

MY DYING BREATH

CLARE CONNELLY

All the characters in this book are fictitious and have no existence outside the author's very-vivid, non-stop imagination. They have no relation to anyone bearing the same name or names and are pure invention (mwah-ha-ha).

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The illustration on the cover of this book features smokin' hot model/s or illustrations of models and, as gorgeous as they are, the model/s featured bear no relation to the characters described within.

Clare Connelly writes on the land of the Kaurna, Peramangk and Yuggera peoples and pays her respects to elders past and present.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clare Connelly grew up in a small country town in Australia. Surrounded by rainforests, and rickety old timber houses, magic was thick in the air, and stories and storytelling were a huge part of her childhood.

From early on in life, Clare realised her favourite books were romance stories, and read voraciously. Anything from Jane Austen to Georgette Heyer, to Mills & Boon and (more recently) 50 Shades, Clare is a romance devotee. She first turned her hand to penning a novel at fifteen (if memory serves, it was something about a glamorous fashion model who fell foul of a high-end designer. Sparks flew, clothes flew faster, and love was born.)

Clare has a small family and a bungalow near the sea. When she isn't chasing after energetic little toddlers, or wiping fingerprints off furniture, she's writing, thinking about writing, or wishing she were writing.

Clare loves connecting with her readers. Head to **www.clareconnelly.co.uk** to sign up to her newsletter, or join her official facebook page.

PROLOGUE

He watches her almost as closely as I do. She cannot lift a hand without his eyes following the gesture, it is a silent ballet: her gestures create an echo in him that he seems unable to control. He watches her always – but I am watching him.

I have waited years to find her and now I have, but I cannot act when he is there.

He is a complication I had not anticipated.

Life is full of complications though and rewards come to those who wait.

I will wait and I will watch and soon this will be over. For I have found The Sole Survivor and I intend to right the wrongs of that night, finally.





ONE

THUNDER ON A STORMY NIGHT

I'm dying to tell him the truth. Of course I am. Lying to this guy is like peeling off my skin, layer by layer. But if I tell him? It will be the end. Not just of 'us', but of the delicate tightrope I must walk. Maybe even the end of me. The secret I carry is not just my own: all the people I love most are wrapped up in its silence and so I hold onto it earnestly, even when I would wish to divulge the truth of who and what I am.

But I don't.

I sit across from him, watching the way his hair flops forward a little over his brow as he reaches for his coffee, already his fourth despite the fact it's still early in the day; the way his symmetrical, determined face scans The Guardian on his iPad, taking in the facts printed and those that aren't. The way his lips curl with that particularly derisive scowl of his as he sees one of his business rivals appear on the pages.

And I imagine how it would feel if he looked at me like that. If his eyes filled with that legendary coldness and he turned that famously ruthless disdain on me.

Alex isn't an ordinary man. He didn't get to own one of the biggest tech companies in the world by being compassionate and patient. He's rough. And he's demanding. Impossibly determined to get what he wants,

and from the minute he saw me, he made it obvious he wanted me. I was his latest obsession and he hunted me mercilessly, in that way he has that makes it almost impossible to say no.

I could have though, and a part of me wanted to. I saw danger in Alex from the first moment I met him, and I'm usually very good at avoiding danger (I've learned to be, naturally). It's not his darkness that terrifies me though, but how much I crave it – how much I crave him.

He knows nothing about me beyond the construct I have allowed him to see and now I find I want him to know all of me. The real me. It defies logic and it breaks every rule we've agreed to. Sex and no-strings is the promise we've made and there are so many strings around the truth of my being that I am tied into a thousand knots.

Could he unravel me? Would he want to?

A curse fills my mind, tearing through me like thunder on a stormy night.

"You're frowning."

As far as I can tell, he hasn't even looked my way, but I make an effort to rearrange my features. I purse my lips, lifting the corners into a smile he once told me was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. "Wrong."

"Really?" He flicks his eyes to mine, and his scepticism sears me. "What is it?"

I shake my head and a curl of dark brown hair drops in front of my eyes. I push it away, tucking it behind my ear at the same time he reaches for it. Our fingers brush and it's there. *Zap*. Electricity and awareness. It scorches me. Does he feel it? It's hard to tell. In the privacy of his apartment he's a veritable sex-god. But he can fold that side of himself away when we're out, presenting a cool, untouchable façade to the world even when he's so not like that.

I tap my fingers against my knee, wondering at the charge of desire that's making my stomach churn.

"What's what?"

It's an infinitesimal change in body language but I'm attuned to every single detail of his. He shifts his weight forward slightly and his shoulders are tense beneath his custom five-thousand pound-suit. "If you're worried about something, I want to fix it."

But haven't I had enough of that in my life? People reaching in and rearranging the pieces of my existence because they think I can't look after myself? "Fine. Take me to bed."

His eyes flicker just enough to show that I've hit a nerve. "That's on my agenda, believe me."

"Now."

His laugh pours over me like warm caramel. "You are impossible."

I am. I didn't used to be, but meeting Alex LaMar has shown me that I am desirable and powerful. I guess I'm a little high on that power, even though I inherently understand how fleeting it is in nature. I am his latest obsession, but I am not foolish enough to think I will obsess him for long. For right here, and now, and when we are in one another's arms, I am his goddess. It is a heady knowledge.

"Impossible to resist?" I tease, flexing that power, feeling it spread through me as beneath the table I let my toe shuffle over his calf, inching it higher and higher until it's between his legs. He doesn't betray so much as a flicker of response, except in the depths of his eyes, where he can't quite control his reactions, there is a darkening of colour, a flash of recognition.

His hand curls around my ankle and I'm reminded for the millionth time of how strong he is. Half-man, half-beast, I often think to myself, barely contained by the stitching of his suit. Broad shouldered, a chest that ripples with bulked muscles and dark eyes that see so much more than I show anyone else. He removes my foot easily, but instead of dropping it to the floor like I expect, he lifts it higher into his lap. He removes my shoe and beneath the table, he rubs the sole of my foot, his eyes snatched to mine with a slightly mocking air.

His skin on mine feels so good that I shudder in my seat. "Take me home."

His lips twist and I hope it's with regret. "Not possible. I have to work."

"Don't you own the company?" I'm dangerously close to sulking now, but so what?

"Yes. And over thirty thousand people around the world count on me doing my job."

I pull my foot away but his fingers don't release me. Instead, they

travel higher along my leg, teasing my calf now and then the sensitive flesh behind my knee.

“What about me?” I ask breathily.

“You’ll wait.”

“What if I won’t?” I whisper, dropping my eyes so he won’t see the desperation gathering there, like storm clouds on the horizon. So far as goddesses go, I have as many insecurities as the next. Power is fleeting; one minute I am high and the next I am waiting for the wave to crash. Frustration gnaws at me.

He doesn’t pretend to misunderstand and I’m glad. He’s not like other guys I’ve dated. Not that we’re dating, I guess. We’re fucking. That’s about the most he’s promised me, and you’ll probably have guessed by now that I’m in way over my head. “Then that’s your choice.”

Non-committal. Putting the ball back in my court, as he is so talented at doing. Reminding me that we’re just sex, nothing more.

I swallow back my frustration.

Four weeks this has been going on. Four weeks since we met, since he fundamentally changed a part of me, four weeks since I first learned the pleasure of life with Alex LaMar in it. On the one hand, that doesn’t seem like long, on the other, I cannot remember ever not knowing him.

I had my own reasons for welcoming his determined seduction, reasons that had nothing to do with the way he makes me feel in bed. But those reasons—rules by which I once lived—are now specks of sand in the distance. I can barely see them, let alone remember. I know that soon my life will swallow me back into it, making it almost impossible to accommodate the demands of this relationship. University is back, and though it’s early in the term, I can already feel the risks of inattention. My focus isn’t where it should be and my grades will suffer if I don’t take care.

My stomach is filled with butterflies; that’s what he does to me. I weave through the tables and no longer see the other diners. It’s just him and me and the ravishing I hope he’s about to give me. I watch as he pays the bill and strides across the room, oblivious to the way heads turn in his direction – Alex never notices that, but I do. I’m someone who’s spent a lifetime learning how *not* to be noticed, and he’s the opposite – so meteoric and blindingly handsome and yet he barely realises what kind of impression he makes.

He doesn't waste a second. Away from prying eyes at last, his body crushes me to the cold, tiled wall and his mouth aggressively possesses mine; his tongue is punishing me and pleading with me and I know then that he's as desperate as I am. He's hard against my gut but he's too disciplined to do more than kiss me. My knees are weak and my shoulders sag; without the strength of his body holding me to the wall I know I'll slip to the floor.

And when I moan a little into his mouth he grinds his cock against me. "It's an IOU," he explains, breaking the kiss and putting horrible, aching distance between us.

I nod, completely torn apart by fire and flame.

The bathroom door bangs shut and a woman emerges. She looks at us quizzically and Alex instantly changes. He's cool and calm, his smile perfectly banal as he reaches into his pocket. I've seen him do this enough times to know what the gesture means. He slips his key into my hand. "Text and let me know when you get there."

Frustration spirals inside me. "One of these days I'll get sick of waiting for you, you know."

His laugh is like melted butter over my spine. "We'll see."

And he's right to be so cocky, pardon the pun. Maybe if I'd lived a normal life, I'd have had some idea how to deal with a man like Alex. But I'm flying blind. I've dated a couple of men, neither of them anything special. The truth is, until meeting Alex, I had no idea I was even a sexual person, really. But I am hooked on him and the way he makes me feel, and I can't imagine myself closing the door on these feelings in a million years.

I know he's watching me walk away. I sense his eyes burning into me all the way to the front of the restaurant. But I don't feel the other set of eyes, though they follow me with exactly the same degree of interest. They're still watching me when I pull the heavy glass door inwards and emerge onto the blustery SoHo street. They watch me as I clip away, and I have no clue. I don't find out about them until much, much later. But for now? I still believe the biggest danger that faces me is the total cluster-fuck of lust I feel for a guy who may disappear from my life any day now.

He arrives late. It's almost midnight when I hear him open the door. And I'm a little bit pissed off. The anger lasts precisely as long as it takes my eyes to settle on the details of his face. So handsome, so rugged, and so tired. I ache to run my hands over his shoulders and kiss him tenderly, pressing away the fatigue. But that's not who we are.

"You're still up."

"Yeah." And I walk towards him so slowly that I'm practically pausing between each step. The lights are off except for the lamp near him. As I draw closer, he realises I'm only wearing a skimpy negligee, and that my fingers are toying with the spaghetti straps. When I'm close, but not so close that he can touch me, I slide them down my arms.

I'm naked beneath. The silk pools at my feet. I step out of it. "You wrote me an IOU, remember?"

His lip twists like a coil. "I've been thinking about little else all day."

I make a tsk-ing sound. "What a shame you weren't here sooner then. I'm a little tired now."

His eyes probe mine. "Too tired?"

A small smirk tilts my lips because so much is revealed in his question. His concern for my welfare—if I say 'yes', he'll tuck me into bed with a chaste kiss, because he is caring like that. But I hear his desperation too, that I say 'no', and allow him to fulfil his promise.

"Not too tired," I offer after silence has stretched for about as long as I can let it.

His breath expels in a soft whoosh of relief, and his hands are reverent as they run along my sides, cupping breasts I weeks ago ceased to think of as mine. They are his, as is all of me.

"Where the hell did you come from, Sash?" He mutters, and for a second I freeze. Fear trickles down my spine as one of the questions I most fear comes out of his beautiful mouth. But he doesn't mean anything by it, I'm almost sure of it. Not in the way I worry about. This is just one of those things; a question intended to flatter. My past holds little interest to him – there's no danger here.

"Your imagination?" My heart beats fast against my ribs for a plethora of reasons.

"My imagination isn't this good," he denies, dropping his hands to

grip my wrist. He pulls me hard, so that I jerk against him and my breath snatches loudly across the empty room.

“What does this say?” He strokes the word tattooed across my inner forearm. It has been written in a curling script, making it difficult to distinguish the individual letters. “Monachopsis.”

His laugh is loud in the sensually charged silence of the room. “Mona-what?”

I shake my head. “Long story.” I want him so badly I feel a little bit nauseous. Having never known desire like this, I have no concept if this is normal, but I do know I’m not willing to give it up.

His fingers drop to his belt. His eyes are burning through my soul as he pulls it quickly from his pants then undoes the button and zip. He steps out of them and grabs my wrists; his fingers are firm around my flesh and I suck a breath in that shakes with pleasure. It’s going to happen. And soon. “All day I’ve thought of you. Of this. All day.”

He wraps the belt around my wrists, curling it in and out of my skin until almost the whole belt has been used. He buckles it and pulls it tight so that breaking free is impossible for anyone but Houdini. I’m not Houdini; nor do I want to escape. “Where?” I say breathlessly, ignoring the fact I should be worried by the depth of need I feel for this man.

And now he scoops down and picks me up, and though I’ve had years knowing just how well I can take care of myself, I’m not ashamed to say how good it feels to be held by him like this; how safe I feel with him.

He’s big and I’m small and still I wonder at the way he lifts me so easily. He carries me through the apartment to the guest room we always use. His room I’ve only seen occasionally – when he’s not in the apartment and I’m free to roam around and wonder at the parts of his life he keeps completely separate to me. You’d spy too, wouldn’t you?

He shoulders the door and then puts me on my feet near the foot of the bed. There’s a hook low down on the frame; I’ve seen it before and always presumed it was something decorative. But he pulls on the belt around my wrists and clips a thick velvet chord through them. I’m tied to the bed and because of where the loop is, I’m bent over at more than a ninety degree angle.

His hands spread my legs from behind and I imagine what my arse

must look like, pale and round in the milky moonlight that slices through the window.

I can't see him but I can hear the whisper of clothes as he undresses and I'm so wet that I can already feel myself coming a little. I'm on the brink of begging when he reaches down and runs his touch over my long hair. He pushes it aside so that his hands can stroke my neck. "I will never get over how beautiful you are."

I shake my head, ready to push aside the compliment as form rather than fact. He doesn't give me a chance. His dick, sheathed in a condom and huge and hard pushes to the core of my being. I writhe in surprise and relief and gratitude. His fingers dig into my hips, holding me steady as he thrusts into me hard, so hard that my head hits the bed frame at one point and I laugh a little. He swears and issues a gruff apology but I shake my head. I don't care. I love it when he's desperate for me. I don't want him to stop.

He understands and even though I feel him throbbing he slows down, refusing to own his climax yet. But me? Oh, I'm there. I sail over the edge, screaming into the room as my whole body begins to shake and I pull at my hands. And when I think I can't handle anymore, he leans forward, cupping my breasts and moving deeper inside me. He's twisting my nipples – he knows I love it.

I want all of him, more than this. I want to feel his weight on me. I want his kisses. And I know that will come, because Alex is never satisfied with just once.

This is the necessity of our relationship. The first coming together that is mandated by a day's distance. It's no-frills sex.

Sure enough, he feels me come apart and he holds me, waiting for the frantic breathing to subside before pulling out of me.

"Untie me," I moan, wanting so much more.

I don't see him shake his head. "No way."

I angle my head to meet his eyes but he nods towards the bed. "Lie down."

I frown. "I can't ..."

"Yes, you can."

And he's right, but there's nothing elegant about the way I scramble onto the bed and my cheeks are pink when finally, I'm lying on my

stomach on the thick mattress. I stare at him mutinously, wondering if he gets a kick out of my awkward ministrations, but he doesn't notice apparently.

"No, no," he murmurs. "On your back."

"I'm not a contortionist," I snap.

With a grunt, he rolls me over, and my wrists form an X that I can't unravel. "I have had a shit of a day, Sasha. I could do without the smartassery."

"You don't think my arse is smart?" I grumble and his lips flicker in a tight smile.

"I think your arse is heaven," he contradicts. "And that I want you a thousand times tonight."

"Even you don't have that kind of stamina."

"Where you're concerned, I wouldn't be so sure." And finally he's kissing me, and thrusting into me, his body weight on mine and everything is perfect, just as I knew it would be. It's perfect as I orgasm again and he kisses me and whispers in my ear, platitudes that I don't even know I need to hear.

He pushes into me and he's coming, every muscle in his body flinches as he crosses his threshold and explodes. And I smile, because he's mine. Not forever. Maybe not even for much longer. But for tonight.

I'm not going to waste a moment thinking about the future, even though it scares the hell out of me.



Two

CREATURES AND THEIR HABITS

I should be tired but I'm not. My body is deliciously sore and my eyes are heavy but my mind is filled with memories that breathe fire and zest into my being. I tap my pen against the desk, angling my head to study Dr Carlton, hoping I look interested in tortious law when really all I can think about is Alex.

But Dr Carlton isn't easily fooled. Maybe because he's young enough to still remember what it's like to be at university. He looks at me and his lips hint at a smile before he carries on with the lecture. I smile back on autopilot and focus more firmly on the notes that are being projected onto the screen.

It's not like I don't care about my degree.

I do, passionately. When I was ten years old and my world tipped on its head, I swore I'd work out a way to make everything better. The power of those who practise law had been, until then, something I understood in a very abstract way. But when I was at trial, and I saw for myself how that power can be wielded, it locked into place my own need to master the law and use it to my advantage.

It has been my sole life ambition, all that matters to me. Until I met Alex. I shiver as I remember the way we fell asleep, his body wrapped around mine, his hands holding me so close that our breath was synchro-

nised. I'm not a calm sleeper. I thrash about and toss and turn, by virtue of the terrors that still course through my blood, so we never stay like that for long, but to fall asleep so cherished is new to me.

Is it new for him?

The question brings bitterness to my mouth because I know the answer and it's not pleasing. Nothing about what we're doing is new for him. He has had many lovers, or so I presume, and each has been discarded no matter how cherished they might have felt for a period in his life.

He told me as much the first time we slept together. *This isn't a prelude to love, Sasha. I'm not looking for Happily Ever After. I'm not offering romance. If you want those things then you should go now, before we begin.*

I should have left.

The spell had been cast though and I was already unable to break free of it.

"Sasha? Your essay had some interesting points on this. Do you want to elaborate?"

Damn it. Carlton knows I'm not listening. I shake my head, my cheeks flaming, and he grins again, a rakish smile that reminds me I used to think he was pretty damn hot. B.A. Before Alex.

He's a visiting lecturer, over from the States, and he has that rich, honeyed accent and a Californian sun-tan. His hair is blonde and long; he wears it in a fashionably dishevelled bun and his face is covered in spiky golden stubble. He made a name for himself when he was straight out of college defending an innocent black man who'd been set up by a crooked cop for murder. It was a huge case and made headlines around the world. Carlton alone had believed the man's version of events. He'd used his own money to run all of the tests and double check all of the evidence at private laboratories and when his money had run out he crowd-funded a huge amount to keep the case going. He's been heralded as a sort of modern-day David to the establishment's Goliath and everything he has touched since has turned to gold.

"Come on, guys! You're all so quiet today. What's going on?"

There's a collective spasm of chairs and desks as we snap to attention, leaning forward and re-engaging. Carlton laughs. "That's better, I guess."

He runs his hand over the back of his neck and turns to look up at the clock. "You've got to understand the real-world implications of what we're doing here. You're fourth years. You're this close to getting out there and practising. Why are you sitting here?" He pivots to the front row, pointing at a girl whose name I can never remember.

"Umm," she mumbles, flicking her eyes around the room, too shy to speak so she shrugs.

"Umm,' isn't an answer!" He shakes his head. He's being kind though. He moves along. "Clint?"

"Yeah?"

"You enrolled in law at one of the finest schools in the UK. Why? What does this mean to you?"

"I want to be a barrister."

"Right." The steam of frustration rising from Carlton's head is practically visible, even though his face is calm and his shoulders aren't bunched together. I don't know how I got so good at reading people's emotions.

Yes, I do, actually. I just don't like to dwell on that. When your very survival depends on knowing how someone feels and assessing if they're a threat, you become a swift and adept judge of character.

"The law isn't theoretical, guys, but a moving feast. It's not just... something you study. It's something you *are*. Something you feel. It changes you and you should want to change it."

We all nod, though I wonder if anyone else has the same understanding of his words as I do.

"Sasha? You look like you've got something to add."

He looks at me like he knows me, but he doesn't. I think maybe he's just great at reading people, too. He's right, though. I was driven to this degree for a reason, and that reason resonates as strongly in my soul now as it did way back when I first chose this path. "People who know the law, who speak its language, hold all the power in this world." It's just Carlton and me. I tune out my classmates and their speculative glances. "More power than money, more power than politics. The law, in our country at least, emboldens those who have no hope. To speak the language of law enables us to speak for those who face unthinkable cruelty and loss. Not just the wrongly and unjustly accused," I murmur, thinking of his case.

“But refugees and children and others weakened by society and circumstance.”

He brings his hands together in three slow claps. “Now, that’s an answer.” He looks at the clock once more. “We’re almost done here anyway. Go home. Next week my first question for each of you is going to be this: *Why are you here?* I want an answer like Sasha’s from each of you. And if you can’t come up with one you might need to seriously consider your choice of degree because if you think the workload is tough, wait until you’re out there in the real world with clients and cases and court systems to navigate.”

There’s a raucous noise as books are slammed onto desks and then stuffed into backpacks and handbags. I don’t have my textbook because it’s at my flat, and I haven’t spent proper time there in weeks. I slide my notebook away with the hastily photocopied pages of someone else’s text jutting out of the sides. Carlton catches me as I come down the aisle, ready to leave.

“That was a good answer,” he says, smiling like we’re old friends.

I like him. I feel comfortable with him. And he makes a nice difference from my other lecturers who are uniformly stuffy and old-fashioned. “Thanks.”

“You feel injustice like a personal responsibility.” His eyes linger on my face.

“Shouldn’t we all?”

His laugh is nice; soft and gentle. “Yeah, but in reality, most people don’t give a shit unless it directly impacts them.”

I arch a brow, surprised by the curse.

He must see my reaction because he shrugs. “I’m not talking to you now as your teacher. I’m talking to you as ... a friend.”

A friend? That’s interesting. “I didn’t know we were friends,” I can’t resist saying, my tone light and teasing.

“All friendships start somewhere. Have you got time for a coffee?”

I’m tempted. This guy is really interesting but all my spare time is invested elsewhere. And I’m desperate to get home and reacquaint myself with my own apartment, before Alex is finished work. “Raincheck?” I say with true regret.

“You got some other place to be?”

I nod.

"Let me at least grab you a takeaway then," he offers. "You looked like you could hardly keep your eyes open."

I grimace. "Was I that obvious?"

"You're just usually more of a live-wire in my class."

I smile at the description; it weakens my resolve. "There's a Pret just around the corner."

"Great. Let's go." He scoops up his own books and pushes the door, holding it open for me. The hallway is packed but we weave through the crowds and emerge onto the steps soon enough. It's a grim London day. The sky is grey and menacing.

"Menacing?"

I didn't realise I'd spoken the words out loud but I nod. "I always think it's like the clouds are sinking down, ready to squash me." I shake my head at the foolish description.

"I like it." He digs one hand into his pocket as he walks. Outside of the classroom, he looks more like my contemporary than a lecturer.

"I would have thought you'd hate the weather here, given that you're from somewhere perennially sunny?"

"On the contrary, I love change."

"I hate it." I shiver unconsciously. I've known too much change.

"Do you?"

I shrug, reminding myself to be careful. I don't really need the reminder; after so many years of hiding, this is who I am now, but around people I am comfortable with I am most at risk of forgetting myself.

"I'm a creature-of-habits girl I guess." I point to the line of shops across the street. "See that bookstore?"

He nods.

"I've worked there for the last four years."

He grins. "That is definitely a habit."

"It's convenient," I say in a voice that is jokingly defensive. "Plus I get to talk about books for hours on end. It's brill."

"Did you grow up around here?"

Specificity is the devil. I keep my response casual. "Not far. I moved to a little studio flat in Edgware when I started university." I pan my hand around the grim skies and low-lying buildings. "This is my village now."

“Cheery,” he replies with a shake of his head.

“How are you finding London? Besides loving our gloomy weather.”

“I always think you guys give your weather a bad rap. The summer was pretty good.”

“Yeah. All three days of it.”

“Fair point.” We turn the corner and the white star heralding my favourite cafe comes into sight. “I love the history here. The culture. I think I saw just about every theatre show playing in my first month.”

“Geek,” I grin.

“Theatre buff,” he corrects, smiling down at me in a way that should inspire caution. I feel a *frisson* of guilt, as though I’m doing something wrong. Which is completely stupid. I’m not flirting with my lecturer – I’d never do anything so stupid. And Alex? My heart accelerates when I imagine him. Would he be jealous? That’s hard to say. Possessiveness is different to jealousy. The fact he feels the former in no way suggests he’d experience the latter.

“What’s been your favourite?”

“Nuh uh,” he says. “Not after that ‘geek’ comment. You’ll totally judge me.”

“Probably,” I nod. “But you don’t seem like someone who’s afraid of a little teasing.”

His expression is wry. “Promise you won’t think less of me?”

“I can’t promise that,” I tease back.

“Matilda.”

I don’t laugh. “You’re kidding?”

“I know, I know.” He pulls his hand from his pocket and holds it up pleadingly. “It’s a ‘kids’ show. But it rocks.”

“No, no, I completely agree. I love it too. I’ve seen it six times.”

“Six? That’s just showing off.”

“It’s utterly brilliant,” I enthuse, warming to one of my favourite subjects. “That song about being naughty? That’s me to a tee.”

“I can see that.” And again a *frisson* dances along my spine.

But I ignore it. “I mean it.” I start to sing one of the hit songs.

He grins at the lyrics. “Ah! The oppressed’s war cry.”

“Isn’t that beautiful though? I always think you have to take a longer

view. So many rules exist and some of them just hamstring us. You've got to move with your conscience."

"You're passionate about this."

Again I need to deflect. "As are you." We stop walking. We're outside Pret, and it's busy. "You took on a case that, if you'd lost, would have made you unemployable. No one would have wanted a bar of you."

"He was innocent."

"How did you know?" The sun pokes out from behind the clouds for a second and I squint looking up at him.

"A lot of reasons."

I narrow my eyes. He's doing my trick – keeping something secret. "You're evading."

"Very good, counsellor."

"Why?"

He leans closer towards me. I can smell something salty on his breath and wonder if he's had hot chips for lunch. "Because it's more airy-fairy than legally relevant."

"I like airy-fairy."

He straightens and grins. "Coffee."

I make a sound of complaint as we push into the busy café. "That's not fair."

"Haven't we just been saying that? What are you having?"

"Piccolo latte."

He joins a line and I move to the sandwiches out of habit. I'm not hungry but I love to browse. Pret a Manger amazes me. All those beautiful offerings made fresh each morning, and their commitment to the homeless population of London. It's the yummiest philanthropy I support.

They're quick too. Carlton is by my side within minutes brandishing a tiny coffee for me and a huge one for him. "The American habit of thinking bigger is better," I chastise, wrapping my hand around the smaller cup.

"You're welcome."

I shake my head in smiling apology. "Thank you."

He grins. "I'm going to go for a walk. I like to drink as I go."

"You'll be walking for miles before you finish that."

"Good." We step back into the cool afternoon. "Which way?"

“Oh.” I hadn’t expected this. But then again, I am walking home, it’s no hardship to go some of the way with him. I nod towards my usual route and we’re moving again. “Where are you living?”

“The University rented a place for me in Clerkenwell.”

“Nice.”

“Yeah. It’s central.”

“So, you were telling me how you knew he was innocent.”

“Ah! And tenacious. Another excellent quality, Miss Lewis.”

“Thank you, Carlton.”

“Dr Carlton.”

“Nope. I like Carlton. And if you don’t answer my question I’ll downgrade you to Carl.”

We turn a corner and he’s quiet; I wonder if he’s thinking about something else.

“Have you ever met someone and just known?”

Now it’s my turn to be quiet. I need to mull that one over a little. I mean, of course I have. I met Alex and just knew I would do anything he wanted, go anywhere he wanted, even though there was danger inherent in that decision. There have been a handful of other people, too, throughout the course of my life. Meera, my best – possibly my only – friend. I met her and I knew I could trust her. Not with my secret, but with my secrecy. She knows there’s a big black hole of information in my past and she doesn’t push it. I love her for that.

I can’t answer his question so I don’t. “Is that how you felt?”

“Yeah.” He sends me a look of embarrassment. “So the case of the century was really based on my hunch.”

“Don’t be ashamed of that. That simply means you’ve got great intuition, doesn’t it?”

“Clayton was so obviously terrified. He’d confessed. It should have been a simple defence aimed at getting him a reduced sentence. But none of it added up. Least of all how this gentle, quiet and polite man could have murdered two old women in their beds.”

I shiver at the gruesome detail. “Who did it?”

“The victims were grandmothers of rival gang members; their murders were retaliatory. Can you believe that?”

I know all about the things bad men can do to the families of their enemies. I shiver and sip my coffee to hide the gesture. “And the cop?”

“Was paid off by the gangs. It should have been easy to pin it on Clayton—he had access, needed money, and as a teenager he’d been involved in an armed robbery, only he hadn’t really. He’d been in with a bad crowd and had agreed to keep watch while they did a job. Nonetheless, on paper, he looked like a good fit for it.”

“He would have been, if you weren’t assigned to the case.”

“Yeah, I guess so.” He’s quiet again and I’m wondering what he’s thinking about when he says, “The first time I met him, I just knew. He stood when I entered the room, called me ‘sir’ unfailingly, and answered all my questions in full. There was no attitude. He’s not an educated man, and he’s huge and tattooed – the kind of looks that a jury would eat for breakfast. But he’s not a killer.”

“He must love you.”

“Yeah. Kinda.” Carlton pauses at the corner, waiting for me to direct him. But we’re getting closer to my home now and that’s a barrier only Meera has breached.

So I flash him a smile and shake my head. “This is where we part ways.”

He looks up at the buildings that surround us. “You’re home?”

“No.” The sun breaks through the thick cloud cover for a moment, making me squint.

“What is it? Don’t want me to see your drug lab or something?”

I nod, pretending to be serious. “Damn it, I knew I’d get discovered one day. Was it the lingering smell of chemicals?”

His laugh is nice. Deep and husky. “That, and the suspicious white powder that’s always on your nose.” He reaches over and wipes at the powder we both know isn’t there. It’s strange for him to touch me, but he’s just playing out a joke. Nonetheless, I step backwards a little guiltily.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

He doesn’t push it and I’m glad. “Any time. See you ‘round.”

My apartment is nothing special. My parents – and I don’t mean my real parents, they’re dead – but Ally and Rick, who took me in and raised me,

hate this place. Compared to their mansion in Buckinghamshire with its millions of windows and liveried history as long as your arm, and view of the banks of the Thames and strawberry patches and apple orchards, this is incredibly low-rent. And it *is* low-rent. Totally affordable for a uni student like me. I think of the bank account they've set up in my name, stockpiling a small fortune in the allowance they provide that I don't access. I plan to give it all back to them one day. A sort of thank you for loving me when you didn't have to.

My neighbours are loud – so loud that they drown out the dark thoughts which haunt my dreams. I never worry here that I am alone. How can I be when they throw parties almost every evening? They've invited me often enough but I have created an image of the studious anti-social book-worm. I smile apologetically and slip into my apartment, happy to be alone but to know that they are there. My upstairs neighbour is the polar opposite. From time to time, I wonder if she is my future. A spinster, alone, just her and a cat and an addiction to hand-blending tea.

My flat is thick with a dank stench. I spy the culprit of malodour: a bunch of tulips purchased around the time I met Alex that have turned into sludge in a vase. The water is now brown goo and the petals litter the bench top, along with stamen pollen that might have been yellow once but is now a brownish gold. "Ugh." I would leave them if there was any chance someone else would come along and clean the vase out for me but sadly, that's the price of living alone.

I think of Ally again with a grimace. Her immaculate home is always groaning under the weight of cut flowers and growing up she impressed on me again and again the importance of maintaining a bunch. Regularly trimming the stems and changing the water is theoretically great, but I appear to be more of a 'set and forget' flower lover.

I wonder what the best way is to dispose of them? Too much liquid to put in the bin. Too much flower to put down the sink. Could I flush them? I stand there wondering about the advantages of each plan before opting for the bin. Happily, in another win for my terrible house-care skills, the bin is half-full still and I realise I've been a little unfair to the tulips. Surely this putrid waste has something to do with the smell? I add the tulips and wretch as I quickly tie the bag.

My phone rings and I know even before I pull it from my handbag

that it's going to be Alex. Maybe I'm not the only one who's fallen down the rabbit hole.

"Hello." Blood washes through my veins.

"Where are you?"

I frown, eyeing my apartment. "In the place where things go to die."

I think I hear his smile in his question. "Meaning?"

"My flat."

This inspires silence. He's curious. He doesn't think of me in those terms; as a person who has a life and a home. "I see." He's grappling with it. I wonder where he's going to go, what he's going to say.

"Where are you?" I say finally, every fibre of my body alert and humming.

"At my place."

I look at my wristwatch in surprise. "It's just gone five. Why are you home so early?"

More silence. I'm nervous suddenly. An air of discontent has shrouded me, dogging my steps since I parted ways with Carlton, like I did something wrong, something I shouldn't have done.

"Are you still there?"

"Yeah. I'm here." I can hear his cogs turning. "I can come to you though."

"No." Too fast. I wince. *Be cool.* I've been lying for almost as long as I can remember and usually it comes second-nature, as easily as breathing and walking. Then again, around Alex my breath burns and my body shakes. He robs me of all my usual skills. "My place is definitely not fit for human habitation."

"I'd like to see it," he says at the same time, so our words mesh over the phone line.

It surprises me. I put it in the back of my mind, to ponder later. "Another time. Maybe." I furrow my brow. "What are you doing home so early?"

He pauses. I stub my toe along the line of tiles, tracing the grout, waiting for him to speak.

"I have to work late tonight. I thought I could see you now."

I frown but my heart is soaring. "You work late most nights."

"Yeah." I'm already reaching for clothes and stuffing them into a bag I

got at the Borough Markets a couple of years back. It's a far from suitable vessel for clothes and makeup but it's all I can lay my hands on quickly. "I'll send a car."

"Not necessary." *TOO FAST*. I smile, even though he can't see it. "I'll be there soon."

"How soon?"

"An hour?"

His voice is gravelly. "Get here faster."



THREE

DARKNESS AND LIGHT

We are darkness and light; ash and sand. We shouldn't mix but we do, perfectly. It's all I can think as I lie pressed against him, in the early hours of the morning. He got in about twenty minutes ago. I heard the door, even though I was asleep.

Was I always like this? Or is it a by-product of That Night?

By the time I realised it was Alex and not an intruder, I was wide awake. I listened while he showered, and when he came to bed, I rolled over to kiss him. We'd made love that evening. I'd come back to his place, as instructed, and he had taken me in the lounge room and then the kitchen, and then he'd gone away again. I'd stayed... His schedule is demanding but I think I am more so, for only hours later I want him again.

"Hey." He had kissed me back, but it was a kiss of exhaustion. My beautiful, usually tireless lover was fatigued beyond belief. I pressed my head against his shoulder while he stroked my hair and then rolled onto my side. He spooned behind me, his hand transferred to my hip, moving lightly in time with his breath.

"How was your day?"

My eyes flutter open. The moon is casting a lovely creamy line into the room. It's not like we don't talk. It's just that we don't talk much. At least,

not with words. God, that's so cheesy, but it's true. I've told him nothing about who I am yet I believe he knows me intimately. "Good. And yours?"

"Were you working?"

He does know I have a job, even though he seems to find it hugely inconvenient when it means I'm not available to be at his beck and call.

"No." I reach down and squeeze his hand. "Go to sleep."

I feel him tense and wonder if he takes exception to being told what to do. "I thought you were coming straight here." He nuzzles into my shoulder and I'm so, so awake now. But compassion for him and his exhaustion keeps me still, despite the stirrings of lust.

"Why?"

"You didn't set the alarm when you left this morning. I presumed you were here. When I got back this afternoon and found you were gone, I was ... concerned." He says it without a hint of admonishment but I sit bolt upright anyway.

"Oh my God." I turn to face him. He's watching me, those intelligent eyes of his cloaked in curiosity. I must look strange because he's scanning me and processing whatever it is he reads in my features. "I'm so sorry, Alex."

"It doesn't matter," he's quick to reassure me. But I know the truth. Alarms are there for a reason. I'm *always* careful.

"I was in a hurry," I say, even more apologetically. "I wasn't concentrating."

"It's fine," he promises.

"I feel like such an idiot."

"Over an alarm?" He pushes up on his elbows and the sheet falls lower down his body. I can't help it. I stare at his abs. He's so beautiful it hurts. "It was just an accident."

"Yeah, but accidents are ..." I zip my lips. I have to deal with my guilt on my own time. He's too attentive; too watchful and if I'm not careful I'll reveal my own hang ups about security and alarms. Accidents are how they find you. I am careful, always.

"I wanted to see you. I expected you to be here, that's all." He changes the subject and the compliment, as vague as it is, does funny things to me. I can't hide my smile. I don't want to.

"I wish I'd been here."

"So you weren't at work." He puts an arm out, forming a void that I am only too happy to fill.

"No." I know it doesn't seem like a big deal, but to me, it is. I'm used to keeping secrets, remember? Separating one part of my life from another is more than a habit; it's a survival technique. "Uni's back now; I had a lecture."

I've surprised him. I hear it in the words he doesn't say. His fingers run over my back while he digests this statement. Does he think it's strange that we've been sleeping together for a month and he didn't know I'm a student?

His question is measured, calm. "I see. What do you study?"

I prop my chin on his chest, so our eyes lock. "What do you think?"

His smile makes my tummy flop. "That's a hard one. I gather burlesque isn't a tertiary subject?"

I punch him jokingly but perhaps he thinks I'm offended, because he catches my fist and lifts it to his mouth. His kiss is an apology. "I was kidding." He laces his fingers through mine, tangling them in a way that makes my heart burst. "If all my fortune were riding on this guess, I would say something like law."

I lift my brows, breath-taken by his acuity. "Oh? What makes you say that?"

"You're smart. Inquisitive. Ever-cautious about what you say, as though you need to weigh every word before it leaves your perfect, delectable lips." He kisses my lips, lips he finds perfect and delectable, and I kiss him back hungrily even though my heart is hammering in my chest at the danger inherent in his perceptiveness. He shifts away. "The only people I know who are so reserved with how they phrase answers are lawyers."

"And me."

"So? Am I right?"

My voice emerges a little strangled. He's so perceptive. It's a red flag; a warning. I must be more careful or secrets will spill, lives will be ruined. "Fourth year."

"And I was your summer project."

"Yeah. Kinda."

He grins. "And now that you're back?"

I wait, not quite understanding.

"I presume you'll be a lot busier. Maybe there won't be the time for this?"

A pit opens before me. Is this how it starts? The beginning of the end? A casual suggestion that perhaps things might have changed, and the relationship might no longer work? Does he want me to end it? Is that why he's asking?

My doubts are a fast-running river, swallowing and churning me and I am directionless suddenly. I've never been with someone like Alex, but I can imagine he'd have a bulletproof way to end relationships without causing drama. A way of almost making it seem like it had been his lover's idea, rather than his. Is he doing that now? The worry comes out of nowhere. He needs me like I need him. But for how long? The feeling that this relationship is a time-bomb hounds me. I take a breath. I need to calm down.

"Actually, I don't know," I say, sounding him out. I'm rewarded by a narrowing of his gaze that speaks of deep displeasure. Relief leads to courage and daring. "It's a pretty full-on schedule and I'm very, very dedicated to my studies."

It's not a lie, either. Though I'm saying it to get to the bottom of how he feels about me, and where he wants me in his life, I am being truthful about my dedication. Until I met Alex, university occupied almost all of my thoughts. Will loving him derail that? Can I find space in my life for him and law?

He catches my wrists and rolls me onto my back. He's straddling me, pinning my arms to my side. "Perhaps you should consider giving up your job then."

I shake my head from side to side. "Can't. Need rent money."

"Then you're going to have to work out how to juggle a job, university, and me."

In terms of what I want him to say it's not even one hundredth of the way there, but it's a start. It assuages the nasty doubts that were drowning me a moment ago. "You might prove detrimental to my studies."

"I won't be." His kiss now is a warning and I heed it. He's not finished with me, and I'm nowhere close to finished with him. Certainty brings

with it relief. The end is nowhere in sight. There is a force that ties us and it is unrelenting.

My hands are ripping at his boxers, pushing them away with a desperation he creates in me. I ache to feel him and his own need is as just as marked. I'm only wearing a silk nightie and he doesn't bother to remove it. He just pushes it up, balling it in his hands at my side. God, I need him. "Condom," I whisper, surprised I'm able to remember such a detail when I'm flicking with fire.

He swears – I love the way he does that. It's so animalistic and dark. When finally he enters me I'm so ready that I cry out on an actual sob of relief. I wrap my legs around his waist; he's so deep, I can already feel myself losing control. He moves quickly, and I throw my head back, crying out into the stillness of his apartment while pleasure engulfs me. It is everywhere. It is the air I breathe; the coldness I feel. It haunts me with his touch.

We make love like that until finally his control wavers and I have no comprehension of how many times I come. The concept of multiple orgasms was foreign to me until I met Alex and now I feel ripped off if I don't climax three times, at least. How could I possibly give that up?

The next morning, I wake up smiling, but he's gone. Disappointment is a pit in my stomach when I reach for him and find only expensive organic cotton sheets. I run my nails higher and they hit a card. I blink my eyes open, swallowing my furry morning breath.

Send me your uni timetable. A.

I flop back against the mattress. It's so like him. And yet, it's a concession of sorts. An agreement to work within the confines of my life. But I don't have any intention of falling in with his plans so easily. The card is thick and expensive, printed on good-quality card stock. His whole apartment is luxe. But I am sick of being here without him. It's as though, with university resuming, I'm remembering that I'm my own person. That I have a life and that I need to pursue it. Another survival technique? Definitely. On some deeply instinctual level I've become terrified of how much I'm willing to give of myself to this man.

I shower, lathering myself in his beautiful bath products and spending

time blowing dry my hair. It's the wrong thing to do though because I smell like him all over. He's going to be on my mind all day.

And he is. I have two subjects at uni and a short shift to cover lunch breaks at the bookshop, and all day I think of Alex. He's under my skin, in my blood, and God, I'm hungry for him. I get a break sometime around three o'clock and, holed up in the back of the store, I check my phone. There are three emails from him. Rather, there are three subjects from him, because he writes nothing in the body of the emails.

11.23 am. Did you get my note?

1.45 pm. I want to see your schedule, Sasha.

I smile at that. He's chastising me. I can just hear the way he's saying my name.

2.57pm. Not playing, huh? I need to speak re tonight. Call me.

Call me. The invitation was there but I have to read it a few times to believe that it's real. I've never done that before. He's called me, but only sparingly. My finger hovers over his name in my phone, ambivalent to make the final press.

"Sash? I know you're on break but we're slammed out here. Do you mind....?"

"Of course not." My manager Annie is a total doll. "I'll be right there."

I open the last email and begin to type: *No time to talk. Can you email me?*

I send it with a smile, imagining his scowl when he sees it. Why do I enjoy provoking him so much?

Annie hasn't exaggerated. The store is flat out. I help an eight-year-old pick the perfect David Walliams book and an eighty-two-year-old find the Royal Horticulture Society calendar she's been looking for. There's a man hovering around the self-help section and when I offer him assistance his lip begins to quiver. Turns out, he's in the midst of divorce and wants books on starting over. I find what looks like a good one and hand it to him but he's evidently decided I'm more helpful than a book and begins using me as free therapy. I nod and make sympathetic noises until I can extricate myself. I do feel sorry for him, and when he shuffles to the

counter ten minutes later, his nose pink and eyes red-rimmed, I go so far as to offer him a tissue. I think he's holding out for a hug so it's a slightly awkward exchange.

Being on the register is what I need. It makes the time go fast. My eyes creep to the clock several times and I wonder if Alex has written back. It's on my eyes' perhaps tenth foray to the timepiece when a familiar face looms into view.

Holy Shit. My heart is about to beat its last. Alex is here. He's scowling. I laughed earlier when I thought he would react like that, but seeing his face now I feel a little bit remorseful. To my surprise, he joins the back of the queue. I smile at the customer I'm serving and mumble my way through the transaction, and then serve the next customer, and the next. By the time he reaches the counter, there are four people behind him. "Yes, sir?"

His expression is deliciously stern. "I'm looking for a book. Can you help me?"

I'm tempted to tell him to shove off, but I can see he's trying to talk about something important and I'm more than a little bit interested. "Sure."

The woman behind him huffs loudly and I send her a saccharine smile. "If you'll just wait over there, I'll be with you as soon as I can."

I really don't get any pleasure out of keeping him waiting now. Especially not when I can feel his eyes on me the whole time. I can't tell if he's impatient or cross, but his expression is dark – at least, to me it is: I'm good at reading people, remember, and Alex isn't just 'people'. "Annie?" I flag her attention just when I worry he might lose patience altogether and leave. "Can you take over?"

She's more frazzled than I've seen her outside of December and the pre-Christmas mayhem, but to her credit she comes right over. "Thank you," I whisper, squeezing past and making my way to Alex.

"I don't know why we're so busy today," I mutter.

He says nothing, which is not, in my limited experience, a good sign.

I try another tack. "What book are you after, sir?"

His eyes are staring at my lips. God. He's going to kiss me. And I'm desperate for him to. That alone scares me so I step away a bit, but he immediately brings a hand around my back, holding me where I am.

“What time do you finish?”

I scan his face, trying to understand why he’s in such a foul mood. Even for Alex he seems weirdly pissed. Surely this isn’t about my uni schedule? “Um, I don’t know. I’m here for as long as they need me.” I cross my arms, a sure sign of defensiveness, I know.

He expels a short, sharp breath, his nostrils flare, and inexplicably, my temper rises.

“Why are you being so weird?”

“What about me is weird?”

“Everything.” At night, in his apartment, I know where I stand and what we both need, but this encounter throws me. “Look, I have to get back to work. Are you just here to be all grouchy?”

His smile is a perfect example of how unpredictable he is; it is beautiful and rewarding, lightning flashing through the darkness of a storm, and my gut aches for more. “I have a thing tonight.”

“A thing?” I prompt.

“It’s a cocktail party at this place in the West End. Will you come with me?”

I’m staring at him, hoping his words will start to make sense. But they don’t. Because that’s not what we are. Besides the occasional coffee at the place around the corner from his apartment, we don’t do ‘out’. “Um...why?”

He grins. My skin prickles all over. “Because of your wit and conversational skills, obviously.”

I’m tempted to punch his arm but Annie’s already sending us curious looks which I think she believes to be covert. “On a Wednesday night?”

“Yes, Sasha. Believe it or not, people do go out through the week.”

My heart is rabbiting angrily. “But ... why?”

He’s not expecting that. He was sure I’d jump at the chance to go on a date. Is that what this would be? A date? A normal couple thing? Is it a threshold I can bring us across that will infinitesimally yet vitally change who and what we are? *Say yes!* But self-preservation is my stock in trade, remember, and nothing about dating Alex LaMar is safe nor wise.

“It’s a cocktail party,” he says softly, and his fingers move over the curve in my back. “Food, wine, music. It’s supposed to be fun. You’ll enjoy it.”

"I'm familiar with the concept." I can feel myself furrowing my brow in a way that my mum (my real mum) used to tell me, even as a child, would lead to wrinkles and premature aging. *Always rub your sunscreen UP, Bianca, not down. You don't want to drag your face to your ankles at your age.* "I mean, why now?"

"Because it's tonight."

I shake my head. Annie's got a queue forming and the teenager she hired a few weeks ago is barely capable of scanning a book without asking for help.

"I mean why are you asking me now? You've had heaps of these things since I met you."

"True." His eyes narrow, giving nothing away. "So?"

I'm quiet, thinking this through a moment.

Apparently he takes my non-response as a 'yes'. "I'll pick you up at eight."

It's instinctive to reject that idea. "I'll come to you."

His eyes flash with the searing pleasure of victory and I realise he's outmanoeuvred me. I'm so keen to avoid him knowing where I live that I've acquiesced to the party invitation when I had no intention of doing so. He nods, confident once more. "It's black tie."

"Black tie?" My disapproval is contained in the tone in my voice.

He nods. "You have clothes that are suitable?"

I bite back a smile. "Yes. Why? Are you going to go all Edward Lewis Pretty Woman on me and give me a credit card to take on a shopping spree?"

I suspect he has no idea who Edward Lewis is and what Pretty Woman means. But he shrugs. "Do you want that?"

I gape for a moment, surprised he would think for a second I was serious. "Like a hole in the head," I mutter, shuddering as I say it because I know just what holes in heads look like. "I have lots of suitable dresses."

"Good." He lifts a finger then and runs it down my cheek, as though he can't not touch me. "Wear one."

I lift my hand to my forehead in a mock military salute which brings a smile to his face.

He leans close to my ear. "Forget your underwear."

I blush to the roots of my hair. I can feel my face burning.

“I want to imagine you naked beneath your dress. I want to know that I can touch you any time I want to.”

A shiver runs down my spine. I find some inner-strength. “Don’t push it. You’re lucky I’m even coming to this thing.”

“But you will be coming.” It’s an intentional double *entendre* and it serves its purpose. I’m speechless.

He straightens and smiles.

That’s it.

He’s walking away just as quickly as he arrived. I stare after him, knowing I must look like a bemused buffoon. It takes a good ten seconds before a customer realises I’m free and approaches me for aid. She’s getting divorced, and she hopes if I can recommend a self-help book on rebuilding her life. Absentmindedly, I wonder if she’s the other half of the customer I dealt with earlier. If not, perhaps I should introduce them?

I smile at the thought as I lift a book out for her and turn back to the registers. I practically float through the rest of my shift. Alex has asked me on a date. And it *is* a date.

What does it mean? If anything? And how long can I let this go on before I really absolutely have to cut him free?

Even here, he is with her. Amongst the books and the browsers there is Bianca and there is him. Does he know that I am watching? Does he know about the professor she spends time with? Will he care when she is gone?

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