

chapter ONE

Queenie

In the stirrups now.

Wish you were here . . .

I **LOCKED MY** phone and carried on looking at the ceiling before unlocking it and sending a follow-up “xx.” That would prove to Tom that I wasn’t as emotionally detached as he accuses me of being.

“Can you just bring your bottom riiiiight to the edge of the exam table?” the doctor asked as I inched myself down closer to her face. Honestly, I’ve no idea how they do it.

“Deep breath, please!” she said a bit too cheerfully, and with no further warning inserted what felt like the world’s least ergonomic dildo into me and moved it around like a joystick. She placed a cold hand on my stomach, pressing down every few seconds and pursing her lips every time I squealed. To divert my attention from this manipulation of my insides, I checked my phone. No reply.

“So, what do you do . . . Queenie?” the doctor asked, glancing at my chart. Wasn’t it enough that she could literally see inside of me? Did she *need* to know about my day job?

“I work at a newspaper,” I said, lifting my head up to make eye contact when I responded, as it seemed like the polite thing to do.

“That’s a fancy career!” She pressed on, plunging her way back in. “What do you do at the newspaper?”

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“I work at the *Daily Read*. The—ouch—culture section. Listings and reviews and—”

“In the technology department? That makes sense,” she said.

I hoisted myself up on my elbows to correct her, but stopped when I saw how concerned she looked. I glanced at the nurse behind her, who looked *just* as concerned, and then back at the doctor. She still looked concerned. I couldn’t see my own face but guessed that my expression mirrored both of theirs.

“Hold on a tick, we’re just going to—Ash, could you just get Dr. Smith in here?” The nurse bustled out.

Many uncomfortable minutes passed before the nurse came back in with another doctor, a man who looked as standard as his surname would suggest.

“Let’s get a closer look . . .” Dr. Smith said, bending down and peering between my legs.

“What’s wrong? Can you not find it?” I asked, worried that the IUD had maybe been absorbed into my womb, the way I still worried that every tampon I’d ever inserted was still knocking about inside me.

“What do you think, Ray?” the first doctor asked her colleague.

“We might need to get Dr. Ellison in here, you know,” Dr. Smith replied, straightening up and putting his hands on his hips.

“I saw a cleaner mopping up some sick in the hallway, why don’t you get him in here to have a look too?” I asked all three hospital staff as they stared quizzically at the ultrasound.

“Aha! Look, the IUD is there!” the original doctor said, pointing at a speck on my on-screen uterus with the excitement of someone who’d just discovered a new planet. Relieved, I lay back on the exam table. “But could you pop your clothes back on and have a seat in the waiting room? We just need to have a quick word, and then we’ll call you back in.”

“Never, ever trust a Gemini man.” I plonked myself down on a chair next to Aunt Maggie. “Here—” she said, holding out a bottle of anti-

bacterial hand gel. She squeezed some into my palm, and as soon as I rubbed it in, she grabbed my hand to consolidate her point. I'd thought that Maggie coming with me would be a calming and firm adult presence, but instead she was just transferring her germ OCD onto me.

I tried to focus on the peeling GYNECOLOGY UNIT sign on the wall to stop myself from pulling my hand out of her grip.

"You know I don't believe in astrology, Maggie." She squeezed my hand tighter, I suppose by way of punishment. I slithered my hand out of hers and crossed my arms, tucking my hands into my armpits so she couldn't grab at them again.

"Your generation don't believe in anything," my aunt told me. "But listen to what I'm telling you, it's for your own good. Gemini men, they are takers. They will take every single thing from you, and they will drain you. They will never give to you, ever, because it's not about you, it's always about them. And they will leave you broken, in a heap on the floor. I've seen it happen a million times, Queenie."

The woman opposite raised a palm to the ceiling and *mm-bmm*-ed in agreement.

"As you know, I steer clear of *all* men, apart from our Lord and Father, because I haven't had time for them since 1981, but believe you me, it's the Gemini ones you need to watch yourself with. Get yourself involved with a man born in June, and there'll be trouble."

I chanced an interjection—"But Tom was born in June"—and instantly regretted it.

"Oh! Exactly! This is what I'm saying!" Maggie exclaimed. "And where is he, please?" She looked at me quizzically. "You're here at the hospital and he's nowhere to be seen!" I opened my mouth to make the point that not all men born at a certain time of year were variations of Lucifer walking the earth and ultimately shut her down; but, always wanting to fully explore any subject, Maggie had more to say. In the increasingly busy waiting room, she continued to use her best outside voice to lecture me (and everyone sitting around us by way of volume), and though I was too anxious about the goings-on of my womb to take

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any of it in, the woman opposite us nodded along aggressively, staring at Maggie's auburn wig as though it could fall off at any minute.

"... if you get involved with a Gemini man, you'll regret it. They like the chase—trust me. The pursuit of a woman makes them feel strong, it makes them feel good, and it makes them think they have a purpose in life. And we all know that unless men have a purpose, they feel aimless. But Gemini men are a whole different story," Maggie continued with awe-inspiring enthusiasm. "When they do finally get the woman, they'll drop her. Drop her like they didn't even *know* her. Gemini men don't mind who they hurt, who they have to use, who they have to step over—they don't even bloody notice."

"Are you sure you don't mean white men, Maggie?" I asked, narrowing my eyes. Her line of fire sounded a little too specific.

"You can take it how you want to," she said, folding her arms and pursing her lips. "You're the one who thought she found her white savior. And look!"

Maggie is a big woman. In all ways. She has a new and even more surprising wig made every week, she doesn't like to wear black because it's too depressing, and she has to wear more than one pattern at any given time, even when she's pottering around the house, because "Jesus wants life to be about color." The obsession with color is a nod to her fleeting career as an artist, a career in which she never created anything but hype around herself. Maggie is also intensely religious, but the less ever said about that, the better. My aunt and grandmother always use religion as a stick to beat everyone with, and even to dwell on it for more than one second would be to entertain something I had no time for.

I sat on the edge of my seat to prevent the hospital staff from screaming my full name out this time around. "What's to stop them from looking me up when I've gone?" I asked Maggie, trying to derail her rant. "What are the rules?"

"Who's looking you up?" she asked me.

"Anyone in the waiting room?" I answered quietly.

“You’re not a celebrity, Queenie,” Maggie said. “Don’t be so paranoid.”

“Queenie Jenkins?” the nurse from before bellowed. I patted Maggie on the knee to signify that I was about to go in, and jumped up; she didn’t stop talking.

The nurse didn’t smile back at me; instead she placed a hand gently on my shoulder and trotted me down the clinical corridor and led me back into the room that smelled like someone had spilled a bucket of bleach.

I glanced nervously at the machine with the intrusive attachment that had bothered me earlier as it hummed lowly in the corner.

“You can put your things back down there,” she said, and pointed to a chair by the door. For the second time, maybe more so this time, I wished it had been *Tom* there in that chair, but I didn’t have time to lament because the nurse was staring at me, so threw my bag on it.

“Can you remove your tights and your underwear and put your legs back in the stirrups? I’ll go and get the doctor.”

“Again?” I asked, throwing my head back like a surly teenager.

“Mmm. Yes, please.” She left the room. I should have worn sweatpants for this, both because I would live in them if I could, and because tights are a complete faff. Putting them on requires half dance, half contortion, and should only be done once in a day, in a private sphere. I got my phone out to text my best friend, who was probably doing something less horrifying with her afternoon.

Darcy. They’re asking to examine me for the second time! I’ll have had this machine in me more times than Tom in the last few weeks

The doctor, a brisk woman with kind eyes that had clearly seen a lot of women’s fear, swept back into the room. She spoke very slowly, explaining that she was going to have one more check of something. I sat up.

“What are you looking for? You said the IUD was there.” She re-

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sponded by snapping on a pair of latex gloves, so I lay back down.

“Okay,” she said after a pause and a prod. “I’ve asked another doctor for a second opinion. And having had another look, it’s just that—well, is there any chance you were pregnant, Queenie?” I sat up again; my stomach muscles would be shocked into thinking that I was exercising at this rate.

“I’m sorry, what do you mean?”

“Well,” the doctor said, peering at the ultrasound, “it looks like you’ve had a miscarriage.”

I lifted my hand to my mouth, forgetting that I was holding anything. My phone slipped out of my grip and onto the floor. The doctor paid no attention to my reaction and continued looking at the screen.

“Why?” I asked, desperate for her to look at me, to acknowledge that this news might have affected me in some way.

“It can happen with most forms of contraception,” she told me clinically, her eyes that I’d previously thought were kind still fixed on the screen. “Most women just don’t know about it. At least it’s done the job.”

I lay back on the examination table long after she’d left the room.

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“Oh, you two will have beautiful children,” Tom’s grandmother said, staring at us from across the table. Joyce had cataracts, but she could still see the future, it seemed.

“Your lovely soft brown skin, Queenie, but lighter. Like a lovely milky coffee. Not too dark! And Tom’s green eyes. Your big hair, Queenie, those dark eyelashes, but Tom’s nice straight nose.” I looked around to see if anyone else at the table was shocked by what she said, but apparently it was acceptable.

“I don’t think that you can pick and choose like a facial composite, Joyce,” I said, fiddling with the pepper grinder.

“True,” Joyce said. “It’s a shame, that.”

Later on when we were in bed, I turned to Tom and put my book down. “What’s wrong with my nose?”

“What do you mean?” Tom asked, concentrating on whatever tech article he was reading on his phone.

“Your grandma. At dinner she said that our future baby should have your nice straight nose.”

“Ignore her. She’s just being old, isn’t she?” Tom said, putting his phone down on the bedside table. “Your nose is nice and squishy. It might be my favorite thing about your face.”

“Oh. Thanks, I guess,” I said, picking my book back up. “Well, let’s hope that our children don’t get any of my squashed features.”

“I said squishy, not squashed. And I’d rather our kids looked more like you than me, your face is more interesting than mine. And I *love* your nose, almost as much as I love you,” Tom said, booping me on the appendage in question with a finger.

He moved so that I could nuzzle into him. I did, and although I wasn’t a person who ever felt particularly safe, did, but just for a second.

“So you’ve thought about it?” I asked, looking up at him.

“Your nose? Sure, I think you’ve got a lovely nose.” He rested his chin on my forehead.

“No, our children. Future babies.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it planned out. In six years when we’ve got a house and I’ve forced you down the aisle, we’ll have children,” Tom said, smiling. “Three is the right amount.”

“Three?”

“One is selfish, two means they’ll always be competing, but when you have three they can start looking after each other as soon as the eldest is eight.”

“Okay, okay. Three coffee-colored babies. But milky, right? Just like Grandma ordered.”

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Queenie

Tom, hello

Queenie

Are you seeing my messages?

Queenie

I'll call when I'm on my way home

Queenie

Got to go to the chemist and get some pills

Queenie

Let me know if you need me to bring anything home

I sat in the corridor staring at my phone's smashed screen, waiting for Tom to reply. A few minutes passed, and eventually, no reply later, I walked back toward the waiting room. I could hear Maggie talking as I made my way toward her.

"One day, years ago now, my ex-husband told me he was popping out for petrol, and do you know what? He was gone fifteen hours! When he got back, I said, 'Terrence, where did you get the petrol, Scotland?'" She paused for effect. "I told him to get out after that. I had a baby to look after, I had my bills to pay, I couldn't deal with any man's nonsense." Maggie paused to adjust her bosom. "The day after he left I went to the doctor and I said, '*Listen*, tie my tubes in a knot, I'm not having any more!' I'm telling you. The one I've got is fifteen now, all she gives me is trouble. It's all about makeup and boys and fake eyelashes and making videos for YouTube. This isn't what my mum came over from Jamaica for, for her granddaughter to be throwing away her education." Maggie folded and unfolded her arms. "I go to church, and I pray, I pray for myself, I pray for my daughter, for my niece. I just have to hope He's listening, Marina."

How were my aunt and this stranger already on first-name terms? I hadn't been gone that long. I threw myself down next to my aunt. Marina, sitting opposite, was nodding vigorously although Maggie had finished speaking.

"What did they say?" Maggie asked, pulling out the hand gel again.

“Nothing really! Just women’s problems, you know.” I swerved the question.

“What women’s problems?” Maggie is a first-generation Jamaican and therefore a woman entitled to information about others.

“Just women’s problems!” I said, forcing what I hoped was a convincing smile.

Maggie and I stood at the bus stop outside the hospital. She spoke about something I couldn’t quite pay attention to as I looked up at the three gigantic tower blocks looming opposite, so high up that dark clouds almost hid their tops. I kept my head tilted back, hoping that if I did it long enough the tears that were brimming in my eyes wouldn’t fall out.

“Queenie, what did the doctor say?” My aunt narrowed her eyes at me. “I don’t buy this ‘women’s problems’ rubbish. Do I have to pry it out of you?” Why did I think I’d got her off the topic earlier?

“She wanted to look at my cervix, Maggie,” I said, hoping that would get her off my case. “Something about it being narrow?”

She looked at me, annoyance and then shock contorting her face. “Pardon? Must you embarrass me?” she said through gritted teeth, looking around. “We do *not* talk about our *vees* in public.”

“But I didn’t say *vagina*, I said *cervix*,” I replied. Her lips tightened. “Anyway, the bus is here!”

The 136 crawled down Lewisham High Street, Maggie speaking a hundred words for each yard we moved.

“You know, back in the day, when Mum came over, they used to put implants and IUDs in black women without us knowing to stop us getting pregnant.” She cocked her head. “To stop us procreating. That is true, you know!” She raised her eyebrows. “Mum’s friend Glynda, the one who eats Mum out of house and home when she visits? Well, *she* couldn’t get pregnant for years and she had no idea why. So you shouldn’t even have had that *thing* put in in the first

place, politically as *well* as physically. You don't know what it's doing to you."

She was talking so frantically and moving so drastically to support her chat that her gigantic plastic earrings were providing a soundtrack to her words.

"Black women's bodies don't work well with this sort of thing. Have you read up on it? Chemical imbalances, the absorption to our melanin—*that* affects the pineal and pituitary glands. *Swelling* also."

Maggie stopped talking to call Diana, so I tried to call Tom. The first three times it had rung out, but now it was going to voice mail. It was past six, he'd be out of work by now.

"Is he still not answering?" Maggie asked.

"Huh?" I looked out the window. "Who, Tom? Yeah, he sent me a text to say that he'd see me at home." She knew I was lying, but my stop was coming up so she couldn't interrogate me about it.

"Are you sure you don't want to come to church with me on Sunday? All are welcome. Even you, with that *IUD*." She looked at me out of the side of her eyes. "God will save even the most wanton. . . ."

I rolled my eyes and stood up. "I'll call you tomorrow," I said before I pinballed my way down the bus, careful not to touch anything or anyone with my hands, and stepped off.

I stood waving at my aunt as the doors closed and the bus pulled away. It's a family thing. It is an annoying and time-wasting thing.

When I got home, the flat was cold. I ran a bath and wriggled out of my clothes. I crinkled my nose at the goo from the ultrasound that had stuck itself to the gusset of my knickers and chucked them into the wash basket. I doubled over and sat on the edge of the bath. The bleeding had stopped, but the cramps hadn't.

I wrapped my hair in my headscarf and stepped into the bath. I sat in the water and prodded at my stomach, wincing as I hit tender spots.

Why had this happened? I was twenty-five; I wasn't going to have a baby. Obviously. But it would have been nice to have the choice. Having a contraceptive placed in my body wholly suggested that I was not wanting to have a baby; so, yes, my choice would be to not actually carry a child to term and then raise it—but that wasn't the point. "Would I have been ready?" I asked myself aloud, stroking my stomach tenderly. My mum was twenty-five when she got pregnant with me. I guess that says everything about how unprepared I'd be. I lay back, numbness cloaking my body as the hot water swathed my cold skin.

Midnight, and Tom still wasn't home. I couldn't sleep because my womb felt like it was trying to make its way out of my body, so I assembled some boxes and started to wrap up and pack my half of our separated belongings in the living room so it at least looked like I was going somewhere soon. A snow globe from Paris, mine and Tom's first holiday together; a comically ugly porcelain donkey from Spain, our second holiday together; and a Turkish eye ornament from our third. I wrapped all of these memories of our relationship with care, swaddling them in layers of newspaper and sealing them with tape. I moved on to the plates, then the mugs, before I stopped to get the donkey back out of the box. I unwrapped it and put it back on the mantelpiece. If I was going to leave a reminder of our relationship, it was going to be the thing I didn't want in my new place. I carried on wrapping until I got into a frenzy of paper and tape, only pausing when I got to two mugs on the drying rack. One embossed with a T, the other with a Q.

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"Why have you got so much *stuff*?" Tom asked, leaning on a cardboard box marked MISCELLANEOUS 7 and wiping sweat from his forehead. "I've only got a few hoodies and two pairs of socks."

"I don't know, maybe I've become a hoarder without noticing?" I

said, cupping his face in my hands. “But you wanted to live with me, so you’re going to have to live with it all.”

“Fine, I regret nothing,” Tom said, kissing me on the forehead. “Queenie, you have a very dry forehead for someone who is meant to be lifting boxes.”

“Yes, maybe so, but I am organizing, as opposed to lifting,” I told him. “And making sure that the boxes marked KITCHEN are in the kitchen.”

“Well, if you’re going to be in the kitchen, could you at least make some tea?”

“Yes, now that you mention it, your clever girlfriend has just found the box with the kettle and bought milk and tea bags on the way here,” I said. “But I don’t know where the mugs are.”

“Look in my rucksack, my mum bought us mugs. Moving-in present, she said.”

I found Tom’s rucksack in the hallway and, when I opened it, found two gift boxes containing a white mug each. I washed them out and made us tea, plucking the hot tea bags out with my fingers in the absence of a spoon. “How do your fingers not burn?” Tom asked, walking into the kitchen, a box under his arm.

“They do, I just don’t talk about it,” I said, handing him a hot mug. “These are fancy, where did she get these from?”

“No idea,” Tom said, taking a sip.

“Oh, hold on, you’ve got the Q mug.” I reached out for it.

“This one’s going to be mine.” He lifted it out of my reach. “Like *you’re* mine,” Tom said, putting an arm around me.

“Do you know,” I said, “whatever tone you’d said that in, it would have sounded creepy and possessive.”

“Creepy and possessive.” Tom took a sip of tea. “Were they the qualities that initially drew you to me?” He laughed.

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I packed until I was exhausted, falling asleep on the sofa boxed in by years of accumulatively unimportant stuff that I probably didn’t need

to continue carting through life. When I woke up the next morning, my alarm chirping obnoxiously from the bedroom, Tom still wasn't back. I sat on the Tube to work, doubling over when pain ripped through my stomach. A woman handed me a plastic bag, saying, "If you're going to be sick, can you at least do it in here? Nobody wants to see a splattering so early in the morning." I snuck in late, turned my computer on, and fake-smiled my way through the morning. The television listings got confused with the club listings, and I asked Leigh to fix it before our boss, Gina, noticed. One day he's going to tell me to do my work myself, but as long as I listen to him talking about his own work and his boyfriend Don's faltering DJ career in great detail, he lets me get away with a lot.

At midday, I walked over to Darcy's desk, a gray metallic dock in the quiet corner of the office that she shared with Silent Jean, the world's oldest and the *Daily Read's* longest-employed subeditor. She was a ghostly pale waif of a woman who didn't fit with the aesthetic of a flashy news institution, one who seemed to hate me without having ever spoken to me. Or to anyone, actually.

"Good afternoon, Jean," I said, bowing. She tutted, nodding swiftly before putting her surprisingly snazzy earphones in. I placed both hands on Darcy's head and began to plait her thick, heavy brown hair, an activity that, thankfully, she found as satisfying as I did, so no HR summons for me.

"*Please* keep doing that. It is *literally* the most soothing thing," she said. I looked at her screen and began to read the e-mail she was composing aloud:

Simon, you just can't expect me to reconfigure my wants and my needs to suit you. Knowing that I'm at a different point of my life to you, instead of understanding it you almost use it as a weapon—

Silent Jean looked at us and sighed surprisingly loudly for someone who rarely exercised her vocal cords. "Queenie! Privacy, please!" Darcy snapped, turning to look at me. Her bright blue eyes looked through my dark brown ones.

“Uh-oh. What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Lots,” I groaned, banging my head down on her partition so loudly that Silent Jean jumped in her seat.

“Right, let’s go, come on!” she chirped, looking apologetically at Jean and sweeping me up and away. She’s the most intuitive of my best friends, though Darcy has known me the shortest amount of time; that we’ve worked together and spent every weekday talking to each other for the last three and a bit years has meant that we know each other better than we know ourselves.

She’s very beautiful, with a complexion as rosy as her outlook, and looks like one of those wartime girls whose pictures their army husbands would kiss at night. You might think that that aesthetic doesn’t really have a place in the present day, but she makes it work.

Darcy bundled me into the lift, forcing me to step on the foot of a man I hadn’t seen before—he was dressed in a tweed jacket with glasses too big for a face that I would have thought was handsome if my entire brain weren’t concentrated on heartbreak. He looked at me and opened his mouth to complain, but instead stared until he looked down at his phone. “It’ll be all right, Queenie,” Darcy whispered, putting her arm around my shoulders.

“You don’t even know what’s wrong,” I whispered back at her. “So you can’t say that.” The lift zoomed to the ground floor and we bundled out, words of sadness and betrayal and abandonment firing out of my mouth at a hundred miles per hour.

“I just don’t know what to do! Things have been so bad for such a long time, Darcy. It’s relentless,” I told her, my pace quickening the more irritated I got with my stupid situation. “We argue every single day, about absolutely everything, so much that he’s started going back home to stay with his parents at the weekends, and when it’s *really* bad, he stays there in the week and commutes! From Peterborough! Then this weekend, when we really got into it, he told me that he needed a break, and that he thought I should move out.”

“Yeesh.” Darcy winced. “Did he mean it? Or was he just angry?”

“Darcy, I have no fucking idea. We stayed up all night talking and bickering about it, and I agreed to move out for three months, after which point we could revisit things.”

“Why are you the one moving out when he can go and stay with his parents? It’s not like you have that option.” Darcy linked her arm through mine.

“He said he can afford to stay on in the flat because my entry-level wage is *nothing* in comparison to his big-boy fucking Web developer salary.”

“Is that a direct quote?” Darcy asked, horrified.

“He’s always been like that about money, so I shouldn’t be surprised that he’s using it against me.” Darcy squeezed my arm tighter to her. “I just don’t understand why he isn’t better at understanding that he needs to lean into all of my stuff. He knows I love him,” I huffed. “Why doesn’t he fucking see that?”

My expletives weren’t suitable for a public dining space, so Darcy herded me away from the cafeteria and toward the tiny park near our office. I guess it can be called a park even though it’s really only patches of damp earth and bare branches surrounding what is mainly concrete, but it’s nice to have something resembling greenery in central London. We warded off the sharp October air by huddling together on a wooden bench that wobbled dangerously, especially when my gesticulating really tested it.

“He knows that I have *stuff*, he’s *always* known about my stuff, so why can’t he be understanding?” I looked at Darcy for a response but carried on talking before she could say anything. “It could all be fine. We have a break, I move out for a bit, sort my head out; then in a few months, all fine, I move back in and we’re happy forever,” I assured myself.

“Like an interracial Ross and Rachel?” Darcy offered.

“*Friends* is the only reference you could think of?” I asked her. “There weren’t really even any black people in *Friends*.”

“I think you just need to give him a bit of time, and a bit of space.

Once you get out of there, he'll realize how hard it is not having you around," Darcy said. She is very solutions-driven, a welcome counter to my impulsiveness and inability to think things through. "Have you been sleeping together?"

"No, not that I haven't been trying." I sighed. "He thinks it's a bad idea. It's been a month since we had sex." Darcy winced again.

"It's killing me." I threw my hands to the sky in mock exasperation. "I just wish it could all be fine," I said, resting my head on Darcy's shoulder. "What if this is the end?"

"It's not the end!" Darcy assured me. "Tom loves you, he's just hurting. You're both in pain, don't forget that. His pride will be in pieces because of this whole break thing. Men don't like to admit that they've failed at anything, let alone relationships. I once suggested a break to Simon, and in response, he booked a triple session with his therapist and then got his eyebrow pierced. Things will get better." Darcy rested her head on mine. "Oh! What did they say at the hospital yesterday, by the way? You know, the scan thing?"

"Oh, all fine." There was no point in telling her. "It's just stress or something."

"Tom went with you, though, right?"

"No, he went back to Peterborough on Sunday evening. Haven't seen or heard from him since."

"Are you kidding?" Darcy squawked. "Do you need to come and stay with me and Simon for a couple of nights? Are you still having those stomach pains? We can look after you."

"No, I'm all right," I said. I wasn't hurting anymore, but in place of the pain was something else, something sitting heavy that I couldn't quite identify.

Wanting to kill some time before I got home to reminders of my disintegrating relationship, I went to Brixton for some Jamaican bun, hoping that I could kick-start my appetite with my favorite comfort

food. I climbed the steps out of the Underground and stood catching my breath at the top.

I inhaled a little too hard, and the smell of incense from the street sellers made me sneeze as I turned into the market. I hopped over a puddle that looked as suspicious as it smelled sour and carried on weaving through what always felt like thousands of people. I made it into Brixton Village and followed a route to the Caribbean bakery that was etched in my memories of Saturday shopping trips with my grandmother. I turned a corner and went to walk straight into the bakery, but was instead faced with a trendy burger bar full of young couples. The men were all wearing colorful oversize shirts, and their female companions were all wearing colorful overpriced coats.

I frowned and retraced my steps, turning various corners in my search and convincing myself that I'd dreamt the bakery's existence before going back to the burger shop. I stood for a minute, trying to recall some sort of memory of going there.

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"Hullo, hullo, how you keeping, Susie?" My grandmother smiled at the plump Jamaican woman behind the counter. The whole bakery smelled so sweet. And not sickly sweet: it smelled sugary, and warm, and familiar. I stood on tiptoe and looked over, seeing how her pristine white apron strained over her soft, round stomach.

"I'm good, tank you, darlin', you good?" the woman replied, flashing a gold tooth at me. "And the little one, she getting big!"

"Too big!" my grandmother cackled her reply. I looked up at her and scowled.

"Why you fixin' up your face like that? She's just saying you're growin' up," an older Jamaican man stepping out of the back room reassured me.

"This one is *too* sensitive, Peter." My grandmother dismissed me with one hand. "Anyway, let me get a bun—not that one, the big one. No, no, the *biggest* one. That's it—and two hard dough bread, one

bull, and a likkle pound cake for my husband, put a smile on his sour face,” she joked with the shopkeepers. The woman handed a giant brown bag of baked goods over to me with a smile. “Haffi help Grandma, she won’t be around forever.”

“Why Susie haffi be so morbid?” my grandmother asked me in a tight-lipped whisper as we walked out. “Sometimes Jamaicans are *too* overfamiliar.”

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With the memory confirming that I was right, I walked with renewed purpose over to the fish stall opposite as the image and the smell of the bakery dissipated in my head.

“Excuse me?” I said to a fishmonger as he slopped some octopuses that were on display into a basin. “Was there a bakery opposite here?” I pointed to the burger bar, its neon lighting shining on other shops and stalls that I noticed had SHUT DOWN and RELOCATED signs across their shutters. The fishmonger said nothing.

“It had a dark-green front, bread in the windows? I can’t remember the name?” I continued, trying not to look at the octopus activities while talking about food I actually liked eating.

“Gone,” the fishmonger finally said, throwing the basin down and wiping his hands on his apron. “Couldn’t afford the rent,” he added in broken English. “Then these people came.” He gestured to the burger bar.

“What?” I yelped. “How much is the rent?” How could it have been raised so much that people who were forced to come specifically to Brixton, to make lives here and create a community here, would be pushed out to make room for corporate-friendly burger bars? He shrugged and walked away, his waterproof boots squeaking on the wet floor with each step.

Queenie

Tom, are you home tonight?
Let me know

I stood at the bus stop, the pains in my stomach starting up again. I bent over and took a deep breath, and when I straightened up, a black BMW pulled up in front of me, the bass pumping from it hitting me with each beat. The passenger window rolled down and fragrant smoke seeped out and toward me. I took a step back.

“Eh, big batty,” a familiar voice laughed.

It was my old neighbor Adi, a very compact and handsome Pakistani man with facial hair so precise it looked like it had been styled with a laser. “How’s that big bum since you left the ends? Ready for me yet?” He laughed again.

“Adi! Stop!” I said, embarrassed, stepping toward the car. “People can hear you!”

The minute I moved into my dad’s house, Adi had been on my case relentlessly, before and after his lavish desi wedding to his girlfriend of eight years. Whenever I bumped into him, he’d talk very matter-of-factly and at excessive length about black women being forbidden fruit to Muslim men, but mainly he gave me lots of chat about big black bottoms.

“Let me give you a lift, innit.” He smiled. “But not if you’re gonna be sick. I saw you bending over.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” I said, giving him a thumbs-up.

“Then get in the car, there’s a bus coming up behind me.” He leaned over and opened the passenger door from his seat.

I opened my mouth to say no again, but a pain like no other made my legs feel weak. I climbed into the BMW. “Watch the leather!” he said, his voice higher than I’d ever heard it. “These are custom seats.”

As soon as I closed the door, Adi sped off so quickly that I felt like I was in a g-force simulator. “Let me just do my seat belt,” I said, reaching clumsily behind the seat for it.

“You’re safe with me, innit.” He smiled again and put his hand on my thigh. His thick silver wedding ring flashed at me.

“Adi,” I said, removing it. “Both hands on the wheel.”

“So as I was *saying*,” he started, “is that big bum ready for me? It’s looking bigger, you know.”

“It’s exactly the same size, Adi.” I sighed. Why had I gotten into the car? It would have been better if I’d just collapsed at the bus stop. My phone buzzed in my pocket. I took it out and read the message from Tom on the screen, feeling my stomach drop.

Tom

Just saw your text.
Not back tonight.

“I can change your life, you know, Queenie.” Adi put his hand back on my thigh. “Girl like you, man like me? I can guarantee you’ve never had sex so good.” I let it stay there.

When Adi dropped me home and screeched away, I stood outside the front door with the key in my hand hoping that Tom had changed his mind and would be on the other side. He wasn’t.

The flat was cold, again. I got into bed and tried to cry in an attempt at catharsis, but it was useless. Nothing. Kyazike called. I canceled it. Maggie called, and I knew that she’d just tell me that Jesus was the answer, so I canceled that too. My grandmother called, and you don’t cancel her calls, so I answered.

“Hello, Grandma,” I croaked.

“What’s wrong?” She always knew when something was wrong.

“Nothing.”

“You know I always know when something is wrong, Queenie,” she growled, so I told her that I had a headache. “No, you don’t. We don’t get headaches. It’s that white boy, isn’t it?”

“You can’t say that!”

“Is he white or not?” she asked me. “Look—if you are sad, you have to try not to be. If I had let myself be sad when I got pregnant with Maggie at fourteen, then where would that have left me?” All of my grandmother’s responses come with a Caribbean frame of reference that forces me to accept that my problems are trivial.

“I know, but it was different back then,” I dared to sigh.

“Yuh tink suffering discriminate against time?” The patois always comes out when she’s feeling self-righteous.

I fell asleep on the sofa again, this time with a hot water bottle pressed against my stomach. I woke up to the sound of running water. I heaved myself up and stumbled toward the bathroom, flicking lights on as I moved through the dark flat. Tom was sitting on the edge of the bath facing away from me, his hand testing the water. He turned the cold tap off and stood up, his big frame tensing slightly when he saw me.

“I didn’t know you were up,” he said quietly. “Scared me.”

“Sorry.” I shrugged. “I thought you weren’t coming back to-night?”

“I worked too late and missed the last train home,” Tom said, squeezing past me. “It needs another minute or so of hot water.”

“But this is home,” I said to him. He didn’t reply.

I started to step out of my clothes as Tom leaned against the doorframe. My turtleneck got stuck on my head, so he was presented with my once white, now most-discolored bra and wriggling torso. “You sure you want to take a break from all of this?” I forced a laugh, my voice muffled by fabric. I got free in time to see him roll his eyes and turn away.

“So you’re packed, then.” I heard an unmistakable tremor of emotion in Tom’s voice. “When are you leaving?” He cleared his throat.

“Can you give me until next week?” I asked, stepping into the bath and turning off the hot tap. “That way we can have a few more days together?”

Tom shook his head. "I don't think that's a good idea, Queenie." He put the toilet lid down and took a seat, facing away from me. "I'll head back to my mum and dad's tomorrow."

"And when will we speak?" I asked, my voice so small.

"I don't know, Queenie," Tom said, placing his head in his hands.

"God, I don't know why you're being like this!" I said, smacking the water.

"Why I'm being like this?" he said, his voice finally cracking. "These last few months have been awful. I'm still trying to forgive you for that shit you pulled at my mum's birthday, for a start. But, Queenie, this *whole* relationship, you've refused to talk to me."

My breath caught in my throat. I didn't know he'd felt like this, and I certainly hadn't expected him to vocalize it.

"You never tell me what's wrong," he continued. "Ever! And you'd close off, you'd cry and lock yourself in the bathroom while I sat on the floor outside telling you I was there if you wanted to talk, but you never did. You've pushed me away for so much of this relationship."

"It's my stuff!" I defended myself.

"We've all got stuff, Queenie," Tom shouted. "And I've tried with yours, I really have."

"Tom," I said quietly. "However shit I've been, you've always forgiven me."

"Yeah, I have." He looked at his feet. "But I don't know if I can do it anymore."

That night, we fell asleep in the same bed, me nestled into Tom's back. When I woke up at dawn, he was gone. There was a mug of cold tea next to me on the bedside table, the Q looking back at me cruelly.