

ONE WAY ←

OR ANOTHER →

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CHAPTER 1

THE SUN REFLECTED OFF THE window, obscuring the view of the shop inside. Still, Bethany was hyperaware of the products on display. She shuffled her feet and coughed but didn't move towards the door. In the window, she caught the reflection of another woman's easy smile, as if she frequented sex-toy stores all the time.

Even in the distorted reflection, the woman was incredibly attractive. Maybe two inches taller than Bethany's five foot eight, she had dark hair cut in a pixie style that suited her high cheekbones and elegant jawline. She was dressed in a dark-coloured trouser suit with a jacket that dipped in at her waist and flared out slightly over her hips. It was a sophisticated look, and the woman carried it off with style. Her smile was wide, and although Bethany was tempted to return it, her nerves over the adventure she was about to undertake prevented her lips from moving.

A soft breeze lifted Bethany's hair and brought her back to herself. Her eyes focused on the window before her, and the tantalising array of products on sale. She could barely believe she was here, and although her heart was thumping in her chest at the prospect of climbing those stairs and walking through that door, at the same time a thrill was coursing through her. Shopping online would have been far easier, and less nerve-wracking, but Bethany had always known it would come to this for this particular purchase. Seeing—and touching—would be essential to make the correct choice.

Vibrator. Even the word sent a shiver of anticipated pleasure skittering down her spine to settle somewhere deep between her legs. In this day and age, buying a vibrator was commonplace for many women—but not

Bethany. She'd made the decision back in college to focus on her studies and her ambition to become a teacher, and as a result, sex and relationships had fallen by the wayside, easily discarded in the pursuit of a higher goal. Now that the goal had been obtained, and she was five years into her teaching career, old urges—and some new ones that she really wasn't sure what to do with—had surfaced, and were in desperate need of attention.

So, here she was, standing outside a sex shop in the heart of London, the thirty-minute Tube journey having done nothing to calm her nervous excitement. Her palms were damp, and she wiped them on the pleats of the light summer dress she wore. She adjusted her handbag on her shoulder, and pushed a few wayward strands of hair back behind the arms of her glasses.

“They have lots more inside, you know.”

She jumped.

“God, I'm so sorry. I thought you heard me approach.”

The voice was deeper than her own, with a hint of huskiness about it that caused a disconcerting fluttering sensation across the back of Bethany's neck. She turned her head, meeting the gaze of the tall woman in the suit, who was now smiling widely at her.

Embarrassment at reacting so twitchily made the manners Bethany's mother had instilled in her from a young age flee, and she snapped out her next words before she could contain herself.

“Well, obviously, I didn't.”

“Wow,” the woman said, frowning as she tilted her head. “I do believe I apologised, but if that's not good enough for you...”

A throat cleared beside them and a woman's voice said, “Miss Keane?”

Bethany turned, her face still set in a scowl, to find the mother of one of her pupils standing a couple of feet away. Lucinda Marchbanks. Of course, it would have to be—Mrs Marchbanks' ideas about the education of her little darling often clashed with Bethany's, and many a parents' evening had been more of heated debate than a report on little Michael's progress.

“Mrs Marchbanks,” Bethany murmured. “Hello.”

“How funny that I should bump into you this evening. Michael came home from school today rather upset. Apparently you sent him to the corner this morning?”

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Stifling a groan, and ignoring the soft chuckle behind her—was that woman still there?—Bethany inhaled deeply.

“Yes, that’s right, I did. He pinched Camilla.”

To her credit, Lucinda Marchbanks relaxed her posture somewhat, although her voice still held a huff as she said, “Well, he’s a boisterous child. I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by it.”

The dark-haired woman snorted, and Bethany rounded on her.

“Do you mind? This doesn’t concern you.”

The woman grinned, held up her hands and backed away, but did not, much to Bethany’s annoyance, actually disappear. Instead, she made a show of crossing her arms and leaning casually against the sex-shop window.

The action, of course, made Lucinda Marchbanks look her way, and Bethany’s cheeks burned as Lucinda’s eyes widened and her eyebrows shot up her forehead. She pointed at the shop before turning her gaze back on Bethany.

“Are you...? Is this...?” Lucinda’s voice was a squeak.

None of your damn business, yes. “Oh, er, no. I was...I was just passing.” She’d wanted to be brave, and say ‘yes, I am intending to shop here,’ but the glare of Lucinda’s green eyes wilted her courage. It probably was for the best—the last thing she needed was Lucinda Marchbanks spreading God knows what about her to the other parents.

There was another soft chuckle behind her, which thankfully didn’t seem to carry to Lucinda’s ears. Bethany gritted her teeth and resisted the impulse to turn round and tell the woman to get lost. “Look, Lucinda, perhaps we can talk another time. I don’t think standing in the street is—”

Lucinda straightened to her full height, an intimidating five foot ten, and glared down at Bethany. “Michael is a good boy, with bags of energy. I do think you need to take that into account during your lessons.”

“Mrs Marchbanks, I can certainly do that, but not to the detriment of Michael’s classmates. Now, can I suggest that we meet at the school about this if you still have concerns?”

“Yeah, you tell her,” whispered the dark-haired woman, only this time it appeared that Lucinda Marchbanks heard her. Bethany cringed as Lucinda looked past her, and turned to see the woman still leaning on the front of the shop.

“Do you mind? This is a private conversation.” Lucinda’s tone was haughty.

“Not if you’re having it in the middle of the street it isn’t.” The woman grinned, but there was fire in her eyes.

Bethany wanted to crawl away from the situation, but knew she was trapped.

“Lucinda,” she said, her tone placating, “why don’t you and I talk on Monday, hm? When you come to collect Michael.”

“Well,” Lucinda huffed, still glaring at the other woman. “I suppose we can do that.” She turned back to Bethany, eyes blazing, and Bethany took an involuntary step backwards. “Have a good evening,” Lucinda said, flicking a glance between Bethany and the stranger that made her feel as if she were under a microscope.

Lucinda Marchbanks spun on her heel and strode off up the street, and Bethany’s heart rate gradually started to slow.

“Well, thank God she’s gone.”

Bethany rounded on the woman, her irritation soaring. “Just who the hell do you think you are?” she snapped.

The woman—*how dare she?*—grinned.

“Oh, come on. Who the hell did she think she was?” she said, uncrossing her arms and walking a couple of paces nearer. “Accosting you in the street with something that was, quite frankly, a load of shit.”

“Do we know each other?”

The woman frowned slightly. “Well, no, but—”

“Then what gives you the right to butt into my conversation—my business?”

The woman smiled that infuriating, cheeky grin again. “Hey, she was giving you a hard time, and I do so hate to see a damsel in distress.”

“You cannot be serious.” Bethany stared at her. *What planet was this woman from?* “I don’t need you fighting my battles for me. I can look after myself, thank you very much.”

“Hey, come on. You can’t blame a girl for trying.”

The woman was still smiling, and Bethany’s heart was back to pounding out its stressed rhythm. How could someone so attractive on the outside be so...shallow on the inside?

“Look, this conversation is over. Please don’t talk to me again.”

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Bethany spun round, and as she did so her handbag slipped down her arm and, before she could grab it, fell to the pavement. It burst open on contact, and to her mortification, the entire contents scattered. Her face flushed, and she knelt to start scooping everything up.

“Here, let me help,” the woman said, sitting on her haunches next to Bethany.

“No, thank you.” Bethany’s tone was clipped, her hands scrabbling to gather all of her possessions as quickly as possible.

“Look, I’m sorry. I guess I did come across a bit strong just now.” The woman’s tone had completely changed—gone was the cockiness, the cheekiness. Now there was nothing but sincerity, and Bethany couldn’t help but turn to look at her.

The woman really was stunning, especially up close. Her deep brown eyes were framed with lush eyelashes, and her skin was lightly tanned, which only emphasised her extraordinary cheekbones. Her lips were full and naturally deep pink. Bethany realised she was staring again, and dragged her gaze away.

“Yes, well. You did,” Bethany replied, concentrating on cramming everything back into her handbag.

“It’s just, well, you seemed nervous when you first looked in the window, and then that woman was just being a bitch to you and...”

Bethany risked another glance at the woman, who was still crouched down at her level. Her confusion escalated; there was nothing but concern and...tenderness etched on the stranger’s face.

“I-I was... Nervous,” she admitted, and blushed.

The woman nodded slowly. She pointed at the remnants of Bethany’s handbag still scattered at their feet. “Can I help?”

“I-I... Thank you. Yes.” Bethany cringed as her voice croaked, and looked away again, grateful for a few moments not to look into that beautiful face and feel like a stuttering teenager.

They gathered the remaining escapees—including, to yet more mortification, the small box of tampons Bethany kept in the inner pocket—then both stood.

“Thank you,” Bethany whispered, clutching her bag to her abdomen.

The woman dipped her head. “You’re welcome.” She glanced up at the shop window. “Look, I’m a regular here. It’s a very welcoming place, you know. In case you were worried.”

Her expression was soft and understanding, and Bethany managed a weak smile, despite everything that had gone before.

“Th-thanks. That’s good to know.”

The woman smiled again. “See you inside.”

And with that, she turned and walked to the two steps that led to the shop door. Bethany watched those long legs as they ascended, then snapped her gaze away as she realised it was journeying up the legs to the perfectly curved bottom perched at the top.

Ogling women was not something Bethany made a habit of. While comfortable in her sexuality since she’d had her first—and only—girlfriend in college, she liked to think of herself as somewhat more highbrow than someone who lasciviously stared at random women she bumped into outside a sex shop. Even if that sex shop was women-run and made a specific point of advertising itself as a safe space for any non-straight customers.

Flustered, Bethany pressed a palm to her warm cheek.

For goodness sakes, calm down. You came here for one purpose, so take a deep breath and get on with it.

Straightening her spine, she sucked in two extended lungfuls of air, exhaling slowly on each one. She fixed the strap on the handbag, hoisted it onto her shoulder, and then, before she could overthink it any further, she stepped to her left, climbed the two steps, and walked through the door.

CHAPTER 2

SARAH WOULDN'T NORMALLY STOP OUTSIDE the shop before entering and launch herself at a random woman hovering by the window, but the woman's understated beauty had stopped her in her tracks.

The woman—Miss Keane, she thought she'd heard that uptight cow call her—had the cute, nerdy look down pat. Her floral print summer dress was shades of pink and grey, and practical yet surprisingly attractive sandals adorned her feet, with painted pink toenails peeping through at the ends. Her body, as far as Sarah could tell with one extended look, was slim and full in the chest. She had hair of a nondescript brown colour that some would probably call mousey, and it fell in soft waves to just past her ears. But it was the glasses that had Sarah smiling—full on, thick-framed but stylishly modern glasses that reminded her of Nomi in *Sense8*.

Sarah was a huge sucker for nerdy glasses—as well as for a pretty woman looking lost and forlorn.

And when their eyes met in the window, the smile split Sarah's face before she'd even thought about it. Miss Keane looking rapidly away only made Sarah smile more, and wonder if today she would get to pick up more than a bottle of lube in the shop.

The incident with that stupid parent and the handbag nearly ruined things, but she was confident that she rescued the situation with her final words. And they were, after all, both heading into the shop, so Sarah had plenty of time to lay on more of the charm. Although, she begrudgingly had to admit, perhaps not as full on as she'd attempted initially. She'd misread Miss Keane, and she wouldn't make that mistake again; cute and nerdy did not mean weak and feeble. Lesson learned.

She smiled. She could imagine what Aunt Evelyn would have to say about this. And Jonathan too. As much as she loved them, their self-appointed roles as her lifestyle advisors had been grating on her nerves lately.

Squaring her shoulders—and shoving all thoughts of exactly what the pair of them would say into the far recesses of her mind—she strode into the shop.

Mira, all long blonde hair and curves, greeted her from behind the counter. “Sarah! Long time, no see.”

Sarah remembered her first visit to the shop, maybe four years ago, and being more than a little overwhelmed by Mira’s obvious enthusiasm for her job. There was welcoming, and there was “Oh my God, will you please get out of my face you over-perky chipmunk”. Mira skirted a fine line between the two.

Still, it wasn’t every shop you frequented where they bothered to find out your name *and* offered you a pretty good coffee thirty seconds after you walked through the door, so she couldn’t complain.

“Espresso?” Mira asked, already walking towards the small Nespresso machine by the side window.

“You read my mind.” Sarah wandered over to meet her at the machine, taking the proffered cup once the hot fluid had trickled its way to completion.

“How’s life?”

Sarah blew on the coffee before taking a sip. “Not bad. Overworked, as usual.”

Mira returned to the counter. “What are you in here for today?”

“Oh, just some lube. But I’ll check out the books too.”

And Miss Keane, who’s just stepped in the door.

“Cool. Shout if you need anything, or another coffee.”

Sarah raised a hand in acknowledgement, her quota of Mira time now filled, and leaned against the window sill next to the coffee machine. Her gaze landed on the nervous-looking Miss Keane, who was now the focus of Mira’s attention. Poor thing looked like a rabbit caught in the headlights.

Sarah studied her over the rim of her coffee cup as she sipped. What was a mouse of a woman like her doing in a shop like this? Although, to be fair, this shop was probably the most welcoming you’d find—certainly

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in London—if you were in any way interested in adding something non-vanilla to your sex life. She swallowed. Non-vanilla was certainly something she craved, deep down, but not something she'd ever found the courage to really explore. Maybe she and the mouse-like Miss Keane were more alike than she'd first thought.

I wonder what you're after, cute thing. And I wonder if I could help you with that.

Sarah shook her head and winced. She sounded like a line from a bad porn movie. And also like she was falling straight into her usual *modus operandi*—seeking out the women who were least likely to give her what she truly desired.

She returned the empty cup to the tray holding the Nespresso machine and wandered across the shop to the bookshelf. The distraction of a range of lesbian erotic titles was probably just what she needed right now.

Or not, she thought, as her gaze once again, and almost against her will, returned to the cute woman she'd met outside.

For all that Miss Keane stirred Sarah's libido—to be honest, many women did—somehow another feeling swept over Sarah when she looked at her, and it was the same feeling that had made her step in with that vile Mrs Marchbanks.

Tenderness.

Sarah tore her gaze away from the woman and forced herself to look at the titles on the erotica shelf even as she rolled her eyes at herself. *Tenderness? Her? Sarah Connolly didn't know what the word meant.*

Except, she did, when she glanced back at Miss Keane, strolling around the shop, eyes wide behind her glasses. God, she was cute, and that weird feeling swamped Sarah again. That feeling like she wanted to protect her even as she pushed her up against the wall and kissed her senseless.

Okay, okay, this is getting ridiculous. Get a bloody grip on yourself.

This time she not only looked away from the woman, but physically turned so that she couldn't even see her out of the corner of her eye.

Yes, that was much better. Wasn't it?

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“Hello there. Welcome!” the sales assistant called out as Bethany stepped through the door.

“Hello,” Bethany squeaked, alarmed at the gusto with which she’d been greeted. *What was that woman on?*

“Would you like a tea or coffee?”

Bethany startled. *A hot drink? Now? Don’t be absurd.*

“No, I’m...fine. Thank you.”

“Okay! Feel free to browse, or ask any questions you may have.”

“I-I will. Thank you.”

Bethany managed a smile, remembering that her manners had already let her down once and determined not to slack again.

The assistant returned the smile—actually, she beamed—before continuing with her task. Bethany stared—were those dildo harnesses the woman was attaching to small hangers? They were in multiple colours and designs, and the thought of their purpose brought a quick flush to Bethany’s cheeks. Images of what she’d like to do with a woman while wearing one of those threatened to blow a fuse somewhere in the back of her brain.

As much as she’d anticipated this—that this shop would tap into all her deepest fantasies—the reality was even more electric than she’d imagined. Her skin was actually buzzing simply from being surrounded by all this potential for pleasure.

She turned away and her gaze scanned the room. Directly to her left were books. Erotic books. The woman from outside was currently browsing the collection, and Bethany yanked her gaze away. This place was intoxicating enough without that distractingly beautiful androgynous women with amazing brown eyes. And anyway, despite how kind she’d been at the very end of their interaction, her earlier crass behaviour meant she was someone Bethany intended to stay well away from, no matter how gorgeous she was.

Beyond the books was a set of shelves holding mugs, coasters, and other sex-themed paraphernalia. A little further clockwise round the room was the dildo section, and directly in front of her, the vibrator section. She knew from researching the shop on the internet that there was also a downstairs area where, if she was so inclined, she could find restraints, whips, paddles, and multiple toys and accessories for anal play.

Maybe another time.

She shivered with excitement. *Definitely* another time, if she ever found the courage to pursue her true desires.

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Bethany shuffled forward to the vibrator section, acutely aware that she and the woman she'd spoken to outside were the only customers in the shop. She dared a glance round. The other woman was now in the dildo section, picking up one after the other, hefting them in her hand and turning them every which way before setting them down and moving on to the next. Another sight that threatened to immolate Bethany. She wanted to explore dildos at some point—but again, perhaps not today. And perhaps not until she had a girlfriend to use one on, even though she knew a dildo could just as easily be used for self-pleasuring.

Ripping her gaze away from that section, and specifically the arousing sight of the annoyingly gorgeous woman fondling the silicone dildos, she forced herself to look at the range of vibrators.

The variety was mind-boggling. Thankful again that she'd spent some time in research prior to her visit, her gaze homed in on the two she'd come to see. She picked up one in each hand. They were cool to the touch, but each was intriguing in its own way. Lightweight, and by the looks of it, easy to switch on and off. She turned them over in her hands, part of her brain thrilling at this new level of daring she was displaying. She was in a sex shop, handling vibrators!

"The one on the left is a lovely one."

The voice was close to her ear. Bethany nearly jumped out of her skin, dropped both vibrators, and watched in horror as one thunked at her feet and the other bounced across the wooden floor to land a few feet away.

"God, sorry!" said the voice.

Bethany turned to face the woman.

"You? Again?" Her heart thudding, Bethany swallowed before adding, "You scared the life out of me."

"Um, yeah. Sorry about that."

Bethany sighed and looked to the ceiling, taking a few deep breaths before looking back and saying, "It's okay. Sorry I snapped."

The woman smiled and shrugged. "It's fine. I'm clearly more of a ninja than I realised."

There was a warmth in her manner that had Bethany, in spite of her recent vow, relaxing into their encounter. After all, the woman hadn't done this on purpose. Bethany bent down to pick up the vibrator at her feet,

checking it wasn't damaged, and was about to step over to retrieve the other one when the woman touched her arm.

"I'll do that."

She walked over and scooped it up, handing it back to Bethany when she was alongside her again.

"There you go, no damage done."

"Everything okay over there?" the sales assistant called.

"All fine, Mira. Me being a clumsy dolt," the dark-haired woman replied, smiling at Bethany.

"You didn't have to say that," Bethany murmured.

The woman shrugged. "I know."

"Thank you."

She smiled again, and a strange little shiver moved through Bethany's body.

"So, would you like a recommendation, or shall I just back silently away?"

Bethany chuckled, her tension releasing at the self-deprecating joke.

"Um." She paused. *Could she? Should she? Oh, what the hell.* "A recommendation would be helpful, thanks." She blushed. "I-I've never bought one before."

She wasn't entirely sure why she had shared that snippet of information, and especially not with this woman, but it was too late to take it back now.

The woman's eyes widened, and Bethany's blush returned in full force. At twenty-eight, she probably was a little late to the sex-toy party, compared to some. She looked at the woman, trying to assess her age. Probably not far off her own, actually. But clearly more experienced when it came to what was on display in this shop.

"Okay, well in that case, that one would definitely be a great place to start." She pointed at the one in Bethany's left hand. "It's easy to use and has enough levels to satisfy most needs. I bought one myself a few years ago and I still return to it now and again."

Bethany stared. Didn't that count as over-sharing, or were there different rules in a sex shop?

"Sarah's right," Mira said from somewhere behind Bethany. "It's one of our bestsellers for good reason. Lots of women compliment it on its gentle

action, especially as a starter vibrator. And it's thin enough that you can use it for vaginal stimulation as well as clitoral."

Bethany swallowed hard and chased away a host of heat-inducing images that flashed through the front of her brain. She looked over her shoulder at Mira, who was smiling warmly.

"Um, okay. Thanks."

She looked back at the woman—*Sarah*—and smiled weakly. "Okay, I think you two have talked me into it."

"Great," Sarah said, smiling yet again. That smile sent a delicious quiver throughout Bethany's body, which annoyed her immensely. *Why am I reacting like this? She was a Neanderthal outside!*

"Cool," Mira said. "I'll get one from the cupboard downstairs and it'll be on the counter when you're ready to pay." She walked past Bethany on her way to the stairs, still smiling.

"Thank you."

Bethany was pleasantly stunned at her own alacrity. Only ten minutes into her first visit to a sex shop and she had her decision made. She placed the two demo vibrators back in their allotted spaces on the shelves, noting the slight trembling of her hands. This was out of her comfort zone, but it didn't mean she didn't want to be here. The realisation had been building over the last few months that something was missing in her life, and that had led her here, as a first step to getting out there again. Wherever 'out there' was. Desire and sexual need had been very much in the back of her mind since college. Since Michelle and their brief time together.

Of course, now that she'd come to accept that she didn't actually want to be alone, and that being involved with someone again would be quite nice, her natural tendency towards geekiness had ensured that she researched the heck out of what that would involve. Knowing her own body, and what she liked or didn't like, was part of it. She had always masturbated—that wasn't the problem. Relying on a few of her favourite fantasies had meant that whenever the urge took her—which wasn't that often—she could happily bring herself to a fairly satisfactory climax. However, some of the research she'd done—films, magazines, books—had opened her eyes, and her libido, to a whole raft of new possibilities.

It felt good, being this adventurous.

“Happy with your purchase?” Sarah asked, and Bethany turned to find her grinning.

Smiling back, the first genuine smile she’d managed since arriving at the shop, Bethany said, “Yes, thank you,” and moved away to dare to peruse the rest of the contents on this floor.

“Hey, I never got your name,” Sarah called. “Well, I know from outside you’re Miss Keane and you teach a little snot called Michael, but I don’t know your first name.”

Bethany turned back to face her, tilting her head. “Why would you need it?”

Sarah startled, then laughed. “Well, for one thing, you know mine. It only seems fair to know yours.”

She edged closer, and her sudden proximity brought her scent to Bethany’s nostrils—light, yet musky. Sensuous and teasing. Sparks zapped over Bethany’s skin from that scent alone.

“I was also wondering, given how well I talked you into buying a vibrator, if I could also talk you into having a drink with me. There are some great bars around here.”

Bethany didn’t know whether to be amused or alarmed. At what point in their brief interaction had she given any indication to this woman that she wanted to continue their acquaintance? In fact, surely she’d given every indication she wanted the exact opposite. Bethany knew it had been a while since she’d dipped her toe into the dating pool, but she didn’t remember the women she’d known back then being so...forward. And thick-skinned. Or maybe it was just *this* woman.

Bethany took a step back.

“Um, thanks. That’s a, um, nice idea, but I’ll pass.”

There was a slight fall in Sarah’s expression, then she seemed to recover and plastered a too-wide smile on her—admittedly, *very* attractive—face. “Okay then. I’ll leave you to your shopping.” She stepped to the side and theatrically opened her arms to let Bethany pass.

The gesture, in spite of everything, made Bethany smile as she walked past.

“Thank you,” she said, dipping her head in a mock bow.

Sarah laughed softly as she walked away.

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Wow, I haven't had one blow me off so quickly in ages. But then, I didn't exactly impress her outside the shop, so I suppose I shouldn't be that surprised.

Embarrassment was not an emotion Sarah felt often, but she was knee deep in it now.

Her gaze tracked Miss Keane's movement across the shop to the dildo section. Swearing under her breath, she tamped down any thoughts involving that woman and dildos when they attempted to present themselves to her mind's eye.

Sarah had not actually had a great track record the last few weeks, when she came to think of it. Had she lost her mojo? After working so hard to get herself into such good shape the last few years, she was rather used to women pretty much throwing themselves at her. Such rejection as she'd just experienced was hard to take.

Yeah, and I can just imagine who would say that was good for me.

She snorted, and inhaled a deep breath.

Her gaze, despite her best intentions, insisted on following the delightfully alluring woman who was now lifting dildos of various sizes up from their shelves and turning them in her hands. Sarah tore her gaze away; this level of torture was more than she could bear.

Sarah wasn't even sure what it was about this Miss Keane that had her so hot under the collar. Although, she had to admit, the quiet, geeky type had always been her undoing. It was something about the combination of brains and beauty, and the—often—lack of awareness of exactly how attractive they were.

Or, perhaps, in this case, it was simply the mere fact that the woman seemed immune to her charms.

The thing was, though, she had thought, just for a moment, that Miss Keane's eyes held a slightly different answer. That there was more than a hint of attraction there. She was normally pretty good at reading that stuff, so should she walk away just yet? Would there be any value in having another go?

Sarah sighed. It really wasn't like her to push for a second chance, but, as her gaze drifted once again to where Miss Keane was now handling—actually, more like fondling, *good God*—leather strap-on harnesses, she had

to admit the idea was tempting. Sure, the woman hardly seemed the type to meet her deepest needs, but Sarah wasn't sure she was ready to explore that yet anyway. So, just like with all the others, this woman would meet the surface needs, the ones that took only one night to satisfy. If only Sarah could get her to say yes to that drink...

Sarah shook out her shoulders, flexed her fingers, then rolled her neck a couple of times and watched as the woman walked over to the counter to pay for her vibrator. It was her only purchase, Sarah noted, but she was also looking somewhat longingly back over her shoulder at the dildo section.

As she left the counter with her purchase in one of the shop's plain plastic bags, Sarah moved to intercept, keeping her movements smooth and easy. She didn't want to spook her like before.

"Before you go," she said gently, as she reached the woman's shoulder.

Relieved to see Miss Keane stop and turn to look at her, Sarah dipped her hand into the small back pocket of her handbag, where she always kept a stock of her cards. When she withdrew one, the woman looked confused.

"I'm not going to push," Sarah continued, keeping her voice low but friendly, "but I am going to give you my card. I find you very attractive, and I really would like to take you out for that drink one evening. If you change your mind, please call me."

It was bold, but Sarah could do bold. She thrived on it, actually.

Slowly, the woman reached out and took the proffered card, giving Sarah cause for a mental fist pump. She stared at it, then looked back up at Sarah.

"I doubt that's a good idea," she said, her eyes narrowed.

Ouch.

She made to hand the card back, but Sarah, a sense of desperation invading her and making her reckless, reached out and closed the woman's hand over the card, pressing it into her palm.

"Keep it," Sarah said, lowering her voice to her sexiest register. "Just in case you change your mind."

And there it was, that flicker in the woman's eyes again. That hint of something that said she wasn't entirely sure about her denial of Sarah's invitation.

Without a word she shoved the card into her handbag, spun round and walked away, then stopped again as she reached the door. Looking over her

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shoulder, her hair backlit by the setting sun, she looked...extraordinary. Sarah almost choked in wonder at the vision.

“It’s...it’s Bethany, by the way,” she said, her voice croaky. “My first name.” And then she was gone.

CHAPTER 3

SARAH TROTTED UP THE FRONT steps of the imposing Georgian terrace house where her Aunt Evelyn lived and pressed a finger to the old-fashioned bell push. The tinkling of the bell carried out to Sarah's ears, and she smiled. She had fond memories of ringing that bell from her earliest childhood, and spending time with her aunt had been one of the few highlights of Sarah's troubled teenage years.

It wasn't Evelyn who answered, however, but Jonathan, her live-in carer. He'd been with Evelyn for over ten years and was more like a family friend than an employee by this point. At forty-two, he was still handsome and trim, his dark blonde hair kept short to prevent its natural curl from going too wild. He was clean-shaven and lightly tanned, his blue eyes standing out against his tanned skin. He was immaculately dressed as always, in dark jeans and a long-sleeved white T-shirt, although Sarah had to smile at the bright pink household gloves he was wearing.

"Sarah!" He leaned forward to kiss both her cheeks. "She didn't tell me you were coming over."

Sarah returned his embrace before answering. "She doesn't know. I just thought I'd pop round and have a cup of tea."

"Lovely." He stepped aside so she could enter the house. "I'll put the kettle on. She's in the living room."

Sarah thanked him and walked down the airy hallway to the living room. It was her favourite room in the house, furnished in a tasteful style that hinted at money without being crass about it. It had a large window that faced the garden, and the June sunshine was streaming through it.

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Her aunt was reading in her favourite chair by the fireplace, although it was too warm a day to need a fire so the grate was empty. Her pale grey hair looked like it had recently been set, and her skin glowed. As usual she wore a smart pair of trousers with a stylish, zipped blue and red cardigan. Evelyn had always had a certain panache about her that made Sarah glow with pride.

“Hi, Evelyn,” Sarah called as she walked into the room.

Her aunt raised her head and a wide smile lit up her face.

“Ah, my favourite niece. What a lovely surprise.”

She put down her book and stood, using her hands on the arms of the chair to lever herself upright. It took some time, but Sarah didn’t offer to help; Evelyn had told her in no uncertain terms on many occasions that she would ask for help if she needed it. Evelyn never asked.

Sarah winced, watching her struggle. It was hard to see her once-active aunt reduced to having difficulty getting out of chairs. She kept forgetting how old Evelyn was now. At eighty-three—ten years older than Sarah’s father—her mind was still going strong, but her body was not, much to Evelyn’s disgust.

“Come here,” Evelyn said, once she was up and steady. She reached out her arms.

Sarah smiled and walked across the room to accept the hug. They held tight to each other for a few moments, then Evelyn pulled away and gestured to the sofa.

“Sit. Tell me all your latest news. Have you had any conquests recently?”

Sarah snorted, and took the proffered seat. “Evelyn, honestly. You can’t ask me that.”

Evelyn shrugged. “An old lady has to get her kicks somehow, dear.”

Sarah shook her head. “You’re not old. Well, not much.” She grinned as Evelyn gasped in mock horror. “Actually, it’s been a quiet few weeks for me on that front.”

“Lost your mojo?”

Sarah stared at her. “How do you even know what ‘mojo’ means?”

“I am a woman of the world, Sarah dear, even if I am stuck in this chair most of the day. I read *The Guardian*. I am familiar with all the latest lingo.”

Sarah laughed out loud. “God, Evelyn, you crack me up. Don’t ever change.”

Evelyn winked. "I do not intend to, dear."

Jonathan appeared, the tray in his hands loaded with all the makings for tea, as well as a plate of biscuits. Placing it on the elegant glass-topped coffee table in front of the sofa, he poured out three cups and passed them round, followed by the plate of biscuits.

"You know I shouldn't," Sarah said, as she pinched two ginger nuts and placed them on the saucer.

Jonathan's gaze performed a once-over sweep of Sarah's body. "Darling, there's not an ounce on you. Trust me, you have room."

He sat next to her. "So, what are we discussing?"

"Sarah's love life," Evelyn replied. "She claims she has nothing to tell us."

Jonathan arched an eyebrow, and Sarah noted with dismay that his were plucked to a perfection she could only dream of.

"Does that mean you may finally have seen the error of your ways? Are you ready to start looking for Ms Right?"

The hopefulness in his voice touched Sarah, but not for long. Long-term relationships were not a possibility for her, not given her history.

"Just having a dry streak," she said but couldn't help wincing when his face dropped. She rushed on, staving off what was certain to be a repeat of his usual lecture. "I did meet a woman last night, though." Sarah directed her comment towards Evelyn, not wishing to see the disappointment in Jonathan's eyes. "She was kind of cute."

Evelyn chortled. "That's my girl. If you fall off the horse, get right back on again."

Jonathan tutted.

"Something to say, Jonathan dear?" Evelyn inquired, her tone snooty.

He turned to Sarah, who steeled herself as she met his gaze. "Another meaningless fling, I presume?"

He almost spat the word 'fling' and Sarah's hackles rose.

"Actually, she turned me down. So there." *Now, why had she admitted that?*

Jonathan smirked. "Hm, maybe you *have* lost your mojo. Or the universe is trying to tell you something."

"Jonathan, I love you like the camp gay brother I never had, but you really need to get off this train."

She picked up one of the ginger nuts and crammed it into her mouth.

“Exactly,” Evelyn jumped in, her tone triumphant. “If my darling niece wishes to play the field, she has every right to. Settling down is overrated.”

Jonathan put his teacup down on the coffee table and sighed.

“Honestly, Sarah. I despair. You are such a wonderful person. You would make some lucky woman a gorgeous wife.” Sarah flinched at the word, but Jonathan ploughed on. “And I don’t understand why you keep just sleeping around.”

Sarah swallowed her mouthful of biscuit. “Life isn’t a Disney movie, Jonathan.” Her voice had risen in volume. “Just because you believe in all that Prince Charming crap, and are holding out for a Mr Right to come and sweep you off your feet, doesn’t mean that it appeals to the rest of us.”

“Hear, hear!” Evelyn chimed.

“And you don’t help either,” Jonathan said, pointing at Evelyn. “Encouraging her to live this wild life.”

Evelyn grinned, her eyes sparkling. “Sarah is a free spirit and she always has been. I merely offer her an alternative viewpoint to your more saccharine take on things.”

Jonathan threw his hands up. “Honestly, you two will be the death of me,” he said, standing. “What’s wrong with romance and love? And happy ever after?”

Sarah reached out and patted his leg. “Nothing,” she said, tugging his jeans until he turned round to face her. “For other people. Just not for me.”

“But that’s the thing that frustrates me the most about all this,” he said, pouting. “I actually think it would be exactly what you’d like, if only you’d give it a chance.”

Sarah shuddered. “Nope. Definitely not. I’d rather focus on finding you your Prince Charming, actually. There’s a gorgeous new guy down in Accounts. I’m convinced he’s family. He might be just your type. Well, physically at least.”

Jonathan recoiled, his eyes wide. “Oh, no,” he said, backing away. “Not another one of your work set ups. I’m not sure I’ve recovered from the last one.”

“Hey look, that wasn’t my fault, okay?” Sarah insisted. “How was I supposed to know he was lacking in the personal grooming department?”

“Sarah, he had nose hair longer than his actual nose. How could you not have noticed?”

Evelyn guffawed, and both Sarah and Jonathan turned to look at her.

“Is my torment somehow amusing to you, Evelyn?” Jonathan asked, his tone snide.

“Very,” the older woman said, reaching for another biscuit. “This is much better than Saturday night television.”

Sarah laughed, and in moments Jonathan was joining in.

“You’re a terrible old woman,” he said, wagging a finger at Evelyn.

She shrugged. “I know. But I find I do not care.”

Jonathan turned to Sarah. “What’s a poor gay man to do?”

“She loves you, you know that. She wouldn’t have kept you on all these years if she didn’t.”

There was a harrumph from across the room, and Sarah winked at Jonathan.

He smiled and leaned down to give her a quick hug. “Stay for lunch, as you’re here?”

She nodded. “Why not? Thanks.”

“Right, I’ll go and potter in the kitchen. Throw something together.” He paused to look at her, his gaze penetrating, and said quietly, “I meant what I said, you know. I do really think that you’d be happier if you found *the one* and stopped all this shagging around.”

Sarah sighed. “I can’t, Jonathan. I just...can’t.”

“What a waste,” he said, shaking his head and walking away.

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BY A.L. BROOKS

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