

## DEAD IN THE CORNER OF MY BEDROOM

### *PART ONE – SUGAR PIE HONEY BUNCH, BY THE SUPREMES*

#### Chapter One

“Tessa!”

I nearly jump out of my seat when she wails, crying that her gum is stuck up her nose. My hysterical four-year-old is doing nothing to help lessen my grip on the steering wheel while I inch along in gruelingly slow Athenian traffic. I could yell and scream, like many a Greek driver, but what would that accomplish? And I’m not going to justify why I give Tessa bubble gum—she wants it, so I get it for her. Every woman I know disagrees with me and tells me I’m a bad mother for doing so. “How can you give her gum? She’ll accidentally breathe it in and choke!”

I’ve always told them to stick it (not the gum), but perhaps from now on I’ll have to try to not give in to Tessa’s whining. I should tell them about this scenario as a piece of advice for their next prey. “Never give a small child gum. Aliens will abduct her and try to give birth to more gum in her nose.”

“But, Mummy! I was just smelling it. But it’s an alien. It’s from Mars. It went inside to make babies!”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Mummy, get it out! It’s hurting!”

Tessa’s imagination is as vivid as mine. At least she has inherited one good thing from me. Funny, my runaway imagination kicked in around the same age. When *I* was four, my mum, despite her eccentric parenting methods, decided I needed to learn

poise and enrolled me in ballet. I lied to all my babysitters that I was taking tap lessons and tried to convince them by flaunting my flashy steps. I cut the hair off all my Barbie dolls and turned them into punks. I asked my parents to paint my bedroom pretty colors, then covered the walls with posters. I memorized all the piano pieces at my piano lessons and never learned how to read the music. I failed the exams. I wore my school blazer back-to-front and inside out to see how many people would notice at school choir. I never sang at the end-of-year concert, as punishment, despite my music teacher striving to persuade me that I had a natural talent for it. My stubbornness and tendency to rebel against anything that wasn't my own decision led me to teach myself how to play guitar instead.

So. Here I am trapped at yet another set of traffic lights. I'm late for a presentation that could maybe land me a transfer to London, and I still have to get my dear Tessa to crèche. Just ten minutes ago, Max and I had just finished trying to "talk" about the possibility of relocating. Just ten minutes ago I was feeling confident about my prospects, excited about something that I might finally see through till the end.

But that was ten minutes ago. Now I'm not sure I even want what I've convinced myself I want. What I *think* I want is to resurrect a passion I have neglected since Tessa was born. It's time to stop doing the opposite of what I should be doing. I have to stop ignoring that little voice in my head.

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I'm gazing at myself in the full-length mirror that doesn't seem to fit my head in. I suppose it's better that way though, because I'm unable to see the ugly faces I make in reaction to my morning splendor. I find myself focusing on the haze of dust brought to life behind me in a beam of sunlight—my body becoming a blurry

foreground image in an artsy attempt of photography. Dust. One of the endless woes of living in Athens. I wonder whether it's time for another round of house cleaning. I wonder how long I'll put it off for this time.

“Max?”

“What, Jane?” Calls Max, in his watered-down Greek accent. He's been speaking a lot like me lately. Aussie style.

I love Max's voice. Smooth, deep, and gentle. It's the first thing I was attracted to when we met. “Can you come and help me do up all these bloody buttons?” I call, still gazing at myself in the mirror.

“I can't, I'm making a Greek coffee. I'll fuck it if I leave. You come in here and I'll help you do up your bloody buttons.”

It took me a while to learn how to not take offence to Max's liking of the word *fuck*. He uses it for every possible part of speech. I eventually realized that swearing in a foreign language just doesn't have the same impact as it does in one's mother tongue, and that he might as well be saying *flower* or something to that effect. However, when he swears in Greek . . . well, let's just leave that as an ellipsis.

I hobble down the corridor feeling the cold of the black marble floor seep through my stocking. For some reason I couldn't manage to put on my other shoe in my eagerness for Max to help do up my dress. I'm in a hurry. Don't know why; I have plenty of time.

“Ohh! Nice! You don't normally dress like this for work. What's going on?”

I feel his soft fingers brush against my breast as he slowly buttons my dress. It's such a pleasant momentary feeling that it doesn't occur to me to mention his overflowing coffee. Instead, I breathe in the majestic scent of his shirt collar and watch

the coffee absentmindedly in the valley of Maxville as it smothers the flame. All that can be heard now is the hissing gas.

“Oh, shit!” Max reaches for the paper towel and tears off more than is necessary.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“Sorry! I didn’t realize till it was too late!”

“But, you were staring right at it.” Max smirks at me as though I’m just self-preserving. That’s what Max likes to call it—the “self-preservation lie.” He likes big words, and he never forgets them either. He looks at me with his gentle blue eyes, forgivingly tilting his shaved head to the side. He knows I’m tired, overworked. My head uncontrollably mirrors his head movement like a confused puppy.

“Was I? Must still be sleeping. It doesn’t matter. I’ll make you another one. What time is it?” I take the coffee-covered paper towel from his hand and throw it in the bin. I feel his hand rest on my lower back. He leans against the kitchen bench looking me up and down as though it’s the first time he’s seen me.

“Seven thirty . . . Have I ever told you how much I love you?” He pulls me toward him and kisses me softly on my top lip with his mouth slightly open. I try to forget that my teeth aren’t brushed and melt into the moment. I nuzzle my head into his neck. His skin’s like silk.

“I don’t have to leave for about twenty minutes. You can go to your desk if you like. I’ll bring you your coffee. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours, right?” I ask, hoping he knows what I’m talking about.

“What’s that mean again?” Max asks with a somewhat ashamed expression on his face for forgetting it already.

“If you do something good for me, I’ll do something good for you. Remember?”

It sure seems our relationship has been on edge lately. It's nothing too serious, but we've been letting insignificant everyday disagreements conquer the most important things in life—the meaningful aspects; the things that are easily forgotten when you become too familiar with each other—such as the reason we fell in love in the first place. So we mutually decided we'd both make an extra effort to help each other out. Try not to argue over meaningless habits we have learned to dislike over the years. Try to make each others' lives that little bit more easy.

“Oh, yeah.” I love the way he says yeah, just like me. “What was it again?”

“If you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.”

“Cool. I like it. S-K-R-A-C-H?”

“No. S-C-R-A-T-C-H. Actually, your English is getting a lot better lately, you know.”

“Doesn't feel like it's getting better. I keep making the same mistakes. What was it that you said? Prepositions?”

“Yeah. Don't worry. A lot of people have the same problem. You speak well, babe.”

“It must be the e-mails. British agents.” Max organizes international music events for a living. He's the only Greek promoter who has alternative taste.

“Yeah, that's right. You're bringing the original bass player from the Sex Pistols for a solo show, aren't you? Whatsisname? Glen somethingerother?” I ask, picking at my fingernail.

“Yeah. Glen Matlock,” Max replies, unable to look me in the eye. He's a big fan of his. He finally convinced Glen's agent to accept his offer. A little voice in my head keeps telling me to ask him for a gig. I'm dying to get myself back out there, to play

guitar again. I can't understand why Max stopped asking me to be the support act for his events. He used to offer me a thirty-minute slot on the stage, to play whatever I wanted. I want to be up there again. I want music back in my life.

I touch Max on his shoulder while he pours himself a bowl of Special K. I'm almost ready to ask him why he stopped asking me, when I'm suddenly distracted by flakes falling on the floor. He doesn't bother to pick them up, but hides them with his naked foot instead; I hear them crunch. *Don't worry about it, I think. Leave it alone.* Think of his strong arms, his beautiful posture—still gorgeous in his tatty ten-year-old boxers and freshly ironed white shirt. Half dressed, but “who gives a fuck,” as Max would say.

“I love you, *vlaka*,” I say. *Vlaka* technically means “stupid little person,” but we both say it to each other in an innocent, harmless way. But this time, as I say it, I'm thinking, *What the hell happened to us?* I squeeze the back of his neck even though I know he hates it. What am I to do? He has no hair to run my fingers through! Max turns and kisses me gently on the forehead after rolling his eyes at my neck squeeze and sniffs my skin. He often tells me that he loves my moisturizer. I can feel tenderness through his breath. It's been a long time. But I can't bring myself to cherish it. “Where's Tessa?” I quickly ask, rising to the surface of my thoughts.

“In her room, I think.”

“Before you go to your desk, can you get her dressed for crèche while I make your coffee and get prepared to leave?”

“Um, I . . .” I shoot him a little remember-what-we-just-talked-about look, chanting *your back my back your back my back, please don't hesitate, please help me out without complaining* in my head.

“Yep, okay. What clothes is she wearing?”

Phew. “They’re on the dresser. You’ll see ’em,” I almost lose balance on my one shoe.

Max runs down the corridor knocking on all the walls, whisper-calling, “I’m coming for butterfly kisses! You better have them ready . . .” I can hear Tessa giggling as a big bed-plonk reverberates through the apartment. He must have lifted her out of her sea of toys on the rug and thrown her up in the air and . . . yep, that’s tickle-giggling I can hear. I smile as I put two scoops of coffee into the biriki. *We’re gonna be fine. We have to be fine.*

When he walks back into the kitchen, he has a dressed Tessa on his shoulders, and her head misses the door frame by a centimeter as he walks through. I semiconsciously swallow the potentially relationship-destroying information back into my stomach. I’ve been hiding the news for too long and guilt is rearing its ugly head. But, I’m only human, right? People make mistakes. Lately I’ve been feeling like I’m stepping on eggshells around him, so it’s only logical that I would be hesitant to speak up, right? And imagine if I brought up my need to get a gig again. Double whammy.

“So, you gonna tell me what the dress is for, my sugar pie honey bunch?” Max begins to sing and twirl me around to the tune. “Sugar pie honey bunch . . . You know that I love you!” And Tessa calls out as the backup vocalist: “Love you!” right on the beat, still on Max’s shoulders, holding onto his head as tightly as possible, and almost poking out one of his eyes. Max continues, “I can’t help myself . . . I love you and nobody else!” and Tessa again, “Da da, dada!”

“Uh, yeah, let me put my other shoe on and I’ll explain.” As I limp back down the corridor to get my shoe, I wonder how I can possibly bring up the idea of relocating

in a way that makes it sound appealing. I put on my shoe and go back to the kitchen to pour Max his coffee, buying myself a couple more seconds to ponder my fear.

“We going, Mummy?” Tessa is standing in the doorway with her Hello Kitty bag. Max must have gotten that ready for her too. Now I feel even guiltier. He’s making such a big effort.

“Soon, pumpkin. Go and play with Doggy on the balcony and I’ll come and get you.”

Out runs a jingling Tessa (she has bells on the back of her runners), and I take Max his coffee and kiss him on the cheek with a 1950s-happy-couple phoniness you only see in the movies. I’m trying way too hard to hide the disappointment in myself. He must realize I’m hesitant to talk about the reason for my dress and high heels.

“Thanks for the coffee, babe,” he says, staring at the computer screen.

Should I just say it? Before I’ve even decided how to go about it, the information takes the liberty to come out of hiding on its own, and before I know it I’m blurting everything out so fast that I feel my tongue is going to suffer from muscle pain afterward.

“I’m wearing these clothes because I’ve got a very important presentation today—a presentation about a new course. You know how I came up with the concept myself and have been working on it for the last year to produce the books? Well, the books have finally been printed and the first sample copies came in last week. So now I have to present the course and my bright ideas about how beneficial it will be for kids nowadays—which now I’m not quite sure of; they’re not as bright as I thought—to the Greek Board of Education to try to get the course accepted into next year’s curriculum. If it gets accepted into next year’s curriculum, I’ll know by next week and I’ll have

made the company a whole lot of money that I'll never see. But I could see some of it, possibly, because if it does get accepted into next year's curriculum, they'll want to make me chief editor of a collaborating publishing house—"

"Jane, that's fucking fantastic! Why were you so nervous to tell me about it?"

I knew it. Max can smell fear a million miles away.

"The publishing house is . . . baby, I'm sorry, but it's . . . it's in London." My left hand is rubbing over my left brow as though I'm nursing a headache. Max looks at me blankly. The expression of nothingness on his face exposes an intensity that is indescribable, as though it has vacuumed the vocabulary right out of my mouth. I can't even be sure if he understood everything I said. Not only was I speaking too fast, but there may have been some words I used that he doesn't know.

We both stare at each other. A million different ways to explain how sorry I am for withholding this information accumulate themselves on the tip of my tongue waiting anxiously for me to open my mouth. If I could bring such a metaphor to life, the instant I open my mouth would sound like a classroom full of children begging to go to the toilet at once. I feel my face cringe as though I'm about to be slapped.

"London? Jane, I've just turned down a job at New York for you." Max is surprisingly calm, and I have to bite my tongue to not correct his prepositional error.

"You said you were happy here. My god, Jane! And you've known about this possibility for a year? And you're telling me now?"

"Well, I could have told you back then—"

"Yes. Why didn't you?" he asks, his voice a little tight. "We're responsible adults. We can both decide what's best for our family, don't you think? And since when are you so gung-ho about your job? I thought you didn't like it."

“I don’t. I mean, not really. But I’m a mother. I have a kid to think about. What? Gung-ho? Where did you learn that word? *I* never use it.” Max glares at me. “Look, baby, I haven’t even accepted it. We don’t even know if everything will go well today. Should we just discuss the possibility when and if the opportunity actually arises?”

“No, Jane. We can’t. Forget it—we’re not going anywhere.” Max sounds a little less calm now.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Just hope that your presentation *doesn’t* go well so that you don’t have to turn anything down!” Max doesn’t sound calm at all, as a matter of fact.

“Max . . .”

“What? Max, *what?* Go. I have work to do.”

I stand there just staring at him, hoping to make him feel guilty for his explosion, even though he probably has every right to explode.

“Fuck off, Jane.”

That wasn’t a yell. That was almost a whisper. That was disappointment.

Christ.