

HONEYED WORDS DARK INTENTIONS

The Everett-Bryce Spring Ball was always an extravagant affair, with Sofia - Seb's mother - always choosing a theme that befit the pop-culture of the day. This year was no different, and as Sebastian stepped into the ballroom, he could have sworn he'd been transported to a large open garden. This year's theme had come from a series of social media posts that his mother had seen around "The Spring Court" from the highly popular literary series A Court of Thorns and Roses.

She had not read the books.

The room had been decorated with large flowing white material covering the usual ornate ceiling, giving the impression of an outdoor event within a marquee. The effect had been doubled by two large spotlights, shining like dual suns through the hanging material illuminating the entire room. Large trees in huge pots were set equidistantly throughout the room, and the tables and place settings had been given decadent floral arrangement. Vines and creeping plants had been wrapped around pillars and around the chairs to make them look like they'd been swallowed by nature.

Seb paused and cleared his throat, his hands slipping into his pockets.

"Jesus christ..." he said quietly.

He had to admit, his mother had done a fantastic job in recreating Spring inside. But it was a far cry from the usual darkened aesthetic that usually adorned this ballroom for her long party evenings. It was light and airy, with a breeze running through the room. As pretty as it all was, it felt a little... Much.

"Little bright in here don't you think?" Asked Grant, stepping up to Seb's side.

"Isn't it just," Seb said. "Could use a touch of darkness to hide all the wicked deeds planned for this evening."

"Yours or there's?" Grant asked, nodding at the gathered mass of Middle to Upper Class toffery.

"Yes," Seb said, casting a wink in Grant's direction. The CEO of Everett-Bryce Holdings shook his head and allowed himself the merest of chuckles before slapping Seb on the back. He followed Seb towards the small gathering of women standing near the champagne fountain. Kinsey, Anabel and, much to Seb's chagrin, his ex and Grant's current fiancé, Natasha.

"Evening ladies - don't you all look spectacular," Seb said. Anabel smiled, Natasha seemed confused at Seb's attempt at a nicety. Kinsey sipped her champagne with a look of cool indifference - one that failed to mask the slight reddening of her cheeks. Seb leaned down towards her. "Especially you."

"Thank you," said Kinsey, regaining her composure and glancing at Grant. "My, my Grantham - don't you look handsome."

"Yes. He does," said Natasha in clipped tones.

"Play nice, Tash," said Seb. She swelled slightly, but Grant placed a hand in the middle of her back and she returned to her usual look of haughty disinterest. Seb watched him move calming strokes up and down her spine.

"Anyone interesting here tonight?" asked Natasha.

"I think we may have an actual Royal," said Seb. "Though it's one of the disavowed branch. He turns up to any event where powdered noses are a likelihood."

Kinsey let out a tiny laugh before clearing her throat and passing it off as amusement. Seb smirked, and she did her best to avoid eye-contact.

"Sebastian, there's a few scheduling conflicts I need to talk to you about before you get too deep into the Champagne - it would be good if I can get your thoughts too, Grant." said Anabel.

"Not tonight, Ana - this is a party," said Seb reaching for a glass.

"The sooner it's done, the easier I can fix it tomorrow," said Anabel.

"Can't we just have one night off?" Grant asked.

"Oh will you both just let the lady do her job," said Kinsey. "She fixes this then she can relax too - you make her hold onto it, she's going to worry all night until you sort it out."

"Alright, alright," said Seb, he glanced down at Kinsey and lowered his voice. "But it'll cost you a dance later..."

"Ugh," said Kinsey. She glanced at Anabel and then up at Seb and rolled her eyes. "Fine."

"Looking forward to it," said Seb calmly.

"Come on, Tasha - lets get something stronger and you can tell me all the horrible things you know about him," said Kinsey, scowling at Seb.

"My pleasure!" said Tasha with a wide excited smile. Kinsey took Tasha by the arm and led her off to a bar on the far side of the room.

"Should I be nervous about this?" asked Seb.

"Depends," said Grant. "Do you want Kinsey to still like you after tonight?"

Seb let out a mournful groan.

"If you could perhaps focus on the matter at hand?" said Anabel. She turned and walked to one of the few truly private areas of the room behind a larger grouping of trees, designed to hide a statue of some historical figure that probably encouraged slavery.

Seb hated this fucking house.

"Well, that worked," said Grant.

"Kinsey is mad at me - and one thing I know about Kins is that if she's mad at me, she'll do whatever she can to disagree with me," said Seb.

"And if you'd suggested she and Tasha couldn't listen to us, Tash would have been texting me already asking what we were talking about," said Grant.

"If you're finished stereotyping the women in your lives as nosy busybodies, we need to talk about the plan," said Anabel. She was nervous - Seb could tell.

"Perfect - my plan is that we call this off," said Seb.

"Seconded," said Grant. Anabel looked mutinous and Grant quailed. "Or... Whatever you want to do, Ana."

"We've been over this a dozen times - we need your father to brag. And everything important I ever found out from him I found out in a window of three hours before he thought I was going to take off my bra," said Anabel. She flinched - and he knew that despite his bravado she felt shame.

"I know that," said Seb calmly. "And I know originally, it was my idea. But I assumed it would be drinks at the polo club, not you having to seduce him in the place he knows better than anyone. I just don't like it..."

"Are you going to leave?" she asked.

"No." said Seb.

"Are you going to watch for me?" she asked.

"Yes." said Seb.

"And if I tap my bracelet?" she asked.

"I'll get a tap on my wrist." Seb added. It was cheap technology - simple. They'd considered all kinds of options down to trying to procure listening devices. But in the end, they knew that security at the party would be high. The best they could hope for was for Anabel to record the conversation on her phone.

Seb had considered hiring Cypher for another job, but the one he was paying him for later down the line was to make a point. He didn't want to turn someone who could still be a friend into an employee - he still held down hope that once everything had been resolved with

Thad, they could bury their own issues. Get back to how things had been before...

Before...

"Then we're set, yes?" asked Anabel. "I'll wait for the right moment - when your father is alone and I approach."

"And you're clear on what you plan on saying?" asked Grant.

"One hundred percent," she said, with a smile that never quite reached her eyes. "You're clear on what you need to do?"

"Defence - head off anyone who is trying to interrupt your conversation. Wait for your signal and distract Sofia," said Grant.

"And I'll be watching, the moment you need me Ana..." Seb said.

"I know," she said with a smile. She reached out and squeezed his arm. "I know."

"It'll be over before we know it," said Seb.

"That was usually the experience with your dad," said Anabel with a dangerous smile.

"Like father, like son..." said Grant.

"Prick," said Seb, shaking his head. And the three actually laughed together as they returned to the party.



Anabel

Anabel took several deep steadying breaths as she saw her opening - some Lord or Baron had just taken his leave, and for the first time Sebastian Everett-Bryce II was alone. His security stood by, and he held up a hand to signal a break. He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow, before calling to the bar for another scotch. Anabel settled herself, and stepped out from behind one of the trees, raised her chin and began to saunter in his direction.

Security cast her a look and stepped into her way, but when they checked with Sebastian's father, he shook his head.

The way was clear.

"Don't you look fantastic?" Seb II said, a glint in his eye. "It's been too long, Anabel."

"Not long enough, Sebastian," she said, coolly. He smiled - after the time they'd spent together, she knew what he liked. "Just wanted to see how you're doing - letting someone like me go can't have been easy."

"It wasn't," he said, glancing up to see if he could spot his fucking wife. When he couldn't see her, he reached out and brushed a curl of Anabel's hair to one side. "But now you work for my son..."

"I do," said Anabel. "He's been very, very good to me..."

She smiled - saw the fleeting look of anger across his still handsome face.

"I see," said Seb II. "I'll admit I didn't expect the two of you to..."

"Get along so well? I'm sure - but he's kind, considerate, generous in so many ways..." Anabel let that linger, and when her tongue moved across her lips, Seb's father seemed to swell. She fixed her face into one of puzzlement. "What's wrong?"


"You and my son - you don't see anything wrong with that?" he asked.

"He's my employer - and a fantastic one at that," she said, and then allowed a look of dawning realisation to flash across her face. "Oh, wait, you think that he and I..."

She allowed herself a little giggle.

"No, no... This isn't a like-father-like-son situation, Sebastian - we are professional at all times," she paused and stepped closer to him, and placed a hand upon his wrist. "Was that jealousy that I saw on that handsome face?"

Seb II grunted, and when his hand reached out again and gripped her arm, she knew her magic had worked.



Sebastian

Sebastian, third of his name, stuck to the edges of the room, his eyes only leaving the newly connected pairing when he was navigating his way around trees and chairs. Grant was doing his job well - distracting anyone who may sway his father's interest and guiding them in different directions, whilst Seb himself was busy trying not to attract attention - he didn't want to let Anabel out of his sight.

Not even for a second.

Though he did wonder where Kinsey had gotten to - what dark words Natasha was whispering in her ear to further increase the widening gap between them. Anabel and his father were close, but still in the room - it would do no harm to scan to see where Kinsey may be. He paused by a particularly beautiful looking silver birch. He glanced around, his eyes falling upon the woman he'd been looking for - but she wasn't with Tasha anymore. Instead, she was talking to Sofia - his mother.

"I couldn't do it, you know," said a voice from over Seb's right shoulder. He jumped and turned, finding Natasha stood holding a cocktail stick devoid of an olive and a Martini glass.

"Jesus christ, Tash - you could sneak up on James Bond," he said, his eyes darting back to Kinsey, then Anabel, and then back to Tasha again. "Couldn't do what?"

"I know what you thought when Kinsey and I walked away from the three of you. That I was going to drip poison in her ear. About all the ways you treated me badly," she said, her eyes focusing on the man playing traffic cop near the bar. "But the truth is - I didn't have anything bad to say."

"That's great, Tash, I..." Seb paused, his brow furrowed and he turned to face the woman who had once tried to blackmail him into marrying her. "Wait, what?"

There was something different about her. He hadn't noticed, not until this moment. Perhaps he'd never bothered to look, but there really was something different about the way she looked. Less defensive, less judgemental. Less ambitious. Seb followed her gaze towards Grant who seemed to have a moment's respite from intercepting unwanted guests as he winked in her direction.

Seb could have sworn she blushed.

"The truth is, we were just really bad for one another. I don't think I knew that until Grant and I..." this time she definitely did blush. Natasha Wilmslow, the most indiscreet woman in all of London... Blushing about a boy. "I'm sorry, Seb - that we wasted so much of each other's time, that we tore holes in each other. I'm sorry that I made you feel like all I was interested in was your name."

Seb lowered his head - Grant had told her.

"I'm sorry too - for all the times I called you when I was feeling down. For all the times I let us fall back into our old routine and then ran away to leave you picking up the pieces when I started to feel better," he said. "I was wrong... I know that."

"I hope maybe, one day, I'll get to apologise for what I did to you in Chicago. The blackmail... To say sorry to..." Tasha began, but Seb held up a hand.

"I don't think you need to worry about that apology," he said with a smile. "I doubt there's a second thought given to those events these days - new lives, new worlds and all that."

"I heard," said Tasha. And in the most unexpected of moments, she reached out and squeezed Seb's arm. "I'm sorry about that too."

"Water under the bridge," Seb said, with a smile. "But thank you, Tash. Seriously."

"I hope we can find a way to be friends - I know you and Grant have healed some old wounds so... Maybe... You and I can find a way to do the same," she said, with a genuine look of hope in her eyes.

"I think we can find a way," Seb said with a smile. He placed his hand on top of hers and squeezed it. He saw her glance up towards Grant, and he raised his glass again. "You two really do love each other, don't you?"

"He plays it down in front of people, but when we're alone, there's pet names and everything," said Tasha. Seb let out a chuckle. She set herself with a look of determination. "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to go and call him my little Pooh Bear in front of that important looking man."

"Make him sweat Tash," said Seb.

"Always," she said, before she stood on her tiptoes and placed a kiss on Seb's cheek. As she walked away, he blinked rapidly.

"Well fuck me..." he said to himself. Of all the things he'd expected of tonight, that had not been one of them, and then panic set in, as he turned to see that his father and Anabel were no longer where they had been before.



Anabel

"So let me see if I understand this correctly - you left my wife's employment after she found out about..." Seb II paused and gestured with his hand to the space between them. "And almost immediately found yourself in the office of my son."

"Thank's to Grant - he's very loyal," said Anabel.

"Yes. But to who?" asked Sebastian.

"The same person I am - to you," she said calmly. "Grant has gained Seb's trust, and through his quick and deft thinking, he gave me the chance to spin my tale. You know Seb - he's a sucker for a sob story and a redemption arc."

Sebastian chuckled. The conversation had turned - she'd caught his eye but now she'd needed to capture his mind. She'd been drawn into admitting that perhaps, she'd just been trying to make her former lover jealous. That, deep down, she missed him. Missed their closeness - and that working for Seb was not as... Fulfilling as she'd once hoped. And so, she'd decided to make the difficult decision to extend an olive branch.

"And you're here to what? Supply me with information about what my son is doing?" he asked, one leg crossed over the other, his chin resting upon his hand. "And what do you expect in exchange?"

"When you return to the head of the company, I want to be your assistant," she said coolly. "I want things back to the way they were between us."

"And what, prey-tell, makes you believe I have any intention of returning to the head of the company?" he asked. Anabel felt a chill against her skin that had nothing to do with the breeze. "I'm enjoying my new-found retirement, and Sebastian is doing a sterling job tidying up our image - all I'm interested in is healing the rift between us and then getting back to the business at hand."

"Pull the other one, Sebastian - it has bells on," said Anabel, leaning forward much to the notice of her would-be suitor. "I know you had plans to install someone to run this company on your behalf, and I know that you've been having Grant play the double agent with Seb. But I know more - I can feed you more. Unless you're going to continue playing this little game, in which case..."

Anabel climbed to her feet, and Sebastian followed, but he gripped her wrist and stopped her from leaving.

"If you wish to discuss this further, might I suggest we take it somewhere a little more... Private?" he said.

"Lead on," said Anabel. And as Seb II turned his back, she turned and glanced to where his son had been standing. But Sebastian was now looking the other way, talking to Natasha.

Her breath caught.

"Fuck," she said, almost silently. And she tapped her wrist, in the hope that Sebastian would turn around.



Sebastian

"Fucking hell," Seb said as he broke into a stride, the bracelet on his wrist suddenly bursting into life. Or had it been tapping for a while and he'd just not noticed? Either way, Anabel had been trying to get her attention while he'd been talking to... Tasha.

He glanced towards the bar where she and Grant were engaging in conversation, and he could have sworn the two of them appeared smug. Were they playing him? Had she been sent to sweet-talk him so he'd take his eye off Anabel and his dad. He was questioning everything at a thousand miles per hour as he walked across the room - had she blocked the signal somehow? Or just distracted him so thoroughly that he hadn't noticed the tapping?

It didn't matter, he just had to find her and he wouldn't stop until... He stopped with a thud as he walked into someone stood in his way.

Kinsey.

"Going somewhere?" she asked.

"I just need to find someone - there's a thing, I need to..." he stuttered, but he didn't know what else to say.

"I was hoping at some point you would come and find me," she said. "But you've avoided me all night."

"I haven't been avoiding you, I'm just dealing with a situation..." said Seb, doing his best to turn her so he could slip past between the strewn chairs.

"You don't think we need to talk?" she asked. Seb paused now, looking down at her with a furrowed brow.

"I've been trying to talk to you, for the last two weeks," he said, with not just a hint of exasperation in his voice. "You haven't returned my calls, my texts, refused to answer the door..."

"I was hurt!" she said, in that way that people have of quietly shouting. "I was hurt and I was embarrassed, Seb! I flew halfway around the world and you rejected me."

"I didn't... That's not what... Can we just put a pin in this for half an hour, I'll come and find you and we can sort this out," said Seb.

"Forget it - I'm going home," she said, and she turned from him. As she did, Seb reached out and gripped her hand.

"Anabel..." he said. And his heart rose to his throat. Kinsey paused and turned slowly to face him.

"Did you just call me... Anabel?" Kinsey asked.

"I'm looking for Anabel - that's who I'm trying to find," said Seb.

"Unbe-fucking-leivable!" Kinsey said, wrenching her fingers from his hand. "I'm trying so hard here, Sebastian, and you're running around trying to fuck your assistant?!"

"What!? No!" said Seb. He was following her now - ignoring the snide looks and disapproving nods. But most of all, he was walking away from where he needed to be, but he couldn't let her leave. Not like this. "Look, she's in trouble... She's... With my dad."

"And?" said Kinsey, stopping and turning - her arms folded across her chest. The look she gave him pushed memories into the front of his mind that he had to push away really quickly.

"And, I don't trust him, Kins. He's a fucking scumbag and they used to be... You know..." said Seb.

"She's an adult, Sebastian - you can't run around playing superhero all the time. She made a choice, and it's not on you to..." Kinsey said, but Seb cut her off.

"The choice she made isn't the one you think it is," Seb said. "She's... Just..."

"Just what?" asked Kinsey. And then she finally saw it, the look of panic in his eyes, the look of concern. She stepped forward and took his hand. "What is it?"

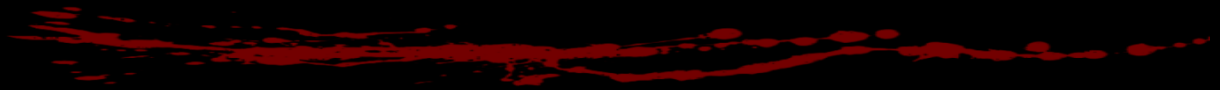
Seb chewed the words before he said them.

"She's supposed to be finding out what my father is up to. She wanted to use their history to get close and see if he would try to impress her if he thought she would..." he paused, but Kinsey knew what he was trying to say. "But she's been letting me know she needs my help so I have to..."

Kinsey reached out and placed a hand on his cheek.

"Go," she said, almost silently.

Seb turned on his heels, and prayed he'd not wasted too much time.



Anabel

The moment the door to Sebastian's office closed, Anabel found herself pressed between the door and a body. He wasn't forceful, but he was keen - thankfully, he hadn't expected resistance, and so when she slipped out of his way, he turned to face her with a look of joy on his face. She'd forgotten how much he enjoyed the chase.

"I thought you wanted us to be alone so that we could discuss your plans," said Anabel, doing her best to maintain her composure as she tapped at her wrist again.

"What plans?" asked Sebastian, a flame in his eyes from the thrill of the game. "I told you, I'm enjoying my retirement."

She made a point of not staying still - a moving target was always harder to pin down. Thankfully, Sebastian's office was filled with furniture - and always an opportunity to keep a couch or a desk between the two of them.

"Then there's no reason for me to be here," she said quietly. "I miss you, Sebastian, but if you're telling me that my career prospects are better suited at your son's side, then I can keep my urges at bay."

"Is that right?" asked Sebastian calmly. "And how do I know I can trust you?"

"That's a risk you'll have to take," said Anabel, matching his flame with her own. She fixed herself with that self-confidence that had navigated her through many a job that she hadn't been qualified for. "Because the way I see it - the information I have for you is much more valuable than anything you have to offer me right now."

"How so?" asked Sebastian.

"Because I have no interest in retirees who have no plan on reclaiming what was stolen from them," she said. It was a risk to needle him, but she needed to wound his pride. And from the way his jaw twitched, she considered that perhaps she'd hit her target.

"It will be reclaimed," said Sebastian.

"Not if your son has anything to say about it," said Anabel. "He plans to keep you neutered."

Another stab. Another blow landed.

"My son isn't as clever as he thinks he is," said Sebastian. "Those contracts he had me sign were full of holes - and all I need is the right leverage on two thirds of the board and they'll vote me back in without a second thought. By the time we reach the summer, I'll have everything I need to reverse the decision and I'll be back where I belong."

"You're digging up information on the board - isn't that dangerous? Surely if you're finding things, others could too? Competitors..." said Anabel.

"Which is why once they've voted me back into power, I'll use whatever leverage I've found to force them to resign. I'll ensure they're fairly compensated, and then I'll ensure their replacements are loyal to their master. Not the fickle, weak-chinned morons that surround that board-room table today." said Sebastian.

"That's... Genius," Anabel said, trying to hide her concern behind a smirk. "Well then, I suppose that makes it easier to decide who I should stand behind."

"Or beside," said Sebastian. "I'll be needing to fill a lot of high profile positions, Anabel. I think you've more than proven you're capable enough to claim a seat at the table."

Her heart caught in her throat - was he offering her a position his board?

"Besides, it will look a lot better for the two of us once I've divorced my wife if my next relationship is with a peer, rather than an employee." he added, slowly walking towards her. Fuck, was he

suggesting that he wanted... Not just an affair... He was actually suggesting that they could be...

She hadn't moved - she hadn't moved and now he was by her side, his fingers running over her wrist. She felt her pulse quicken, and there was a moment in which she couldn't be sure whether she felt excitement or fear. But it didn't matter.

Because when the door burst open, the lock breaking, the shocked, angry look in Sebastian's eye faded the moment he locked eyes with his son.

Who's rage threatened to tear the world apart.



Sebastian

"Step aside," Seb said, no base in his voice, but warning.

"Don't do anything foolish, Sebastian." said his father. "Don't do anything you might regret."

"If I do what I'm thinking about doing, **father**, it won't be I who has regrets." said Seb.

"Seb..." said Anabel.

"It's alright Anabel. Come here," Seb said. She glanced at him, and then back at his father, before she stepped around the table and walked his way. Seb held out his hand and Anabel took it, squeezing it in silent thanks.

"She's a grown woman, Sebastian..." said his father.

"And you're a married man," Seb said, trying his best to remain calm. "Married to my mother, who right now is out there entertaining your guests while you're in here..."

He dared not speak the dark thoughts that had gone through his mind in the moment he shouldered the door. Dared not put that evil out

into the world and allow this shadow of a man to confirm his intent. But his father looked almost worried.

His security reached the door - how Seb had made it here before them was something he knew his father would want much longer to understand. But rather than calling them to his aid, Seb's father held up a hand. Seb stepped forward, still holding onto Anabel.

"If you so much as look at her again, I'll rip out your tongue, do you understand me?" Seb said. And he knew the calmness with which he spoke was the thing that truly shook his father. "I'm done with you preying on the people who matter to me."


"Understood," said his father. Seb blinked, and for a moment he almost stepped back. His father acknowledged something in that moment - acknowledged that his warning was every bit as dire as whatever he himself could revenge upon Seb and his friends.

His father was... Afraid.

Without another word, Seb turned and found Anabel looking not at him, but at his father. He gave her hand a small tug, and she seemed to shake something clear within her mind. She followed him as he left the office, stalking past the security that pushed into the room once they'd vacated it.

"Good work Ana," Seb said once they were out of earshot. "You almost had me believing your story..."

"Mmmmm..." said Anabel as she followed Seb, but he couldn't help notice the glance that she cast back to that open door, and the man that watched them both stalk away.



Seb had never been much of a beer drinker, but on this occasion he was making an exception. He took a sip from the bottle in his hand. Kinsey had far from forgiven him, but she'd thawed after seeing him race after Anabel. She'd told them both off, but then hugged them tight in relief that Anabel had remained unharmed. Now, she was busying herself talking to Tasha about plans for her wedding to Grant, while Anabel sat on a lawn chair with Seb's jacket around her shoulders.

"He said he'd be back in charge by the summer," said Anabel, hugging herself. She lifted a beer of her own to her lips, as Grant sat on the edge of the lounge.

"Fuck..." he said. "That quickly?"

"Doesn't matter," said Seb smiling. "We have what we need to convince the board of what he's planning - I knew he'd want to blackmail them, but force them to resign as well? Christ - he may as well have just handed me the game."

"Doesn't it feel a little easy?" Grant asked.

"Are you doubting my powers of seduction, Grantham?" asked Anabel. Grant chuckled.

"Of course not, but... I don't know..." Grant sipped his beer now. "I can't help but worry this is all falling into place too easily."

"My luck had to turn around sometime," said Seb, with a smile that never reached his eyes. "Kind of tired of the Universe's plans fucking with mine."

"You still need to be careful," said Grant. "If anyone you approach is still loyal to him, and they feed him the wrong thing..."

"I know - he'll shut it down, before he sees it coming," said Seb. "Which is why we have to be quick... We need to have this locked down within the next month."

"Agreed," said Anabel. "What happened tonight will have spooked him - he won't know for sure whether or not I was being genuine. I'll need to do something about that..."

"Keep your distance," said Seb. "Nothing in person, not after tonight."

"I can travel with you to America - use the distance as an excuse," said Anabel.

"And I can keep things running on this side of the Atlantic," said Grant. "I can make sure the board are informed of everything you told them."

"Okay," said Seb. "And when the time is right, I reveal everything. George and all - and that's when everything changes."

"If this works, Seb," Grant said, before sucking air over his teeth. "No-one has ever pulled something like this, not on your father or anyone like him."

"If it works," said Seb with a wink. "If it doesn't I suspect I could end up at the bottom of the Thames."

"Jesus!" said Anabel. "Don't joke about things like that..."

"Who said I'm joking?" Seb asked, and without waiting for another response he walked towards Kinsey and Tasha as Grant and Anabel shared a knowing look.

THE END