

# Coincidences

Zoe Storm

(Based on a prompt by Juniper Rose)

[Content warnings: internalised transphobia.]

“Well?” I ask, stepping out of the changing room. “How do I look?”

“Stunning,” Tammy replies. “You’re absolutely beautiful, Nee.”

“Isn’t she?” the dressmaker says, stepping back to admire her work. “The dress fits perfectly.”

Tammy shakes her head. “It’s not just the dress,” she says. “It’s her. *She* is beautiful. Always has been.”

“Thank you, Tam,” I say, feeling my cheeks heat up a bit. *Always the flatterer*, I think.

“You’re welcome,” Tammy says; then, after a moment, she adds, “Listen, Courtney, are you sure you want to go through with it?”

I sigh. “Oh, Tam, come on, not this again.”

“Yes, this again. I’m sorry, but I have to ask.”

“Over and over again?”

“Over and over again, yes.”

The dressmaker gives us both a glance. “Do you girls need some space to discuss some things?” she asks.

I look back at her, then shake my head. “No, thank you. And thank you for the dress. It will be ready for the wedding next week, won’t it?”

“Of course. It could be ready by tomorrow, it just needs a few minor alterations.”

“Right. Okay. Well, I’m going to go change out of it,” I say.

“Our conversation’s not done, you know,” Tammy says. “Because—”

“Tam,” I cut her off, placing a hand on her arm. “Can we not do this right here, right now? Can we wait until later, while we’re having brunch?”

Tamara looks at me for a few moments, then nods. “But we *will* talk about it.”

“Yeah, of course,” I reply. “I’ll go change.”

I retreat back into the changing room along with the dressmaker, and we start undoing the zippers and buttons on the dress. After a moment, the woman speaks up. “Everything okay?”

“Yes, everything’s fine,” I say.

The woman nods. "Alright. Just checking." She pauses. "But your friend is right. Getting married is a big step. You have to be absolutely sure you want to go through with it, or you'll regret it down the line."

"I am sure. And besides, I can't let all this work go to waste, can I?" I step out of the dress and gesture at it.

"I can sell this to someone else. It's a custom piece, yes, but I can absolutely adjust it to fit anyone and everyone."

I look at her for a moment, pausing in the process of buttoning up my blouse, then shake my head. "Thank you for your concern, but I'll be fine."

The dressmaker nods and leaves the changing room without another word, carrying the dress away; I finish getting dressed, then step out and smile at Tamara. "Shall we?"

Tammy nods. Together we leave the dress shop and walk in silence the couple blocks to our favourite café, where we sit at our favourite table. The waiter comes right over and takes our brunch order.

"Okay. So can we talk now?" Tammy asks.

I roll my eyes and sigh. "Yeah, let's talk."

"Come *on*, Nee, you *know* this isn't right," Tamara says, exasperation in her voice. "Why are you going along with it?"

"You know why I'm going along with it, Tam," I reply. "If I don't do this, instead of Rosemond merging with Koffler, Koffler will buy Rosemond outright, break it to pieces, and sell it for parts. And that will mean many people, possibly the entire staff of the company, will get laid off. I can't let them do this to them."

Tammy shakes her head; she reaches across the café table, grabs my hand, and gives it a squeeze. "But it's not *right*. You shouldn't have to sacrifice yourself for someone else."

*Not for someone else*, I think. *For you*. Tammy works at Rosemond, too, and while the rest of the employees probably won't have too much trouble finding new jobs, for Tammy, considering who she is...

I shake my head in turn. "We were lucky that my dad and the CEO of Koffler went to Harvard together, so Dad had an in on him, and managed to convince him to agree to... this. I won't throw that away."

"Yes, but, forcing you to marry the CEO's son?" Tamara insists.

"I'm not being forced. These were the CEO's terms, I could've rejected them."

"And we're right back at the merger versus buyout part. This is *blackmail*."

I sigh. "It is what it is."

"You don't even *like* the guy. He's absolutely not your type." A pause. "What *is* your type anyway? I realised I never asked."

*You're my type*, I think; but I can't say it out loud – Tammy doesn't think of me like that anyway. "It is what it is," I repeat, shrugging. "And Jacob Hogan is pretty decent as men go."

"Yeah, but he's still a man. And you're a lesbian. You don't like men, Courtney."

"I don't," I reply. "But it is—"

Tammy raises a hand. "Do not finish that sentence."

"Sorry."

She shakes her head again. "If Hogan is so *decent*," she says, spitting the word out, "why is *he* going along with this? I mean, you don't love each other. You barely even *know* each other."

"Maybe..." I begin, then bite my lip. "Maybe he's hoping I will come to like him in time?"

"Fat chance of that happening. And meanwhile, you'll have to perform your wifely duties for him. You'll have to lie back and think of England."

"Tammy..."

"Yeah, yeah. It is what it is."

I frown. "This isn't funny, Tammy. This isn't a joke. Do you think this is what I want? Do you think this is what I'd have chosen? Remember how it goes? Sometimes it's possible to make no mistake, and still lose. That's not a weakness. That..."

I let the sentence hang in the air, and Tammy smiles. "That is life," she concludes. "Quoting Picard at me is unfair, Nee."

"I know," I say; I give her hand a squeeze. "I know."

"Do you think we'll still be able to have *Star Trek* nights when you're married to that guy?"

"Of course. Only instead of having them in the living room, we'll have to have them in my room. Like we did in your room when we were kids."

Her smile turns rueful. "Before my parents threw me out, you mean?"

"...Yeah."

"Still can't thank you enough for convincing your parents to take me in. How did you even do that? I realised I never asked."

"It didn't take that much convincing, they always had a strong sense of justice. Dad especially. That's why he's not forcing me to do this, he's leaving this up to me."

Tammy silently nods. We're quiet for a couple moments, then she speaks up again. "I understand why you won't call the wedding off, but are you sure you can't convince Hogan to call it off himself? Or at least convince him to be... respectful? You said he seems decent, so I'm sure that if you go to him and say, 'Yeah, I'm a lesbian, actually,' he'll understand."

"Yeah, maybe. Maybe not."

“Try it, at least?” she says, her voice pleading. “Please? For me.”  
I look into her eyes, and I find that I just can’t resist her. “Yeah. I’ll try.”  
She squeezes my hand again. “Thank you, Nee.”

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I look up at the skyscraper looming above me, a monstrosity of menacing steel and glass, and frown. Only the richest people in the country can afford to live here, and I don’t even want to know how much money an apartment in this place costs, let alone an attic like Jacob’s: his condo is spread along three full floors, and features several bedrooms (of which only two are in use, his and his personal assistant’s), a handful of bathrooms, two living rooms, two *sitting* rooms, three dining rooms, and a fully-featured, restaurant-grade kitchen. It’s opulent, and ostentatious; it’s princely and showy.

It’s pretentious and disgusting.

I shake my head and step into the building, walking up to the reception desk. The attendant smiles up at me, and her eyes light up in recognition: I’ve visited this place enough times that she recognises me right away. “Oh, good afternoon, Miss Darnell! How are you doing?” she says.

“I’m doing good,” I reply. “And you?”

“Can’t complain. Are you here to see Mr. Hogan?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“Great, I’ll buzz his suite and tell them you’re coming up. You know where the express elevator is.”

“Yes,” I repeat. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, have a great night.”

I wave goodbye to her, then walk the length of the lobby to the elevators, and take the express one, which she’s unlocked from her desk. It takes less than a minute to reach the top floor; I step out and walk to the condo’s door, which opens as I approach to reveal Jacob’s assistant.

“Hello, Courtney,” Leonard says, smiling politely at me.

“Hi, Leonard,” I reply. “You look more fit, have you been working out?”

“Aerobics. Don’t want to bulk up too much, you know, I like looking slim.”

Slim is one way to put it: if you look up ‘twink’ in an encyclopedia, you’ll probably find Leonard’s picture there as an example. Still, I nod. “Yeah, I get it.”

“To what do we owe your visit?”

“Oh, nothing much. I just need to talk to Mr. Hogan for a second.”

“Is there something I can help you with, or do you need to talk to him directly?”

I hesitate for a second before answering: while Leonard handles pretty much everything in Jacob’s life, and will certainly pass on my message if I ask him to – I’m Jacob’s

fiancée, after all – this is a delicate situation, and it's better to talk to the man himself, to avoid any possible miscommunication. "Directly."

Leonard nods. "Alright. Come in."

He moves aside and motions me into the condo, closing the door behind me as I step over the threshold. We make our way through a couple doors and into the main living space, and Leonard turns to me again. "Mr. Hogan is on the balcony, getting some fresh air." His lip twitches in amusement for a moment. "As fresh as you can in the middle of the city, in any case. By the way, I was just about to head out; I have some things to do. You can get out on your own once you're done talking, I assume?"

"I do," I nod. "Thank you."

Leonard nods back, and as he makes his way back the way we came I cross the living room, then the *other* living room, climb up two flights of stairs, and reach the sliding glass door to the balcony. I'm about to walk out when I pause: through the door I can see Jacob pacing back and forth, clearly agitated, speaking into his phone; the door is partially open, so I can hear him clearly. Before I can realise what I'm doing I instinctively duck to the side, hiding from his sight, and listen in as he talks.

"...No! I already told you, I can't tonight!" Jacob shouts. "No, I don't care if I'm killing you! I know you're in trouble, and I'm sorry, but I can't bail you out every time. *Like I told you*, I have dinner with my father and the mayor. No, I can't just say I won't go!" A pause. "*Because*, I can only play the irresponsible brat card so many times before people start to get suspicious! These things take time to arrange, I can't just drop everything and come bail you out of trouble. And what if someone follows me, huh? What if someone finds out what I've been doing? What then? Can you even imagine what people would say?" Another pause. "This is not what we agreed on. *Yes*, I would like to do it. Obviously. Yes, I do like doing it! But come on!" Yet another pause. "Okay, listen. *Listen*. Okay. I'll do it *this one time*. But this is the last one! From now on, no emergencies. You're on your own." Yet another pause. "Yeah, yeah. I'll see you tonight."

There is a heavy sigh; I lean over a bit so I can peek through the glass, and see him looking down at his phone, shaking his head. As he does so, he seemingly catches sight of me, or a glimpse at least, because he looks up, directly at the window, and calls out, "Is someone there?"

I lean back so I'm once again fully hidden, and after a moment I hear him sigh again; "Great, I'm imagining things now," he murmurs.

Moving as slow as I dare, taking care not to make any noise, I tip-toe away from the door and through the condo until I reach the front door; I silently open it and close behind myself, and take the elevator down.

Once again the trip is brief, less than a minute; but it's enough time for me to realise there was no need for me to hide, and to mentally kick myself for my behaviour.

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"You just left? Without talking to him?" Tammy exclaims.

"Yeah, I just left like the dumb idiot I am," I reply with a nod.

"So what are you going to do now?"

I frown. "You could've said 'You're neither dumb nor an idiot, Courtney,' you know."

"I could have, couldn't I?" she says with a cheeky grin; then she repeats, "So, what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know." I sigh. "I don't think Leonard will tell Hogan I was there, that guy doesn't like to meddle in other people's business; so I hope I'm in the clear."

"Right," Tammy nods. "Unless Leonard *does* tell Hogan; what then?"

I sigh again. "I don't know," I say again.

"But, you know, this is a good chance, actually."

"A good chance for what?"

"From what you said, Hogan is going somewhere tonight. He's blowing off an important dinner meeting to go somewhere he's not supposed to be; and if someone sees him there, wherever *there* is, it would make people gossip about him, which he doesn't want. Have I got the gist?"

I nod. "Yeah. So what?"

"I was thinking: what if we followed Hogan? To see where he goes. And then we can snap some pictures, and tell him to call off the wedding if he doesn't want us to make them public."

"You want to blackmail him, you mean."

"Yeah," Tammy says; she leans back into her chair and repeats, "Yeah. But they blackmailed *you* first, so turnabout is fair play, right?"

"I... guess so?" I say. "I'm not so sure this is a good idea."

"Why not?"

"What if he doesn't take kindly to being blackmailed? I know I wouldn't."

"Yeah, but he wouldn't be able to do anything about it, because we would have leverage."

I look at her for a few moments, then I shake my head. "There's no way I'm going to be able to talk you out of this, is it?"

"Nope!" she says brightly. "I'm going to do it whether you like it or not. Whether you want me to or not."

"Why? I mean, why are you doing all this for me, Tam?"

“Because I...” she begins; then she stops, pauses for a couple seconds, then continues, “Because you’ve always been there for me. I owe you so much, Nee.”

I smile. “You really don’t, I was glad to do it. Anything for my... best friend,” I finish after a moment.

“...Yeah,” she says, a bit hesitantly. “Same goes for you. You’re my best friend, Courtney, and I want to help you.”

“I better come along for the ride, then. To make sure you don’t get into too much trouble.”

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“I’m telling you, Tam, there’s no way he went in there.”

“Come *on*, Courtney, you saw him. Clear as day, like I did. He got out of the cab and walked in through the front door after waving to the bouncer.”

I frown. “They must’ve swapped him in the car with a body double somehow. I mean... It doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t?”

“Well, to begin with, from how he talked on the phone, it sounded like he was hiding something big. This...” I wave my hand at the front of the building, and continue, “...isn’t *big*.”

Tammy turns her head and looks at the club Jacob Hogan – yes, despite my protestations, I’m pretty sure that actually *was* Jacob Hogan – disappeared into. “Well, I mean” she says, pointing at the sign, which proudly announces LESBOS AND FINLAND in tall neon letters, “if you look at Tom of Finland’s art you will see something big alright.”

“You know what I mean,” I say, piercing her with a glare. “Even if Hogan is gay – and he’s not, because then why would he accept to marry me? – that’s not something that must be kept hidden. It’s not *scandalous*. Plenty of corpo big-wigs are gay nowadays.”

“So you think there’s something more to it?”

“Possibly.”

“Well, only one way to find out.”

Tammy opens the door and steps out of the car; before I can stop her, she’s already halfway to the club’s door. “Wh– Tam! Get back here!” I call, racing behind her.

“What?” she says, turning back towards me.

“We can’t just go in there. What if he sees us?”

She shrugs. “Well, if he sees us, we’ll chalk it up to a coincidence. It’s not weird for us to go into a queer bar anyway.”

I look at her for a moment, then nod. “Yeah, you’re right. Let’s go.”

I pause for a moment to lock the car, then we cross the road together and walk up to the bouncer standing outside the venue; he raises an eyebrow at us. “Evenin’, ladies,” he says. “Bit underdressed, are you?”

Tammy and I exchange a glance: we are in fact in our normal street clothes, which are not something you’d wear to go clubbing. But no matter; I shrug. “Guess so,” I say, turning back towards the bouncer. “It’s not a problem, is it?”

“No, it’s just unusual. But the club’s motto is ‘come as you are,’ so if that’s who you are, who am I to judge?” he replies, shrugging in turn; he leans over and unhooks the velvet rope blocking the entrance, pulling it aside, and motions with his head to the door. “In you go. Have fun.”

“Thanks,” Tammy says, nodding at him; I follow her into the club, where I stop and look around. The venue is packed: it’s filled wall-to-wall with bodies moving to the low electronic music thumping in the background, and lit by blue-violet lights. There’s what looks like a stage running across the length of the room, with a couple tech-looking people standing on top of it, checking various things – it looks like they’re getting ready for a show of some sort.

“How are we even going to see Hogan in this crowd?” Tammy shouts above the noise.

“I don’t think we’ll have a problem,” I reply, also in a shout. “He’s a big guy. Tall, muscled, likes to wear suits. He stands out.”

She looks around. “Well, I don’t see him. Wanna grab a drink while we keep looking?”

She nods her head towards the bar, and I smile. “Yeah, of course,” I say.

Getting to the bar is no small feat, there’s very little space to move around, but we soon manage it, and I lean over it so the bar girl can hear me shouting my order of a gin and tonic; Tammy asks for a Fernandito, and the girl nods. In short order we’re stepping away from the counter holding our drinks. “Cheers,” Tammy says, clinking her glass against mine.

“Cheers,” I reply. “May our hunt be successful.” She smiles at me and I look around as I continue, “But still, it’s weird. You’d think we’d have spotted him by now. What if he’s not here?”

“He *has* to be here. We saw him go in, and there’s only the one door,” Tam says.

“What about the fire exits?”

“Those have an alarm, assuming this building is up to code.”

I nod. “So maybe he’s in the back somewhere? In an office or something?”

“Why would he be in the back?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he has some dealings with the owner of this place?”

Tammy hm-s. “Possibly. But that still wouldn’t explain the secrecy. It’s still not something that might cause a scandal.”

“Yeah.” I take a sip of my drink and continue, “At this point, I have no idea what he might be hiding. Maybe this whole thing is a wild goose chase, and we’re wasting our Friday night.”

“A Friday night spent with you is not wasted,” Tammy replies.

I look at her, cheeks flushed red from the drink – she always was a light-weight – and smiling warmly at me; there’s a glint in her eyes that makes my stomach flutter.

But I push the thought away with a frown and another sip of my drink. *She doesn’t like you that way, Courtney*, I remind myself. *Don’t push what doesn’t need to be pushed.*

Tammy inclines her head to the side and looks at me. “Nee? Is something wrong?”

“No,” I reply. “I’m okay.”

“You sure? Because you look–”

“I’m sure,” I cut her off. “Let’s just...”

I stop talking as the music fades into silence and the lights dim. A brass fanfare resounds throughout the club.

“Ladies and gentlemen and non-binary friends!” a voice booms from the loudspeakers. “This is the moment you’ve all been waiting for! It’s time for the show! Tonight, sadly, one of our regular performers couldn’t make it, but we found a suitable replacement!”

Tammy and I exchange a glance: wait, what?

“So, without further ado, let’s all welcome back the famous, the *infamous*, the legendary, the fantabulous, Madame Natasha Hart!”

A happy, bouncy pop song starts playing, and the stage is suddenly flooded by spotlights as a tall, muscled drag queen steps onto it from backstage, the lights reflecting off the multicoloured sequins of her rainbow dress – which leaves very little to the imagination – and I do a double take.

*It’s Jacob Hogan!?*

“Yo yo yo!” Jacob (Natasha?) exclaims, walking along the stage, clapping his (her? ...their?) hands together, gesturing and shaking his body. “Hello! Nice to see y’all, bitches and bros and non-binary hos! I’m glad to be back, it’s been too long since I did a show! Have y’all missed me?”

“We love you, Natasha!” a voice screams from the crowd.

“And I love you!” he replies, pointing at the place the voice had come from. “I love you all! Except the owner of this dump. *Him* I don’t love, the asshole. Can you believe he called me *this afternoon* and asked me to perform? Come on, give a girl some time to get ready, will ya? Let him hear what you think of him!”

She raises her hand, and the crowd explodes in a loud chorus of boos and disapproving whistles.

“Yeah! This is what I like to hear! But never mind him, I’ll slap him around a bit later. For the time being, let’s get ready to *make some noise!*”

She punches the air and the crowd cheers; on that cue the beat drops, the music picks up, and Natasha launches into an elaborate dance, moving up and down the stage and side to side, using each and every part of her body to full effect. It’s actually impressive: I didn’t know someone as bulky and muscular as Jacob Hogan could even move like that.

I turn to the side and look at Tam, who is staring up at the stage, mouth open, completely flabbergasted; as I watch, she shakes her head and looks back at me. “Well,” she breathes out. “Guess this explains it, then.”

“Oh yeah,” I nod. “*This* is big. If the tabloid press gets even a whiff of this, they’ll come down on Hogan like a flock of vultures.”

“Yeah,” Tammy agrees. “But this is great, actually.” She pulls her phone out of her purse, taps the screen a couple times, and raises it up.

I blink. “Tammy, what are you doing?”

“Making a video,” she replies. “It’s why we’re here: to find out about Hogan’s dirty laundry, and use it to blackmail him.”

I look at her for a moment; somehow, this feels *wrong*. It would be one thing if we’d found out Jacob was involved in something like corruption or unsavoury business dealing or organised crime, but him being a drag queen? It’s not something I’m sure I feel comfortable using to blackmail him.

I look up at the stage, where Natasha is still dancing like there’s no tomorrow. As I watch, the music stops, and she strikes a pose as a cheer erupts; “Thank you, thank you, y’all are way too kind to lil’ old me,” she says, running her eyes over the crowd – and I get the feeling she stops, just for a fraction of a second, when she looks in our direction.

Then she strikes another pose, a new song begins, and she’s off dancing again. And she’s really good at it.

I shake my head. “No, Tam,” I say, turning back towards my friend. “Let’s not do this, alright?”

Still filming the show, she turns her head to look at me. “What do you mean?”

“It wouldn’t be right to use this,” I motion at the stage, “to blackmail him. Her. Whichever, I don’t even know. It wouldn’t be right. And you must realise it too. Queers stick together.”

She looks at me for a moment; then, reluctantly, she nods. “Yeah, you’re right. It would be shitty of us to do this to her. Alright.”

She turns back to look at her phone, and I frown. “Why are you still filming?”

“How can I not film this? She’s incredible.”

I look at Jacob – at Natasha – dancing up on stage, and I nod. “Yeah.”

We keep watching, and Tam keeps filming, as Natasha moves on to a third dance, and then to a fourth, and a fifth. Then she stops: she's breathing heavily, and her body glistens with sweat under the club's lights.

"Thank you, everyone!" she says. "You bastards have been wonderful! It's been a lovely evening! Have a good rest of the night."

She bows deeply, again accompanied by cheers from the crowds; then she straightens up.

And points right at me.

"Oh, by the way, can I ask security to bring that girl backstage?" she says. "The one in the frumpy, out-of-place outfit. I need to talk to her. Do not rough her up tho, or I'll have your balls!"

I blink: wait, what?

Beside me, Tammy starts moving: she hisses out a curse and tugs on my shirt as she says, "Come on, Nee, we gotta move!"

It takes me a second to realise that, yes, we *really* gotta move, and we start making our way through the crowd, weaving between people who are all looking at us, trying to make it to the door before – nope. As we're about to reach the exit, the two bouncers standing beside the door step in front of it, their arms spread, blocking our escape.

"Sorry, but you heard Madame Hart," one of them says. "Would you kindly come with us in the back?"

"Which one?" the other asks. "They're both wearing frumpy, out-of-place outfits."

"Hey!" Tammy exclaims, but is ignored.

"Doesn't really matter, does it, Ivan?" the first bouncer answers. "After all, it seems they're together. We can just grab them both, and then Madame will sort it out."

"Right," Ivan nods, and turns back to us. "Yeah, so. Can you please come with us?"

We could try to escape. We could try to burst through; Natasha *did* say 'do not rough her up,' so these two probably won't use too much force in trying to stop us. But, on the other hand, the two bouncers are enormous and wardrobe-shaped, and they look really menacing. And I don't know if they're going to try and follow Natasha's order to the letter.

I exchange a glance with Tammy, and in her eyes I see that she made the same mental calculation; she sighs and nods, and I nod back.

"Yes, of course," I say. "Lead the way."

As the whole room watches in complete silence – except for the thrumming of the music, which has started back again – the two huge men escort me and Tamara across the floor and through a door behind the bar, along a short hallway, and into a room, in which a man is seated behind a desk, apparently doing some work on a computer; he looks up and raises an eyebrow as we enter.

“Madame’s orders,” Ivan says. “She asked us to take them backstage, so here we are.”

The man nods. “Of course. Take a seat.” He motions to the bouncers, who pull a pair of chairs away from the wall, and we comply. “Nat will be right along. Probably. Depends on what she wants to do.”

“Have you worked with her long?” Tammy asks.

“For a while, yes,” he answers. “But it’s probably better if you don’t ask anything else? She’s already mad at me for asking her to come in tonight, and she’ll be *really* mad if I let something slip, so let’s just not talk. Dimitri, can you please bring the ladies something to drink while we wait? Some water will be good.”

Dimitri nods, leaves the room, and is back in short order with two bottles of water, which he hands to us. We sit in silence for quite a while, at least half an hour – after a while I lose track of time – until the door opens suddenly and Jacob – no, Natasha – marches in, followed by Leonard.

“Thanks, George, and sorry for waiting. It took Lenny a bit to get here,” Natasha says.

“It was no problem,” the manager, George, replies. “I assume you want the room.”

“If you’d be so kind?”

George nods, motions at Dimitri and Ivan, and together they leave the room, closing the door behind themselves. Natasha sighs; she pulls out a chair, sits down heavily in it, and lights a cigarette while Leonard takes up position just behind her. She takes a deep drag, blows out the smoke, and pauses. “Mind if I smoke?” she asks, eyeing me and Tamara.

We both shake our heads.

“Okay, good. Well, not good, these things will be the death of me sooner or later, but, you know. Who are you?” she says, looking at Tamara.

“Tamara Laney,” she replies. “I’m Courtney’s friend.”

Natasha nods. “Alright, okay. So, what are you two bitches doing here?”

“Nat,” Leonard says.

“What?” she snaps, turning towards him.

“Be nice.”

“Oh, I’m being plenty nice, I just called them bitches instead of, I don’t know–”

“Be *nice*,” Leonard repeats, “or we’ll have to find some way to clean out that potty mouth of yours, my dear. You know what happens to bad girls who speak out of turn.”

He places a hand on Natasha’s shoulder and squeezes it firmly, while leaning down to loom over her; she narrows his eyes at him. “Aardvark,” she says.

Leonard immediately removes his hand, straightens up, and takes a step back. “You alright, sweetie?” he asks, his eyes and voice suddenly full of concern.

“I’m alright,” Natasha replies. “Just...” she glances over at me and Tamara. “Not in front of people we don’t really know?”

“Fair. Sorry.”

Natasha nods. “Forgiven. And I’m sorry, too,” she says, turning fully back towards the two of us. “I shouldn’t have called you bitches. My apologies. It’s just that I get a bit too deep into character when I’m on edge.” She sighs. “But still, the question stands: what are you doing here? You’ve followed me, I assume, especially since Lenny told me you visited me in my attic today, but I don’t remember seeing you.”

I reluctantly nod. “Yeah, I kinda overheard you talking on the phone – with the manager here, I assume,” I add, to which Natasha nods, “and we decided to follow you to find out your secret.”

“So we could blackmail you,” Tammy helpfully supplies.

“*Tam.*” I hiss, piercing her with a glance.

“What? The cat’s fully out of the bag, so it’s fair we lay our cards down on the table, isn’t it?” she shoots back. “Yeah, we wanted to blackmail you with your secret.”

“We’re not going to do that, though,” I quickly explain. “I mean, you do not out queer people. No matter who they are, no matter what they did, you just don’t. So your secret is safe with us.”

“Thank you,” Natasha says, taking another drag of her cigarette. “That’s a relief, really, because I wouldn’t have had any way to stop you in any case except giving you what you want.” She pauses, takes another drag, and exhales the smoke. “What *is* it that you want, in any case?”

I bite my lip. “For you to call off the wedding.”

“Done.”

I blink, then goggle at her. “*Done?*”

“Yeah, done,” she says as she puts out her cigarette in an ashtray sitting on the desk.

“You don’t even want to know why?”

“Doesn’t really matter, ‘I don’t want to marry you’ is reason enough. But if I had to take a wild guess, it was probably that my father was forcing you to marry me by threatening to do... something, I don’t even know what.”

“Yeah,” I nod. “Well, that, and the fact that I’m a lesbian. But mostly that.”

She sighs. “Typical Dad. Yeah, let’s just call it off. It would’ve been a sham marriage anyway, considering...”

She motions down at herself, and I narrow my eyes at her. “Yeah, about that,” Tamara asks, “I’m sorry to be blunt, but what are your labels? Are you trans or what?”

“Nope. Madame Natasha Hart is my stage name. I’m she/her, but only when I’m in costume. This is a character.”

“And she’s straight. But *he* is gay,” Leonard says, placing a hand on Natasha’s shoulder again; she covers it with her own, and smiles up at him.

“Oh,” I say. “Oh, I see.”

“Yeah,” Leonard says, shrugging. “We weren’t looking forward to telling you about this, and it turns out we don’t have to.”

“Happy for you guys. Seriously.”

The two of them nod. “My dad will be disappointed that I’m not marrying and ‘settling down with a good woman,’ as he likes to put it,” Natasha says, “but he’ll get over it eventually.”

“Maybe he won’t have to,” Tamara says.

Natasha frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I think there’s no need to call off the wedding,” she replies. “You do know what a beard is, don’t you?”

“Besides the facial hair, you mean?” Leonard replies. “Yes. And you’re right, it could work. You two,” he points at me and Natasha both, “could get married, while being fully aware it’s a sham marriage, and be each other’s beard.”

“Would you be okay with it?” Natasha asks, looking at him.

“I don’t mind, sweetie, I know you love me. We could keep living together in any case, like we’re doing now; our house is certainly plenty big enough, even for four people. And it would get your father off your back.”

Natasha nods, and looks at me again. “And what about you? Would you be alright with playing pretend like this? I assume Tamara is, since she’s the one who brought up the idea, but what about you?”

I nod. “Yeah, I’m a lesbian anyway, so—” I say, then I abruptly stop, my brain having caught up with her words. “Wait, why are you talking about Tammy? She’s not involved in all this.”

“She’s not?” Natasha says. “You mean you two aren’t together?”

I gulp, and bite my lip. “No, we’re not.”

“Huh.”

“...What do you mean, ‘huh’? Why *would* you think we’re together?”

“Because we have eyes, my dear,” Leonard replies. “We can see how you look at her. And how she looks at you, for that matter.”

“How she...” I murmur, and turn to look at Tammy; she looks away to avoid meeting my eyes. “Tammy?!”

It takes a moment, but then, still not meeting my eyes, she nods. “Yeah,” she whispers. “Yeah.”

My mouth falls open; I look at her, flabbergasted. “But... But you never said anything! Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because...” she begins; then she sighs. “I never said anything because I wanted to save myself the heartbreak.”

“The heartbreak...?”

“Yeah. I know you don’t like me, Nee. You *can’t* like me. You’re a lesbian. You like girls. And I’m...”

“Oh, darling,” I hear Natasha whisper, but her words barely register; I’m too busy staring at Tammy to pay attention to anything else. I gape at her for a few moments, my mouth opening further; then I shut it, stand up, and step over to her.

“You *idiot*,” I say, slapping her shoulder. “You absolute.” Slap. “Complete.” Slap. “Utter.” Slap. “Incredible.” Slap. “*Dumbass*.”

“...Yeah,” she says. “I know. I mean...”

“No, you absolutely *don’t know!*” I shout. “First of all, if you were anyone else, I would punch you right in your dumb face for implying you’re not a girl, because you *are*. From the moment you told me, from the moment you came out to me, it became absolutely *impossible* for me to see you as anything else! You idiot! Do you even know how hard I pined after you?”

Tammy gives a start of surprise, turns her head, and finally her eyes meet mine. “You... Nee, what...?”

“I’ve been in love with you all along, you absolute weapon! I’ve been crushing on you *so hard* for years now! I’ve probably been in love with you since before you came out to me! When you said you were a girl I actually thought, ‘Oh, so this explains why I like her,’ *that’s* how much of a girl you are! You...” I take a deep breath, and I’m surprised to realise I’m crying. “You could’ve said something.”

She looks at me for a few seconds, then shakes her head. She straightens up in her chair. She licks her lip.

“Can I say something now?” she asks. “I know it’s late, but can I say it?”

I nod. “*Please*.”

“I love you, Courtney.”

I take a deep breath and exhale it. “And I love you, Tammy.”

I lean in, embrace her, and kiss her deeply, wildly, years of pent-up passion suddenly released; I feel her fingers run through my hair, and I run mine through hers as our bodies intertwine, as if they were made specifically for each other. It takes a while before we come up for air, and when we do, she looks deep into my eyes. “Stay with me forever?” she says breathlessly.

“I will,” I answer, and we kiss again. And again. And again.

Then we come up for air again, and we're about to kiss once more, when I hear someone clear their throat; I look over my shoulder and see that Natasha and Leonard are looking at us, mild smiles on their faces.

"So," Natasha says. "I guess the wedding's back on then?"

I look at Tammy, and she shrugs; I giggle, and shrug in turn. "Yeah," I answer. "I guess it is."

*The End.*