

A N D R E A B R A M H A L L

LOST FOR WORDS



CHAPTER 1

“I HAVE A CONFESSION TO make.”

Sasha Adams sighed inwardly, straightened her back, and spun to face her best friend. Bobbi Johnson’s confessions ranged from eating the last chocolate biscuit when Sasha was PMSing to... Well, just about anything was possible.

“All right. Will we need bail money?”

“Erm...not this time.”

“Spade to bury the body?”

Bobbi’s dark-skinned face cracked into a wide smile, her coal-dark eyes twinkling with amusement. “Possibly. When you kill me.” The relaxed afro curls in her short Mohawk flopped a little as she shuffled from side to side, and Sasha could see a sheen of sweat on her upper lip.

Sasha rolled her hand to hurry Bobbi along. It had been a long day at work, her feet were killing her, and all she wanted was to get home. The Serenity Spa was a luxurious, opulent place to work, but Sasha wanted nothing more than to kick off her shoes, put up her feet, and finish up the new project she was working on.

Bobbi sucked in a big breath and started, “I may or may not have accidentally—remember that part, it was totally accidental—but I may have introduced your mother to a new form of baking. Possibly.”

Sasha frowned. “You’ve been baking with my mother?”

“Accidentally.”

“How does one ‘accidentally’ bake? And with my mother? And what do you mean ‘a new form’?”

“It’s a long story.”

Sasha blinked, then pointed to the corridor. "My last massage's done. You?"

Bobbi nodded.

"Then I guess you can tell me all about this long story while you give me a lift home."

She seemed to consider this a moment, then nodded. "You probably can't kill me while I'm behind the wheel. At least not without killing yourself too. Sounds like a plan."

They collected their things from the deserted staff room before they climbed into Bobbi's old red Astra. Well, red except for the blue door on the passenger side she got from a scrapyard after an incident with a skip and a vicious badger. But that was another long story.

Sasha waited until they'd pulled out of the car park, glad she didn't have to wait for the bus this evening as the drizzle covered the windscreen. She turned in her seat to watch Bobbi's face. The orange-tinted light of Manchester city after dark was more than enough to see her friend clearly.

"I'm ready for your confession, my child," she said, doing her best impression of a priest.

Bobbi snickered but began, "So, erm, you know the other night when you had a killer headache and went to bed early?"

"Which night? You have tea with us nearly every night, and I've had a couple of migraines recently."

"Two nights ago, we were having tea with your mum. Migraine from hell hit you."

"Okay, the scene is set."

"So your mum was having some of her pains, you know? The ones from her prosthetic."

Sasha nodded provisionally, wondering in another part of her brain if her mum had caused herself some new blisters on her stump. You'd think that nearly five years after a bone-cancer scare, with a leg amputation to show for it, Fleur would have learnt to let people take care of her more. It wasn't as if the myriad of phantom pains she suffered weren't consistent reminders to take it easy. "Get to the confession, Bobbi."

"Well, she was taking her medicine."

Sasha lifted her eyebrows. "Which medicine?"

"The one the doctor prescribed."

“The doctor’s prescribed her with a range of ‘medicines’, honey. Which one are we talking about here?”

“She was smoking a joint.”

“I hope you went in the conservatory with her. She’s stinking the house out with all the pot she’s smoking now.”

“You’ve noticed, huh?”

“Noticed?”

“How much she’s smoking lately?”

“Well, yeah. It’s hard to miss when I walk out of the house smelling like a pothead all the time,” Sasha commented. “Why?”

“Just wondered if it meant she was getting more pain than usual. That’s all.”

“She hasn’t mentioned it particularly. I think she’s just enjoying her official hippie status. She thinks she’s back at Woodstock or something.”

“Woodstock?”

“Apparently.”

“Your mum went to Woodstock? *The* Woodstock?”

“So she tells me.”

“Seriously?”

Sasha shrugged.

“How did I not know this? Tell me all about it. Now.”

“No, you’re still telling me about my mother and you baking.”

Bobbi cast her a glance, then turned back to the road. “Fine, but later you’re telling me about your supercool mother and Woodstock.”

Sasha rolled her hand again.

“Well, she was coughing every time she tried to take a drag. So I asked her why she didn’t stop smoking the stuff. She said she couldn’t if she wanted to get any sleep that night, and I might have possibly mentioned, in passing, very, very briefly, that she could always take it a different way. One that wouldn’t be so hard on her lungs all the time.”

“You taught my mother how to make space cakes.” It wasn’t a question. It didn’t need to be.

“It was an accident.”

“That’s not an accident, Bobbi. An accident is where you trip, fall off the kerb, and sprain your ankle. Or where you drop a glass when you’re washing up because your hands are wet and soapy. Those things are

accidents. Taking my mum into the kitchen, showing her how to make hash cakes, and no doubt helping her polish off some of those hash cakes, that's not an accident. See the difference?"

Bobbi nodded like a chastised child and mumbled an apology under her breath.

Sasha chuckled at the look of contrition.

"You gonna kill me now?"

"Nah."

Bobbi looked at her hopefully. "Really?"

"Really."

"I won't teach her anything else—"

"Honey, I hate to burst your little bubble here, but I'm pretty sure my mother has made hash cakes before. I'm *very* sure she's eaten them before. And if she hadn't been stoned already, your little 'accidental' divulgence would not have been anything new to her at all."

Bobbi eyed her sceptically from the corner of her eye. "I don't know. She seemed—"

"Woodstock," Sasha replied in a sing-song voice and tried to suppress a grin when Bobbi nodded and wrinkled her nose.

"There are pictures of me as a five-year-old at Glastonbury with her in 1978."

Bobbi nodded again.

"There's not an awful lot left to teach her, hon."

"Fair point," Bobbi conceded. "I'll ask her for lessons in the leading-folk-astray category of life."

"Now you're learning, young grasshopper." They drove in silence for a few minutes until they tuned right into Sasha's road.

"Sasha?"

"Yeah?"

"Your mum's awesome."

Sasha rested her head back against the headrest, a grin spreading across her lips.

"You know that, right?"

"Yeah," she said quietly. "I do."

Bobbi parked up outside the house Sasha shared with her mum. One of many on a street filled with long lines of Victorian houses, each one joined

to the next. Each one made of red brick that had long since faded to dirty. Paint colours were the only real distinction from one house or street to the next; graffiti acted like the territory lines for gangs of youths, and the paint on each front door was chipped and scarred.

Sasha liked to think theirs was fairing a little better than average. And the planters in the front yard were neat and weeded. The stone topper on the wall was painted too, and the bins were upright and not covered in graffiti. The window at the front had a net curtain stretched across it. A black cat sat on the windowsill staring out at them, green eyes watching them with bored disdain.

“Sasha?”

“Yeah?”

“Did she really go to Woodstock?”

Sasha pointed to the door. “Come on. We’ll have some tea and you can ask her for the details yourself.”

“Cool.” Bobbi tugged her keys out of the ignition.

“But if she tries to tell you that I’m the secret love child of Jimi Hendrix...she’s talking out of her arse.”

Bobbi tutted. “Even I’d know that.”

Sasha slid the strap of her handbag over her shoulder and glanced at her hand. Yup, her milky-white skin would definitely give that one away.

“You can’t even play the guitar.”

* * *

Sasha strode into the kitchen and popped an arm around her mother’s shoulders, kissing her on the cheek as Fleur stirred a pan on the stove.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Fleur said, not taking her eyes off the pan. “How was work today?”

“Same old, same old. Massages, manicures, facials, aching feet.” Serenity Spa might be a luxury spa, but it was still a spa. She pointed to the pan. “Is there enough for one extra?”

Fleur smiled. “Of course. Hey, Bobbi.”

“Hey, Mrs A.” Bobbi stepped up and kissed Fleur’s other cheek. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“How was your day, Mum?” Sasha dropped heavily into a chair and toed off her shoes. She groaned with pleasure as she wiggled her toes in contentment.

“Same old, same old,” Fleur said, reiterating Sasha’s well-used phrase. “Wine, girls?”

Sasha shook her head. “I think I’ll just have a cuppa.” She stood to put the kettle on to boil. “Bobbi?”

“Please.”

“Mum?”

Fleur lifted the crystal necklace from her neck, pointed to two, seemingly random, spots on the counter, and hung the chain over it. Sasha resisted the urge to roll her eyes as Fleur closed hers, connected to her “higher spirit”, then swayed back and forth for a moment before opening her eyes and giving a little nod.

“Yes, but I’ll do it,” Fleur said. “You’ve both been working all day.”

“It’s fine, Mum. I’m already up.” Sasha filled the kettle and flipped the switch, eyeing her mother critically. “You okay? You look tired.”

“You’ll look tired too when you get to my age.” Fleur tossed her shoulder-length grey hair over her shoulder with an exaggerated flounce. “In fact, there were several years where I don’t recall sleeping at all. Must be catching up with me now. Now pass me the plates.”

Sasha did as she asked, then finished making the tea while Fleur doled out generous helpings of pasta for Bobbi and Sasha, and a smaller one for herself.

“You’re not eating much,” Sasha commented, pointing to her mother’s plate, then examining her fork with mock wariness. “Poison?”

Fleur tittered. “Too slow. Besides, what would I do with your bodies?”

They all laughed.

“Oo, that reminds me,” Bobbi said, looking at Sasha. “IKEA tomorrow? I need a new mattress; the spring stuck in my back for the past six months actually broke free of the fabric last night.” She pointed to her eye for effect. “I nearly lost this. You’re off tomorrow, right?”

“No, I’m working half-day in the morning.”

“I can pick you up when you finish. Go straight over to the shop then.”

Sasha shrugged. “Sure. My last client is at twelve, so I should be out just after one.”

“I’ll be in the car park.”

“Bobbi?” Fleur said.

“Yeah?”

“Why did my mentioning hiding your bodies remind you of IKEA?”

Bobbi shrugged. “Innovative storage solutions?”

Sasha and Fleur looked at each other. *What exactly do you say to that?*

Fleur cleared her throat after a few minutes of silence. “So, Bobbi, tell me what you’ve been up to.”

“Me?” Bobbi squeaked.

“Yes, you.”

“Why me?”

“Because I’m a boring old lady who needs to live vicariously through you youngsters.”

Sasha almost spit out the mouthful of tea she’d just taken at her mother’s bold-faced lie. “Mum, you have more going on in your life than we do. Yoga, Pilates, bowling.” She pointed to the crystal hanging from a chain around her neck. “Wasn’t it your meditation group meeting today?”

Fleur waved her fork in the air. “Life-Changes Dedication class, yes.”

Sasha did roll her eyes this time. Bobbi bit her lip.

“Don’t look at me like that, Sasha. Just because you don’t have any faith doesn’t mean you get to scoff at those who do believe in something greater than themselves.”

“I wasn’t scoffing.” *Much.*

Fleur gave her *The Look*. The look only a mother can give her child. No matter how old you got, *The Look* would always make you break out into a case of guilt—even if you hadn’t done anything wrong. *The Look* would always make you give up your wildest deeds and deepest secrets. *The Look* should be outlawed under the Geneva Convention. *The Look* should be a war crime.

Sasha cleared her throat and said quietly, “Sorry. How was your class?”

“It went very well, thank you.” Fleur turned rather prim and proper, looking down her nose a little at Sasha. Sasha and Bobbi turned back to their plates, but Sasha pushed the food around for a few moments before taking a bite. “The spirits are pointing me in a very definite direction for one of my little projects.”

“Oh.” Sasha swallowed. “Which project is that?”

“Project Comp,” she said with a wink at Bobbi.

Bobbi’s eyes widened and she stared down at her plate, shovelling more pasta into her mouth.

Sasha frowned. “And what’s Project Comp all about, then?”

“None of your business.”

“Oo, a secret mission.” Sasha grinned. “Will you tell me if I guess correctly?”

Fleur hooted, and Bobbi blanched. “Since there is no way in hell you’ll ever guess this, I can agree to those terms.”

Sasha narrowed her eyes. “You don’t think I can guess your secret?”

“Not a chance, sweetheart.”

“Hm... *Comp?*”

“Yes, Project Comp.”

“Comp as in competition?”

“That was obvious, darling.” Fleur lifted one eyebrow. “You’ll never get beyond there.”

“You’ve entered a baking competition and plan to wow the ladies of the WI with your new hash cakes?”

Fleur tipped her head back and chortled. “No, but what a wonderful idea. It’s been some time since those old biddies let their hair down a bit.”

Sasha looked around for inspiration. Nip, the black cat with stunning green eyes and an attitude from hell, sauntered through the kitchen doorway, hopped up on to Fleur’s lap, and proceeded to pull a pasta shell off Fleur’s plate, then batted it across the table until it was out of reach.

“You’ve entered Nip into a prettiest-pussy competition?” she guessed with a snigger.

Bobbi spat her tea across the table, earning her a disgusted look from both Fleur and Nip.

Fleur tutted. “It’s no wonder neither of you have had sex in years.” She chucked the cat under the chin, and Sasha avoided eye contact with Bobbi. Poor Bobbi thought she hid her feelings well. Sasha didn’t agree, but for the sake of their friendship she ignored the longing looks. She couldn’t help that she wasn’t attracted to Bobbi like that. She was a friend, almost a sister with how close they were. There could never be anything else between them, despite what Bobbi so obviously wanted.

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“You certainly are a pretty pussycat,” Fleur continued with a stroke over Nip’s head, “but no, that’s not my project. That would be far too easy. This one is the first step in my greatest challenge yet.”

“Talking a big game there, Mum. You sure you can back it up?”

Fleur smiled a little Mona Lisa smile. “Like I said, the spirits are on my side with this one. Everything is already in motion.” She reached over and patted Sasha’s cheek. “I can’t lose.”

Sasha squinted. “You’ve definitely entered your hash cakes in the WI baking competition.”

* * *

Sasha closed the door to her bedroom and glanced at the clock. Eleven o’clock. She needed to be up at six thirty so she’d have time to get ready and make it for the seven twenty-five bus. If she didn’t, she’d never get into work by eight. She should really get ready for bed and try to get some sleep. But exhaustion and she were becoming long-time companions, it would seem. She sighed heavily and resigned herself to another sleepless night as a need even more pressing urged her to her desk rather than her bed.

Powering up her laptop, she cracked her knuckles, twisted her head from side to side, listening for the satisfying crunch as her vertebrae realigned themselves, and then opened up the document she’d been working on. She quickly scanned the last page she’d written, re-familiarising herself with where she was, then let her fingers find the keys. Dialogue, scene descriptions, actions, and the final act of the script began to take shape beneath her fingers.

This one was a little different to her previous scripts. A murder mystery set against the sometimes bleak and sometimes stunning landscape of the Norfolk Coast. Sasha pictured each scene, watched through her mind’s eye as her heroine approached the villain, weapon raised, ready to strike.

Sasha was captivated by these characters. In them she could see so much potential. She hadn’t finished the first script, and already she could picture the second and the third. Maybe more.

She smiled as she concluded the last action scene and moved to the more sedate ending to the story. A hospital room, perhaps? Yes, a hospital.

Was it strange that her world felt more complete when she could escape to her fictional realm? Was it wrong that the words, the characters called to

her and kept her awake when little in her actual life could do the same? The stories she created fulfilled her in a way her job could never compete with: giving a massage to some hairy-backed bloke or creating a narrative where she could see her wildest dreams and deepest fascinations played out and explored. It wasn't even a real choice.

Sasha needed her escape, her release. Her fictional friends kept her company when others could not, offered her a way to vent her frustrations, to weep the pain and fear away with. They allowed her to be herself with in a way she could not be with anyone else.

There was no judgement, no fear, and no consequences in her make-believe world. There were no pressures, no responsibilities, no ties.

As her characters kissed passionately and promised to return for another book, Sasha felt free.

CHAPTER 2

JAC KENSINGTON RAN HER FINGERS through her hair and propped her head in the other hand. She glanced around the glass-topped conference table in the company headquarters. Mags French and Sophie Angel were scanning spreadsheets or reviewing contracts as they waited for her to finish her phone call.

She ended it and cleared her throat, “Okay, ladies, I hereby call this board meeting of Kefran Media Limited to attention.”

Sophie rolled her eyes and flicked her gaze to Jac. “Just because you’re the major shareholder doesn’t mean I’m going to let you hijack this meeting like you did last year. This might be an annual scriptwriting competition, and our decision deadline might be looming, but the three of us will make this decision together. Then we can call it quits for the night.”

Jac tapped her pocket, checking for her packet of cigarettes before remembering she’d quit. Again. She waved her hand at the scripts in front of them. “Fine, let’s get this sorted so I can go home. I’ve got a really good bottle of vodka waiting for me.”

“You shouldn’t drink alone.” Mags frowned at her. “It’s not a good sign.” She pushed her fingers through her short bob, frowning a little when her arm seemed to want to continue after her hair had run out. Still getting used to the new shorter hairstyle and colour on her long-time friend, Jac grinned as Mags pushed her horn-rimmed glasses up her nose.

“Vanessa will be there to share it with me.” *Possibly*. Jac didn’t really want to think about the odds that her girlfriend of the last eighteen months would actually be at home waiting for her when she finally left the office. But she certainly wasn’t prepared to put money on it, a fact that must have

shown on her face as Sophie snorted at her. “Fine,” Jac said with a sigh, “then I’ll go to a bar and get drunk before I go home. Happy?”

Sophie and Mags both shrugged unhappily before Sophie folded back the pages on one of the scripts, her long blond hair falling over her shoulders, blue eyes watching her, worry adding to the creases there, creases they were all beginning to notice at the corners of their own eyes.

“If you do,” said Sophie, “at least have some crisps or pork scratchings to soak it up, then. It’ll help with the hangover.”

Jac cast her what she hoped was a withering look but said, “Fine,” as she stared at Mags. “You start. Favourite and why?”

Sliding her glasses up her nose, Mags launched into a hearty speech supporting Jac’s least-favourite script, but she made some good points. It was lighter and had a frivolous subject at the heart of it, so it would probably do quite well.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sophie said. “It’ll do okay and then fade into the background with all the other forgettable films we see produced.” She waved the other script in front of them both. “This one has some funny moments in it. It’s a romance, but, damn it, it’s got a soul too. It has a meaning at its core, values that offer a moral to the story, rather than just some empty laughs that will be forgotten as soon as the credits roll.”

Jac nodded—all points she’d noticed about *Nightingale* too.

“It has a bite to it, and it’s so, I don’t know, *relevant*. Maybe that’s the right word. The cultural issues that we face today. Women’s rights, human rights, religious differences—”

“That’s where I have a problem with it,” Mags said. “We could end up staring down the barrel of huge religious backlash as a result. If we got any of the religious elements wrong or out of context, we could be in real trouble. I don’t know about you, but I don’t fancy getting on the wrong side of all this.”

Jac understood Mag’s point of view. The script was culturally and religiously sensitive—a Muslim girl and a Christian girl falling in love with each other. Arranged marriages. The views of other religions and cultures on homosexuality and marriage. Honour killing. Sharia law. The rights of women in Muslim countries... Sensitive was an understatement. Yet this script handled it well. They could fact-check all the relevant points. They could get an expert on board to consult with.

“Yeah, but aren’t you sick of just creating fluff films, Mags?” Sophie asked. “When we started this company, it was with the idea that the three of us could make a difference. Could use our skills and talents to really do some good. I know we had good reasons to move into the popular films, the romcoms. If we hadn’t, we wouldn’t be able to tackle the odd film that means something. Something like this is why we made those. Seventy-five percent market pleasers, twenty-five percent soul redeemers, remember?”

Jac nodded in acknowledgement as Mags slumped back in her chair a little. Sophie was right. That was exactly what they’d always planned to do. It just hadn’t really happened yet.

“But we’ve always wanted to find the film that could do both, the one we could make ends meet with and yet was also important.” Sophie waved the sheaf of papers she was holding in her hand. “*This* could really do that. The writer hasn’t slammed Islam. She’s pointed out cultural differences, but in a lot of ways she’s also pointed out similarities between Middle Eastern and Western cultures, and the hypocrisy of people who commit the same abuses they condemn others for, by calling them something different.” She dropped the script back on the table. “Domestic violence and crimes of passion are no different to honour killing, they just have a different name.”

“We punish those crimes—” Mags began.

“Ladies, I think we can leave the social debate out of this. Between these two scripts, I think it’s clear that *Nightingale* is the superior piece of work. Agreed?” Jac waited until both Sophie and Mags nodded. “Good. Our decision has to be whether or not we are comfortable going with the heavy subject matter that is a potentially risky prospect or sticking to the romcom that we know will do okay.”

Sophie folded her arms over her chest and slumped back in her seat. “You know how I feel. I think this film is a must.”

Jac turned to Mags. “Are you truly uncomfortable or just playing devil’s advocate?”

“A little of both. I do think we need to be careful. But I do agree that Sophie has some good points.” She grinned. “And I don’t think it would be that big of a risk either. I think the marketplace is crying out for something like this. No one’s been brave enough so far to do it.”

“I agree,” Jac said. “It has all the elements of a classic film: a great premise, great action, hot love scenes, and a few great monologues for the actresses to really sink their teeth into.”

“And she’s a local girl,” Sophie added. She took a quick, excited-sounding breath before she launched into her next point. “It’s set in Manchester, so we’ll have all our assets and resources on hand to work this. No location issues to drive up production costs and make logistics a nightmare. We can all effectively work from home base. After all, it’s not like we’d be able to go to Pakistan to film, so we would be looking at CGI for those scenes. We’ve got the best tech here in all of Europe.”

“Another good point.” Basing themselves at MediaCityUK—the most sophisticated HD production facility in Europe—in Salford Quays, rather than trying to find office and studio space in London, had been a decision they’d deliberated many times when they started their company, but it was one they hadn’t lived to regret. It had, however, meant that Jac had worked on location for extended periods on more than one occasion, and one day soon she would again. But not this time. This time they could all work together from start to finish. It had been a while since they’d had a project like this. She’d have fun directing it, a fact that always showed through positively in the end product.

Really, she was finding fewer and fewer reasons to say no to this script.

“Okay.” Jac held up her hand, a sheaf of pages wedged in her grasp, curling about her fist. “We’re going with this one. *Nightingale* by Sasha Adams.”

Sophie did a little dance in her chair until the top button on her blouse popped open. Jac and Mags stared, then burst out laughing, pointing like schoolchildren. Sophie rolled her eyes and quickly refastened it.

“Want me to contact the winner?” Sophie asked.

Jac shook her head as she glanced at her watch. “It’s after ten. Too late to call now. I’ll do it tomorrow and set up a meeting with her to start the paperwork and get the ball rolling.”

“Gotcha.”

Sophie and Mags collected their things and stood. Sophie looked Jac up and down, her expression softening, switching from driven business executive to concerned best friend in an instant. “You sure you’re going to be okay?”

Jac gave her a small smile, then deliberately tried to broaden it. “Go on, I’m fine.”

Sophie squeezed Jac’s shoulder as she passed behind her chair on her way out of the conference room, then planted a kiss atop her head. “You know where I am if you want to talk.”

“I do, thanks.” She patted Sophie’s hand. “Now go and get out of here before your wife comes looking for you.” She threw her a practiced cheeky wink as the door closed behind Sophie and Mags, but not before she caught the look that flashed between the two of them. *Dubious* would be a generous word for it. The silence settled around her and she patted her pocket again, checking for her cigarettes. “Fuck.” She sighed and picked up the screenplay they’d just decided to make a film and started reading again.

“Third read and it still has me vacillating between wanting to laugh and cry.” She shook her head. “That’s a good sign.”

* * *

The beauty of living in an apartment in Salford Quays was that Jac’s commute was less than five minutes. On foot. Thank God, because her leather jacket did bugger all to keep out the chill, or the rain, as she made her way down Broadway to the apartment block, fishing in her pockets for the fob that would let her into the building.

Cursing to herself, she checked the pockets on her messenger-style laptop case, chuckling when she found the fob and her keys in the main compartment. She’d slid them in with her MacBook when she was packing up. *Getting forgetful in your old age, Jac. Better watch that.*

She held up the fob to the outer door and pushed it wide, then hit the Call button between the two lifts. She spun the small bunch of keys around her finger by the metal loop that held them together, catching them in her palm every once in a while. When she realised what she was doing, Jac frowned. Yet another fidgeting habit to add to all the rest since giving up the evil tobacco.

She hated smoking. Hated the way the smoke clung to her and the way her body craved the nicotine. She hated how her fingers itched to hold one of the little sticks, hated her dependency on something—anything—that wasn’t her alone. But she hated the process of quitting anything even more.

The fact she wasn't always driven purely by her own will... Well, that was not something she ever wanted to admit, not even to herself.

The lift alert chimed, and she stepped inside. Pizza? Curry? Chinese? She hopped back and forth between her dinner options before deciding it was likely to be a beans-on-toast night before falling into bed, ready to start again the next day. She was looking forward to talking to Sasha Adams. The woman could write, and if even half of that came across in her personality, she was going to be fun to talk to.

The doors opened at the penthouse floor and the spacious hallway that led to the four-bedroom apartment she called home. Jac spun her keys one last time and crossed the highly polished wooden floor to her door. It swung open, and she stepped inside, pleased the lights were on. Vanessa was home. Maybe they'd order a curry after all.

"Hey, Vee. Where are you?" Jac tossed her keys onto the table next to the coat rack, dropped her bag onto a chair, and hung her jacket on the peg. She ran her fingers through her hair, straightening the asymmetrical style so it hung over her right eye. Vanessa had told her how she loved the way it fell across her face like this. Made her look mysterious and sexy, she'd said. Granted, it had been a while since she'd said that. But she had said it. Once.

Across the apartment, the door to their bedroom opened and Vanessa walked out, pulling a rolling suitcase behind her. Her long red hair cascaded down her back like a wave of burnished copper, glinting in the light as she glided across the floor, heels clicking on the solid oak. Her blue eyes flashed with annoyance.

"I didn't expect you home so early."

Ah. So that's the way it's going to be. "Sorry to interrupt your plans." Jac didn't feign ignorance as to what was going on. Nor did she have any inclination to ask the obvious question. "Were you planning to leave a note, or was I going to find out when I reported you missing to the police?"

Vanessa held up the envelope Jac hadn't noticed she was holding. She didn't cross the room to give it to her. Instead, Vanessa leant over with an arm outstretched and let it plummet onto the coffee table. "I'm not that callous."

Jac disagreed, but it didn't really matter now.

"We had a good run, but we want different things, Jac."

Despite her earlier resolve, Jac managed to bite back any questions before they escaped her lips. They'd spent eighteen months as a couple,

twelve of those living together in this apartment. At least a few of those months had been good. *But this isn't a surprise*, she told herself. It was never going to be.

"Maybe it's the age difference, but I'm not ready to just be at home all the time. I want to have fun," Vanessa said needlessly into the silence.

The twenty-five-year age gap wasn't really the issue at all. She wanted to scoff at that. And that Jac had only been looking for a beautiful distraction from the loneliness she didn't want to look at or analyse any more closely than she did her need for a cigarette. Both impulses made her fidgety and crave something to do with her hands.

"Aren't you going to say something?"

Jac's chuckle was absolutely without mirth. "What do you want me to say? Would you like me to ask who it is that's offered you a better part than I would?"

Vanessa slammed balled hands to her hips and squinted at Jac. The look formed hard lines on her face that suddenly made her look considerably older than her twenty-five years. It wasn't flattering.

"No?" Jac asked into the silence Vanessa left. "Would you like me to offer you a part in the new film I'm making? Lead role? Biggest part of your life? That's what you want, isn't it?" *That was all you ever wanted, wasn't it? When will I learn? That's all I've ever been for any of them.*

"I knew you didn't care." She grasped the handle of her suitcase. "You're not even putting up a fight for me."

Was she right? Was there no true sentiment behind the time they'd spent together? Jac shook her head. No, she wasn't that callous. "I cared for you, Vee. I truly did. And you're right, we had some good times, but we both know it hasn't been right for a while now." She smiled sadly. "I'm glad we can be honest about this."

Jac didn't want a fight. She didn't want to argue. If this was the path they were walking, then she just wanted it done with. And she didn't want to create any hard feelings. There was no need for that. Besides, Jac wasn't convinced that either of them felt enough for what they had to really cause either of them much in the way of hurt. That in itself said everything Jac needed to know. She stepped into the room properly and held her hands out to Vanessa.

"You're a wonderful young woman, Vee, and I wish you all the luck in the world going forward." She took Vanessa's face in her hands and placed

a soft kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry this didn't work out, but you're right to move on. We both deserve to be happy."

Vanessa's hands touched hers as she pulled back and looked into Jac's eyes. For a second, Jac saw the sparkle in her eyes that had attracted her to Vanessa in the first place, a sparkle she had mistaken for a depth Vanessa didn't truly possess and could adopt for only so long, like any other role she played.

Jac closed her eyes and touched her forehead to Vanessa's.

"Be happy, Vee."

Vanessa let a tear roll down her cheek as she pressed her keys into Jac's hand, squeezed, and walked away. Jac smirked. Vanessa could have her dramatic parting scene. She wouldn't even look back at her. Sure this would be aggrandised in the retelling to make it sound like the parting of two soulmates divided across a wasteland of broken promises and shattered dreams, but Jac found she didn't care. She focused on the wheels of the suitcase running and clicking across the floor and then the sound of the door opening, then closing with a tinny metallic *click*.

She fidgeted with the keys in her hand, spinning them around her finger, over and over again, just as her mind played over the conversation. She tossed her keys onto the coffee table and picked up Vanessa's envelope. As soon as she opened it, she saw how short and to the point the note was. That, too, told her everything she needed to know.

*I'm sorry, but this isn't working for me anymore. Good luck and
goodbye.*

V

"We want different things, Jac."

Jac looked about the empty flat; the sound of a boiler cycling on as the heating kicked in hummed in the background. The only break in the silence. Maybe she was right. Maybe Jac did want something different in her life. *Only question is...I don't know what the hell that is...well, not outside of work, anyway.*

CHAPTER 3

“I HAVE A CONFESSION TO make.”

Sasha sighed inwardly, plastered on a smile and turned to face Bobbi, who stood with her hands stuffed into the pocket of her oversized hoodie, and her usually mischievous gaze glued to the floor.

“Another one? Already?”

Bobbi nodded.

“Need me to drive a getaway car?”

“You can’t drive.”

“Good point. I’d be useless at that, but I can ride a mean scooter.”

“You’ve never ridden a scooter.”

“Course I have.”

“Have not.”

“I rode one to school every day in junior one. Ask Mum.”

Bobbi sputtered, “I—I didn’t mean a push scooter when you were six, you numpty.”

Shrugging, Sasha said, “Yeah, but I did.” She bumped Bobbi with her shoulder. “Come on, then. Out with your big confession.”

“I sent your screenplay off to a competition I saw on Facebook and you made the finalist list, the winners are drawn by the end of the week, and you might be a winner, and the producer loved it,” Bobbi said without taking a breath, and without looking up. As they stood in the middle of IKEA, her coal-black eyes flitting to Sasha’s face before sinking to the lino-covered walkway again. She looked much younger than her forty-two years, and Sasha almost felt sorry for the discomfort she clearly felt.

Almost.

“What?”

Bobbi’s throat worked in a heavy swallow, and her gaze slowly rose to meet Sasha’s from under those long eyelashes. Her brown cheeks had paled, taking on a grey tinge Sasha hadn’t seen on her before, and she tugged on her top from inside the kangaroo pocket. She took a deep, visible breath and started again. “I said, I entered you into a screenplay competition I saw on Facebook, and they like it.” She shrugged one shoulder. “If you win, they’re gonna make your script into a film.”

“Fuck off!” Sasha blurted out, unable to stop herself. She clapped her hand over her mouth.

Bobbi’s eyes widened, and the corners of her mouth twitched almost into a smile. Almost.

Sasha glanced around, noting a mother hurrying her child away from Sasha and her filthy mouth with a withering look. “Sorry,” Sasha said and grabbed hold of Bobbi’s arm, dragging her past the display of a ridiculously small model studio apartment with some admittedly clever storage solutions Sasha promised to revisit later. Some may just be big enough to hide a body Bobbi’s size. She was only five-foot-nothing and skinny, and Sasha was pretty sure that if she was angry enough, she could fold her friend up like a paper doll.

Sasha found a deserted corner between two displays and shoved Bobbi in ahead of her, rose to her full five-foot-five inches in height, planted her hands on her hips, and stared menacingly. At least she hoped it was menacingly. Because Sasha was well aware that she was more the cuddly maternal type than the ferocious-warrior kind of woman.

But Bobbi gulped and looked suitably terrified. *Good.*

“They really like—”

Sasha held up a hand. “Start at the beginning. Which screenplay? What possessed you to think it was a good idea? And...and...and *what the hell?*”

Bobbi tucked her hands back into her pocket and sighed. “Right, so, that screenplay you let me read. The one about the girls at the music college, one of them was Muslim, the arranged-marriage one. You remember giving me that to read?”

Sasha waited. Toe tapping. Bobbi gulped again and glanced over Sasha’s shoulder.

“Well, anyway, I thought it was so cool. I mean, so much better than loads of the lesbian films, well, than a lot of the *straight* films out there at the moment too. It was sweet and funny and sexy and, like, so relevant, it really should be made into a film, Sash. I told you that I thought it was awesome.”

It was difficult to maintain the scowl under praise, but Sasha felt she did an admirable job. It had Bobbi looking at her feet again.

“Anyway, I saw this link being shared around on Facebook, it was a competition for writers to submit a screenplay they wrote for a chance at exposure, and the winner gets to talk to some big producer about the chance to make their screenplay into a film.”

“How do you know this is legitimate and not some sort of scam? Did you have to pay money to enter this competition?”

“Just a nominal entry fee. And I looked up the company and the producer. It was legit, Sash. I swear. This producer’s done some really cool stuff.”

“Who is it?”

“Jac Kensington. She produced that one we watched last year. What was it called again? The one with the woman who was getting married and fell for the florist doing her bouquet. You know the one I mean, right?”

“*Bloomin’ Perfect?*”

“That’s the one. She did that one. It’s her company, and it all looks totally legit, so I sent it to her.”

“And she likes it?” Sasha was stunned. Her hands dropped from her hips.

“She loves it.” Bobbi’s excitement was palpable now that the fear of imminent death no longer tempered it. “She sent an email when the finalists were announced. I’ll show it to you when we get out of here.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Sasha pointed her finger in Bobbi’s face as the numb feeling gave way to something else, something not nearly so comfortable. Something a little like panic. She wasn’t cut out for something like this. She wrote her little screenplays as a way to vent about her very normal, rather boring life, not to get to the finals list of a competition. Not to have a producer “love” her story.

She latched on to uncomfortable and ran with it, morphing her fear into anger...sort of. “Or better yet, why didn’t you ask me? Point it out and

let me decide for myself if I wanted to enter something like this? Why go behind my back like this?”

Bobbi took hold of her hands and squeezed them lightly. “Because you wouldn’t have done it, Sash.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yeah, I do. So do you.” She wiggled Sasha’s hands. “You’d tell yourself it wasn’t good enough, or that even if it was, you couldn’t possibly enter, just in case you did win, because you couldn’t possibly go anywhere.”

“Well I can’t—”

“Like Longsight is the place to be.”

“My mum needs me.”

Bobbi’s eyes twinkled. “Who do you think paid the entrance fee?”

Sasha took a step back. “What?”

“Your mum was the one who paid for you to enter the competition.”

Competition. Wait. Comp. *Project Comp.* Shit.

“Why would she do that? She needs me.”

“You should probably ask her that.”

“Oh, believe me, I will.”

“But, you know, maybe she thinks it’s time you, I don’t know, moved out, or maybe *moved on* is a better way to put it. I mean, you’re what, forty-five now? That’s like—”

Sasha held up her hand again, and Bobbi cut herself off like she’d hit a brick wall. “Listen, Bobbi, I moved *back* in with my mother five years ago when she was battling cancer and needed help. Before that I was perfectly happy in my own place, thank you very much. I’m not some loser who’s never cut the apron strings. Mum’s still recovering. She still needs help.”

Bobbi shrugged, clearly deciding not to pursue it any further.

Narrowing her eyes, Sasha had prepared herself for the next round when a vibration from her pocket drew Sasha’s attention. She pulled out her phone, looked at the Unknown Number ID, and shifted it to voicemail. She wasn’t in the mood for cold-callers today. “Come on,” she said with a heavy sigh as she flicked her long hair over her shoulder. “You said you needed a new mattress.” She backed out of the corner and headed towards the bedroom displays, Bobbi playing shadow behind her. “You can tell me the rest as we go around this bloody maze.”

“The rest” turned out to be light on the details and heavy on the excitement until Sasha had a headache and Bobbi’s new mattress was on the

trolley ready to be loaded into the back of Bobbi's car. The rain had started while they'd been in the store, sometime during all three hours of looking, trying out, relooking, retesting, and then finally queuing up to buy said mattress. The grey clouds that had loomed earlier over Ashton-under-Lyne were now spitting their heavy load with a vengeance.

Bobbi grabbed the handles of the cart, towed it through the doors, and out to the car park while Sasha stood looking out, wishing they'd thought ahead to park under the covered section. Or that she'd thought to bring an umbrella.

Grateful she at least had a hood on her coat, she pulled her long hair into a bunch at the back of her head, twisted and tucked it into the collar, then flipped up the hood on her jacket.

A torrent of tiny pencils rained down on her head, past her face, and clattered to the ground with a tinkle and a splash.

Bobbi spun around, eyes and mouth making perfect circles, hands flapping before she started to yank the trolley behind her, gathering some speed. Her loud announcement was already trailing off into the distance she put between them.

"I have a littler confession to make!"

* * *

Bobbi looked at her sheepishly. "I'm really sorry, Sasha," she said as she turned off the main road. "I just get a bit bored and I can't help myself."

After a moment's thought, Sasha shook her head. She'd been on the receiving end of more than one of Bobbi's boredom-related incidents over the ten years they'd been friends. This was another she'd probably laugh at before long.

"Forget it, bitch. I'm saving up all these incidents for one hell of a revenge attack."

Bobbi grinned. "Oh, I look forward to that. See you at work tomorrow."

"Yup." Sasha tugged her coat tighter around her and stuffed her hands deep into her pockets as she climbed out of Bobbi's car. She waved as it retreated into the distance.

Sasha pulled her keys from her pocket and opened the door to the house. A cloud of smoke greeted her, and the combined odours of lavender, sage, and pot assaulted her nostrils. Holistic therapies, indeed. Sasha half

expected to one day walk into their house and find her mother dealing her wares to the teenagers who hung around on the corner.

“I don’t want to know.”

She closed her eyes and seriously debated heading down to the pub for the night. But then decided against it. She had work in the morning, and working through the munchies after getting inadvertently stoned due to her mother’s tinkering was better than trying to give a dozen massages, pedicures, or facials with a hangover.

“Mum?” She waved her hand in front of her face and made her way to the living room, opening windows as she went, hoping no one was driving by who might be interested in the pungent plume venting into the cold, dank evening. While it was perfectly legal for her mother to use the stuff, going through the rigmarole of explaining it to a new batch of coppers every time was...frustrating? Annoying? Time-consuming? All of the above? “You promised you’d only smoke in the conservatory! The whole house stinks now!”

“Oh, don’t be such a fun-sponge. Here, have a puff on this.”

Fleur was draped across the sofa in a sea of tie-dyed taffeta and chiffon. Her shoulder-length grey locks were tied back with a bandana of every colour under the sun. She looked like she belonged at Woodstock. Sasha sniffed. She smelled like she belonged at Woodstock, except for the cat that lay cradled along one arm while her mother stroked its back and it flicked its tail in Sasha’s direction. Nip’s green eyes stared malevolently, and Sasha wasn’t sure if it was as stoned as her mother or plotting the interloper’s death. Either was entirely possible, and it gave Fleur a decidedly Doctor Evil edge to her hippie chic.

Sasha waved the roach away. “Fun-sponge?”

“Yes, you know? A bore, dear.” She pulled another drag off her spliff. “I’m up with the kids,” she murmured around the smoke she’d inhaled, letting it seep out of the corner of her mouth in a way that always reminded Sasha of Frenchy from *Grease* trying to teach Sandy how to smoke.

Sasha wrinkled her nose. “I think you mean ‘down with the kids’, Mum. And, no, you’re not.”

Fleur shrugged, exhaled, and eyed her up and down before motioning Sasha to bend towards her. When they were eye to eye, she reached over and pulled a pencil out of her hair. “What happened to you?”

“Bobbi.”

Fleur cracked a sloppy grin. “About time you got yourself a little lesbi-action there.” She elbowed Sasha in the ribs. “Not gonna ask about the pencil. There are some things a mother does not need to know.”

Sasha tutted, grabbed the pencil from her fingers, and tossed it onto the coffee table as she stood up straight. “That’s just so wrong. You’re my mother, and Bobbi’s my friend.”

“All the better. You’re still young, and you’re letting that thing heal itself closed like a pierced ear.” Fleur waved her hand in the direction of Sasha’s crotch. “It’s not like I don’t know what sex is, dear. How’d you think you got here? Your father and I, well, he used to do this thing with his tong—”

“Stop! Stop. Just...stop.”

Fleur snickered somewhat evilly despite the obvious lethargy and said, “Rowr,” while holding out her bony hand like she was clawing at something. The whole visual was just too...disturbing.

“Ew. So not going to happen. And please, don’t ever make that noise again.”

“Fun-sponge.”

“So it would seem.” She opened another window and handed her mother a blanket for the moment she would inevitably complain about the cold. She fetched two glasses of water and a jumbo-sized bag of crisps from the kitchen, then plopped down on the sofa next to her mum. Just far enough away to be out of Nip’s reach, should she decide to attack. Not that it looked like the feline could be bothered...but Sasha had learnt to be cautious over the years. “Mum, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Well, dear, I thought even you could tell that Bobbi wanted a little of your lady-loving.”

Sasha rolled her eyes. “Bobbi told me all about Project Comp.”

“That girl can’t keep a secret to save her life.”

“No, she can’t. So, come on, why didn’t you tell me you wanted me out of your hair?”

“I don’t. I want you to let yours down a bit, honey.” She reached across the back of the sofa and ran her fingers through Sasha’s locks. “So soft.” She twirled the strands around her fingers the way Sasha remembered her doing when she was a child. “And still lovely and dark. You can barely see those few grey ones scattered about.”

“Love you too, Mother,” Sasha said through gritted teeth. She wasn’t particularly vain, but she didn’t need to be reminded that she wasn’t getting any younger either.

“Oh, pish. You’re a beautiful, vibrant, young woman, and I want you to have a life.”

“I do have a life. A very full one, as it so happens.”

“You go to work, you come home, you cook, you clean, you tidy up after me, and you lock yourself away in that room of yours. That’s not a life. That’s servitude.”

“Stop it. It’s no different to what you did for me when I was a kid. Why did you do all that if not to get payback now?” Sasha grinned.

“I did that because I’m your mother and I love you.”

“Well, I’m your daughter and I love you. What’s the difference?”

“A mother’s job is to always look after her children. Always. A daughter’s is to grow up and live her own life.”

“Why do you have to make it sound like I’m a middle-aged loser still living with you because I haven’t got anything else, haven’t done anything else? I have lived on my own. I have lived with a woman other than you. I’ve done that. I have a good job, a lot of great friends. I came back here to help you. To spend time with you. I’m happy here with you.”

“Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

Fleur waved her hand, disturbing Nip, who meowed angrily and jumped out of Fleur’s embrace. Arching her back, she offered Sasha a hiss for good measure, then curled herself up onto the crisp packet, making good and sure she crushed anything left inside.

“Yes, I know all that, and, believe me, I’m very grateful you did come back. I love having you here with me. But you aren’t happy. You’re content. You’re settled. But you’re not happy. You’re working in a job that, well... Frankly, you could do better.”

“What’s wrong with being a massage therapist?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. But you don’t want to be a massage therapist. You want to be a scriptwriter, or whatever they call it. You want to write films and plays and all that stuff.”

“It’s not as easy as that. You have to find the right people. You have to know the right people.”

“Which is why I paid that entry fee when Bobbi asked me about it. I asked the crystals, and they were very clear in their directions, honey. Very clear.”

Sasha fought not to roll her eyes again. Her mother’s devotion to crystals and seeking guidance from her higher self was just...great. Really. Really great. Just as long as she kept it out of Sasha’s life.

“They clearly told me that this was a turning point in your life. A pivotal moment, where all your hopes and dreams could come to fruition or all my fears and worries would. All I had to do was lead you to the path, and your higher self will do the rest. You’re alone, and unhappy, and you shouldn’t be.” She linked her fingers with Sasha’s. “You don’t need to be.”

“Mum, even if that was the case—which I’m not saying it is—but even so, it’s not that easy.”

“You let the crystals take care of all that, honey.” She patted Sasha’s hand and leant her head back against the sofa. “Let the crystals take care of everything.”

“Crystals don’t hold the meaning to life, Mother. And they certainly don’t hold the answer to every question I have.” She didn’t mean for it to come out as snippy as it did, but...well...it did.

Fleur turned to look at her, for once, her expression completely serious, her eyes clear of the usual pot or pain haze, and her hands steady as she lifted them to cradle Sasha’s cheeks. “No, I don’t suppose they do.” She stroked her thumb over her jaw, then let it fall and took hold of Sasha’s hand. “Do you remember when you were little and I used to read to you every night before you went to sleep?”

Frowning, Sasha said, “Of course. But what—”

“Do you remember what your favourite story was?”

Sasha smiled at the memory of those idyllic childhood moments curled into her mother’s side, where words met dreams and fuelled her imagination for a lifetime. “*Peter Pan*.”

Fleur patted her hand. “Do you remember why?”

“You mean beyond it being a fabulous story that has layers and layers of meaning that still resonate for me today as an adult?”

Fleur snorted. “Yes, beyond that.”

“Okay,” Sasha said, drawing the word out. “There were two lines in it that were amazing to me when I was a little girl. So many of the stories were

about girls who were princesses being saved by the handsome prince, or they were just sidekicks. But in *Peter Pan*, it always felt more like Wendy was the one who could save Peter. And it was almost like Peter knew it. There were lines that reflected that and stuck with me, like the bit where Peter says, ‘Wendy, one girl is more use than twenty boys’ and ‘it’s wonderful what clever girls can do’.

“Yes.” Fleur looked her directly in the eye. “It is, isn’t it?”

“Mum,” Sasha said. Admittedly, it came out with more of a whine than she’d intended. “This isn’t a book or a film. It’s real life.”

“Do you want to know what my favourite line is?”

“What?”

“Keep adventuring and stay not a grown-up.”

“Sounds about right,” Sasha said with a chuckle.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not right, though.” Fleur closed her eyes, a smile pulling at her lips as sleep claimed her.

Sasha sighed and covered her with the thick woollen blanket, knowing she’d sleep for several hours. She squinted at her mother’s face, wondering at her colouring. The hue seemed a little off, a little yellow. *Must be a trick of the light*. She pressed a kiss to the top of her head and whispered the words Fleur had whispered to her almost every night of her childhood: “So come with me where dreams are born and time is never planned. Just think of happy things, and your heart will fly on wings in Never Never Land.”

Nip took advantage of the lull in conversation and curled up against Fleur’s stomach, purring as she watched Sasha head for the door. Her eyes clearly told Sasha she’d won the battle for Fleur’s affections. Again.

“Yeah, yeah,” Sasha murmured and pulled the door closed behind her. She went to her bedroom and pulled her copy of *Peter Pan* from the shelf on her way to bed. The pages were loose in the spine, the corners dog-eared, and the pages shiny from where her fingers had run across them so many times. She pulled a blanket around her shoulders, slumping back against the headboard and opening to the first page.

“All children, except one, grow up,” she read aloud, sighed, and snuggled deeper into her pillows.

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LOST FOR WORDS

BY ANDREA BRAMHALL

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