Margaret didn’t deserve to feel bad.

Margaret looked up, and the edges of her mouth pulled upwards. “So long as you make sure you plan another time, when I’m not feeling so awful?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Mum. I plan on wining and dining Anna until I die.” He swooped in and kissed Anna full on the lips.

Anna pulled back, but he closed the space again. She forced herself to accept the kiss, even while her stomach churned at his words. *We've never discussed the concept of forever. We also never discussed him snogging me in full view of his mother.*

\* \* \*

Swishing through the water, Ollie grinned at the toddler splashing towards her. "That's right, little one. Kick those legs."

The mother holding the child smiled as well. "She's doing ever so well. Look at her."

"I know. Absolutely brilliant. She'll be ready for the Olympics soon." Ollie preferred the children's pool—it was warmer and cuddled her injured knee comfortably. She always had to take painkillers before she went into the adult pool.

Another parent came over with their child, who was wearing a bright pink tutu attached to her costume. The mother had a halter-neck tankini that showed off her curves.

Ollie often wondered about how people chose their costumes. She liked the simplicity of her usual black one-piece and a pair of board shorts over the top that nearly hid her knee and brushed over her scar so that most people didn't see it. It made her feel comfortable and staved off too many questions from her pupils and their parents.

"How long have you been teaching swimming?" the mother asked. Ollie couldn't remember her name, but it didn't matter.

"Two years."

"Do you need qualifications or...?" The woman seemed genuinely interested, but wary. Perhaps she felt Ollie wouldn't want to talk about herself.

Ollie didn't mind. "Yes, you need your Level One and your Level Two. I thought about doing my Three, but I don't need it to teach classes. I have enough."

"Oh. And do you do anything else?"

"I own a shop," Ollie said, holding out her hands until the little girl squealed and grabbed them. Her mum let her go, and Ollie pulled the child around in the water. "I sell crafty things. In the day, obviously. I do this as an extra thing." She laughed as the little girl shouted and splashed, then let

her hands go. The kid kicked wildly in glee and the mother looked on in delight.

“So, how many classes a week do you do?”

“I do three in the week and one on a Saturday morning. I also teach crochet two evenings a week.”

“Full week,” the mother said and then laughed. “Don’t you have a life?”

Something hardened in the pit of Ollie’s stomach. Her jaw ached. “I like to be busy.”

“Really? When do you relax?”

Ollie felt the pull of the water behind her, or was it her own need to swim away from the woman? “I like what I do.” She tried very hard to remain professional. Somehow, a little of the bitterness she felt towards the woman seeped through. “I mean...” She concentrated on the delighted face of the little girl, who was poking a bubble in the water with a huge amount of focus. She took hold of the girl’s feet and tickled them. The giggling that brought forth dissolved some of the tension as if into the water around her. “It’s a real pleasure to be able to help kids have fun.”

Uncertainty still trickled from the mum. *Please don’t ask me anymore.* “I wouldn’t manage constantly working. Got to get some feet-up-gin-in-hand time at least once an evening.”

She decided to let that one slide. How much gin the mum consumed of an evening was as much Ollie’s business as the hours she worked were the mum’s. With a flutter of relief, Ollie noticed the time. “Okay, guys. Time to get out and dry. Great work today.” In her changing cubicle, her stomach still churned as she rubbed at her skin roughly with her towel. *Do I work too much?*

\* \* \*

Thursday came around rather slowly for Anna. Timothy and Bethany were constantly at one another’s throats. Bethany was irritated by Timothy’s inability to change his schedule so she could watch some show where a bride relinquished all control of the wedding to her groom, and then the ultimate fallout was televised. Timothy had declared her tastes childish. Bethany replied she thought his were too.

*Four days of this and I’m ready to smack their heads together.*



But they were both adults, more or less, and needed to work it out themselves. Thank goodness the today had been quieter once Bethany had shut herself in her bedroom with university work. Arthur had taken to sitting on Anna's lap, meowing and nuzzling her hands, so she gave him plenty of treats and cuddles. She knew that the kids would sort it out soon, but in the meantime, home life wasn't as picturesque as she would like. She felt rather naïve for wishing for perfection, but there it was.

It was a relief to leave work at four o'clock. She would have plenty of time to go home, mow the lawn, have a shower, and make her dinner before the crochet class at seven. She had decided on the colours for her blanket—burgundy, of course, navy blue, and cream. She'd seen the combination in a furniture shop once and had never forgotten it. The trio would match her living room well.

Her house phone rang and Anna huffed, wondering why she even had a house phone when her mobile worked just as well and wasn't always halfway across the house. She hauled herself to her feet, her knees cracking.

"Hello?" She looked at her watch, hoping it wasn't something that would take too long.

"Anna, it's Patricia."

A comfortable feeling enveloped her stomach at the voice of her best friend. "Why, hello. How are you?"

"Great." Patricia sounded her usual bright self. "Never better."

"Can't talk long," Anna said. "Places to be."

"Ah, yes, your crochet thing. How's that going?"

"Wonderful. Well, I've a lot to learn." Anna leant against the telephone table. "But it's fun. And it's nice to be filling my time with making things, rather than just pages and pages of poetry chosen by the national curriculum."

The easy friendship they'd developed and maintained since college carried the conversation fluidly, but after ten minutes Anna hastily looked at her watch. "I'm awfully sorry. I have to go."

"Hot date with some wool?"

"Something like that."

"You must be making something sexy. Can you make a cock ring out of crochet?"

Anna stifled a giggle. "Speak soon," she sang.

“Love you, babes.”

She drove to the shop early, hoping to catch Ollie for a few minutes before the class started. That way she could get herself settled with the pattern. She parked and strode to Darn That Yarn.

*I wonder whether Ollie chose the name herself.* She could just imagine Ollie getting frustrated with a project and proclaiming the new name of her shop to the world.

Anna had managed to arrive twenty minutes early and stood by the side door, wondering whether Ollie would even be downstairs yet. She paused before she finally knocked.

A blond mop of hair stuck itself out of a window open right above the side door. “Anna.” Ollie’s face was alight. “Hi.” Her mouth was full of food.

Anna’s heart fell. “Sorry.” She squinted upwards. “I wanted to...I suppose I thought if I was early we could sort out the new pattern.”

Ollie threw her a hand gesture, as if she were physically waving away Anna’s apology. “It’s fine. Just one minute.” She disappeared from the window.

*I should have just arrived at seven like everyone else.*

The side door opened, and Ollie ushered her in but fanned her hand towards another door. “Go on up.”

“To your flat?” Anna eyed the staircase in front of her with curiosity.

“Yep. Go on.”

Anna ascended the narrow staircase, and when she reached the top, she found herself in a sparse but comfortable flat, the open doors hinting at a bedroom, bathroom, and office. A large living space took over most of the flat, with kitchen things on one side and sofas on the other. It was decorated in soft greys, blues, and greens. A warmth settled over Anna as she looked over the flat. Various crocheted items adorned the furniture.

“That looks great,” Ollie said, pointing to Anna’s scarf before going to the counter in the kitchen.

“Thank you. I love it, actually.” Anna stroked the softness of the scarf with her fingers.

“You worked very hard on it. Quick drink before we join our fellow crafters?” She finished off her sandwich and leant against the counter. “Tea?”

“All right. Thank you.”

The dining chair made a scraping noise as Ollie dragged it out from under the table for her. Ollie made tea for them and then sat across from her, leaning backwards in her wooden chair. Anna sat with her bags in her lap.

“So, how has your week been?” Ollie asked.

“Fine, thank you.” Anna grimaced.

Ollie shot her a long look. “You don’t look sure.”

“Well...” Anna let out a slow breath. “Okay, kids arguing.”

“Ah.” Ollie sipped at her tea and gestured for Anna to do the same.

Her bags went onto the tiled floor and she pulled her chair in a little more. Her fingertip circled the rim of the china mug, and she took in the pretty flowers wrapped around it. The mug was warm against her palm as she slipped two fingers into the handle.

“Something specific or just a personality clash?”

“Television rows. Personal comments. I’m trying to let them sort themselves out but—”

“But at some point you’ll be locking them in a room together and not letting them out until they’ve kissed and made up?”

“Pretty much.” Anna chuckled. “Honestly, they’re in their twenties. And I know Timothy’s a special case, but, really, you’d think I had a couple of ten-year-olds under my roof.”

“Kieran and Helen still fight like cats and dogs. Not as much as they used to, though. Probably because they no longer live together.”

“If only they’d communicate like sensible human beings.”

“Might be a bit much to ask.”

“Ugh,” Anna said, putting her fingers to her forehead. “I just wish I could have a night off sometimes.”

“Then welcome,” Ollie said, “to an evening of treble crochet stitches and making new friends.” Her eyes were soft as they looked at Anna over her mug.

Anna smiled back, closed her eyes, and breathed in the steam from the tea. Ollie’s flat smelled like herbs, a soft scent that made her think of the hand cream she’d given her. “It’s nice here, anyway.” Anna swept her chin in a circle to indicate the flat.

“Thanks.” Ollie sat back and crossed her legs. She tapped her forefinger against her mug. “Came with the shop. Almost identical to my old place, actually. Furnished too. Made moving in pretty hassle-free.”

“You couldn’t get something more substantial in the divorce?”

“Nope. Didn’t get a whole lot from that. And I don’t need anything bigger,” Ollie said. “This does perfectly for now. Perfect for one.”

“Fair enough.”

Ollie looked at her watch. “We’d better go open up the classroom. And you”—she pointed a finger at Anna—“had better choose some DK for your blanket.” She stood and picked up her keys, a large bunch with a simple green heart on a key ring.

“DK?” Anna stood, too, and gathered her bags.

“Double knit. Sorry. Keep forgetting you aren’t familiar with the lingo.” They headed downstairs.

The noise of things being moved around drifted through from the classroom.

“Have you decided on colours?” Ollie moved to stand close to Anna.

“Actually, that’s as far as I’ve got. Navy, burgundy, and cream.”

“Lovely.” Ollie grabbed a set of steps from against the wall, opened them out, and climbed up. She leant forward to take two balls from their little cubby holes. She held the navy and cream balls out, her head tilted and her eyebrows raised in question.

Anna stuffed the wool under her arm and grabbed the ladder, flashes of Ollie tumbling from the top making her shiver. *She probably does this all the time.* She was dating a health and safety officer; it was only natural she would want to keep Ollie safe. As she allowed her gaze to trail up Ollie’s long legs, she realised Ollie’s backside was right at her eye level. She swallowed. It wiggled a bit as Ollie fumbled to move some balls around. Anna couldn’t tear her gaze away. It was a very nice bottom, hugged perfectly in a black pair of jeans and brushed by the bottom edge of her white long-sleeve top.

Another one of Anna’s rules was that she didn’t ogle bottoms. She was far too set in her feminist ways. She didn’t approve of men doing so, and therefore she didn’t do it herself.

*What is the matter with me?*

Gripping the ladder more firmly, she forced her gaze back to Ollie’s boots. Her insides relaxed a little as Ollie finally clambered down.

Ollie's fringe was hanging in front of her eyes, and she pushed it back, holding out a ball of burgundy wool. Anna's expression must have displayed her pleasure, because Ollie beamed at her.

"Perfect?"

"Yes." As she took the ball from Ollie, their fingers brushed.

They looked at one another. The earth seemed to stop spinning. Everything was quiet.

A loud knock on the side door broke the moment.

Anna pulled her lip into her mouth while Ollie went to open the door. Clutching three balls of yarn tightly to her chest, she wasn't sure she had the ability to move without dropping one of them. She steeled herself, set her fingers tight around them, and breathed deeply for a few minutes. Then she walked towards the classroom.

Six or seven people had arrived already. Anna was instructed to sit next to Christian, a tall, broad-shouldered man about her age, with a toothy smile and kind eyes.

"You came last week," he said after introductions had been made.

"And the week before." Anna shook his hand. "I'm afraid I'm still a bit of a novice."

"Well, we've all got to start somewhere." He took out a huge cardboard box from under the table.

She peered inside. It contained four cones of some kind of thick material made into thread. "What on earth is that?"

"T-shirt yarn."

"Made from...T-shirts?" Anna couldn't help staring at him.

"Essentially, yes."

"What do you make with it?"

"Well, you can make lots of things. I'm making some toy baskets for the grandkids." He held up a ratty-looking piece of paper with a pattern for a large basket with handles on it and an owl face on the front.

"How clever." Anna reached into the box to pick up an end. She frowned at him. "What size hook would you need for that?"

He moved slowly, his eyes gleaming, and produced a wooden hook as wide as Anna's thumb.

Anna tried not to swear in shock. She failed.

As Ollie shot her a look from the other side of the room, Christian laughed.

“You know we have minors here tonight, right?” Ollie grumbled.

A hand clamped over her mouth, Anna still sniggered through her fingers.

Christian waved the hook as if it were a magic wand, and that just made her laugh harder.

When Anna looked back over, Ollie just shook her head and shrugged and then began handing out the pattern for some his-and-hers slippers.

Matthew and a couple of the others scoffed at it.

“I know, I know,” she said. “Heteronormative pattern. But there are so many good ones.” She smirked at Matthew. “You can rename yours ‘his-and-his’ if you like.”

Matthew was quite camp in the way he spoke and the way he behaved. He winked at Ollie, which made Ollie blush and look at the floor for a moment. Why would Ollie blush at that? Did she have a problem with Matthew being gay?

Christian’s starting colour was a lovely bright peacock-blue. Anna watched his large hands for a moment. It looked like difficult work, and not just the stitches. *My hands would ache within minutes.* She looked down at her own collection, and the balls looked so small in comparison.

A hand-typed pattern was slipped onto her desk. Ollie was smiling down at her.

“Mad, isn’t he?” Ollie glanced towards Christian.

“A bit.” Anna’s brow furrowed at all the abbreviations and acronyms in the pattern. Then she noticed a hand-drawn red box on the side of the paper. “You made me a key.”

“You only need trebles and chains and slip stitches for this pattern. Reckon you can handle that?”

“I already know chains,” Anna said. “What’s a slip stitch?”

“Like a double, but without the extra yarn-over-hook and pull through.”

Anna just stared blankly up at her.

Ollie smiled and perched on the side of the table and showed her until Anna nodded. “And then trebles.”

A treble, it turned out, was simply a longer version of a double, and Anna got the technique pretty quickly.

“Were you as good at teaching in the field as you are at teaching crochet?” she asked.

Ollie averted her gaze, and Anna immediately regretted the question. But after a moment, and a deep breath, Ollie nodded. “Better,” she replied with a wink.

With a sense of relief, Anna took out the correctly sized hook and leant her elbows on the table by Ollie’s hip.

“A small row of chains, and a slip stitch to form a ring,” Ollie said slowly, allowing Anna to follow on the pattern with her finger. “Chain three, two trebles into the ring, chain two, three trebles...”

Anna’s gaze darted from an abbreviation to the key and back. She continued reciting the pattern herself. “Chain two, three trebles, chain two again—there are a lot of these, aren’t there? Three trebles, chain two and join with a slip stitch into the...the third chain.”

“Easier than Shakespeare?” Ollie teased.

“It does look like a completely different language, to be honest. That is, until you look at this handy little key.” Anna eyed her. “I can tell you wrote this yourself. I hope it was a copy-and-paste thing.”

Her lips twisted, and Ollie glanced away, flicking her hair away from her eyes.

“You’re not telling me you typed this out from scratch?” Anna rolled her crochet hook between her fingers. “Oh, Ollie. You shouldn’t have.”

“Just wanted it to be right.” Ollie tapped the side of her head. “Got it up here, the whole pattern.”

“How long did it take you?” Anna asked.

Ollie scratched the side of a finger. “Not long.”

“Ollie.” Anna pointed towards her with her hook, ready to give her a royal telling-off for going to so much trouble.

Amy called out, needing help beginning the slippers, and Ollie smiled briefly before hopping down from her perch.

Christian was making something disc-shaped—perhaps the base of the basket for his grandchildren. It was getting bigger and bigger as he turned it like the steering wheel of a car, adding stitches in a spiral.

Anna made a slipknot and began, following the pattern slowly and carefully. Realising she’d made a mistake, she undid the piece and then

started again. Her stomach warmed as she felt her confidence grow. *I like trebles. They're huge.*

Once she'd finished the first four clusters of trebles, she joined them up and held them out, scrutinising the tiny, messy bundle of wool. Her hands shook a little with unease. She looked over at Ollie, but she was deep in discussion with Amy and the lad sitting next to her, so Anna turned to Christian.

"Doesn't look right to me," she said, holding the work out at him like an offering.

He took it from her and teased the tiny piece into a square shape with holes at each corner. "It's fine, don't worry." He gave her an encouraging smile.

She tilted her head to one side and reconsidered the square. "That's... that's okay, then?" She glanced towards Ollie again, who seemed miles away. *I wish she'd come over.*

"Yes."

"Okay." She sighed and allowed her shoulders to drop. With a single nod, she bowed her head towards the pattern and continued. Similar to Christian, she worked round in a circle, making sure she remembered the two chain stitches in each corner.

As she finished the second row, her phone rang. She dropped her crochet hook with a metal clang on the floor and bent down to grab it while simultaneously answering her phone.

It was Timothy, and the moment she picked up the phone she knew something was wrong from his panicked tone.

"Anna. It broke. I didn't mean to. It's smoky and..." His voice was muffled, as though he had put the phone on speaker. All she could hear were smacking sounds—his hands against the sides of his face, she could easily imagine.

"Don't panic." She stuffed everything into her cloth bag. "Timothy, I'll be right there."

She was half aware of Ollie's eyes watching her as she left.

\* \* \*

When Anna arrived home, having possibly ever so slightly broken the speed limit several times, Timothy was waiting for her by the front door.



He point-blank refused to go into the kitchen and had sensibly closed the door after accidentally setting the toaster alight with a teacake.

She stroked his upper arm. "It's all right. You've done the right thing by calling me." She looked around. "Where on earth is Bethany?" There was a growl in her voice.

"She's in her bedroom," he said, starting to pat the sides of his head. She held his hands to his face and he stilled under her touch. He stood in front of her, shoulders slack. "I didn't know what else to do." His breathing was shallow and his face was beetroot.

"I'm home now, Timothy."

"I knocked and knocked but she wouldn't open the door." His voice was a little muffled from between two sets of hands.

She took his hand in her own. "This is what we'll do," she said. "You go sit in the living room. I will look in the kitchen and assess the damage."

"What if the fire isn't out? What if the whole kitchen is ablaze?"

"We'd know, wouldn't we? It'd be very hot in here"—she gestured towards the kitchen door—"and there'd be smoke, wouldn't there?"

He nodded.

"Once I've had a look, I will go up to Bethany's bedroom and give her a piece of my mind."

Apparently having decided this was acceptable, he went into the living room.

Anna held her breath and closed her eyes tight before opening the kitchen door. Her entire body relaxed on an exhale. Apart from a slight blackening to the wall behind the toaster, the only harm seemed to have been to the actual appliance. She figured she could do with a new one anyway—that one was at least ten years old. She tumbled the toaster straight into the bin and cleaned the area around where it had been. Then she trudged upstairs to confront her delightful daughter.

Ten minutes of shouting from Bethany—and stern words from Anna, resulted in Bethany shuffling downstairs to apologise to her brother. They gathered in the kitchen, and for a second or two, Timothy eyed the place where the toaster had been.

"It's okay," Timothy replied. "However, the rule remains that I am not to come into your bedroom."

This made Bethany's mouth fall open.

“Which is why after knocking for a long time, I had no option but to phone Anna.”

“Maybe we should—maybe we should change the rule, then.” Bethany’s voice was tentative. “So long as changing it is...is okay with you, Timothy?”

“I will need a detailed and specific list,” Timothy said, clasping his hands in a businesslike gesture, “itemising each individual situation in which I am permitted to enter your bedroom.”

Even though Bethany grimaced and rolled her eyes, Anna stayed quiet. They had to sort this out themselves.

“How about...” Bethany looked at the floor, eyebrows furrowed. “What if the rule changed to...you knock on my door. If after three knocks you don’t get an answer, you can open it?”

“Am I allowed to come in?”

“No.” Bethany’s voice was sharp, but she softened as she looked at her brother. Then she smiled and shrugged. “Unless you think I’m dead.”

“Right, kids.” Anna strode to the counter to open a bottle of wine. “Let’s watch a silly movie and eat popcorn. What do you say?”

With a nod from Timothy and a shrug from Bethany, it was decided.

“How was your crochet group?” Timothy asked once they were all sat down.

“Until it was *rudely* interrupted by a misbehaving toaster, lovely, thank you.” Anna patted her cloth bag.

“Meet anyone new?” Bethany tilted her glass of wine at her mother, and her tone was overly flippant, like she didn’t want to seem interested but actually couldn’t wait to hear the answer.

“A man called Christian. He was making the strangest thing. A basket out of something called *T-shirt yarn*—can you believe?”

Bethany pursed her lips for a moment. “Actually, that sounds kind of cool.” She slid her gaze towards Anna and narrowed her eyes. “But you *are* going to have to give me more information. What’s he like?”

“Tall. Blue eyes, I think.” Anna sipped from her glass and shrugged, using her other hand on the remote to find a movie to watch. “I didn’t look that closely.”

“Nice-looking?” Bethany asked, the embodiment of pure innocence.

“Okay, I suppose.” She glanced at Bethany, who couldn’t hide the intensity in her expression. “Ah, I see. No. Not in any way my type, Beth.”

“Shame.” Bethany twirled her glass and grinned with a conspiratorial air in Timothy’s direction. Timothy just grinned back but didn’t comment. *Have they been discussing my love life?* “Could do with someone interesting in your life.”

“Uh, excuse me? What about Liam?”

“What about him?” Bethany shrugged. “He’s such a bore, Mum.”

“Oh, you just don’t know him very well yet.”

“You’ve been going out what...” Bethany counted silently on her fingers. “Like, seven months? And he never stays here. And you never drive him anywhere; he always drives. And he talks about nothing but his work and how crap it is.”

“I don’t like him,” Timothy said.

“I know you don’t, love.” Anna sighed and shot Timothy a smile, hoping for one in return. He stared at her, his expression remaining sombre.

“He was nasty to me when you brought him home,” Timothy said.

“He wasn’t *nasty* exactly.” Anna scratched her jaw and grimaced.

“He used the *R word*, and I don’t like the *R word*. It’s a word that is used to negatively describe someone with learning difficulties.”

“He did *not*.” Bethany eyes were large, and her hand flew to her throat. “Mum. Seriously, that’s not cool. Get rid.”

Anna held out her hands as if they were searching for an explanation. “He just...he simply didn’t have the right word in his vocabulary and...” She shrugged dejectedly. “I did pull him up on it.” She eyed Timothy. “He *did* apologise, didn’t he?”

“Not very sincerely.” Timothy’s gaze remained downcast.

*He shouldn’t have to deal with that.* Anna’s heart ached. Timothy should never feel that being ridiculed was normal. Her glass of wine held no answers as she stared down into its rich red. She sighed.

“I’m sorry, Timothy. I’ll have another word.”

“No need.” He shrugged. “He probably won’t get it.”

Tears stung her eyes. She closed them against the intensifying ache in her chest.

They all quietened in front of the television. The action noises filled the room: guns crashing, cars screeching, and characters shouting at one another.

Timothy munched his popcorn.

*This evening could have been so much worse. What if he had set fire to the kitchen? I'll have to go through some safety information with him at some point.* Anna sipped her wine, barely tasting it. She knew logically that all was well, but she couldn't help worrying.

The light from the television flicked across the surface of her glass, turning into a fiery red as it hit her wine. Her stomach burned with the non-existent memory of her kitchen on fire. *Pull yourself together.*

Her mobile rang for a second time that evening and she stared down at it as though yet another catastrophe was imminent. She saw a number she didn't recognise.

"Hello?"

"Anna?" The voice was female.

The burning sensation eased, as if Ollie's voice were an icy presence that quenched it. "Ollie, hello." She sat up straighter on the sofa. "How did you get my number?"

Ollie laughed. "Oh sorry. I may have...um...saved it when you called me that...that first time."

The remote control was passed on to Timothy, and she carried her wine glass into the kitchen. She noticed Bethany's raised eyebrow watching her leave.

"Hope that's okay?"

"Course." Anna said.

"I was phoning because...because I was...honestly, I was worried. You left in such a hurry. Christian said it was something about Timothy?"

"All sorted now." Anna slid into a chair and placed her glass on the oak table. "He refereed an argument between a teacake and our toaster. Set fire to them both. No harm done." She smiled. "Sweet of you to worry, though."

"Oh...well..."

Anna gave her a moment, sipping at her wine and rolling it around in her mouth. It suddenly tasted scrummy.

"Glad it's all okay," Ollie eventually said. Her voice seemed stronger. "Is Timothy all right?"

"He's fine. Think he was more concerned he'd set the kitchen on fire, to be honest." Anna leant her elbow against the cool wood of the table. "Very small fire, mainly located inside the actual toaster."

"Good."

Anna leant her phone against her shoulder and fingered the stem of her wine glass. She scrambled for something more to say. "So, hope the rest of the group went well."

"Yeah, fine. Thanks. Amy is such a clumsy kid, though. Her yarn went flying across the room, nearly hit Matthew on the head." Ollie snorted.

Laughter bubbled up Anna's throat. "Oh dear. Perhaps she could do with a sling for it, or something. Like a kangaroo's pouch."

"Oh my God, that's a great idea. You design it; I'll get the patent sorted."

They laughed some more before quietening.

"Crumbs, I'm sorry. I just realised I didn't pay you for the lesson."

Ollie's chuckle made the ache in her stomach completely dissipate.

"Don't worry. I won't let you off that easily. You can pay it next week."

"All right," Anna said. "You do have a knack for convincing me to return, don't you?"

"I'm the best."

Anna stared down at the wood of the table, traced a finger around one of the knots. *I wonder if Ollie's settling down for the evening too. I wonder what she's wearing.* She stared at her wine and then pushed it away. It was obviously loosening her mind, making her think things she wouldn't usually. *First I stare at her backside, and now I'm wondering what she's wearing.*

"Anyway," Ollie said on a sigh. "I suppose it's nearly bedtime for me. You working tomorrow?"

"Nope, the wonders of October half-term. You?"

"Well, I'm sort of by myself. No one to actually run the shop if I have a day off. And what with the swimming lessons I teach, I don't have much time to sit around. So, Sunday is my only day of rest."

"You should get an assistant," Anna said. "What does Matthew do? He told me when I first met him that he was your right-hand man."

"He probably meant when it came to picking up..." Ollie cleared her throat. "Picking up potential dates."

"Ah right, a wingman, is he?" Anna sipped at her wine. "Although I'm sure the places he goes to find potential partners are a little different from the places you would go."

Ollie muttered something that sounded like agreement. "Anyway. I'll let you go," Anna said. She was surprised how deflated she felt about the prospect.

“Been nice to talk to you.” Ollie’s words came out in a rush.

They made Anna feel tingly all over. “You too. Um. Text me if you get bored. I might not answer straightaway but...it’s half-term. All I have to do is housework. And a bit of marking.”

“A-ha. I remember it well.”

“I can’t have my phone set to ring when I’m teaching, but if I’m at home, it’s usually close by.”

“Well, I’m the boss. I operate under a very strict mobile-phones-allowed policy at my place of work.”

“Ha! Okay, I’ll see you next Thursday, Ollie.”

“Yes, you will.”

“Bye, then.”

“Goodbye, Anna.”

The line went silent, and Anna sat back in her chair. She smiled, rubbed her upper arms, and reached across the table to finger her wine glass. Ollie’s voice was warm, and it was natural and easy to listen to.

When she turned around, she found Bethany leaning against the door frame leading into the hallway.

“Everything okay?” Anna asked.

Bethany had her eyebrows pushed downwards, but the corners of her lips were curled up. “Yes. Can I have another glass?”

“Do you have uni tomorrow?”

“I do not.” Bethany tossed her hair back.

“In that case, my dear, feel free to finish the bottle.” Anna smacked her thighs with her palms, drained her glass, and stood. “I am off to bed.”

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# HOOKED ON YOU

BY JENN MATTHEWS

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