The Scion and the Scientist
by starfishdancer

Summary

Grant Ward has been working for years to keep Ward Enterprises out of the destructive hands of his older brother. Thanks to a clause in his grandfather’s will that gives voting shares to every Ward and the impending birth of a new nephew, however, Grant’s just about to lose the reins. He needs to even the odds – and quickly.

Dr. Jemma Simmons has been working to find a cure to the rare disease that took her cousin’s life, but with dwindling donations to the university, she may never even get the chance. Attending the university’s mixer for potential donors is a long shot to getting her research funded, but she’s determined to try.

After overhearing the pretty young scientist pitch her project, Grant decides to make a pitch of his own: he’ll fund her research over the next two years if she’ll agree to marry him long enough to wrest enough shares to keep the company out of Christian’s hands for good. It’s a deal neither of them can refuse, but in the end, they might just get more than they bargained for.

Notes

So this is a bit terrifying, but I’ve decided to attempt a chaptered fic even though I have a ridiculous paranoia that I’ll be killed before I can finish things leaving everything unresolved
and especially even though I'm not entirely sure of the entire plot at the moment. Still, when I wrote a little "romance novel" prompt for WardSimmons Days, the idea wouldn't leave me alone. (Here, in case you were wondering: http://archiveofourown.org/works/7296457/chapters/16903348) I can't promise any sort of regularity in terms of a posting schedule, but I am working toward keeping momentum. And I'm excited to challenge myself with a project that scares me. So without further ado, on to the story!

See the end of the work for more notes.
“And over here we have another biomedical lab, where a few of our bright stars of research are working on…”

Grant keeps the charming smile on his face even as he tunes out the university director and goes back to thumbing out an email to his assistant to ask her to send him a couple of reports he’s been waiting on. The older, rotund man is acting as the guide to the group of donors who Grant knows are being granted this tour less as an exclusive reward to them and more in the interests of wringing more money from their pockets under the auspices of showing the representatives of the top ten donors the good their contributions have done so far. The research is worthwhile, he knows; the Ward Foundation vets its contributions with greatest scrutiny. But every researcher and every university thinks their research is more important or more ground-breaking or more worthy than other research, and Grant didn’t bring his family business from the brink to the success it is today by chasing charity over profitable endeavours.

Grant glances through the observation window of the lab they’d stopped in front of as he hits send, watching as yet another set of white-clad researches in ugly blue gloves poked about with their petri dishes and microscopes, the hum of machines running their calibrations a low buzz in the background. The university director is droning on, gesturing enthusiastically, though honestly Grant doesn’t see much difference from the last lab they were shown, and that was a whole other department. Grant just hopes they can move on and finish up. He’d rather hear the whole schtick at the cocktail party the university is hosting in the evening. At least there he can have a drink. He’s have skipped the whole thing but had gotten word that that Director Blake had invited the press, and since he’s already got a reputation for being an unfeeling bastard in the business world and beyond, his PR advisor had insisted he make an effort.

The door clicks next to them just as he’s clicking open Valerie’s email, which was as quick to arrive as he’d expect from his efficient employee, and the group turns as a bespectacled young man who is nearly as tall as Grant wrangles a tiny slip of a woman in a lab coat and an ugly pair of green goggles out into the hall. A student who has overstayed her welcome in the lab, Grant assumes, given the long-suffering expression on the man’s face. He turns back to his email, but can’t help but quickly glance back up again to take in brunette, who is very pretty despite the oversized eyewear perched over half her face.

“I just need twenty more minutes. Thirty, tops, to start another trial version,” she wheedles in a lilting British accent.

“Nuh-uh,” the man-handler shakes his head. “That’s what you said two trials ago.”

“But-“

“Dr. Simmons!” Director Blake says, a pleased tone to his voice. “How fortuitous to see you!”

The woman and young man freeze, seemingly only now recognizing that they have an audience. They turn almost comically slowly around in sync, eyes meeting and flick away before a sheepish smile finds its way onto the young man’s face. She, on the other hand, looks decidedly guilty before she pushes her goggles up onto her hair and blinks at the director.

“Dr. Simmons is one of our leading biomedical researchers,” Blake gestures, to Grant’s surprise, woman who he’d guess is in her mid-twenties, if that. Her mouth lifts into a friendly smile. “These are ten of the universities top donors last year, come to take a special look at our facilities before
“Dr. Simmons, who is blushing at the attention – she really is rather adorable with the flush colouring her face and highlighting the smatter of freckles across her nose - tilts her head in acknowledgement at Avery Kensington. Mrs. Kensington is about ten years Grant’s senior who has taken over her husband’s charitable endeavours in recent years as he’s slowed down, likely because he has a good three decades on his fourth wife.

“Yes? I mean yes, I am she.”

“Your contributions to the research into cell reprogramming in stroke victims during your doctorate has made huge strides in the medical community, and I know my husband and I have certainly benefitted! Is that what you’re researching now?”

“Dr. Simmons currently has a grant to study Batten’s disease, while she completes her third doctorate.”

The scientist ducks her head and blushes again, but the pride in her eyes tell him the praise isn’t just flattery. Grant makes a note to have the head of his Research and Development department look into whether Ward Enterprises should be making wooing her onto their staff. She’s clearly extremely smart, though genius doesn’t always translate to a profitable business investment, and he isn’t above using his considerable resources to poach her if the returns look high enough. He knows what university researchers earn, and New York is an expensive city in which to live. It might not take too much convincing.

“Batten’s disease?” One of the other group members, whose name Grant didn’t bother to learn since they don’t travel in the same circles, asks.

“It’s extremely rare,” Dr. Simmons says, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’ve never heard of it,” the man grumbles. “Shouldn’t you be looking at cancer? Now that’s a disease that needs curing!”

“There are many diseases worthy of studying,” Dr. Simmons says, her brown eyes soft and earnest. “And cancer isn’t one disease, but rather several, which is why research is often specialized.” She sighs and bites her lip, and Grant wonders how many times she’s had to have this conversation.

“And let’s not forget, all new advancements in science might be applied more broadly. We’ve only to look. Now if you’ll excuse me, I must get back to-“

“Going home.” The firm command has the group glancing back at the tall man who’d pushed Dr. Simmons out, his face polite but stern.

“Now, David, surely Dr. Simmons is capable of deciding when she’s finished.”

“Dr. Simmons,” David says, before the woman herself can open her mouth, “has been working for 35 hours straight. Closer to 36, even.”

“I’ve done longer before.” Grant can barely hear mumble under his breath but he has a hard time holding back his amusement at her petulant tone.

“Since she has an important engagement with this lovely company and our esteemed director in,” David pulls his cell phone from his coat pocket and checks it, “four and a half hours, she is going to
go home, eat something more substantial than a granola bar, and have a nap so she’s bright eyed and bushy-tailed for the mixer.”

Dr. Simmons looks mutinous for a moment, like an adorably piqued hedgehog, then sighs. “Very well, Mr. Alleyne. You win.”

She nods in the group’s direction, and to his great surprise glares pointedly at the cell phone in his hand, though given her stature the look is less fearsome and more adorable. He tucks his phone in the inside pocket of his jacket and raises his empty hands in mock surrender, a smile on his face and his eyes locked on her the entire time. She looks poised to say something but David simply raises both brows and she proceeds to scurry away. Well, Grant thinks. At least tonight was looking slightly more interesting.

Director Blake begins his droning again, and as they pass David, who must be Dr. Simmons’ student and not the other way around, Grant listens in amusement as he mutters to himself.

“Sheoulda taken Lewis up on the offer to trade internships,” David shakes his head as he heads back into the lab. “Had to do something in my field, I said. Didn’t want to go to New Mexico, I said. Bet Dr. Foster isn’t nearly as stubborn as this one.”

///// Jemma grumbles to herself all the way home and through the sandwich she picked up in the university cafeteria. She doesn’t stop even as she flicks the light on in the near closet that serves as her bedroom.

“He-ey,” moans a voice from the bed, and Jemma’s hand flies to her throat. It takes her a minute to realize that it’s Daisy curled up in her blankets.

“Sorry,” Daisy says sheepishly, pushing messy dark hair out of her eyes. “Bobbi thought you’d be out for the day so said I could crash here instead of the couch. She offered hers, but …”

“Lance is on nights, isn’t he? And still taking up her bed four days of five even though he and Bob insist they aren’t a thing anymore and she’s not on nights like him anymore?” Jemma fills in the blanks wryly.

“Yeah. Want me to get out of your way?”

“I just needed a couple of hours to sleep and it’s too cold for the van right now.”

“Don’t be silly,” Jemma waves. “But shove over. I’ve been ordered to get a few hours myself before tonight’s nonsense.”

“Oh, yeah. You have that rich people thing, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Jemma says sulkily. “Going to have to get trussed up like a Christmas goose just to beg for scraps to see my research through.”

“Wow. You do need sleep, because that barely made sense.”

Jemma strips off her slacks and blouse, undoing her bra and slipping it out from under the camisole she was wearing. She doesn’t bother to put them into the wardrobe that is wedged into the small space, instead kicking them into the corner and crawling in next to Daisy when she holds the quilt up.

“So a party with rich people, huh?” Daisy scotches closer to wall as Jemma sets the alarm on her
phone. “And I live in my van.”

“Mostly I think you live here, these days” Jemma yawns as she wiggles into a comfortable position.

“Yeah.” Something like guilt passes over Daisy’s face. “But I don’t pay rent or anything.”

“Well, you do pitch in for groceries and for using our parking space. And it’s not like you have a real bedroom.”

“Half of New York doesn’t have a real bedroom. The tiny window you’ve got in here barely qualifies it as a real bedroom.”

“Yes, well.” Jemma yawns again. “We all do what we can. And considering it takes four steadily-employed adults to make the rent on this place, two of whom are sharing a room with bunkbeds like pre-teen boys…”

“Mmm,” Daisy nods.

“And you do pitch in more than Lance does,” Jemma adds as an afterthought, and Daisy barks out a laugh.

“Make less of a mess, too,” she smiles. “And hey, maybe this rich people thing will work out for you nicely. Put on a slinky dress and charm an octogenarian into marrying you so you can live in the lap of luxury until they croak, when we can all live in the lap of luxury.”

“I don’t have a slinky dress,” Jemma says. “And I’d rather he fund my research. Or she.”

“Of course you would,” Daisy smiles sleepily. “Now shhh and get your beauty rest so we’ve got half a shot. There’s only so much a push-up bra can do.”

“You’re ridiculous,” Jemma laughs, but does as Daisy says and lets herself fall into sleep.

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Grant straightens his jacket sleeve after looking at his watch, glad to finally be through with the evening. This sort of shindig was more up Christian’s alley; a bunch of sycophantic fortune hunters, with their ingratiating smiles and tangible greed, willing to do or say anything in the hopes of currying his favour. It’s exactly the type of reason he’s the one who goes to this kind of thing instead of his brother.

The attention is decidedly similar to the attention he’s used to getting from women, the ones who watch the eligible bachelor lists like hawks, who try to fall into his lap in the hopes of snaring a big ring and a bigger credit account, or at least a little publicity. That kind of attention is at least a little more fun, he has to admit, since he’s not above playing the field a little – or a lot, to be honest. Hey, he’s clear about his intentions from the get-go, and if there’s been a party or two that were disappointed things didn’t go the distance, well, they’d all had fun along the way.

Unlike tonight, which had been a snooze from the start, when the damned university director decided a mixer was an excellent time to give a twenty-minute self-congratulatory speech. The only bright spot had been watching the doctor from earlier in the day tout her research, all enthusiastic gestures and a stilted awkwardness on an expressive face that told he she wasn’t one for artifice. It was refreshing, even though he’d found himself mostly corralled to other scientists and their projects and had only heard a little about the progress she was making when he’d drifted near a conversation she was having with Avery Kensington.
“It’s a shame,” the director had said when he noticed Grant looking in her direction. “Our most promising researcher, but so focussed.”

“And that’s a bad thing?” Grant had asked, bemused.

“It is when you’re researching a disease so rare the funding is pitiful,” the director had spoken frankly. “Pharmaceuticals aren’t interested in cures that won’t make them any money, and with a bequest about to run out, it’s likely to be put aside for several years. Do you have any interest in Batten’s disease, or?”

Grant had indicated he hadn’t heard of it, though he was not about to give away it was the petite scientist herself who had caught his attention. He shakes himself out of his reveries as the car pulls up to his building, and waves the driver on as he makes his way past the doorman, who greets him with an apologetic grimace.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Ward, but…”

Grant sighs. “Let me guess. My mother has come to complain about her generous allowance is far too meagre again?”

“Worse, I’m afraid.” Phil jerks his head toward the lobby, where Grant can just see his brother standing, looking at a piece of art as though he, and not Grant, owns the building. Grant curses under his breath and thanks the doorman for the heads up while he briefly considers calling his driver back and finding a nice family-free hotel in which to spend the night. He didn’t get as far as he has by being a coward, though, so instead he strides inside.

“Christian,” he says dryly. “To what do I owe this dubious pleasure?”

“Can’t a man just drop by and visit his younger brother?”

“No.” Grant says bluntly. “What do you want?”

“Aren’t going to invite me up for a friendly drink?” Christian’s smile is mocking. “Not even to congratulate me?”

“On what?” Grant says. “Did the Guinness Book of World Records finally recognize that you are – and not have, to be clear – the world’s biggest dick?”

It’s not Grant’s sharpest insult, but it’s been a long, tiring day. Christian doesn’t mock him for it and his smile doesn’t falter; if anything, it looks sharper. “Now, now, Grant. Is that anyway to talk to the future CEO of Ward Enterprises?”

“Like hell I’m going to hand the reins over to you,” Grant spits. “I don’t care who you think you’ve convinced to sign shares over, they’ll be turning their proxy back to me-“

“Anna’s expecting again,” Christian cuts him off smoothly, as though he hadn’t been interrupted at all. “So whatever sway you think you have to get these Ward shares under your proxy, think again. You’ve got some irons in the fire, I’m sure, but what are they? 15 to 18 months out, at best? Do you know what kind of policy changes about shareholders I can have made in that kind of time?”

Christian straightens his suit jacket, that unrelenting grin on his face and begins to stride out. He stops, and turns back. “You know, I really like this building. Six months from now, I think I’m very much going to enjoy that top floor view. Might make a nice gym. Or maybe I’ll just leave the place empty. Knock out a few walls. Won’t matter, will it, when everything’s mine?”
Grant doesn’t say anything as Christian exits, whistling just to piss Grant off. He’s made a mistake, though, Grant thinks even as he quietly fumes. Tipped his hand early. Grant’s got six months to keep even the playing field, and an idea that won’t take half that much time if he plays his cards right. And Grant always, always plays his cards right.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

In which Jemma and Grant go on a date, and he makes his proposal. Literally.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who is taking this chaptered adventure with me; it's hard but I'm having fun! And thanks to my Person who is not in the fandom but helping keep me on track, story-wise. Love and comments feed the muse!

It takes him a few days, but by the third night since Christian revealed his news, Grant has a few backup plans in place to minimize the damage his older brother can. Christian was right in that the irons Grant has in the fire won’t come to fruition soon enough to prevent a takeover, and if the company goes to his brother it will be run into the ground, funneled into Christian’s pet projects and pockets then dismantled out of spite. Christian operates his privately-owned businesses the same way their father had run Ward Enterprises, and their father’s shady investments had nearly crippled the company. He’d caused losses that should have been impossible in the market climate, all while mysterious bankruptcies and legal loopholes had seen their parents’ and Christian’s personal finances bolstered. Only some careful planning had kept Grant from having to conduct massive layoffs to save Ward Enterprises from folding altogether, and he can only imagine how much worse it will get if Christian takes the company from him.

Not for Grant so much as for the employees. He’d learned to prepare for the worst after Grandfather had died and has some resources hidden away. They are all untied to the family, dating back to before he’d wrested the company away from his father’s equally destructive hands. Christian couldn’t touch them even if he knew about them. Grant might be out of his home – and he will miss this place – but he won’t be the penniless wretch he knows Christian wants to leave him.

To save more than just himself, though, he needs a new iron, as it were, and one that can be forged fast. Their great-grandfather’s will, archaic as it is, is surprisingly standing the test of time and several sets of lawyers. A new member of the Ward family comes with shares that will fall under Christian’s proxy as biological father of the child. They two of them have been deadlocked for years, now. The only counter-move Grant has is a dubious one, but he has a bold move to make that he’s sure Christian won’t see coming. And, thanks to some digging by an investigator he has on retainer – outside the family’s ties and whose loyalty is firmly with Grant – he is confident that the plan has minimal risk of biting him in the ass.

It’s what has him back at the university labs days after his tedious visit, making his way to the lab where the receptionist helpfully told him Dr. Simmons is finishing up some sort of volunteer work with freshmen students. She’s exactly where he’s told she would be, in another pristine lab coat but this time without the gloves and ugly goggles as she talks a teen through the different settings on the microscope. He takes a moment to observe her, patient with the student who looks nervous and stressed, and watches as they go through a few more slides until the student is able to do it without
“Thank you so much, Dr. Simmons,” she sighs in relief. “I thought for sure I was never going to figure it out.”

“Nonsense, you’d have done just fine,” Dr. Simmons says. “You just needed a little confidence, and I know Dr. Whitehall can be a little intimidating to ask.”

“A lot intimidating,” Emily. “Which is why I have to run. I hear he locks the door the second the class starts, so I need to be there early.”

“You heard correctly,” the doctor says.

“Thanks again,” the student calls as she runs out the door, darting around Grant. Dr. Simmons doesn’t even notice him as she begins to clean things up, puttering around the lab. He knocks on the door.

“Yes, what can I help you with today?” she asks, then turns around and starts. “Oh! You’re not a student.”

“No, Dr. Simmons, I’m not,” he says. He lets the silence stretch out a little, taking the time to watch and assess as she bounces a little on her toes. When she bites her lip and wrings her hands, nervous and unsettled, he steps forward to put her out of her misery.

“Grant Ward,” he say smoothly, reaching out to extend his hand. “We weren’t introduced, but I was at the donor event earlier this week.”

Her hand is small and warm in his, but her grip is firm and sure, even as she’s clearly flustered. “Dr. Jemma Simmons. Is me. Which you know. Yes, I do recall your being there. What can I help you with, Mr. Ward?”

“Call me Grant. Please.” He gives her his most charming smile, running his thumb over her knuckles before letting her hand go. Her eyes dilate and her cheeks flush, which bodes well for his next move. “I didn’t get a chance to discuss your research with you, and Mr. Blake suggested you might be looking for new funding soon. I have a bit of a proposal I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Oh!” The smile that takes over her face is beautiful in its broadness, and he can’t help but smile more genuinely in return. “That would be lovely. Did you mean for it to be now? I’m expected in the labs, but-”

“Actually,” he says, cutting her off gently. “I was hoping you’d discuss it with me over dinner.”

“Dinner?” she squeaks. It’s adorable.

“Dinner,” he smiles. “On Friday. How about at 7 o’clock, Dr. Simmons?”

“Seven o’clock? Yes, that should be fine. And you should… you can call me Jemma.”

“Great. Jemma.” She ducks her head when he says her name, tucking her hair behind her ears again. Her lovely mouth drops open a little in a moue of surprise, and he’s worried a moment that the place he’s chosen for its privacy and discretion will be a bit daunting, but she nods.

“Shall I pick you up, or send a car? Whatever makes you more comfortable,” he amends.

“I can … I’d rather meet you there,” she says.
“Here’s my card,” he says, pulling one out of his front pocket and putting it in her hand. “And that’s my personal cell, so if you need that ride after all, or anything else, just give me a call.”

“Okay.” She looks at the card as though lacking anything else to do.

“I’m looking forward to it, Jemma,” he says, and if the little thrill he gets is more at his use of her first name or the pretty red that rises to her cheeks, he’ll have the chance to find out Friday.

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“Oh. My. GOD,” Daisy says when Jemma tells her.

“You’re not serious, now, Simmons?” Fitz says as he tosses a miniature basketball across the room, where Mack catches it and lots it easily into the basket suction cupped to their wall.

“Oh. My. GOD,” Daisy says again while Jemma sinks into their lumpy couch, nodding and covering her face.

“You can’t possibly want to go out with some rich wanker who has been in the gossip columns for running around with underwear models more than he’s made it in the business section!” Fitz’s accents thickens in his disdain, and Daisy squints as she does when she’s trying hard to pick the words out.

“Leave Jem be, Turbo,” Mack says easily, pulling the ball back toward him with his long legs. He doesn’t even have to leave the arm chair. “She’s allowed to have fun and date rich wankers if she wants.”

“It’s not a date,” Jemma says. “He says he wants to talk about my research and he has a proposal for me, for funding.”

“YEAH, he does,” Daisy says. “Dude, he’s just using that as an excuse to see you.”

“I should cancel,” Jemma mumbles into her hands. “I have his card, I’ll call him and tell him…”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Daisy says. Fitz squawks, but ceases when Daisy glares at him. She drops next to Jemma, taking her hands away from her face. “Look, you said yourself the other day you found him attractive. Would it hurt to go see if there’s something there?”

“No,” Jemma admits.

“And if he does want to talk about your research, is that a bad thing?”

“No,” Jemma says. “It would be a very good thing, actually.”

“So go,” Daisy says as Fitz and Mack resume their living room basketball. “Have fun. Eat a dinner you wouldn’t dream of affording. It’s one night, and this is way better than an octogenarian. I’d be willing to give this one a ride, even if he didn’t potential millions to drop on my – HEY!” she breaks off when Mack’s carefully aimed throw hits her in the forehead.

“Don’t be crude, Dais,” Mack laughs and then juts his chin in Jemma’s direction. “You’ll give our girl a coronary.”

“Who’s going to have a coronary?” Bobbi asks, coming through the door.

“No one,” Daisy says, “Now that the doctor is in. The medical doctor, that is.”
“God, that was a hell of a shift,” she says. “This ER rotation has been the worst. Shove over? I’m too tired to walk to the other side of the couch.”

Daisy and Jemma obligingly move down, and Bobbi sinks down next to them, throwing her legs up on the coffee table even when Fitz tries to glare them down.

“At least you showered this time before coming home,” Fitz grumbles.

“Had to,” Bobbi says. “Blood and guts kind of day. I smelled like a mortuary.”

“Ugh.”

“So what’s this that’s got our Jem all in a kerfuffle? I know no one scooped her research, because even if I didn’t hear it at work, I’d have expected a text blow up by the time I got off the subway.”

“Oh, no, she just has a date… with GRANT WARD.”

Bobbi gives a low whistle. “Nice. Where’s he taking you?”

Jemma drops the name, and Bobbi’s eyebrows lift.

“Oh God!” Jemma says suddenly, shooting straight up off the couch and knocking Bobbi’s feet down as she starts to pace. “I can’t go there! I’ve nothing to wear. Except my black dress. Which he’s already seen me in. But I suppose that’s fine, right?”

Bobbi and Daisy are already shaking their heads. Even Fitz looks skeptical.

“Jem, honey… no. That dress… no.”

“Daisy is right,” Bobbi says. “Even if he’d never seen it in his life, I wouldn’t recommend you wear that dress. It’s…”

“What?” Jemma says. “It’s perfectly appropriate!”

“Yeah,” Daisy says. “Appropriate is about the best thing you can say about that dress.”

“What?” Jemma looks at Mack and Fitz as if to help.

“Don’t look at me,” Fitz says, hands raised in surrender. “It’s a black dress.”

“It’s a very nice dress,” Mack says, and Jemma looks placated for a moment. “My grandmother has one just like it.”

Jemma meeps in indignation, and Daisy laughs.

“Actually,” Bobbi says. “I think I have just the thing for you to borrow.”

“I can’t borrow a dress from you!” Jemma shakes her head, backing nearly into Mack. “You’re practically an Amazon. It won’t fit.”

“Oh, it will,” Bobbi says. “It’s one of those bandage dresses. I’ve worn it clubbing back in the day, a few times. Forms to the figure. Very flattering.”

“Again, you’re an AMAZON,” Jemma says. “Even if it ‘forms to the figure’, as it were, what am I going to do about it being far too long?”
“Oh,” Bobbi smirks, tipping her head back and kicking her endless legs up on the coffee table again. “That won’t be a problem. In fact, on you, it might actually cover a little more than just your ass.”

“Clubbing days, you say?” Mack laughs.

“Drank free in that dress every time,” Bobbi boasts.

“Bloody hell,” Fitz shakes his head. Bobbi just winks at him. “Now that we’re all home, can we quit talking about Simmons’ love life and start talking about important things? Like what we’re ordering for dinner?”

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Friday night arrives quickly, and Jemma finds herself in the restaurant at a quiet table at the back, in the blue bandage dress that she has to admit is more becoming on her than her go-to little black dress. Daisy had done her hair for her, twisted it into a loose but elegant twist, with little tendrils left loose and curling. The neckline is a little more plunging than she normally wears, and she has to wonder that Bobbi got away with wearing it in public. Given their differences in shape, she suspects the pale blue number would have been bordering on indecent on the blonde.

Dinner had been lovely, though she’d been nervous at first. Grant looked extremely handsome in a navy suit that, by coincidence had complemented her dress well. He’d had manners that would make her mum swoon, standing to greet her and pulling out her chair for her. He’d made suggestions from the menu but hadn’t tried to order for her, which she appreciated. She’d had a boyfriend that constantly spoke to wait staff on her behalf, and even on the rare chance he asked for what she wanted, she hadn’t been pleased. That relationship hadn’t lasted long.

The conversation had been a bit awkward a bit, as on any first date, but Jemma has to admit that was mostly due to her own social failings and nervousness. Grant is very gracious though, and smoothly steered the conversation, touching on things from places they’d traveled to stories about their school experience. She’d been surprised to learn he’d spent much time away at boarding schools, including military school in his teens; he’d been more surprised, she thinks, to learn that she skipped boarding or even public school entirely but had still managed to go to graduate and head to uni by seventeen when she’d finally been allowed to take extra credit and an accelerated workload.

True academia had been where she’d finally found her stride and flourished, she’d admitted. That had segued into talking about their work, though he’d deftly navigated that topic, mostly, to her research, asking intelligent questions and looking at her with an intense focus she found incredible. Having that focus on her alone was a heady experience, and even if it didn’t come to anything more than this single night, even if her research never saw a penny of Ward funding, she wouldn’t regret it.

But, it would seem, he did have an interest in both funding her research and more than a single night, because over dessert he raised funding her research again, indicating he had a bit of an unconventional but mutually-beneficially agreement he wanted to run passed her, pulling out a thick folder of paperwork.

She’s opened the file, scanning quickly through the proposal to fund the university at the same level as the previous two years but have the funds dedicated to her research, when her brain catches up to herself and she chokes on the very lovely champagne he’d ordered. He slides his chair closer to hand her a napkin as she coughed.

“Okay?” he asked.
She nods, then shakes her head. “I think I’m going mad, because I do believe this paperwork suggests that you will fund my research if I marry you.”

“It wouldn’t be a real marriage. I just need to buy myself some time,” Grant says, his voice a low plea that seems to wind itself around her heart against her will. “If I can’t secure more shares, my brother will pick Ward Enterprises apart, piece by piece, and I can’t let that happen. I need a wife, Jemma, at least temporarily, and you need a steady flow of funding. So I’d like very much for you to consider marrying me.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Jemma and Grant discuss his proposal, and Jemma's friends make another appearance.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re not serious,” Jemma says, blinking up at her dinner companion. At his stoic face, she falters instead of continuing on, as she’d be wont to do otherwise.

He pointedly glances down at the very official-looking paperwork he’d passed her. “Let's say I was, but in hypothetical situation. No consequences. No pressure. Tell me what you're thinking.”

Jemma tugs at the hem of her borrowed dress then drops her hands nervously into her lap. When he’d mentioned funding for her research with his dinner invitation, she can’t say she’d imagined this kind of proposal.

For lack of anything to say, she leafs through the pages of the agreement, scanning and thankful for her reading speed as she goes. “So … hypothetically … you’d fund our research for two years,” she says slowly, “if I marry you for that length of time.”

“Yes,” he says. “You’ll understand that I won’t discuss the specific details beyond … hypothetically … unless we’ve come to an agreement. Suffice it to say that, for business reasons, I need a wife. For the sake of my company and my employees more than my own, but nevertheless, I need to appear to be legitimately married within the next few months.”

“I’m not a prostitute,” Jemma blurts out, glad for the semi-privacy of their restaurant seating when it comes out a little louder than she’d anticipated. “My research is important, but… I’m not… I won’t…”

“And I don’t pay for sex,” Grant says with a sharp grin that reminds her just how attractive the man is, not that she needed much of refresher. She blushes and looks down at her hands, which she’s been wringing in her lap unnoticed. Or so she thinks until he slides his seat even closer to her to still them, skin warm against her own.

“Hey,” he says softly. “I’m not asking you to sleep with me for funding. I need a wife on paper to buy enough time to keep the company safe. I have some other irons in the fire, but they are at least a year out, and it turns out I don’t have that kind of time.”

“So you just need a wife in name only?” Jemma asks, biting her lips.

Grant grimaces. “Well… sort of. It has to look real, at least. My brother’s lawyers are going to fight this one, and I can’t give them any ammunition. We’ll need to make it look genuine, which means we’ll need to be seen together on dates. Play the gossip columns a little. I need it to look like we’re swept up in this, enough to elope after a short time of whirlwind dating. There’s space enough in my home that we won’t be falling all over each other privately, but in public…”
“I’m not a good liar,” Jemma shakes her head. “Terrible, actually. I don’t know that I could make it look real.”

“Don’t worry,” Grant flashes her a grin. For some reason her heart stutters in her chest. “I can. It’s all about the details. As a researcher, you know how important the details are, Jemma.”

His eyes are locked on hers and she can’t look away. Doesn’t want to look away. The slow, low timbre of his voice is having a near hypnotic effect on her.

“My fingers, stroking your hand,” he continues in that same entrancing tone. “Stroking over your wrist.”

As his digits dance over the soft skin, her breath catches in her throat. She wonders if he can feel her pulse fluttering under his fingertips, because her heart is beginning to speed its rhythm in her chest. But then his hand is leaving to capture a stray wisp of her hair.

“It’s about the way I tuck the hair behind your ear, grazing your cheek, lingering around your chin,” he says as she finds her chin lifting toward him unconsciously. “Leaning in, pausing a breath away…”

His eyes flick to her lips as his hand comes to cup her jaw. She nods minutely as her eyes flutter shut as he closes the distance between them.

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Grant Ward is a very, very good kisser. The kiss relatively chaste – they are in a restaurant, after all, and one she doubts would appreciate anything even remotely resembling lewd – but it certainly doesn’t make it any less of a pleasure when his lips move against hers, pulling back only a hair’s distance before chasing her mouth again. When they break apart, moments or hours later, she can’t seem to tell, it takes her a moment to gather herself enough to blink her eyes open.

He’s smiling at her softly, and he reaches to brush his knuckles across her cheek before playing with one of the loose tendrils of her hair.

“See?” he says, his voice a low timbre, not quite a whisper. “It just has to look like we got caught up, a maelstrom of attraction leading to an impulsive wedding. And I think we can manage that, can’t we?”

His eyes are locked on hers and she feels a frisson of something run up her spine. Attraction, certainly. Interest. Like a magnet, pulled toward the pole and wanting to lock in. She finds herself nodding, even as she has to remind herself to compartmentalize. He’s playing a role. Whatever else her traitorous libido wants to think, he only means for it to seem as though they’re caught up.

He moves back to sit in his chair proper again, picking up his fork to take a bite of his dessert. She’d tasted the chocolate on his tongue, she can’t help but think wildly. He spears another bit onto the fork, then holds it out to her. “Want?”

He’s only asking about the cocoa concoction, she knows, but it’s all swirling together with the offer he’d laid out on the table, the feel of his skin against hers, the good she could do if she agrees to this ruse. Her stomach churns.

She means to tell him she doesn’t know, not sure if she means the dessert or his suggestion, but when she opens her mouth he slips the fork past her lips. “It must look romantic to outsiders, she thinks. He can so easily set the stage and she can see how easy he’d make it to act the part of woman falling for him. He’d kept her interest, kept up with her, and she knows that’s not an easy feat. He’s a different
kind of smart than she is, but he is definitely intelligent, a strategic mind that must manoeuvre well in the business world.

It’s outrageous, she knows, to even consider doing it. To live a lie for two years. She slowly chews the bite of brownie, because she is considering it. Two years of funding would mean a great deal. She’s been burning the candle at both ends for so long, trying to get as much done as she can as the grants to trickle to halt, and she’s been living with the looming threat of having to give up for longer than that.

It wouldn’t be as though she’d be doing it for selfish reasons. In fact, it seems selfish to turn her nose up at it. The amount he’s proposing, even spread over two years, would likely mean getting to the point of clinical trials on the therapeutic protocol she’s working on to alleviate some of the more painful symptoms of Batten’s. She might even make inroads to a cure. Can she really weigh the small sacrifices she’d make in a fake marriage against that?

“It wouldn’t be a fake marriage,” Grant says, startling her out of the thoughts she realises she must have, in part at least, spoken aloud.

“Pardon me?”

“Think of it more as a marriage of convenience. It would be a real marriage, even if in name only. Our reasons are no one’s business but ours.”

“People have gotten married for worse reasons, I suppose.”

“They have. My parents, for example. An example which you’ll have the unfortunate pleasure of witnessing in person, as there will be some functions both before and during the marriage that we’ll need to attend as husband and wife. Though I’ll try to spare the both of us from as many family obligations as I can.”

“I… I need to think about this,” Jemma says.

“Of course.” Grant takes her hand in his, squeezes it gently. “You’ll need time to consider it. Make sure the terms are agreeable to you. But even if you aren’t ready to say yes to a proposal just yet, would you at least agree to another date?”

“Another date?”

“Yes.”

She has a sneaking suspicion he’s laughing at her a little, but really it is his fault she’s completely flummoxed. “Even if I intend to say no to the whole wedding thing?”

“Even if,” Grant grins at her. “You were having fun, right? Before the whole?” He waves his hand as though that covers the whole sort of proposal, and she supposes it does.

Jemma nods.

“So let me take you out again, while you think about it.”

“So it looks real, if I decide yes,” Jemma says slowly.

“It can’t hurt,” Grant says lightly. “At the very least, you’ll get a fun evening out of it.”

“Okay,” Jemma says slowly. “But… Could we maybe… um…”
“Go ahead, sweetheart,” Grant urges. She names what she needs, and is rewarded with his delighted laugh.

/////“I can’t believe you told him you need the next date to be somewhere where you didn’t have to borrow a dress,” Daisy snickers while Mack just looks appalled. Jemma is just glad that Fitz is working late, because she really does not need the lecture.

“Well I certainly can’t go to another fancy restaurant in the trousers I wear to work, can I?” Jemma tips her chin up in defense.

“Well, no,” says Daisy. “But seriously. Fitz is going to have a field day with this one.”

“Oh, please don’t tell Fitz,” Jemma pleads.

“You know she’s going to now,” Mack says. “And really, Jem, did you really just come out and blurt it like that?”

Daisy starts giggling all over again. “Oh, God, Mack, can you imagine it?” Her voice shifts up an octave and into an accent that Jemma supposes is supposed to be an approximation of hers. “Oi, Ward, I need to wear me regular pants, don’ ay?”

“I don’t sound like that!”

“No one sounds like that,” Mack says. “And I’m pretty sure ‘pants’ means something altogether in Britain.”

“Oh I know,” Daisy grins. “But I guess maybe it is too early for Jem-Jam to be talking to Ward about her knickers.”

“You two are terrible. Very bad friends, would not recommend,” Jemma grumbles.

“You love us,” Daisy waves off. “But in all seriousness, you’re seeing him again on Monday?”

“Yes,” Jemma nods.

“She must like this one, Daisy. She’s giving up the opportunity to work late at the lab then run home for Bad Movie Night.”

Daisy eyes her critically, and Jemma worries at her lip, afraid she’ll give away the whole proposition in her expression. “You do like this one, don’t you?”

Jemma nods jerkily.

“But?”

“But what?”

“Your hesitating. Don’t tell me you’re starting to buy into Fitz’s ‘he could be a serial killer’ paranoia?”

“Well, no,” Jemma rolls her eyes. Fitz really does have the most outlandish ideas. “But… but what do I really know about him anyway?”

Now it’s Daisy’s turn to roll her eyes. “That’s why you do the dating thing, dummy. To get to know
him. Wait… do you have a bad feeling about him or something?”

“Well, no. But when has that ever been a reliable way of knowing about someone?”

“Gut feelings are important,” Daisy says. “There’s lots of people-

“She means her gut feelings,” Mack interrupts. “And honestly, she doesn’t have the best track record.”

Jemma shakes her head miserably. “Like William. Who it took me ages to figure out was married and I was the other woman.”

“Or Kelly,” Mack says. Jemma grimaces. The less said about Kelly the better.


She leans down off the couch to pat underneath it until she’s sliding her battered laptop out from where she’d tucked it under the couch. It may look like it has seen better days, but it boots up quickly and Jemma has no doubt that it is much more reliable than it appears. Then Daisy’s fingers are flying over the keyboard and she’s pulling up some interface onto the screen.

“Um, Daisy,” Mack says cautiously. “Do we need to have the talk again?”

“Oh relax, Big Man,” Daisy smirks. “Like I’d do anything illegal on your very traceable Wi-Fi. This is totally legit. I’ve kind of been doing this… thing… lately. For a private investigator. See? I even have an account.”

“What thing?” Jemma asks, curious.

“I dunno, like background checking mostly. Some surveillance, here and there. That kind of thing.”

“Are you saying you’ve found a job, D?” Mack says slowly. “Like actual paycheck and taxes, Jemma can do something else with the bail money, job?”

“Maybe,” Daisy shrugs. “It’s early days. The computer thing is kind of my wheelhouse and May – the investigator I’m working with – tends to look the other way if I use my outside sources to find things. Unlike you squares.”

Her face has turned teasing, and she turns the screen to Jemma. “But this is May’s database and, at least as far as I can tell, no immediate red flags. No arrests on records, no marriage licenses – not even filed. Financials, obviously, in a good state, and it looks like your Grant Ward has been good about filing his taxes. I mean, I can do a bit more digging but, from what I can tell, on paper at least he seems decent enough, and the rest you might just have to figure out the old-fashioned way.”

“Thank you,” Jemma says, for lack of anything better to say, and if she continues to worry on her lip she hopes that Daisy and Mack will incorrectly extrapolate that she’s just a bit gun-shy on a relationship. Though she certainly can’t imagine they’d figure out from looking at her that she’s considering a not-a-fake-marriage to Grant Ward. “Can I transfer you the fee?”

“Fee?” Daisy says blankly.

“For your services,” Jemma says. “There must be a basic rate.”


“I… don’t know what that means.”
“I do favours for friends?”

Both Jemma and Mack just blink at her.

“Veronica Mars? Show that didn’t get nearly as much love as it deserved? Used to run on the CW? Okay, you two are hopeless. Okay, taking the pop culture out of it, you don’t owe me a thing, Jem-jam. Even if you didn’t let me crash on your couch and use your Wi-Fi.”

“But I feel badly, when it’s your actual job, and…”

“Nope,” Daisy says. “And don’t try to push. We both know that I can out-stubborn you on this one.”

Mack nods. “She’s got you there. Come on, Doc. Let D do her thing and don’t waste your breath or your energy. You’re going to need it when she inevitably blabs to Fitz about your borrowed wardrobe comment.”

“She wouldn’t!”

“Yeah! I wouldn’t,” Daisy sticks out her tongue. “Except maybe I group texted everyone like three seconds after you told us.”

Jemma’s mouth drops.

“Sorry?” Daisy grins sheepishly then ducks as Jemma swings a couch cushion at her. “Sorry! Sorry! It was too funny not to share?”

The room fills with her giggles as she tries ineffectively to block Jemma’s indignant and wild pillow swinging as Mack’s baritone laughter fills the living room.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh! Chapter Three is up! I feel pretty good about this one too! I’m about to head on holidays next week so it might be a bit before the next chapter is up, as even though I am going on vacay with my Person who has been helping me make this better and work and providing such awesome suggestions for tweaks, we are both in need of resting and relaxing. Plus we are going on a cruise and the internet is really expensive. It might also mean a bit of a lag in responding to comments, but rest assured, I read them all, I cherish them, and they feed the Muse and make me feel awesome and bolster my confidence. So please feed the Muse. She loves comments. Especially complimentary ones.
Grant rubs at his forehead as he scrawls one last note on the last of the file folder of briefing notes and proposal he had to finish going over today and drops it on the pile in his outbox. It's the second stack Margaret will have to clear out, log, and distribute today. He worked through the weekend to make sure his evening stayed clear, and her day had started with a small mountain of paperwork. He glances at his wristwatch, noting that it is nearly two o’clock. He's about to press the intercom on his phone to ask her to have something sent in for lunch when it rings on his end, his assistant’s extension flashing across the call display.

“Yes, Margaret?”

“Mr. Ward?” she hesitates, clearly choosing her words care. “There’s no meeting scheduled, but Ms. Romanoff is here to see you.”

“That’s fine. Send her in.” Grant says. Margaret’s extremely efficient and a force to be reckoned with, but so is Natasha Romanoff. As amusing as it would be to find out which of them would come out on top in a standoff, they are valuable resources to him, and he isn’t so stupid as to lose either over an imprudent urge to ruffle feathers.

The redhead strides into his office like she, and not he, belongs there. “Ward,” she nods with a slight curl to the lips painted as vivid red as her hair, her tone respectful but cool.

“Romanoff,” he says in an equally even tone.

“I have the second workup you requested on Dr. Simmons,” she says, sliding into the chair opposite his desk and pulling a flash drive from somewhere he doesn’t see with the careless elegance she always seems to exude.

“Already?” he can’t help but ask. He doesn’t doubt her thoroughness – he knows better than that – but he’d expected her to need more time to suss out any risks Grant needs to know about if he’s going to go through with her plan.

She lifts her shoulders slightly in a shrug. “There wasn’t much of note, at least risk-wise anyway. Dr. Simmons takes great care with the way she handles these sensitive patients. You can rest assured that there isn’t going to be any issues that we weren’t aware of.”
Simmons is impressive, I’ll admit, with two PhDs under her belt by twenty-seven and a third one in the works. Most of what I’ve dug up is academic. It’s in the first folder for you to wade through, if you’re feeling ambitious.”

“Anything out of the ordinary I should be concerned about?”

“There’s no red flags, if that’s what you mean. Unless you want to count exactly one parking ticket. Which she paid promptly. Her financials are in good shape, too. Scholarships for the most part took care of student debt. Taxes filed before the deadline every year. She donates to several charities, mostly focused on children, regularly. Even her associates are fairly above board.”

“Fairly?”

“For the most part. There are three other people that share the lease to the three bedroom she’s lived in the last two years. One roommate – Barbara Morse, goes by Bobbi – has a significant amount of student debt, but given she’s just into her residency after med school, not a surprise. The mechanic and the engineer, Alphonso Mackenzie and Leopold Fitz, have some debt as well, but not in concerning amounts. They get standard pay for their field and from what I saw are loyal to their employers, since both have turned down head-hunters in the last few years.”

Grant nods as Romanoff lists her findings.

“Colleagues and acquaintances and whatnot, they all seem standard. Except there is one friend,” Romanoff leans back in her chair, perfectly at ease even though it is one Grant chose specifically to intimidate visitors with its discomfort. “Daisy Johnson. No fixed address, and her files are clean – too clean. A van registered under that name parks in the space allotted to Simmons and her roommates, and there was some bouncing around that was unusual when it came to tracking down what should have been very basic information. I’d say it’d be worth keeping an eye on if you had a hope of recruiting Simmons, but honestly? You really don’t.”

“Wait, what? Recruiting Jemma?”

“Look, the woman is practically a saint, and I don’t think there’s any amount of money you can throw at her to lure her to working for you.”

“A saint? She seems very sweet, but that’s laying it on thick, don’t you think?”

“No, I’m serious,” Romanoff says, leaning forward to point to a folder one the screen, one she’s marked with an asterisk. “See this? Several pharmacology companies have been trying to recruit her ever since she finished her first doctorate, and she’s turned them all down, including at least one offer that would have seen her salary tripled. She doesn’t care about money, she cares about curing some diseases, Baxter’s or whatever-”

“Batten’s,” Grant corrects.

“Right,” Romanoff waves a hand dismissively, but somehow he gets the feeling she knew and was testing him, though he can’t possibly guess what would motivate her to do as much.

“She’s made some research strides in pain management, it would seem,” Romanoff carries on, “and though would have made her quite the profit if she’d let it go to a bidding war, her patents have all gone directly to companies with a reputation for making treatments available at affordable prices. And did you know she corresponds with kids diagnosed with Batten’s? Don’t ask how I dug that up.”

Grant raises his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Okay. So she’s a saint.”
“Veritable saint. You’d have more hope of convincing your older brother to work for you than Jemma Simmons.”

“Then it’s a good thing neither of those is my intention,” Grant says.

“Well unless you think you can get her to date you, I can’t think of any other reason you’d want such an in-depth background check.”

Grant lets the silence stretch out, face as expressionless as carved stone. Romanoff finally barks a husky laugh.

“Really? Well that’s you playing against type, isn’t it?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“That she’s not your usual type,” Romanoff says, her tone suggesting she thinks he’s an idiot. “You favour tall blondes who like seeing their picture in the society pages but have aged off of the Leonardo DiCaprio dating wait list. This one is quite probably an actual genius.”

“Tall and blonde doesn’t mean stupid,” Grant points out.

“Never though so,” Romanoff doesn’t miss a beat. “Just there’s a difference between smart and bonafide genius. But fine. You want to date the good doctor. I wish you all the luck with that.”

Romanoff’s face is schooled into the perfect neutral expression, but Grant has a feeling she doesn’t think highly of his chances. Which is ridiculous. He’s a good-looking multi-millionaire. He’s the very definition of eligible bachelor. Has she not seen his abs? He knows his beach pictures have showed up in the society pages at least twice.

“Well, thanks so much for that,” Grant grouses. “Just so you know, she’s already agreed to a date with me. A second one at that. Tonight.”

“A Monday night date? Let me guess, a restaurant so fancy even YOU couldn’t get in on the weekend.”

“Nope,” Grant’s lips lift in a secretive grin. “I’ve got something much more impressive than that planned.”

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Jemma is nervous. She fidgets with hem of her Mackintosh, tugging at it with her mittened hand while she waits for Grant to show their tickets to the gatekeeper. She’s been a bit concerned that he hadn’t listened to her about going somewhere with a more casual dress code when he’d pulled up in the limo, but when he’d stepped out to greet her, he too had been wearing jeans.

Of course, she’d bet his are a darned sight more expensive than the pair she’d picked up at Winner’s a few years ago. They certainly fit him well enough she could believe they’d been made specifically with him in mind, though that likely wasn’t a thing. Was it a thing? She’d have to make a note to ask Daisy. Preferably when the rest of her housemates were out, as she’d never hear the end of it otherwise, whether it was over her lack of fashion knowledge or the way she just knew she’d blush thinking about how the denim hugged his thighs.

She still hasn’t decided what she’s going to do about the whole marrying thing.

She should really make up her mind to tell him one way or the other, she knows. He deserves to
move along to someone else if she’s going to say “no”, so he can find someone else with whom to make the whole sham work. If he needs to be married within a few months, there can’t be an unlimited amount of time before the offer expires and he needs to seek out a new candidate, so she should tell him thank you but no thank you.

And yet.

He hasn’t said a word beyond letting her know there was no pressure tonight, they were just an ordinary pair heading out on a second date. To a football match, as it were.

“I have season tickets,” he’d explained on the way over. “I don’t often make time to go, sometimes only when Thomas – my youngest brother – comes to town.”

“So the seats just sit empty? When you don’t go?” she asked, trying very hard to keep judgment from her tone. It seemed like such a waste.

He’d lifted a shoulder elegantly, a half smile on his face. “There’s a draw amongst my staff, when I’m not using the tickets. The seats get filled. And I don’t have to worry about getting good seats when I’m in the mood to see my team play.”

She isn’t sure if she should feel badly that someone who is a bigger fan is out a chance to see their team play tonight, but then again, the free tickets were never a guarantee, so…

“Ready?”

He startles her out of her thoughts, reaching out a hand. She plops her mitten into his palm and lets him lead her to where they will be sitting. He’s not wearing his gloves, she notes, and she can feel the warmth of his fingers bleeding through the soft cotton around hers.

“Have you ever been to a football game before?”

“Oh yes,” she says automatically. “I used to take in a match now and again when I was in uni… Oh wait. You mean an American football match?”

“Game,” he corrects with a smile.

“Right,” she nods. “And no, I can’t say that I have.”

They fall into silence again. They let go when they climb the stairs to their seats, and she worries a moment about being swept away in the crowd – there are beginning to be a lot of people in the stadium – when she feels his hand move to the small of her back. His body angles a bit in front of her, keeping her from being jostled, and she can’t help but beam up at him as he points to their seats.

“I don’t have boxed seats,” he explains. “The view is just as good here, and you don’t miss out on the crowd experience. The energy when your team gets a down, or holding your breath to see if the kicker makes the field goal…”

“I can’t say I actually know very much about American football,” she admits as they settle in. “Or anything at all for that matter.”

“After how many years Stateside?” he teases.

“Well, I didn’t think real football needed any improvement on, so…” she jokes.

“Careful, sweetheart, or one of these fans will sack you.”
She blushes at the endearment, then blinks in confusion. “What on earth does football have to do with losing my job?”

He lets out a surprised laugh. “What? Oh, sacking. It’s a type of tackle.”

“Oh,” she says. “Oh! You were making a football joke.”

“Badly, it seems.”

“Not your fault,” she says, patting his arm. “I really don’t know much about the game. I hope that doesn’t ruin your experience. I know you said you don’t often get to go, and I don’t want you to have a bad time.”

“Not possible,” he smiles at her, brown eyes crinkling a little at the corners. She is reminded yet again that he is a very attractive man. “I don’t mind explaining anything you need as we go.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” Grant says. “You’ll be an expert in no time.”

///// She isn’t an expert by any means, but she’s definitely understanding more of the game by the time halftime rolls around. Grant has been good natured, too, never losing patience when she asks after a rule again or when she cheers for the wrong thing, even during the brief time his team was down several points. He’d also bought them beer and hotdogs, which he said was part of the experience.

She only wishes she’d thought to dress more warmly.

She’d thawed a little when she’d used the restroom – and wasn’t that a long line in the ladies’ room – but sitting relatively stillly in the open-air seats has convinced Jemma it is past time she switched to her winter coat. Even though she’d grown up in the wet cold of England, freezing is freezing, and there’s only so much her thinly-lined Mackintosh can do. Still, there isn’t much she’s able to do at the moment besides make another trip inside to the loo to get warm.

She makes her way back to their seats, glad she had at least thought to wear a hat and mittens and that the venue wasn’t subject to the wind. She’s surprised to find that Grant hasn’t returned from the washrooms, yet, but she supposes there are likely more men at the game and perhaps even more demand in the toilets.

It’s a few minutes, nearly enough to make her concerned she’d missed some signal and has been left behind, when she sees him making his way back to the seats, a bag over his arms and a tray of food. She is ridiculously happy to see the faint curl of heat coming off what looks to be thick-cut French fries, even if it will mean taking her mittens off to get that goodness in her stomach.

“You looked cold,” Grant says as he steps past their seat-mates, setting the bag in the chair as he hands her the tray to hold. “Now I know you aren’t a fan – yet – and it’s definitely too big, but I thought this would be toastier.”

She could absolutely kiss him, she thinks as she sees him pull out a pullover from the bag, along with a scarf in Giants home colours. He trades them to her for the tray, and she pulls the thick cotton over her jacket, wrapping the scarf around her neck. He hands her one of the cups from the tray as she settles back into her seat.

“Hot chocolate,” he says. “I wasn’t sure if you drank coffee this late, or at all, so…”
“No, it’s perfect, Grant,” she says. “Thank you. Really. I should have dressed more appropriately. You did say we’d spend some time outside.”

“Well, the temperature dropped suddenly, you’d probably have been fine a few days ago.”

“Well, still. Thank you. I’m much warmer.”

She’s still a little cold, and she doesn’t know how on earth he’s able to read that, because he’s soon wrapping an arm around her and tucking her nicely into his side.

“This okay?” he asks quietly.

“Yes,” she says, looking up at him through her lashes in a wave of shyness, hoping that the word doesn’t sound nearly as breathless to his ears at it just did to hers. She almost wishes she weren’t quite so attracted to him; she has a feeling she’d find herself much less mortified.

He just smiles down at her, eyes crinkling slightly at the corner as they lock on hers. For a moment, she feels something like the push and pull of two magnetic poles, some crackling force between them as his eyes dart to her lips as she unconsciously wets them.

“Dude, we’re on the Jumbotron! Woo! GO GIANTS!”

The shouts from the seats above theirs, combined with popcorn raining into her hair and lap from above, breaks the spell. She ducks her head and brushes kernels out of the strands before glancing up to see that sure enough, she and Grant are in the bottom corner of the screen, though the focus is on the cheering fans with painted faces and – is that man really lifting his shirt to show a decorated belly? She shakes her head with a smile and settles back to watch the rest of the game.

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“Jemma. Jemma, we’re at your place.”

Gentle hands jostle her shoulder, and she jolts awake, knocking her purse to the floor of the limousine, the contents spilling out across the immaculate carpet. She feels the heat rising to her cheeks as she stammers out an apology.

“I’m so sorry, I didn’t realise I’d fallen… I didn’t mean–”

“Hey, it’s okay,” Grant says, and she’s sure he’s hiding an amused smile from her. “You mentioned you’d been pulling long days at the lab, I figured you could use the sleep.”

“I’m so embarrassed,” she says a little miserably. He’d had to take a phone call, and she’d meant to just close her eyes a moment, but the low talking and the motion of the car must have lulled her into slumber. She’s only grateful she had remained seated. If she’d drooled on him, she’d be mortified.

“Don’t be,” Grant says, as he starts to help her gather her scattered things. “It gave me a chance to check my email without looking obnoxious.”

“You did last through the football match. Game,” she corrects automatically.

“Game,” he confirms. The almost elusive smile is back.

“It turned out to be rather exciting. I liked it when they hit each other,” Jemma says. “Very smashing to watch. Quite literally.” She bites her lip then, hard, to remind herself to stop rambling like some
silly girl with a crush instead of the very competent and accomplished biomedical researcher she happens to be.

“Anyway,” she finishes lamely. “I had a very nice time.”

“Speaking of time,” he says, holding out a tube of lip gloss, a crumpled receipt, and her cell phone while she tries to stuff a roll of glow-in-the-dark condoms – surely Daisy’s work since she knows for a fact she didn’t purchase them - into a purse pocket before her humiliation is complete. “Have you had enough to give my proposition any thought?”

She takes her things from his hands, looking down at them rather than making eye contact. This is it, Jemma thinks. This is where, as lovely as it has been spending time with him, the whole plot has to come to an end.

She opens her mouth to say as much when her screen lights up with an email notification.

Katie Morris flashes at the top, and her heart squeezes in her chest as she thinks of Katie. Nearly thirteen years old, she’s one of the Batten’s patients Jemma corresponds with. She thinks of Katie and Jesse and Adella, living in pain and on limited hope. Of Douglas and Tina whose funerals she’d attended only last year. Of the others whose names she doesn’t even know, of their families. Of the numbers she might help in future for what, a mere two years of her life? And it isn’t as though Grant has shown himself to be some kind of monster whose company she couldn’t endure.

Slowly but resolutely, she nods.

“Yes,” she says. “I’ve thought about it. And yes. I accept your proposal.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments make me ridiculously happy and feed the muse. I know I shouldn't seek outside validation for my work. But I do. I do seek it. I seek it hard.

You can also always come say hi or ask me about this or other work or even random things on Tumblr, where I'm
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Jemma agrees to the marriage of convenience, and she and Grant negotiate the terms of their fake marriage.

Chapter Notes

The story is progressing, YAY! Not going to lie, this chapter gave me a lot of trouble, but thanks to some very helpful questions and suggestions from my Person, I managed to get a handle on it! The next chapter might take a little longer - and my apologies for that - but I got a bit stuck with this one so I'm not a chapter ahead any more! So all the hearts to my Person who doesn't just beta this piece for me when she's not even part of the fandom, helping to keep it on track and grounded, but who keeps me on track and grounded in real life too. And all the hearts to you, the readers, who make it easier to forget the agonizing struggle part of writing and remember the parts I enjoy about it. <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She’s going to tell him no.

Grant wouldn’t have made it as far in his business as he has if he hadn’t made a point of learning to read people, and every line in her body has him bracing for the gentle rejection she’s steeling herself to give as she gathers her spilled things. He feels a surge of disappointment. He’ll be hard pressed to find as safe a candidate for wife as Jemma. There’s no guile to her, no fortune seeking, no ulterior motivations he’d have to guard against even while he went against Christian’s own machinations. And he also genuinely likes her. The attraction between them was sure to help with the sell as well.

He genuinely regrets not being to explore their chemistry further. If he didn’t have Christian’s heir turning whatever next relationship into a business arrangement, he might have had a chance to wonder whether she’d blush as prettily as she is now, all flustered and sleepy-eyed, if he leaned in a whispered that he wanted to take her home, into his bed, or whether she’d surprise him again with her sharp wit and clever tongue. Instead, he moves to help her collect her spilled sundries so she can let him down easy.

Until her whole demeanor changes. He doesn’t know what she sees as she glances down to her hands, fisted in her lap for strength, but in a split second her whole posture shifts infinitesimally and he knows the affirmative is going to slip through her lips before she even can draw a breath.

“Yes,” he hears her say through a rush of triumph that roars through his ears. “I accept your proposal.”

Though the relief is nearly too much for him, he’s too practiced at refraining from acting on impulse to let his victory show. Instead, he waits for her to look up from her clasped hands to catch her eye.
“You won’t regret this,” he says sincerely, handing her the blister pack of birth control and a small canister of what appears to be pepper spray he’d gathered from the seat.

She looks like she already might, as white teeth press into her lip, but she only nods jerkily, then looks down at their joined hands.

“How,” she says, then stutters to a stop. She clears her throat, then tries again. “How are we going to go about this? Do I just… go back upstairs and say we’re getting married, or… Because I don’t think they’d buy that, and… How do we?”

She stops again, clearly not sure where to go with this.

“No,” he says decisively. “No, that’s not how it needs to be done, to look right.”

“Then how does it need to be done?”

She’s gnawing at her lip again. He sets her hands back in her lap and gently cups her cheek, brushing his thumb against the lip she’s abusing.

“Careful, or you’ll draw blood.”

Her mouth opens into a moue of surprise. If his thumb lingers a millisecond longer than necessary, it’s impossible to tell before he’s returning his hands to his own lap. She blinks at him, wide-eyed. He’s struck, for a moment, at how beautiful she looks, her face cast gently in moonlight.

He shakes his head slightly, reminding himself that he doesn’t have time for silly nonsense, no matter how kissable her mouth looks.

“We need to sit down, go over the paperwork. I’ve had my lawyer draft the proposed details for our marriage, but of course you’ll want to negotiate your own terms.”

“Yes!” she says, a little loudly, before continuing more softly. “Yes. I will want to… negotiate the terms. Of our marriage.”

He smiles at her, but instead of putting her it ease, it seems to fluster her.

She hesitates. “Do we look at it now?”

“Why don’t you come to my place tomorrow?”

“Your place? Tomorrow?”

Her uncertainty is ridiculously charming.

“It’s private, so we can hash things out. We can have dinner. Plus, it would help to sell the story, if you were to come over and stay a while. Third date, after all.”

“Third date? What does that have to do with… oh!” She says as it dawns on her. “My friends will assume…. Yes, that makes sense.”

“So… dinner tomorrow?”

“Yes?” she says, then nods determinedly. “Yes. We’ll have dinner. And negotiate.”

“Good,” he says. He lowers the shade and catches the eye of his driver, who gets out to walk around and opens the door. Jemma steps out, and Grant slides after her.
She turns toward him, and he can see the question in her eyes. Before she can voice it, he steps into her space, tilting his head slightly at the driver and a few bystanders. Understanding dawns in her eyes as his hands catch her waist to pull her against him as he bends toward her. Her eyes flutter closed as she comes onto her toes and tilts her up to him. Then he’s captured her mouth, and though it is a calculated move, it isn’t any less of a pleasure, feeling her soft curves against him as his lips move against hers.

When he pulls away, it’s just far enough to press his forehead to hers. “Until tomorrow?”

“Yes,” she says, her eyes still closed, a breathless tinge to her voice that he can’t help but be proud of. “Tomorrow.”

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Jemma twists the strap of her purse nervously as she steps in front of Grant’s building. He’d offered to send a car for her, but she’d declined. It seemed silly, she thought, to send a driver all the way to get her only to come back, when she could simply hail a cab outside the uni. Only in front of the impressive and imposing address in front of her as the car that has seen better days pulls away, sure the acrid smell of a previous passenger’s cigarettes and cheap perfume has lingered on her skin, she’s beginning to feel like she ought to have taken Grant up on the offer.

Still, she straightens her shoulders and marches toward the doors, trying not to white-knuckle the leather strap as she moves forward. It does not help that, as she was leaving for work this morning, her friends obnoxiously egged Daisy on even as she tucked a handful of prophylactics in Jemma’s handbag with a wink. Usually a grump before his coffee, even Fitz had gotten in on the shenanigans, helpfully suggesting Daisy count once she’d come home. Despite the cold weather, she’s sure it took at least three blocks before the flames in her cheeks died down.

As Jemma climbs the steps to the entry, a uniformed doorman steps out from the brightly lit interior to hold the door open for her, smiling at her. It’s a reassuring smile, friendly and much less threatening than the looming building before her, and she feels some of the tension in her shoulders loosen.

“Miss Simmons!” he greets.

“How did you…?” Jemma trails off as she lets him guide her into the lobby.

“You’re Mr. Ward’s special guest,” the doorman positively beams at her. He gestures with a spotless white glove to the elevator. “He let me know to expect you at this time. You’re even prettier than your picture. If you’ll follow me, I can send you up.”

“My picture?” Jemma asks uncertainly.

“Mr. Ward circulated one to all us doormen,” Phil says, and though she didn’t think it was possible, his smile stretches even wider. “He suggested you might be a regular visitor. Thought we should know to let you up to his floor without any issues.”

“Oh. That was very nice of him.”

Phil guides her into the lift. He swipes a key card over a panel and presses the top floor button. “That will take you to the penthouse, and I’ll call up to let Mr. Ward know you are on your way.”

“Thank you, Phil,” Jemma says as the doors slip shut. She sags against the wall as the lift moves, releasing her breath in a sigh of relief that it was over. She straightens as the movement slows and the intricately molded gold doors open into the entry way of what can only be a private floor.
“Jemma,” Grant says warmly, and she turns to see him come around the corner. He seems to have taken her request to accommodate casual wear seriously, as his feet are bare below the cuffs of his jeans. The sleeves of his soft-looking black Henley are rolled up to display muscled forearms and his hair is wet like he’s just stepped out the shower. She finds it oddly attractive.

“Hello,” she says formally, her hand finding its way to the strap of her purse again.

“Won’t you take your coat off, stay awhile?” There’s a teasing lilt to Grant’s voice.

“Yes. Of course.”

She begins to unbutton her pea coat, and Grant steps behind her to take it as she eases it off her shoulders. She feels nervous, which is ridiculous, considering this is, in essence a business meeting. The business of their impending marriage. Which will be very businesslike. She should not, for example, be focusing on how close he is standing, enough that she can swear she feels the heat of him as her coat slips down her spine.

“You’re nervous,” he says, tipping his head pointedly at her hands twisting in her lap. “This isn’t going to fly if you look frightened by me every time I approach.”
“I’m sorry,” Jemma says, her throat tightening. They haven’t even started and already she’s bollocking it up.

“Hey,” Grant says, and then a second time even more gently. “It’s okay. You just need time to get used to it. And that’s exactly why we’re here tonight. To talk about what we need to do – and that’s both of us, not just you – to make it look and feel real. Okay?”

“Okay,” she says.

“Let’s start here.” Grant reaches into her lap, taking one of her hands as he moves a bit closer. Not close enough to feel intimidating, but slightly more than casual contact.

“Contact,” she says, and some of the butterflies seem to flee her stomach. She always feels better when there’s a plan in place Grant clearly has more than the beginnings of one, if the mountain of paper he pulls from a locked briefcase leaned against the couch is any indication. She doesn’t know his clinical approach causes a twinge of hurt to rise in her chest, but she blinks it back. He’s been very open about his intentions and the reasons behind his attentions, and her feelings are her own to manage. She pushes on. “And I should… I should probably start spending more time here, shouldn’t I? Unless I can tell my friends about-”

He’s already shaking his head. “No. I can’t risk anything getting out. I know you probably trust your friends- “

“I do,” she says emphatically.

“But I don’t know them. And even the most trustworthy people can slip up, by accident,” he says when it looks like she’ll rush to defend them. “The fewer people that know, the better.”

“So who gets to know?” She narrows her eyes at him in suspicion.

“You, me,” he says as the corner of his mouth tilts in a wry almost smile. “And the lawyers who oversee the contract and NDA.”

She wrinkles her nose in confusion.

“Non-disclosure agreement,” he clarifies. “Once we’ve agreed terms, I’ll have my lawyer write the final agreement. I understand if you want your own lawyer to look at it, though I do insist on vetting the firm and full confidentiality.”

Jemma shakes her head. “I don’t think a lawyer is in my budget.”

Grant’s face softens. “I’ll pay the retainer. I don’t want you to feel any of this is unfair or for you to feel like your interests haven’t been protected. I’d offer a lawyer from the firm I use, but…”

“But they are more likely to protect your interests,” Jemma says a little miserably. “But I don’t want to jeopardise this… agreement … and I don’t know any lawyers for this kind of thing.”

Grant squeezes her hand. “Tell you what. Let’s just start by going over what my lawyers have prepared. We can take it from there after that. Okay?”

“Okay,” Jemma nods, leaning to read over his shoulder. “So we start with how long?”

“It needs to be two years,” Grant says. “From now, not the time of the marriage, but the wedding needs to take place sooner rather than later.”
“Were… were you thinking we’d date and have a quick engagement, or…”

“I was thinking dating, publicly and increasingly. Then an impulsive elopement in Vegas. It’s tacky, I know,” he says ruefully. “And it isn’t ideal. But I have… let’s say, business interests there. Believe it or not, it’s actually the best way to stay under Christian’s radar.”

“Christian?”

“My brother.” Grant doesn’t explain further.

“So, going to Vegas won’t raise suspicions.”

“No. In fact, going to Vegas is a move Christian expects me make. If you accompany me when I go, we can make show of taking in the sights, gambling, getting caught up and hitting a chapel.”

“Whirlwind romance and elopement,” Jemma nods. “Though won’t they expect you to seek an annulment, or…”

“We’ll say we decided to try to make it work. Two crazy kids in love. You’ll move have to move in here, of course. And though I’m afraid the rushed wedding is inevitable, I asked the lawyers to leave where we go on our honeymoon to you.”

“Honeymoon?” Jemma blurts. “Oh, you don’t need to take me on a honeymoon.”

“Appearances,” he reminds her.

She sighs. “We’ll have to visit my family, I suppose” Jemma says. “Once we’ve married. I expect mum and dad won’t be happy I’ve gone and married without them, but that can’t be helped and if I don’t bring come and introduce my husband…

“That can be arranged easily enough,” Grant says. “We can visit them as a honeymoon, maybe tack a couple of days in Paris.”

“For appearances.” Jemma can’t keep the wry tone from her voice, but Grant seems amused rather than annoyed. She glances over at the paperwork, flipping through. “What’s this? Family obligations? You’ve worked in family functions? This seems long. Wouldn’t it be easier just to say we do all of them?”

Grant grimaces. “Let’s just says that, while they can’t all be avoided, those kinds of obligations will be… limited. I do have specific public outings for after we’re married outlined in the next section. Charity events where it would look odd not to bring my wife, for example.”

“My work…” Jemma bolsters herself and carries on. “My work is important and sometimes I will need to work longer hours. I can be flexible, and I might not need to put in as many hours if funding is secure, but I need to be able to build flexibility in for my own work. If I’m making a breakthrough, or if trials are running long… I can’t just drop things.”

“That’s fair,” Grant says. “I can support that, both here and in public. But if you don’t need to work through events, or even anything that would cast our newlywed status into doubt… I need you to make a life here. Maybe that means working from here, when you don’t need a lab.”

“Oh,” Jemma says. “That makes sense. I can… I can do that.”

“I can note here that I’ll make sure to provide you with adequate work space to make it possible. Also…” Grant winces even as he makes notes on the paper. “I have cleaning staff, and if I suddenly have a guest room set up and used…”
“Oh,” Jemma says. “Oh!”

“It just needs to look as though we share a bedroom,” Grant moves to reassure her. “We can move your things in the bedroom, and I’ll take the couch here.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jemma shakes her head. “I’m not going to boot you from your own bed. And I’m certainly more size appropriate for the couch.”

“The couch is longer than I am tall,” Grant counters. “And I’m not going to make you move into my home just to take the couch.”

They eye each other in silence for a long moment, and Jemma sets her expression so he knows she can out stubborn him on this.

“Jemma,” he sighs. “I insist. Let me be a bit of a gentleman here.”

“Is it a cot?”

“What?” Grant narrows his eyes at her.

“Is your bed a tiny cot, suited to, I don’t know, military camping or holding small infants?”

“No,” he says slowly. “It’s a perfectly adequate California king-sized bed. I’m not trying to trick you into taking the lousy sleep.”

Jemma rolls her eyes. “Well then it’s settled. We’ll switch off.”

Grant blinks. “You know I don’t expect you to...”

“We’re both adults,” Jemma waves him off. “And I’m not going to spend two years feeling guilty that you haven’t slept in a proper bed.

“Fine,” Grant says. “We’re two adults, we can rotate the bedroom.”

“Excellent,” Jemma says. “You note that right there in the agreement.”

She watches until he does, a ghost of an amused smile on his lips. “What next... wait, why is there a section on sex in our fake marriage agreement?”

Her voice rises about three octaves over the course of a sentence.

“Breathe,” Grant commands firmly, and she draws in a gasping breath. “It’s nothing untoward. It’s just important to make sure expectations – or lack thereof, in this case – of what each party envisions from the other are outlined.”

“So no sex?”

“Not with each other and not with outside parties for the duration of the agreement,” Grant confirms. “I know that it is a long time, but any perceived infidelity puts the arrangement in jeopardy.”

“No sex for two years,” Jemma says.

“Are you going to be able to handle that?”

“I can handle myself just fine,” she retorts. He raises an eyebrow, but she doesn’t back down. He can take that as he will – it’s not entirely untrue. “What about you? I’m not the one in the paper with all
the models. Is two years going to be a problem for you?”

“I’ll handle – manage,” he’s laughing at her, she can tell by the twinkle in his eyes – “just fine.”

“Well that’s settled,” she says, a bit grumpily.

They haggle over some more of the details – and goodness, this agreement is comprehensive - including how the marriage will dissolve and the previously-discussed funding for her research.

“In addition to the money for your research, we should also talk about what kind of allocation you’ll want during the marriage,” Grant continues. “This is the number I suggested to the lawyer.”

Jemma balks at the figure before what he’s said even registers. “Allocation… are you suggesting I’m looking to be paid? Like some sort of kept woman?”

Grant seems to think better of answering that right away. Jemma glares at him.

“Sort of,” he concedes.

“I’m not a bloody child, in need of an allowance!”

“It’s not an allowance,” he cuts off her protest. “There are going to be expectations of you as my wife. In terms of wardrobe for events, in terms of spending at charities. I don’t expect you to shoulder all of that.”

“What do you expect me to shoulder? Because I don’t see what I’m contributing at all. The financial arrangements don’t have me contributing to rent, or groceries, and now not even the clothes on my back? I’m not a bloody gold-digger. I earn my way and- “

“Jemma,” Grant says, and she turns to face him. When did she stand up and begin pacing? If she wasn’t so upset, she’d be embarrassed, but as it is… She pops her fists onto her hips.

“Okay,” Grant concedes. “I can see where you’d get the wrong impression. But believe me, you are contributing. I don’t want to go into detail, at least not until the paperwork is in order, but I won’t retain my job without a wife. A job that comes with a generous salary. Not to mention I have no doubt Ward Enterprise’s shares would drop significantly and rapidly if my brother were to take the reins. If you don’t want to talk about an amount, we need to compromise.”

She gestures at him to continue.

“We’ll go with a credit card, one with a limit big enough to support your buying clothes and shoes for events, or anything else you might need in the role of Ward wife. When the bill comes, we’ll decide on a fair amount that I’ll cover.”

“That sounds acceptable, I suppose” Jemma says. Her hands drop from her hips and she runs her hands through her hair. Grant opens his mouth as if to say something, but his phone chimes.

“That will be dinner,” he says.

“Which I’m paying for,” Jemma says, daring him to object. “I think I can afford a little Thai food.”

He lifts his hands in surrender.

“I’ll have Phil send the delivery man up,” he says. She’s sure he’s hiding a smile. She grabs her wallet out of her purse, then pauses.
“And perhaps you can find a way to dispose of this?” She tears off a condom from the strip Daisy had shoved in her purse. “I have a very real feeling my roommates will make a production of counting when I return home.”

“In that case,” Grant grins and reaches over to snag the whole strip out of her purse. “I’ve got a reputation to maintain.”

Chapter End Notes

As ever, comments make my day and feed the muse. When the writing gets hard and I'm lying on the (sometimes not even metaphorical) floor going "WHY? WHY DO I DO THIS? IT IS HAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRD", even one person telling me they liked the thing can help me remember that I, too, like the thing, and get off the floor. If you are shy, you can always do it on Anon - I monitor to make sure my space stays safe for readers and the author (that's me!) alike, but I don't discount comments just because a person isn't ready to put their name with it. And if you ever want to drop by Tumblr to ask about head canons or the fandom or unrelated topics like books, I'm @thestarfishdancer and my ask box is open! xoxo
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

In which Jemma spends the night at Grant's.

Chapter Notes

Guys, guys, guys, I am super slow but I am plugging away at this story bit by bit! I hope you keep reading and enjoying, and that my Muse keeps cooperating (and that stuff like kidney stones don't get in the way again, because those were not pleasant, to say the least).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jemma can’t sleep. She’s laying on what might possibly be the world’s most luxurious mattress in sheets that probably have a higher thread count than all the sheets she’s ever had in her life put together, plus she’s exhausted after a long day on her feet in front of students and microscopes and petri dishes.

And she can’t sleep.

She shifts on the bed once again and sighs. She’s got this whole bedroom to herself as Grant insisted she take the first rotation and stretched out on his couch for the night. This should be the easy part of the whole ruse, staying the whole night over at Grant’s place, where there are no friends to correctly interpret her blushes and catch her in a lie about their relationship.

It’s too comfortable. Too comfortable and too quiet. At home, her room may be roughly the size of Grant’s closet, but it feels cozy, the sounds of New York filtering in even when the windows are shut tight in the colder months. If not the hum from the nightlife and traffic, there’s the sounds of her roommates to lull her to sleep. Fitz and Mac’s rumbling snores through the thin wall between their rooms, Fitz absurdly loud for someone so small, drowning out the much larger Mac. Bobbi coming in from a late shift, trying to be quite but inevitably stepping on the creaky part of the floor or tripping over a pair of shoes that hasn’t quite made its way to their front closet. The sound television softly playing if Daisy fell asleep before turning it off or her even breathing on nights Jemma insisted her friend take the bed for Jemma to crawl in to as well when she gets home when she’d known she’d be late at the lab.

Her home is lively, has signs of life even in the wee hours of the morning, and without them, somehow, Jemma doesn’t feel safe enough to shut down, unable to quiet her mind long enough for her to get some rest when she knows there is no one to coax her through if it spins toward those dark place, no friend to reassure her that she is cared for and valued. It doesn’t seem to matter how soft the sheets are against the skin not covered by the borrowed t-shirt acting as a night gown, nor how amazing and decidedly not saggy this mattress is compared to her own.

And now she’s thinking about her mattress, running through budgets to replace it as she should have done ages ago, turning over options when she should be turning over and going to sleep so she can
be prepared for tomorrow.

She sighs again, wondering if she’d fare any better on the couch, guessing it would feel equally lonely in its own elegant way. Grant had finished going over the changes his lawyer had made to their agreement based on Jemma’s additional notes, before he’d given her the full tour of the penthouse and the amenities available to her when she begins living there in earnest.

It’s an extremely impressive living space, if impersonally decorated. It’s near impossible to pick out any touches of Grant’s, as though it is a real estate show room rather than a place he’s lived in for years. She is, however, looking forward to trying out what appears to be a very excellent shower in the bathroom attached to the master bedroom. It’s probably excessive to have water spray at you from so many jets, but Jemma does not give a fig. If she’s going to be a bundle of stress worrying about keeping the agreement a secret, she will need whatever sort of pulsing massage sprays the glorious thing will divvy out. Perhaps she should try to see if it relaxes her enough to sleep tomorrow night, because she’s certainly not getting anywhere on her own tonight. She debates getting out of bed and seeing if it would help at the moment, but she’s not confident that she could do so without somehow managing to wake Grant up, and that would certainly be inconsiderate so late at night.

Or early morning, as it were, she notes as she glances at the digital clock on Grant’s bedside table. The glowing red numbers seem to mock her as they broadcast the lateness of the hour. Jemma groans, flopping over to her other side and pulling the duvet over her head, praying sleep comes soon.

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Jemma blinks blearily as her phone chirps a cheerful chorus to signal it is time to wake up. She groans aloud. Has that song always been that annoying?

She has to run back to her flat to change clothes before she heads to work, and she agreed to cover a freshman lecture first thing this morning, a favour she’s regretting thoroughly at this moment. She pushes back the duvet and manages to shuffle out of the bedroom toward the kitchen, where she desperately hopes Grant’s fancy kitchen includes a pot of coffee on an automatic timer. Her usual pot of tea simply won’t cut it today.

As she turns the corner, rubbing her barely-open eyes, she manages to run smack-dab into Grant, who is just stumbling out, a mug in his hand. In her state, she bounces right off his torso and would have landed on her behind on the hardwood, rather painfully, she’s sure, except that Grant has decent reflexes even first thing in morning. He hisses back a curse when his coffee sloshes over the hand that hasn’t darted out to snag the front of her shirt – that is, his shirt she’s borrowed – so he can pull her back up toward him.

She finds herself with her hands splayed across his abs – and goodness, Daisy was right, those certainly are more impressive in person than in the gossip rag images her friend had pulled up on Google – since he’s dressed in nothing but a pair of sweatpants, dipped low enough she glimpses the vee carved by his hipbone and confirm that he appears to be neither a boxers or briefs man.

“You okay?” he asks, his voice rough.

She forces her gaze up with scarlet cheeks, an apology ready to drop from her tongue, but what comes out is “Bloody Nora, you look like hell!”

He looks, in fact, somewhat like she suspects she herself does. His hair is decidedly untidy despite its
short length, his face is a bit wan beneath the overnight growth of stubble, and there are dark circles beneath bleary, tired eyes. And those are most certainly pillow creases across his forehead.

Grant doesn’t dignify her comment with response, unless one counts the surprised grunt.

“I’m sorry,” she says, finally finding that apology. “For smacking into you, burning you with your coffee, and I really, really should not have said a thing. I’m sure you don’t look like hell. A little coffee and you’ll be right as rain.”

“No,” Grant sighs. “Already saw myself in a mirror. I look like hell. Feel that way too. That couch is… less comfortable than it seems.”

“Is there more…” Jemma waves vaguely in the direction of his mug.

“It’s coffee,” Grant says.

“Yes,” Jemma says slowly. Has lack of sleep made him daft? “I know.”

His brow wrinkles, and though a man with those cheekbones shouldn’t be adorable as well as attractive, in his rumpled state, the man has been ridiculously blessed by the universe, it would appear.

“You said you drink tea in the mornings, usually,” Grant says, equally slowly. “I had my assistant pick up one of those fancy brewers and pick a breakfast blend. She’s British too, very picky about her blends, though of course I’ll have my housekeeper stock up on whatever you want, going forward. I started the machine, and I think it’s just about ready, if you wanna…”

“Oh,” Jemma says. “Thank you, that was very thoughtful of you. But I’m afraid tea is not going to cut it this morning.”

She realises, belatedly, that they are still pressed together, his arm secure around her back, the heat of his skin bleeding through the material of her borrowed sleepwear. And her traitorous hands are itching to move lower, to trace down his stomach to see just how low the sculpting dips below his sweatpants.

Instead, she pulls them back, hoping she’s got enough control that he can’t read anything into her deliberately unhasty movements, and as she takes a step back out of his personal bubble, she can only hope that her cheeks are not flushing as scarlet as they feel.

“Yeah,” Grant says after a brief pause she tries not to read into. “I just poured the last of it, but I’m probably going to need another, especially since half of this one is on the floor. I can get another pot started.”

“Thanks,” she nods, wishing she’d picked a shirt with long sleeves to wear to bed so she could twist her hands in them. She hasn’t felt this bloody awkward since she was a skinny teen with spots and no social skills of which to speak. “I’ll just… go into the kitchen.”

She makes a gesture toward the kitchen, and Grant steps smoothly to the side so she can pass him, shaking the remnants of his coffee off his hand before wiping it on his trousers, tugging the material briefly down lower. It’s an effort to keep her eyes appropriately high.

“Wait,” he says before she’s gotten more than a few steps. “Did you… did you not sleep well? Is there something wrong with the room? The bed? Did you need more blankets?”

“Oh no,” she whirls around, hands fluttering franticly. “Your home is very lovely.”
“Not what I asked,” Grant tilts his head at her. “You need something stronger than tea this morning, which suggests you didn’t sleep well.”

Jemma sighs. “It’s just… not what I’m used to, is all. It will just take some adjusting, I’m sure.” She makes an effort to smile widely at him, in her usual way. But judging by his unchanging expression, it’s less successful than she’d hoped.

He follows her into the kitchen, and she shifts on nervous feet as he dumps the grounds from the coffee machine, rinsing the pot before filling it with water. Her eyes dart around awkwardly, falling on the tea brewer, the basket rising and falling, before it halts above the water, chiming an alert. It’s much different than fussing over the kettle on the stove and setting a timer to make sure her leaves are not over steeped.

The hiss of steam at the first drip of coffee pulls her eyes back to Grant. The steady dripping makes her feel anxious, and she is suddenly very aware of the chilled air on her legs. She tries to discreetly hitch the hem of the t-shirt downward, wishing she could flee to the shower without it feeling terribly awkward.

“I should…,” she jumps, beginning to open cupboards at random to try and find a mug. “Must get home to shower after this. And change. Can’t go to work in this. That would be a right sight.”

She squeaks unattractively when Grant comes up behind her, turning her gently to the cupboard she realises belatedly he’d shown her last night, the rows of matching, unchipped pottery mugs staring her in the face. She is sure her face colours distastefully as she grabs the nearest one. Then it’s another set of far too long silent minutes as they both hover, waiting on the watched pot to do its thing.

It’s with great relief when the final drop hits the surface and she can grab the pot. She gestures at Grant first until he holds out his near empty mug so she can fill his before setting hers on the counter. She fills it to the brim before choking down a scalding gulp like she did to study for tests in uni. It’s bitter on her tongue and she grimaces before swallowing more.

Grant watches her with inscrutable eyes. She ducks her head, downs the rest. And flees.

 /////

Jemma lets herself quietly into the apartment, though she knows the chances of avoiding a grilling from Daisy are slim to nil, especially since she’s likely tucked into Jemma’s bed. Even if she could to sneak in quietly to get her things, Daisy is not likely to sleep through her turning on the light to find something to wear to work. In fact, Jemma thinks even as she slips off her shoes in an extra effort to sneak by unnoticed, it’s likely her only hope is that Daisy is out on assignment from her new boss.

“Oi, that you, Jem?”

Jemma jumps nearly a foot at the groggy voice from her bed, because that is decidedly not Daisy.

“Lance! What on earth are you doing in my room?”

“What’s it look like, hen?”

Jemma rolls her eyes even though it’s unlikely Lance can see her do so in the dark. She flicks on a small lamp, and he hisses and blinks up at her.

“I’d have expected Daisy to be using it when I didn’t come home.” She bristles suddenly as the thought occurs to her. “If she’s downstairs sleeping in her van in this weather because you had a row
with Bobbi and didn’t want to go home, so help me heaven, Lance Nathaniel Hunter…”

“Naw, love, no cause for full-naming me! Well, I did have a row with Bob, but…” He shrugs and grins. It’s par for the course for the two of them, really. They fight and break up and they fight and make up. It’s practically foreplay for the two of them, and unfortunately less private than Jemma and her flatmates often wish for.

“Daisy?” Jemma prompts when Lance trails off.

“Oh, right. Bob didn’t want her to interrogate you about boffing that Ward bloke, so she pulled her in to sleep in her room.”

“Oh, that was nice of her,” Jemma says. “But that doesn’t really explain why you are out here, and not in the home you pay rent for.”

“Well it seems Bob didn’t appreciate suggestion about what the two of us could do to keep Daisy distracted from interrogating you, so she told me where too. Figured it was best to take the lumpy couch in the hopes she’d forgive me sooner. But then your room was empty, so…”

“So you made a crude joke about a threesome,” Jemma sighs. “And Bobbi put you in your place. Then you decided to crash here because you were too lazy to take the tube home.”

“Hey, now, love, it wasn’t crude. A thing of beauty, really, what I suggested we could get up too. Oh well. Their loss,” he says. “Anyway, now I get to interrogate you about boffing the Ward dude. Daisy said something about counting the rubbers in your purse?”

Jemma is sorely tempted to throw said purse at him. He waggles his eyebrows comically at her, though, and she can’t help the laugh that bubbles out of her instead.

“So, this Ward bloke? Good shag, then? Know where all the knobs and buttons are?”

“I’m beginning to wonder why Bobbi sleeps with you, let alone puts up with you.”

“It’s because I know where all her knobs and buttons- Hey!”

The last comes out muffled as Jemma slaps her hand over his mouth. She pulls it away before he can lick her – she’s been caught by that one before and won’t be caught again – but her point is made.

“Right, right,” he grumps affectionately. “You never tell us the fun details.”

“And that’s not going to change,” Jemma says firmly, glad that she’s set precedence of privacy over her bedroom antics. She’s much less likely to get caught in a lie since her friends are used to teasing and grilling her without any real expectations of details. She might actually be able to pull this off.

“Right, then,” Lance says. “Well if you won’t be a love and tell me about the sex you’re having, how about you make us a proper cuppa and I tell you all about the sex I’m not having? No?”

Jemma just shakes her head. “How about I make you a proper tea and you go home?”

“Fine,” Lance says, leaning back in the bed triumphantly. He’d probably just wanted to have a cup of tea all along and was too lazy to make it, Jemma realises. Smarter bloke than he pretends to be, she smiles fondly as she makes her way to fill the kettle.

///// Jemma sticks out her lower lip and tries to blow a stray strand of hair from in front of her goggles. It
falls back to where it was before. She flexes her wrist to bare a bit of skin between her neoprene
gloves and her lab coat, using it to scrub the lock to the side as best you can.

“You should take a break, Simmons.”

Jemma straightens, her back twinging and protesting the quick movement. She has been bent over
the petri dishes awhile.

The director is standing in the doorway, looking at her with an expression she can’t quite place. It’s a
frown, and yet he doesn’t quite look unhappy with her.

“Oh, I’m fine, Director Blake,” she waves. “Just wanted to finish injecting these …”

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” he says. “Finish up, or call a student to take care of this –“ he waves
vaguely over her research as though it is inconsequential– “ then meet me in my office. I expect you
there in fifteen minutes.”

Jemma barely refrains from huffing in annoyance, simply presses her lips together and nods. She’s
fortunately far enough along that she can quickly finish the last of her protocols, and though she
would have preferred to go over her notes, it won’t hurt the experiment any if she’s not here to
observe, thankfully.

She gently gives instructions to her lab assistants and walks as fast as her legs will carry her to from
the lab building to the campus building in which the Director has taken an office. She wishes she had
had time to stop in the loo to check to make sure she’s presentable, but all the time she was afforded
allowed her only to smooth her hair in the shadowed reflection of a picture frame in the Director’s
waiting room and hope for the best when it came to what she was wearing.

The Director keeps her waiting anyway, and she grits her teeth against frustration. She’s once again
left her work at his beck and call, to be left wedge uncomfortably in the hard chairs outside his office,
ignored by his disinterested assistant, with no reading material beyond the self-congratulatory
university magazines he’s seen fit to stock and the cheesy inspirational quote posters he seems to
think will make him seem less cold to the students.

They really, really don’t.

She straightens her spine and wishes that she hadn’t thought better of getting a fifth cup of coffee.
Her stomach will likely thank her, and perhaps it will mean she can fall asleep at Grant’s home
tonight with less difficulty, but she could really use the fortitude right about now. She’s exhausted
and not really up for a discussion with her boss’ boss.

“Ms. Simmons,” the Director’s voice cuts smoothly through her contemplation. She grits her teeth
against correcting her title and lifts her lips in what she hopes is some approximation of a serene
smile as she stands.

There is no one coming from his office. She closes her eyes and pushes down the surge of rage that
he’d kept her waiting, from the looks of it, while he finished his Sudoku.

“Do sit, Ms. Simmons,” he gestures at the chair in front of his desk, which thankfully looks more
comfortable than the wooden ones out front.

“Dr. Simmons,” she says before she can bite it back, as she gingerly lowers herself into the chair.

“Yes, yes,” he waves dismissively. She smiles tightly, counting silently to ten in her head, then again
when she still wishes she could strike the smug look from his face.
Drat. She usually has more control.

“Simmons, I’ve received some … interesting paperwork,” Director Blake begins.

She blinks at him, confused.

“From one Grant Ward,” he carries on, and she starts, fortunate in that he’s looking at the stack of paper on his desk rather than her, since she doesn’t have a poker face of which to speak. She had her tiredness to thank for the genuine bewilderment he’ll read on her face.

“Is… Is that a bad thing?” She wrinkles her brow. Her surprise isn’t unfeigned either. Grant hadn’t mentioned that he would be contacting the university any time soon. In fact, she had expected he’d have waited a little longer into their … relationship. For lack of a better word.

“No,” Director Blake says, looking up at her now, his eyes boring holes into hers. She resists the urge to squirm. She’s not a recalcitrant child, sent to the Headmaster’s office. She shan’t behave as such.

She lifts her chin and blinks at him, waits out his silence.

“No,” he says finally, grudgingly. “No, he has renewed the annual donation. And there’s additional funding.”

“Well, that’s lovely… Isn’t it?”

“Funding specific to your research. Research that hasn’t been of any interest to Ward Enterprises in the all the years the company has been a major donor. And that I would hazard a guess still isn’t, since what I hear from a few little birds is that what he has shown interest in, is one researcher in particular. That is you, Ms. Simmons.”

The use of that particular title feels deliberate, an insult. Like he’s baiting her.

Jemma holds her breath a moment to gather herself, refuses to rise to it.

“And if he is,” she says evenly. “Then I don’t see how it is any of your business.”

“It’s my business so long as it is my university funding in jeopardy.”

“Which it clearly isn’t,” Jemma lifts her chin. “As you yourself said, the annual funding is in place. And if Gra – Mr. Ward wishes to give additional funding toward research, that can only continue to benefit your university, I don’t see how my personal life has any bearing on it.”

“You had better see it doesn’t,” Director Blake says, the threat in his voice clear. She swallows but doesn’t lower her chin. “Yes. You had better see that it doesn’t.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm @thestarfishdancer on Tumblr if you feel like stopping by to say hello! Comments are welcome and feed the Muse. And a fed Muse may still not be a fast Muse, but she's definitely less slow when she's got something to digest. ;)


Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which Grant and Jemma move their fake courtship forward.

Chapter Notes

The Muse has started cooperating on this one again, so hopefully the next update won't come with quite so long a wait! I hope you are still enjoying reading, at least as much as I am enjoying seeing where these two crazy kids want to take their slow burn story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Grant resists the urge to groan aloud as he presses his fingers to his temples, willing away the headache that has dogged him all day. It doesn’t help, nor does the fact that he’s running on so little sleep he doesn’t think it can even count as a nap, thanks to his deceptively-comfortable looking couch. He hasn’t ached this much since those first few weeks of military school, before his body became used to the paces the cadets were put through on the regular. Unfortunately, the unrelenting, stiff torture device that dares to present itself as a sofa isn’t something he can strengthen himself to conquer.

Once everything is in place and he and Jemma are officially married, he’s going to completely refurnish the room. They can say she hated the way it looked, or that they wanted something that was theirs. Whatever. He doesn’t care. So long as neither of them is forced to sleep on it longer than necessary.

Maybe he’ll take it somewhere and set in on fire. He’ll have Margaret look into whether it can be done.

Until then, it will stay a bit of a dilemma. Because as much as he’d love to trade out the couch for a turn on his excellent mattress as per the schedule he and Jemma had worked out, he can’t let her sleep on that godawful thing. She’s the one doing him the favour, payment or not, and he hasn’t forgotten that.

A knock on the door frame breaks him from his thoughts, and he’s not surprised to see Margaret. While she usually uses the intercom feature on the phone for visitors, she doesn’t waste time with the formality when she’s on her own.

“Come in,” he gestures, careful to keep his impatience with the day as a whole out of his voice.

“The Detourneau files you wanted,” she passes them to him, “and a red eye from the shop down the block, to get you through the last of the afternoon.”

“Thank you, Margaret,” he says, taking the paper cup from her hand.

Margaret is worth double her weight in gold. He’s one hundred percent certain that his father would
never have been able to drive the company into near bankruptcy if he had had enough sense to see that Margaret Carter could be far more valuable to the company in a role beyond head of the secretarial pool before he had his fatal heart attack.

The state of things made it easier to slip it from Christian’s hands, of course, but it was barely salvageable by the time Grant was made CEO. A lot of former employees saw the brunt of the effects of Jerry Ward’s reign, and Grant would bet good money a lot of families wouldn’t have suffered if Margaret had been keeping the previous CEO in check.

Fortunately, Grant isn’t nearly as myopic. Her title might be Executive Assistant, but she’s his right-hand and essentially his senior advisor. He trusts her more than he does anyone else in the company. More than anyone else in general.

“Did you need me to move your four o’clock? Perhaps fit you in with your doctor? You are due for a flu shot in the next couple of weeks.”

“No.” Grant frowns. He didn’t think he looked that bad. He’s run longer on less sleep before. Hasn’t needed to in a few years, but age can’t have caught up to him that quickly. He’s thirty-five, not seventy-five. “It’s not the flu, I’m just tired.”

“Tired?”

Tired enough not to think before he opened his big mouth. This whole thing works only when everyone buys the whirlwind romance schtick, and that includes his executive assistant.

“Late night,” he amends. “I’m seeing someone. She…it was a late night.”

“Congratulations,” Margaret says dryly. “Shall I make the usual arrangements with the florist?”


“No?”

“Arrangements with the florist, yes. But not the usual ones. Not roses.”

“No…roses?”

Grant shrugs a little. “They’re done by every guy who doesn’t want to spare five minutes. Hell, I’ve been that guy.”

“But you’re not that guy today?”

“No,” Grant says, letting a wisp of a smile cross his lips. “Not today. Roses say unoriginal at best, and uninterested at worst.”

Margaret, ever the professional, doesn’t let so much of a hint of surprise cross her face, but simply nods sharply, then tilts her head at him. “And?”

“And what?”

“What do you want the flowers to say?”

He purses his lips and nods slowly, thoughtfully, even as he turns over the possibilities in his mind. It’s not as much about what he wants the flowers to say to Jemma so much as what he needs anyone watching to read into them. He taps his pen on the block of post-it notes before making writing three short points in his deliberate scrawl before pushing it toward Margaret.
“Can you find a florist who can work with this? Right,” he smiles at her slightly offended expression. “Of course you can.”

Margaret plucks the post-it from the pad, her eyebrows raising in slight surprise as she glances at what he’s written.

“And the card?”

“Have them write, “Play is the highest form of research.” he says.

“Einstein?” Margaret is trying not to sound incredulous.

“This one is...different. She’s smart.”

“And likes to play?”

“That,” he says, his mouth curving into a slow smirk, “would be telling.”

She opens her mouth but seems to think better of saying anything, turning on her heel and walking in that determined step he knows means she’ll have it sorted before the hour’s out. He slides the files she’s left behind in front of him to begin flipping through, his focus back on his next meeting and his next problem.

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“Holy crap,” Daisy says as she opens the door for Jemma at her knock – or at least what passes for one. With her bags on one arms and the bouquet in the other, she’d had to resort to kind of kicking at it blindly and hoping one of her flatmates was at home. “Of all the days to have a whim to pick up fresh flowers...”

“Oh, I didn’t pick these up,” Jemma blushes as she lets Daisy pull the box that surrounds the vase away with a rustle of plastic, so she can warily toe her shoes off and slip into her house shoes on. She lowers her book bag to the floor and nudges it out of the way before holding her arms out for her flowers again. “Grant sent them to me at work, but they’d get so little light in the shared office, and I thought we might enjoy having some here.”

“Yeah,” Daisy says, handing them back and then following behind Jemma as she rounds the corner to the kitchen and dining area, stopping on the spot. “Only he didn’t just send them to you at work.”

“Oh my,” Jemma breathes. The centre of their small dining table is already adorned with a bouquet just as large as the one she hauled home with her, complete with matching vase.

“I know, right?” Daisy says, nudging Jemma until she moves forward and sets the bouquet down next to the first. “Dude is way into you. You must have seriously rocked his world. Shook him all night long, if the bags under your eyes are any indication.”

“Do I look awful?” Jemma exclaims, alarmed, moving to dig through her purse, hauling out her keys, a receipt and two pens, one of which she drops to the floor while trying to put them back in, then drags out a compact. Daisy smacks it back into her purse, shaking her head, before picking the pen Jemma dropped.


“I am tired,” Jemma sets her purse on the kitchen chair, moving to pull the plastic off her second set of flowers. “I didn’t get much sleep last night – and no, I’m not going to go into details for you any more than Lance, so don’t bother.”
“Fine,” Daisy says. “Not like I need to ask anyway. You were out all night. Not like you slept on the couch.”

“No. No, I certainly did not,” Jemma says, to herself mainly. It comes out unintended, but serves to cement the impression Daisy had anyway.

“Nice.”

Jemma fusses with the cardboard box, trying to flatten it to fit in the recycling while Daisy wags her eyebrows comically.

“Seriously, Jem,” she says when she finally gets a laugh from her friend. “What’s with the mega flowers? Does he like to do something weird? Oh my GAWD, please tell me he likes something weird like to dress up like a Stormtrooper, because that would make my night.”

“Good lord, Daisy, where are you getting these ideas? He’s not exactly a poor man. No one dressed as any cartoon characters –“

“Movie character, that one’s Star Wars, babe.”

“You know I’m more of a Star Trek fan,” Jemma says. “Anyway, no one dressed up as anything. I’m sure he just wanted to send me flowers, and perhaps he thinks I expect something numerous or large given his… status.”

“Dude. Jem. It’s not the number of arrangements or even the size. It’s what’s in them.”

“I don’t…” Jemma shakes her head, wrinkling her forehead. “I don’t track where you’re going with this.”

“The flowers,” Daisy says. “They have a message.”

“Well, yes, I saw the card… wait, did you open it?”

“No, but given how red your cheeks are going right now, I kinda want to. But no, apparently there’s like a whole secret code language for flowers. Like how people send roses for Valentine’s day because they mean love or whatever.”

“You know this how?”

“I was researching spy stuff, for the new job, and got into a Wiki hole a while back, and it was kind of interesting. The irises – I like the choice of white, by the way – reminded me. It’s like the tell, that there’s a message. From there, I did some poking on the internet.”

“You know this how?”

“I was researching spy stuff, for the new job, and got into a Wiki hole a while back, and it was kind of interesting. The irises – I like the choice of white, by the way – reminded me. It’s like the tell, that there’s a message. From there, I did some poking on the internet.”

“Daisy, I do think you’re reading far too much into this.”

“Maybe,” Daisy’s lips quirk into a smirk as she replies. “But then it’s an extreme coincidence that these speak so well together. Seriously, we have the gardenia – which smells amazing, means ‘sweetness’ or ‘secret love’. And then there’s these button-looking things in the pink and white – runcola or something.”

“Ranunculi,” Jemma provides helpfully.

“Thank you, yes,” Daisy says, “ranunculi, which mean that you are radiant with charm. So you’re sweet and radiant and charming, which, obviously. The lavender shade of roses means that he’s enchanted by you or love at first sight – do you see where I’m going with this?”
“Yes, I see, since you’re bloody explaining as you go. Not exactly difficult to follow.” Jemma rolls her eyes fondly.

“Also, hey,” Daisy ignores her, “they’re called ‘grey knights’ so I’m going to read that as him wanting to be your white knight, only not as boring or whatever.”

“Yes, I’m sure the Victorians sent that message.”

“Okay, yeah, I’m stretching it there,” Daisy admits. “But I’ve saved the best two for last, because those goblet-looking white ones are arum lilies and mean arder, and these ones are sweet peas, for delicate pleasure and bliss. Those two basically scream, ‘thank you for the good time’, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m sure I don’t.” Jemma bites her lip and refuses to look Daisy in the eye or say anything further. She can’t afford to get caught in a lie, and she’s quickly figuring out the best way to avoid that with her nosy friends seems to be to avoid answering their questions and let them draw their own conclusions. It certainly helps that her friends have dirty, filthy minds and do all the work on their own.

She shakes her head to herself, letting Daisy push her into the living room and cajole her into having popcorn for dinner, confident she won’t spoil a plan before it’s even started if she lets her friend chatter away.

/////“Dr. Simmons!”

Phil’s cheerful voice breaks through Jemma’s musings, as she ceases her purposeful stride in front of Grant’s building, hoisting her grocery bag higher onto her hip only to huff when her small duffle starts to slip down her arm.

“Oh, please call me Jemma,” she says, holding back a groan when her bag slides to the crook of her elbow despite her best efforts. “I feel very much like I’m still at work otherwise.”

“Very well… Ms. .Jemma,” Phil beams, taking the paper bag from her. She shoots him a ‘thanks’, hoisting her bag back up. “I hope this means you won’t be getting another late cab home.”

“Oh, it’s perfectly safe, I’m sure,” Jemma says. She’d been thankful for the excuse of Grant’s meetings with shareholders across the globe at ungodly hours of the morning, because it meant the last two nights she’s gotten a goodnight’s sleep at home. That excuse won’t fly tonight, so she’s packed enough clothing and melatonin to hopefully see her through the weekend.

“I’m here to meet Grant,” Jemma says after a beat of silence. “Only he texted to say his meetings ran late and I don’t think he’s arrived home yet.”

“No, he hasn’t,” Phil says, and Jemma nods.

“Alright, then… do you have a coffee shop you’d recommend nearby, where I can wait? Or perhaps I can just stay in the lobby?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Phil’s ever present smile only grows wider. “Mr. Ward said to send you up, and he’s left you a key.”
“A key?” Jemma says, stupidly.

“So you can let yourself in,” Phil smiles at her kindly.

“Oh,” Jemma says, trying not to let the relief show on her face that they haven’t reached the key swapping place in their pretend romance yet. Though, she thinks as her heart begins to pound a little in her ears, she and Grant should probably discuss those kind of milestones and timelines.

Oh god. She realises that she’s going to have to bring him to meet her roommates at some point. While it certainly makes sense to spend more time at his place, given his lack of other people in his space, she can’t avoid it forever, not if they are going to buy the infatuated bit.

“Jemma?” Phil is beginning to look at her in concern.

“Sorry,” she smiles weakly. “Just a little lost in thought. Can I?” she gestures and Phil holds out her bag, then hesitates.

“Are you sure you can manage?”

“Oh yes,” she says. “It’s not heavy, just a few things. I thought I could make Grant dinner, but I wasn’t sure he’d be stocked on what I need, since-“

“Since he usually orders in, and when he doesn’t, it’s because he’s eating out?”

“Yes, I suppose you’d be quite familiar with that. Anyway, while I’m not exactly the calibre of cook you’d find at Per se, per se” Jemma giggles a little at her joke, “I competent enough.”

“I’m sure Mr. Ward will appreciate it, having someone take care of him for a change,” Phil is smiling at her widely. “I’m not sure I’ve seen any evidence of home-cooked meal since he moved in.”

“Well,” Jemma ducks her head, her heart twinging a little at the thought. “I hope he likes lemon chicken piccata, anyway.”

“I’m sure he will,” Phil smiles, holding open the door for her, then swiping his card to send her to the loft before resuming his place at the door.

///// 

Grant is annoyed by the time he makes his way up the elevator. It’s been an extremely long day, starting in the wee hours because of a series of overseas calls, followed by an emergency meeting that ran late because of a shipment issue that has Christian’s signature sabotage all over it. He’d managed to get things sorted out and the company won’t see a dent in the profits over this, thankfully, but he’s been on the go for 18 hours straight, and he’s feeling it.

There are positive outcomes, he reminds himself even as the chime sounds to let him know it is time to stop slumping against walls of the elevator. There was no long-term impact to the company. He’s tired enough that sleeping on the couch probably won’t pose much of a problem. And when he texted Jemma to apologize again for running late and ask if she wouldn’t mind ordering dinner, she’d sent a return text to say she’d already taken care of it, complete with a smiley face emoji. It’s cute, and it’s nice to come home to one less thing to have to worry about.

He unlocks and opens the door, hearing the strains of music from the direction of the kitchen, a bluesy, slow song. He stops just outside where he would be visible through the entry, trying to make out if the melancholy tune is one he recognizes. It’s not, nor is the voice. What is familiar, however, is the voice singing along softly, less polished but pretty in its sweetness, dropping into a hum every
now and again when the words fail her.

It also smells incredible. Like butter and garlic, and a hint of something citrus. He thought he knew all the best places that delivered to his neighbourhood, but clearly Jemma has an in somewhere he doesn’t know about. Thank God. He’s starving. Margaret had offered to send Valerie out to grab him something no less than three times, but he’d been too focused to even think of eating until it was all over.

He walks in, leans against the doorframe, and gives a small wave when Jemma looks over. (“Hello,” he says and smiles.

“Hi,” says Jemma, smiling slightly before looking back to the pot she’s stirring.

“Not takeout.”

“Nope.” She lifts the big wooden spoon. “Something different.”

He makes his way to the cupboard to pull a glass from the cupboard, before hesitating, his hand hovering between two sets of stemware.

“Should I open a bottle of white, or red?” he asks.

“Oh,” Jemma says. “There’s an open white in the fridge, if you like. I brought it for the sauce. If it isn’t to your taste, of course, you don’t have to drink it. But you can. If you want.”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” Grant turns his head to hide his smile at her rambling, wrapping his fingers around the stem of two glasses. He sets them on the counter, then makes his way to the fridge. She glances up at that, and he notices that she has a smear of sauce on the side of her face that was cast in shadow. “You’ve got…”

He gestures to his cheek as he pulls out the open bottle of white and pours it into the glasses.

“Oh,” she says, rubbing and it with the back of her hand and missing it completely.

“Here,” he says, stepping up and handing her a glass with one hand, smoothing his thumb to wipe it away with the other. Her skin is soft and warm. He clears his throat lightly and steps slightly back as she ducks her head, moves a strand of hair behind her ear, before looking up at him beneath her lashes. He opens his mouth and closes it again, not sure of what he wanted to say or what came over him.

The timer on the stove beeps insistently.

“That’ll will be the noodles,” she turns abruptly back to the stove, busying herself with the pot.

“I’ll just,” he waves toward the dining room, grabbing his own glass and making his way to the table. He definitely doesn’t flee. Definitely.

Chapter End Notes

Comments make me ridiculously happy, feed the Muse, and also make the sun shine a little longer during the day, probably. You can also always come say hello on Tumblr, where I'm @thestarfishdancer!
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which the couch in Grant's living room is still ridiculously uncomfortable.

Chapter Notes

I know, I know, I'm behind on replying on comments. But at least this chapter is ready!
:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“So,” Jemma says, circling her fork through the sauce in her plate absently. “We should probably start to talk about…”

“About?” Grant says, popping another bite in his mouth. She’s fairly proud of her efforts in the kitchen, because this is his second helping, and she was very generous with the first portion.

She bites her lip, wondering where to start, making another winding revolution of her plate. Grant sets down his own utensils to catch her wrist. Startled, Jemma’s eyes fly to his, before she realises the scratching sound that had been annoying her had been by her own hand.

“Sorry,” she says, dropping the fork with a clatter and thrusting her hands into her lap, where she knots them together to keep them still.

“It’s fine, Jemma. You were saying?”

“We should start to talk about timelines,” Jemma says. “For the next steps to … how we’re going to work toward… you know.”

“Getting married?” Grant sounds amused.

“No! I mean, yes. Well sort of. Like the key thing.”

“The key thing?”

“You left the doorman a key for me, so I could let myself in tonight. Is it for just tonight? Do I give it back? Or am I supposed to keep it? And am I supposed to give you a key, because you haven’t even met my flatmates yet, so I certainly can’t give you a key until we’ve done that, and if I do give you a key, then they are clearly going to tell me we’re moving too quickly, and… my parents, you’ll have to meet my parents.”

“Breathe,” Grant says, then holds out her wine glass – which he’d topped up sometime during her mini meltdown – until she takes it and takes a swallow that is definitely more than a small sip. His lips press together, and she narrows her eyes at him, because she’s quite sure that he’s laughing at her. She can’t confirm it, of course; he’s very good at schooling his features, she’s noticed. It’s likely very helpful to him in his business dealings. And quite possibly at poker, if he indulges in the game.
“Let’s start small,” Grant continues. “The key is yours to keep. But unless you think we need to overnight at your place…”

He raises an eyebrow in question, and she shakes her head. “No, no. I don’t think that’s necessary. Not when you have a place to yourself.”

“Then I don’t need a key to yours. But yes, I should meet your friends.”

“Preferably doing something where they can’t interrogate you,” Jemma worries at her lip. “Or me. Most especially where they can’t interrogate me.”

“Still worried it won’t look real? You’re doing fine.”

“In front of strangers and your doorman,” Jemma counters. “Aren’t you worried your friends will see right through you, too?”

“Won’t be an issue,” Grant waves his hand dismissively. “So, what were you thinking, with your friends? Something with the group, or did you want to start with one or two? Double date with Bobbi and Hunter if they are not pretending they aren’t dealing with each other again? Meet up for lunch near campus with Fitz?”

“Group is probably better,” she says slowly. “They’re all nosy and I’ll never get any peace until they’ll all met you and can compare notes. Might as well pull the plaster off in one go. I suppose you could meet us for drinks… no that won’t do, too much opportunity to ask questions.”

“I think you’re going to find there’s not really away around that, in a group activity, at least not one…”

“That’s a meet-the-boyfriend event?” Jemma’s dismay is plain on her face. Grant just nods, and she sighs. “There is the one thing we do, but I am not sure it would be something you’d want to come.”

“Try me,” Grant says.

“Well,” Jemma squirms a little in her seat. “You could come to Bad Movie night?”

“Bad movie night?”

“Yes,” Jemma nods. “I can’t remember exactly how it began, but now we try to get together every month or so. We make popcorn and take turns trying to find a movie worse than the last. Last time Daisy found one about a giant octopus and a shark. A mega shark,” she amends. “They fight.”

“And you just sit there and… watch these movies?”

“Well, and poke fun. Mostly the others,” Jemma says. “They’re better at it than I am.”

“I can work with that,” Grant says thoughtfully. “When’s the next one?”

“I’ll have to check with the others. It’s Fitz’s turn to set things up, we’re due to have on by the end of the month, so…”

“Well, let me know, and I’ll schedule around it.”

“Alright,” Jemma says.

“We should probably do something other than stay in tomorrow. Unless there’s work you have to get done?”
“I’ve some marking I need to do, but it shouldn’t take me long. I got through most of the quizzes earlier,” Jemma says. “What did you want to do?”

“There’s a few different things we could do,” Grant replies. “We can go over our options tonight, or we can figure things out tomorrow if you’d rather call it a night.”

“Tomorrow sounds good to me. I’m rather knackered.” Jemma gestures at his now empty plate. “Did you want more?”

“Thank you, but I’ve definitely had more than my share,” Grant says. “That was very good.”

“Thank you.”

“You know you don’t have to cook for me, though, right? It’s not… I don’t expect you to…”

“No, no, I know,” Jemma says. “But I don’t expect you to pay for every meal either, and I like cooking.”

“Oh. Don’t worry about the dishes, either. My cleaning service comes tomorrow and you can just leave… okay, now you look horrified.”

“I’m not leaving dirty dishes for someone else to do.”

“It’s fine. I don’t normally leave dishes for them, no, but it is one of the services the company offers and I’m already paying them to be here, so…”

“No,” Jemma counters. “I made the dishes, and they aren’t paid to clean up after me.”

“It’s not a big deal, Jemma.”

“It is to me,” she replies simply. “I’d rather spend the fifteen minutes it will take to finish the dishes that can’t go in the dishwasher, then to be cavalier about someone else’s work.”

“Okay,” Grant says, then pauses. “Is there something I can do to help?”

“I don’t mean… I’m not criticizing,” Jemma cringes. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“Well, I’ll feel like a complete ass, sitting there while you clean up. That’s not your job either. And while I might not have to do it, I do know how to wash the dishes.”

“No,” Jemma says. “If I wash, you can dry?”

“I can do that.”

“Thank you,” Jemma says. “For not pushing on this.”

“You’re welcome,” Grant replies, taking his plate and making his way into the kitchen.

“And,” Jemma pauses in the doorway, feeling suddenly nervous. “For the flowers. I know I texted to say so, and I know they are part of this whole… thing… but they were really lovely. So. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Grant says, a little gruffly. The silence stretches a moment between them, then he clears his throat to break it. “So… Dishes? Then I was thinking I’d crash, unless you wanted to watch a movie on the big screen or something.”

“No,” Jemma shakes her head. “No, I think I’ll just… finish those quizzes and read in bed. I don’t
need to take over your temporary bedroom as well as the Master.”
“I don’t want you to come over here just feel locked away in the bedroom, either.”
“I know that,” Jemma says. “Now, I found the dish soap and a rag earlier, but I don’t know where
the towels to dry them are so, if you want to grab one while I start running the sink?”
“Right,” Grant says. “I’ll just… right.”

Jemma makes her way as quietly as she can from the bedroom to the kitchen in the dark, trying to
keep even her footsteps as silent as possible. She’s feeling very confident in her ability to make it
there to heat up some milk as a last dash hope to try and get her melatonin pills to kick in.

She’s made it almost all the way past the sitting room when it all comes crashing down around her,
quite literally, as she misjudges the distance between her and the side table with a decorative vase.
The corner meets her hip sharply, the words “bloody hell” come out of her mouth in a yelp before
she can prevent them, and the vase teeters precariously. Her hands dart out to catch it, only to knock
it off instead, finishing off the whole affair with a resounding thump. The only silver lining is that it
doesn’t shatter.

“Jemma? Are you alright?”

Grant’s voice is concerned, and does not at all sound like she’s roused him from a deep sleep. Or a
sleep at all.

“Yes, yes,” she tries to keep her voice in a hushed whisper anyway, as though she didn’t make
enough bloody noise to wake up the whole building. “Just ran into the table, is all.”

She pats around on the ground until her fingers find the vase, then she sets it gingerly back in its spot.
Then she turns and squints into the darkness, trying to make out his figure on the couch. Only he’s
not on the couch. He’s sitting up next to it, and she thinks for a moment that she’s startled him into
rolling off, only to realise there was no noise evidence of any such thing.

“Are you sleeping on the floor?”

“Oh,” Grant says. “No?”

“No? Because it looks like you are!”

“Why are you whispering?” Grant whispers.

“Because I thought you were asleep! On the couch!”

“I wasn’t.”

“I can see that!”

“I mean, I wasn’t sleeping.”

“Nor were you on the couch!”

“The floor seemed like it might be more comfortable.” Grant sighs, leans over and flicks on the light.

“More comfort – for heaven’s sake, Grant. Why on earth didn’t you say something? There’s no use
in two of us not sleeping. You take your bed, and I’ll take the couch.” She nods to herself, then
walks determined over to plunk down on the seat, holding her hand out for his blanket and pillow.
“Jemma, no,” Grant shakes his head. “I can’t let you sleep on this thing. Or try. I don’t think there’s a person on the planet who could. The floor is actually a tiny bit better than that thing.”

Jemma opens her mouth to protest, but he cuts her off. “You’ll be as achy and stiff as I was the other day, and I’ll feel like an asshole. Look, I’ve had to sleep with nothing but a thin foamy between me and the cold ground at military school. I can manage on the floor for now. And tomorrow we can find a mattress that works for you.”

“The mattress is fine. The bed is lovely. Which is why you should go sleep in it.”

“What is it, then? Is it the laundry detergent? I’ll have the staff switch it up.”

“It’s not… I told you, the bed is lovely. I just… It takes me a while to settle into new places, and yours is much quieter.”

“Quieter? And that … keeps you awake?”

“It’s silly,” Jemma shrugs, “but yes. I’m used to hearing my flatmates moving about, or snoring through the walls. The upstairs neighbours watching television at night. The cars going by in the street. Even when I travel, it’s hotels with friends or had to room with a colleague… oh, for heaven’s sake. Well, there’s an easy solution, isn’t there?”

“I’m sorry, I’m a little lost here. Not sure where I follow.”

“Come on,” Jemma says, snagging his wrist and pulling until he stands up.

“What are you… You know you don’t have to drag me, I’m very capable of walking on my own. Been doing it for over three decades.”

“Very funny,” Jemma says. She does stop pulling on his arm, though keeps her loose grip on his wrist until they are both standing in the doorway of the master bedroom. “See?” She gestures.

“Um, yes,” Grant says slowly, turning to look at her like she’s suddenly revealed herself a madwoman. Though perhaps in his estimation she has. “It’s a bed, the one we agreed would be yours for the first rotation.”

“Grant,” she says patiently. “You don’t sleep well on the couch, or on the floor, and you refuse to let me even attempt it because it is supposedly so uncomfortable, despite the fact that I can’t sleep in this very large bed because I’m not used to being quite so alone in all this space.”

“I get all that,” Grant says. “But I’m still not letting you take the couch until we have an excuse to buy something that doesn’t double as a torture device.”

“You must be very tired,” Jemma says dryly. “Otherwise I’m sure a man as smart as yourself would have already come to the apparent conclusion. We can share. It’s a very large bed.”

Jemma is all rationale now, ploughing forward. “I don’t take up a great deal of room, and if you’re worried about your virtue,” if her voice sounds a bit mocking, well she’s very tired, “I can assure you, I’m very good at keeping my hands to myself.”

Grant doesn’t say anything, just listens, though his eyes on her are soft for all the intensity of his gaze.

“Grant, I’m exhausted,” she admits. “I just want to sleep. And it isn’t as though we might not get called upon to share later. If we visit my parents for example, are we going to try to sneak one of us onto the sofa during the night? Or if we travel and the hotel staff becomes chatty about a newlywed
couple who don’t share a bed?”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m already uncomfortable, and you’re already uncomfortable. If this doesn’t work, we can move to something else, but in the meantime, don’t you think we should at least try. Where are you going?”

“To turn the living room light out,” Grant says, and sighs. “I’m too tired to argue with you, so sure. If it doesn’t work, we can figure something else out in the morning.”

“If you aren’t back in two minutes…”

“You’ll be right back out to bully me back here, I know.” The corner of Grant’s mouth lifts in a slight smile. Jemma doesn’t have it in her to be offended. Bullying might be a strong word, but then again, she did practically manhandle him.

As promised, Grant does return before the promised deadline.

“Do you have a preferred side?” Jemma asks when he tilts his head at her expectantly.

“Left,” he says, gesturing to the side closest to the door. “Does that work for you?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Jemma says, crossing over to crawl in, shuffling herself to curl close to the edge. She sits up and glances over when he doesn’t crawl in right away, finding him pulling the decorative pillows from where she’d stacked them in the corner, placing them on the bed. “What on earth are you doing? Are you making a pillow wall?”

“I still think it is important we have boundaries.”

“So you’re literally building one. Out of pillows.”

“What else is this weird tube one good for? Or any of them. Nice they might finally have a purpose.” He grins at her, his expression turning teasing. It’s a side he seems to rarely show; a pity really, since it is such a good look on him.

“You’re the one who bought them. Why would you buy them if you don’t even want them?”

“I just picked a duvet cover I liked, the decorator did the whole,” he waves his hand over the line of cushions down the middle of the bed, “thing.”

“This is very unnecessary, you know. I’m a very still sleeper. I don’t kick or put my cold feet on anyone’s legs.”

“Uh uh,” he says, taking on that teasing lilt again. “That sounds exactly like what someone with toes made of ice would say before attacking me with them in the middle of the night. Nope. I’m sticking with barricade for safety.”

She snags her pillow and swings it at him playfully.

“See, I’m already under attack. I bet you do kick, freezing feet.”

She smiles at him and shakes her head, tucking her makeshift weapon back against the headboard. “Goodnight, Grant,” she says, and reaches over to turn out the light. She curls onto her side and closes her eyes, feeling absurdly comforted by the even sound of his breathing, even though she’s half certain he’s planning to sneak back onto the couch of doom once she’s asleep. She means to tell him that if he’s truly unable to platonically share the bed, he can always see if the bedroom floor is as
comfortable the living room, but she’s asleep before the thought can do more than flit through her mind.

Chapter End Notes

I’m @thestarfishdancer on Tumblr if you want to drop by to say hi there, or you can also leave a comment here. I know I am late replying to them, but I do, because I love comments. They feed the Muse. <3
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

In which - surprise! - bed-sharing has occurred.

Because OF COURSE IT DID.

Chapter Notes

My apologies on the wait on this one and for the lack of reply to comments so far. Real life has been crazy for both me and my beta reader. But I'm keeping on keeping on, and while it might take me ages, the comments and the chapters WILL come. Hearts to you, readers.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Grant wakes up to the soft haze of morning, the thin gap where the curtains hadn’t quite been pulled closed letting a ray of light illuminate the bedroom. He sits up slowly, trying carefully not to wake Jemma, who is breathing softly and evenly at the edge of the mattress on the opposite side of the bed.

He’d thought about going back to the living room once she’d fallen asleep. Boundaries were important and he’d negotiated them – keeping separate bank accounts even though he’d be covering Jemma’s expenses as his wife, negotiated types of public displays of affection, et cetera – into their contract for that reason. They were there to make sure expectations were clear, that lines didn’t get blurred, so no one got hurt. He wasn’t his older brother or father and hell, probably his grandfather at that, not caring who he destroyed so long as he was the one who wound up ahead. It might be the Ward way, even the easier way at times, but he’d promised himself long ago that was the one line he’d never cross.

Separate sleeping arrangements were supposed to keep their business arrangement just that, business. She hadn’t been wrong, though. There was no point faking a relationship in public if they were going to get busted the first time some hotel chambermaid had to make two beds.

She’s the stillest sleeper with whom he’s ever shared a bed. She’s in exactly the position he imagined she’d taken after turning out the light, her back to him, one hand tucked under her cheek while the other is curled slightly around the side of the mattress, as though to hold herself in place. In fact, he’s pretty sure that, the teasing he’d done the night before aside, he’s the more restless sleeper of the two. The fact that he’d woken up with one arms slung around a red and grey cushion and the bottom half of his pillow wall nudged over into Jemma’s space certainly suggested as much.

He pushes the covers off his legs carefully, but even the movement doesn’t have her stirring. He swings himself out of the bed, padding carefully to his dresser to pull out his running gear, before making his way to the bathroom to change even though he has a sneaking suspicion Jemma won’t wake up even if he dropped the whole drawer on his bare foot and cursed up a storm.

He hesitates a moment. He’s not used to leaving someone behind in his bed, of having to take
anyone else into consideration outside of work decisions, but he also doesn’t want her to worry or feel unsure of herself if she wakes up and he’s not in the penthouse. Nor does he want to wake her up. He settles for finding a scrap of paper on which to scrawl her a note, which he leaves propped on the lamp where she’s sure to see it, letting her know he’s gone for a run, and a time she might expect him back.

He pauses for a moment in the doorway before he leaves, compelled for some reason to stay a moment to watch the rise and fall of her breathing, her back to him and, he suspects, that ghost of a smile on her sleeping face.

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He hears the shower running when he gets back to the penthouse. He can’t help but grin when he makes his way in the bedroom to hear Jemma singing some happy pop song he’s vaguely familiar with, though he can’t quite place it since most of the words are drowned out by the rushing water. She’s clearly taking advantage of the setting with all the jets.

He pulls off his sweat-soaked shirt and tosses it in the hamper, making a note to thank Jemma for making the bed. Even the decorative pillows are arranged as the designer most likely intended; while he isn’t in the habit of leaving an unmade bed, he’s always just left them on a chair for the housekeeper to deal with.

Thinking better of walking around bare-chested, he grabs a t-shirt out of his dresser, then a clean pair of sweats to wear until the Master bathroom is free.

He’s just turning the blender on when Jemma makes her way into the kitchen, clad in a pair of jeans and a sweater that he suspects she bought only recently, as it is less faded than the casual clothing she’s worn to date, and she’s tugging absently at the hem as though she’s not used to how it fits.

He wonders a bit about that; if she’s self-conscious about her wardrobe given the kinds of places he’s likely to take her, he’s going to want to remedy that. How to do it without offending her is the question. It will be a bit easier once they are married, and he has reason to provide her with a credit card. Then again, he has a feeling that getting her to spend his money, even on things she wouldn’t need if not for playing the role of his wife, is going to be difficult. It’s kind of a good problem to have, when it comes down to it. There’s some sort of relief in knowing that he isn’t jumping from the fireplace into the fire in an effort to keep Ward Enterprises safe from Christian’s hands.

“Should I make you one?” he says over the sound of the motor, making sure to keep a perfectly straight face even as she visibly balks at the green concoction he’s making himself for breakfast. Kale smoothies are not for everyone, he knows. “I think I have enough wheatgrass for a second.”

“Oh,” she stumbles, clearly stalling for a polite response. He grins rather than draw it out, then gestures at a paper bag on the counter.

“Kidding. I picked up some scones from the bakery down the corner, to go with your tea, and there should be some jams in the fridge.”

“Oh, thank GOD,” Jemma breathes, and he laughs out loud. “You, Grant Ward, are a troll.”

“Can’t say anyone’s accused me of that before,” he says, turning off the blender and pouring the drink into a large glass. He rinses the blender in the sink before loading it into the dishwasher.

“Not to your face, but I bet they’ve thought it,” Jemma says cheerfully. “Ooh, real scones! These do look lovely. Would you like me to make on up for you, or are you happy with just your green goo?”
“Hey, my green goo is super good for me. It’s going to keep me fortified for the day, because it’s full of nutrients. I’m not sure what your breakfast is full of.”

“Deliciousness,” she says around a mouthful of scone, peering in the fridge until she finds a jam that appears to be to her satisfaction, one of the tiny jars he thinks came as part of a gift basket a realtor sent him after his last property flip.

“You don’t know that this smoothie isn’t delicious,” he counters. She pins him with a look. “Well, it isn’t terrible-tasting, anyway.”

“Not terrible does not equal delicious,” she says, moving around him to fill the fancy tea machine and starting it brewing before making her way to the dining table with her plate of scones, her jam, and her utensils.

Grant grabs his tablet and follows her in, setting himself next to where she’s spread out her marking. It’s an unexpected boon, he finds, that they can work side by side comfortably. She doesn’t feel the need to interrupt him just because the silence has stretched out, and he knows that isn’t completely common. The quiet scratching of her pen as she jots notes, with the occasional hum of thought, is fairly soothing. He finds himself hoping she doesn’t find him a distraction, especially when this is going to be their future of sorts over the next two years.

She even goes about making her tea quietly. He doesn’t hear her come back until she’s settling the mug of coffee he’s forgotten in front of him, one she’s clearly freshened from the pot because there’s steam wafting from the top.

When the last of his breakfast shake and coffee are gone, he leaves her to her work while he showers, shaves, and dresses for the day. He throws on a pair of jeans in deference to her own casual wear choices, and makes a note to scratch going to the opera off the list options he’s got for their “date”. As visible as an appearance might make them in the gossip columns, Jemma’s going to need to be comfortable first, and that means easing her into the more public aspects of his life. No, if this is going to work, he’s going to have to start thinking more along the lines of what he’d do to really pursue a woman like Jemma, not what he’d do to make it look like he’s pursuing a woman like Jemma.

This faking dating thing was complicated. Thankfully, he’d never backed down from a challenge before, and this wasn’t going to be the place he started.

She’s still marking her papers when he’s finished dressing, but the pile is significantly smaller. She glances up at him when he enters the dining room, shaking her hand out as though to rid herself of a writer’s cramp.

“You look like you could use a break,” he says. She looks down at her papers, chewing on her lower lip, obviously deciding if she’s at a good place to leave off. She must decide that she is, because she nods and shoves the papers away from her.

“You have a lot of marking, usually?” His brow furrows as it dawns on him. “I thought you were research-funded.”

“Oh, I am,” she nods. “It’s not my class, really. The professor’s been ill, and I’ve subbed in because it was a bit much to ask a TA.”

“Wait, doesn’t the TA start the grading, then, normally?”

Jemma grimaces, and he waits patiently to encourage her to continue. “Normally, yes,” she
concedes. “But the dean insisted it be me, and since he’s my boss… here I am.”

“Yeah, I’ve met him,” Grant reminds her. “He’s a piece of work.”

“Yes, well,” she sighs. “He’s not particularly thrilled that my research isn’t likely to produce anything particularly lucrative for the university, and rather than give him more excuses to try and undercut my resources… well, sometimes I take on things outside my normal capacity as a researcher, is all.”

“I thought you had dedicated funding,” Grant says.

“I do,” Jemma responds. “But it covers the bare bones, really, and if Dr. Pierce is going to find a way to squeeze what he can out of me or squeeze me out.”

“Wow.” Grant frowns. “At least that will change, once we get married and I fund the… you didn’t up the figures.”

“No,” she says, but waving it away. “Oh, please don’t look at me as though… It’s already a great deal of money, Grant. It will allow me to continue my research, to work toward maybe finding a solution that will save a great deal of pain and suffering. That’s invaluable, to me anyway.”

“Jemma.”

“Let’s change the subject,” she says brightly. “You said last night you had a few options for what to do today?”

He doesn’t press the issue, and he’s not even sure why there’s a niggling feeling growing in his gut that he should push her to negotiate for herself better. The deal works out very well for him, and he’s spent years working toward making sure the bigger advantage is always his, and the wider the gap is in his favour, the better. This is no different, he tells himself, and she’s perfectly happy with the arrangement. Nothing’s broken. That’s all that’s needed. So he takes the shift in subject and ignores the voice that wants to suggest this is something he should fix.

“Yeah,” he says. “I figure you aren’t likely to want to play hooky on Monday,” she shakes her head to confirm his thinking, “so whisking you to Paris is probably out, even if you happened to have your passport on you.”

She chokes on the gulp of tea she was taking at his suggestion. He crosses the room to pat her gently on the back until her coughing is under control.

“You can’t have seriously been considering Paris,” she says hoarsely.

“It’s romantic,” he protests. “City of lights and all that. Just wanted to throw it out there.”

“It’s too much,” she says, her eyes blown wide. He nods, doing his best to project that he’s hearing her. He doesn’t want to scare her away.

“Okay,” he says. “We’ll save Paris for later. But we can still get out of the city if you want.”

“If you suggest we jet off anywhere out of state, I will throw something at you.”

“Noted,” he says. “It’s a little late in the season to go apple picking, but the leaves are supposed to be pretty spectacular right about now. We could make a day trip somewhere?”

“That sounds doable,” she says. “And rather nice, actually. Where were you thinking?”
“The Cloisters are supposed to be really beautiful right now. Or if you don’t mind venturing out a little further, we could head to Sleepy Hollow or even the Hudson Valley, if we wanted to do a vineyard tour. That might make for a bit of a later night, though.”

“Oh, can we do Sleepy Hollow? I’ve always wanted to go,” Jemma says.

“Sleepy Hollow it is, then,” Grant says. “It’s a date.”

Jemma rolls her eyes, but without malice. “Do you want me to pack a lunch or some snacks?”

“Sure, maybe some snacks, if you don’t mind,” Grant says, pulling out his phone to scroll through the town’s visitor page. “There’s a few places to choose from for meals. There’s even a place that does afternoon tea.” Jemma’s face absolutely lights up. “I think we have a winner for lunch, then.”

“Yes, please,” Jemma says. “Don’t fret, I won’t make you eat a cucumber sandwich if you don’t want to.”

“And I appreciate that. Do you need to finish up, first, or…?”

“No, they’ll keep until tomorrow,” Jemma says. “And I could use a break. I’ll just tidy up and then poke through the cupboards to see what we can take along.”

“Sounds good,” Grant says. “I’ll make arrangements for a car, then, and we can leave in a half hour, if that works?”

“It does,” Jemma says.

“You might want to put on an extra layer of two,” he suggests. “Because I have a feeling you’re not going to want to stay in the warmth of the car when you can be out playing in the leaves.”

“Hmm,” Jemma smiles, beginning to shuffle her papers together, then grabs her briefcase to start tucking them neatly inside. “It’s almost as though you’ve met me.”

“I’m not going to take any selfies in a pile, just so you know. You’re on your own for that.”

“Well see,” Jemma calls back over her shoulder as she makes her way to the Master bedroom. “I’m very persuasive.”

The laughter echoes in her voice, and he has a sneaking suspicion that she’s not wrong, and he’s going to end up half buried in the leaves with her before the day is out. Somehow, though, the idea doesn’t sound so bad at all.

Chapter End Notes

Comments keep me going on days when the cold and dark (both literally and figuratively, it’s still winter - second winter? wintersies?- where I’m from) drag me down and I find myself circling the drain.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

In which Grant and Jemma go on an outing

Chapter Notes

Apologies for taking so long. There's been a lot going on lately, between my job being insanely busy, my beta's job being insanely busy, and some other real life stuff that just didn't loan itself to writing. But I'm keeping calm and carrying on, and this next chapter is finally done! Many thanks to my lovely beta who helps me keep the story on track (she's a real life friend, not a fandom friend, and I'd be lost without her for many reasons). Any mistakes left over are mine; I've done my best to correct things, but sometimes things get missed, especially when I'm reading what I THINK I wrote instead of what is actually on the page.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The drive to Sleepy Hollow had been quiet, but not uncomfortable, Jemma was relieved to find. She was deterred from the plan to marry Grant so he could save his company and she could continue her research to spare families the pain that her own had faced, of course. But the coming two years would certainly be made much more difficult if every time she and Grant were alone for more than five minutes, things descended into the depths of awkwardness. The two of them could be friends through this. And then they could part friends, when it was all over. No harm done, even if she would be deceiving those closest to her, lying to her roommates and parents and…

Best not to dwell on that.

Better to dwell on their day together, starting with the journey in what was a very, very nice car. She was deterred from the plan to marry Grant so he could save his company and she could continue her research to spare families the pain that her own had faced, of course. But the coming two years would certainly be made much more difficult if every time she and Grant were alone for more than five minutes, things descended into the depths of awkwardness. The two of them could be friends through this. And then they could part friends, when it was all over. No harm done, even if she would be deceiving those closest to her, lying to her roommates and parents and…

Best not to dwell on that.

Better to dwell on their day together, starting with the journey in what was a very, very nice car. She’d been surprised to find that Grant didn’t intend for them to take the usual town car and driver. Instead, it was just the two of them in the shiny grey sports car. A Maserati. It suited him. Understated, yet sleek. Undisguised, unapologetic luxury, and yet somehow not ostentatious.

He’d offered to let her choose the music, but since she wasn’t familiar with stations, she’d deferred to him. After a few quick flips through his pre-sets, they’d spent the hour to the small town with the strains of classic rock as the background. She’d even sometimes found herself humming along quietly without hardly noticing. She’d always been a sucker for Janis Joplin.

He’d navigated the traffic expertly, too. When she’d commented on it, he’d merely shrugged and admitted he got more work out of the way on the commute when someone else was driving, but that he actually preferred being behind the wheel.

That shouldn’t surprise her, either; her sort-of fiancé (what was the term for a future fake husband, anyway?) was always in control. She wondered, not for the first time, what he’d make of her friends, when they finally met, of the joyful chaos that was so unlike the world he seemed to have built for himself. Controlled.Handled. Everything simply … managed.
She really had to appreciate then, just how unfettered she felt by him. He was clearly making an effort for her benefit, not to default to managing her. He made sure she had choices, kept her own measure of control and comfort.

They’d found the tea house fairly easily, thankfully, since she was very ready for more caffeine by the time they’d arrived. While it wasn’t exactly the same as the afternoon tea she might find in a shop back home, or at her parents’ place, for that matter, the tea house still felt a bit like a balm to her soul. It relieved some of the lingering homesickness that had faded over the years but never entirely left. After their luncheon, Grant had been amenable to her suggestion they go exploring, which was how they found themselves ambling easily down the walking trail that followed the path of an old aqueduct, her mittened hand tucked in the crook of his elbow.

“Thank you, again,” Jemma breaks the silence. “For agreeing to the tea house for lunch. I know it isn’t exactly… well, your cup of tea.”

“You’re welcome,” Grant replies. “But you really don’t have to thank me. I don’t mind eating a sandwich now and again. I know the whole “Ward family” thing can make it seem like we can’t survive unless our food is sprinkled with gold or served with a side of diamonds, but that’s really not the case.”

“I know,” Jemma says. “I just … appreciate your willingness to accommodate my own tastes at the expense of yours, is all.”

“Well, it’s no “green goo”, but the food was good,” Grant quips. Jemma smacks his arm playfully, her eyes widening when she realises she’s swatted him as easily as she might Fitz or Daisy. Only he isn’t either of them. Her eyes dart up, but he only looks amused at her, smiling down in a way that seems almost fond.

“Speaking of food…” Grant starts, looking at her meaningfully.

“Are you hungry already?” Jemma says. “Just when you were saying you were fine with a sandwich, too!”

“No,” Grant shakes his head at her even as he thoughtfully tugs her slightly to the left of the path, where the ground is a bit more even. “I know we hadn’t really discussed it, but I’ve got a meeting in Boston this week, and I won’t be back in time for Thanksgiving, if you were thinking of doing something together for the holiday.”

“Oh, right,” Jemma says. “I forgot about that.”

“You forgot?”

“British,” she explains with a smile, waving her hand as though to bat the idea away. “Thanksgiving is not really a thing for me.”

“You don’t do anything with your friends, then?”

“Not normally, no,” Jemma says. “Three of us are ex-pats, you see. The others… Well, Mack usually drives up to have dinner with his family. Bobbi might had made us do something if she weren’t stuck on nights again, I suppose, but since she is…”

“And Daisy?”

“Um, not sure, to be honest,” Jemma says. “We didn’t know her last Thanksgiving. I’m not sure what her traditions might be, or if she has any. Certainly she hasn’t brought it up.”
She trails off, worrying at her lip. She ought to have asked. What if Daisy was hoping they’d do something as a group? She’ll text Bobbi and Mack, she thinks, see if they’ve checked in with Daisy to make sure she’s taken care of.

“But I don’t have to worry about a family holiday this soon, then, either?” She can’t help but keep the relief out of her voice as it dawns on her that it was a very real possibility.

“No,” he confirms. “I told you, I would subject you to them as little as possible. We’ll definitely have to make an appearance at the annual Christmas fundraiser the family supports, but Thanksgiving, Easter … I stay as far away as I can get.”

“Oh,” Jemma says, ducking her head, not sure what to say that wouldn’t be awkward or prying.

He waves it off. “Anyway, I just wanted to make sure you were aware of my travel plans,” Grant says. “And make sure I’m not failing at the whole devoted boyfriend thing by forgetting to make space to do your Thanksgiving things.”

“No,” Jemma says, turning quickly to assure him and nearly slipping on the muddy path as a result. Grant nimbly steadies her, hands finding their way to her waist.

“No,” she continues. “There are no important holidays or whatnot missed. Christmas is the first big one we’ll need to plan. But we don’t need to do that today? Or… do we?”

“Not today,” he nods. “Though we should probably start talking about it soon. I tend to have more obligations in December. I imagine you experience a similar uptick in activity, and we’ll need to coordinate as a couple.”

“Yes,” she says. “But this week… are you still gone on Friday, then?”

“I fly back early in the afternoon, so as long as you don’t want to make lunch plans…”

“Not lunch, but how would you feel about pizza dinner with my friends?” She hurries on, nervous. “It’s not fancy, I know. It’s just Bobbi’s shift doesn’t start until midnight and the whole group is free that night, so we’re going to do our Bad Movie Night and we’d talked about your meeting my friends then. But you don’t have to, of course. We can find another time or – “

“Jemma,” Grant interrupts her, and he has the grace not to laugh at her, though she’s certain it’s buried under there. “I would love to come.”

“Oh. Good. I mean, thank you.” She says, then jumps and nearly slips again when her phone vibrates emphatically in the pocket of her coat. Only Grant neatly tucking her into his side prevents her from thoroughly embarrassing herself.

“Everything okay?”

She nods, willing herself not to blush with what she’s sure is a futile effort. “Sorry,” she says, tugging of her mittens so she can pull out her phone and glance at it. “It appears Daisy has managed to hack into my phone and put a customized pattern on it again. It was a little unexpected with all the vibrations… and obnoxious, really.”

“She do that a lot?”

Jemma hums, but it’s a fond sound, letting Grant guide her down the path so she can unlock it and check the text. “She doesn’t violate anyone’s privacy, if you’re worried about that. She just likes to see if she can do it, I think, and to play a prank now and again. We’re quite lucky I had my mobile on silent, because she’s got her ringtone changed, too.”
“Something embarrassing I gather?”

Rather than answer aloud, she tilts the screen toward him so he can see that her friend has programmed “Let’s Get It On” to play when she called. Grant’s mouth tilts up into a smirk, and Jemma quickly scrolls through to reset it to a generic tone, making a mental note to later find a song with a pointed message to use. Perhaps she’d see if Grant had any suggestions.

“Anyway, she’s bored, it seems. Said I should send her pictures. A selfie doing something American, given where we are.”

“Do you want me to take it?”

“I think she’s hinting that we should take one together.”

Grant grimaces. “I’m not really into lying in the leaves to take a selfie.”

“Oh, I have no intention of trying to convince you that’s a good idea,” Jemma says. “Especially since I have no intention of taking any like that anyway.”

“Really?” Grant looks to her in surprise. “That… you seemed like you were very into that idea earlier.”

“Yes,” Jemma admits. “But that was before Daisy joked about watching out for spiders in the leaves.”

“Ah,” he smiles knowingly. “A little arachnophobic, are we?”

“No.” Jemma lifts her chin, daring him to contradict her. “I just very much don’t like the idea of having spiders in my hair.” She wrinkles her nose unconsciously at the thought.

“Yeah,” Grant draws it out, the twitch of one side of his mouth the only sign of how unpleasant he finds the idea. It’s fascinating, really, how very good he is at schooling his expression. The thought of spiders in the hair and there is nearly no reaction, even though the two of them are nearly alone on the path, no one within earshot. He is as unguarded as he gets, she suspects, and it is still very guarded indeed.

She shakes off the thought. “Besides, it’s more muddy than I anticipated when we left your flat this morning. As lovely as the leaves are, I don’t suspect they provide much protection from the wet ground.”

“I suspect you are right,” Grant says, scuffing the toe of the sturdy boots he’d been savvy enough to put on into the path as though to prove her point.

“Fortunately,” Jemma says, letting her hand trail down his arm until she could tug at his hand, “there’s a perfectly lovely backdrop just there.”

“The brick wall?”

“Well, yes. Or we can get one at the next ventilator shaft, if you want, though I daresay we should go back the way we came soon. I’m not exactly prepared to walk the whole six-mile leg of the trail today.”

“Or I could just take your picture in front of one of the shafts,” Grant counters.

“Are you really that against having your picture taken?”
“In a selfie? Yes,” he says bluntly. “It’s not the Grant Ward brand.”

“I’m not exactly comfortable with sending what is essentially a giant lie to my closest friends, either,” Jemma says, a bit miserably she must admit. “But they already thing it is weird I don’t a single photo with my boyfriend,” Jemma says. “Or of my boyfriend, even. I can’t exactly…” She waves her hand vaguely.

Grant sighs. She simply looks at him, waiting him out.

“You’re right,” he says. “If this were a green card marriage, we’d be failing the documentation test.”

“So what will it be,” she asks grimly. “The brick or the ventilator?

“Let’s head back and get one near one of those,” Grant says.

“That’s not just because you think I’ll forget on the short trek, is it?” she narrows her eyes at him.

“It is not,” he reassures her. “But if you’re going to throw it on Instagram or Facebook, and ‘here’s us with a wall’ seems less interesting than ‘here’s one of the historical aqueducts’, so…”

“Fair point,” Jemma says, letting him tuck her arm in his again to head back the way they came. “though I don’t have an Instagram. But the next ventilator shaft as our lovely stone backdrop to our first selfie is probably best. Daisy will be well pleased.”

Grant lets her lead him along until they find one of the stone structures, and wisely kept quiet as she fusses about what side to take the picture from, trying to find the right light.

“Come on, then,” she says finally, grabbing a fistful of his jacket to tug him closer as she raises her cell phone up. She grimaces as it slips in her hand, catching it before it hits the ground, getting nothing more than an accidentally-captured blur for her troubles. “Hmpf.”

Her next efforts are no better, for all that she manages to keep her cellphone in hand.

“We look…”


“I’m sorry,” Jemma sighs. “I’m just… I don’t like photos of me in general, and add in that I can’t get the idea that this picture, even, is a lie to my friends…”

“Okay,” Grant says, plucking the phone from her hands, and running a soothing hand up her arm. “You’re thinking about this too much, and the wrong way. It’s not a lie.”

She opens her mouth to protest but shuts it again at his expression.

He continues, his voice low and calm enough that her own panic begins to subside. “You’re just sending her a picture of your outing with me, today. It doesn’t have to be more than that right now. We can start small, okay?”

“Okay,” she says. She blinks in surprise as he steps away from her, holding the phone aloft and realises he means to take one of just her, alone. She breathes out a sigh and runs her hands over her hair to try to tidy it, not that she can see how it looks, then drops them to her sides. She turns a little toward the camera and tries not to look uncomfortable as she smiles.

Grant drops the camera a little and fixes her with a pointed look.
“What?” she says.

“Jemma, you look like you’re in front of a firing squad, not getting your picture taken.”

“I told you, I’m not good in front of the camera. And I don’t know what to bloody do. Stand in front of this stone thing and… do what? Shall I do jazz hands?” She means it to be sarcastic, striking a terrible pose, and she shrieks as the flash goes off. “Grant! I can’t believe – “

Grant laughs at her grumbling, taking the opportunity to snap another one, and then another as she tries to pin him with her most intimidating look. Bloody hell. She strides toward him and he darts easily out of her way, a playful expression she’s never seen on his face. She does manage to back him against the aqueduct, but he holds her phone aloft, just shy of her reach even as she pushes herself on her tip-toes. She makes a little jump for it and her boots slip on the landing, sending her falling into him with a squeak of indignation as he manages to snap other one.

“There.” He smiles as he shakes his head at her. “Selfie accomplished.”

“I would like to reiterate my earlier comment that you, Grant Ward, are a troll,” she says, dropping her face into his jacket for a moment before she begins to right herself.

“Guilty,” he says, sounding not at all like he feels that way. She narrows her eyes at him in a mock glare followed by a peal of laughter she can’t hold in. And it should surprise her, but he manages to snap one more before he hands her phone back, and it’s the one she knows will be the one to send to Daisy. Her, cheeks flushed from exertion and her eyes sparkling with laughter, tucked against his jacket.

“Oh,” she can’t help but breathe.

“See? I told you. You just needed to stop thinking about it so hard.

Jemma pulls away just far enough to stick her tongue out at him, then blushes at her public silliness as she sees someone approaching from the corner of her eye.

Grant must see them as well, because an almost sly look crosses his face before he is quite looming over her, her back to the grey stones they’d been joking over as he leaned in, a glint in his eye. He lowers his head, his lips nearly brushing her ear.

“That’s Christine Everhart,” he whispered. “She runs one of those gossip blogs. We couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity.”

She’s about to wrinkle her brow in confusion and ask what he means, but then it dawns on her what a picture they might make now. His arms framing her in as he ducked down as though to nuzzle at her ear. Her hands are fisted in his jacket – and when did they get there, since she has no recollection of moving them? – her cheeks flushed and her head tilted to look up at him.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

The low timbre of his voice has her shivering unconsciously, and her eyes flutter closed as he moves in slowly, to give her time enough to say no. She doesn’t, instead finds herself rising up on her toes to meet him even as one hand tangles itself in her hair, the other sliding to the small of her back to pull her body into his. Then his lips are on hers.

She can feel the heat of him through his jacket and hers, a contrast to the cold stone at her back, though she’s cushioned somewhat from it by his hands on her. Though their kiss at the restaurant the first night had been somewhat chaste because of the setting, it seems that Grant has other ideas for
this one, as his tongue darts out to sweep along her lower lip until she’s opening her mouth to him. She’s unsurprised to find he knows exactly what he’s doing, kissing her as deliberately as he does anything else. If he does business half as well as he kisses, it’s no wonder he’s as wealthy as he is, really.

She knows that what they are doing is all for show, yet even so her body is responding to the electrified chemistry between them, losing herself in him. The way his mouth moves on hers. The press of his body, hard against hers. The playful tug at her hair as her arms circle around his neck to pull him closer.

A throat clearing knocks her from her thoughts, and she jumps as they break apart, having forgotten they weren’t alone, even though that was the whole reason Grant had kissed her in the first place. Grant’s hand manages to cushion her head from knocking against the ventilator, and they both wince, she at the sound, he undoubtedly at the pain of the scraped knuckles he’s sure to have as a result.

“Well, well, well. Grant Ward. I wouldn’t have imagined running into you here.” Jemma feels the heat rising in her face, which she hopes serves to sell the point Grant thought to make. There’s something unsettling about the look in the eyes of the pretty blonde who’d approached them, a knowing smirk on her face. Another blonde hovers just behind, though she appears less sharp and more nervous than her friend.

“Ms. Everhart,” Grant says, and Jemma is impressed at how he somehow manages to sound slightly breathless yet nonplussed by her interruption all at once. “I can’t say I expected to see you here.”

“Oh, I could say the same.” A slight smirk dances over her lips as she raises her eyebrows at Jemma, then the razor grin is turned on Grant. “I must say, Grant, she certainly doesn’t look like one of your regular models. You know, the actual models.”

“Chrissy!” the reporter’s friend hisses. “You can’t just say people can’t be models!”


“Jemma,” she introduces herself, shaking hands with Millie before extending to Christine almost against her better judgment, though it would certainly look ruder to refrain.

“And what do you do, Miss…?” Christine tilts her head at Jemma, never breaking eye contact.

“Doctor,” Jemma corrects automatically, and is rewarded with a strange sense of triumph as the immaculately groomed eyebrows raise in surprise.

“A doctor.” The reporter smiles more widely now, looking exactly like the cat that got the cream. “My, my, that is different. So do tell, doctor, what brings you and one of New York’s most eligible to Sleepy Hollow?”

“Uh… aqueducts?” Jemma blurts, then glances up at Grant. Surely he knows how to extract them from this before she says something truly mortifying.

“Ms. Everhart,” he cuts in smoothly, taking Jemma’s hand and tucking it back into the crook of his arm. “If you’d like an interview, you are welcome to contact my public relations staff, but in the meantime, Jemma and I would like to return to our date.”
“So it is a date,” Christine Everhart says victoriously, even as her friend begins to tug her away down the path, thankfully not in the direction Jemma and Grant were headed.

“Goodbye, Ms. Everhart,” Grant says firmly, but not without amusement.

Jemma lets him guide her back down the path. They walk in silence for some time, then Grant chuckles lowly. She darts a look up to him in question.

“That couldn’t have gone better if we’d planned it.”

“Really? You do remember the part where I said aqueducts brought us here, don’t you?”

“Okay, that could have gone better,” he concedes. “But not much. If Everhart’s interested, decides to share that there’s something to be interested in…”

The thought makes her heart beat hard in her chest. If the rumours and coverage are set to begin, so too must they ramp things up before Grant’s brother can figure out the plan and try to counter it. It’s time to get ready to get married. And soon.

Chapter End Notes

Comments feed the Muse cookies. And delicious ones like chocolate chip, not ones with oatmeal and raisins.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which Bad Movie Night takes place.

Chapter Notes

I had a lot of fun writing this chapter, which might be why it didn't take quite as long to get written and posted. I can't promise to keep up the pace, but I will be getting my behind in gear on the next chapter soon. Many thanks to Cinema Sins for posting on the reference movie so I didn't actually have to watch the thing myself. Because oh boy. How? HOW?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Grant glances at his cellphone as the town car pulls in front of the address Jemma had confirmed with him by text – twice, she’s adorably nervous – and sends her a quick note to let her know he’s arrived. She’d let him know she was home and offered to come down to fetch him when he got there. He’d reassured her that he was fine being buzzed up like any other guest. She’d texted him a few times about the plans while he was traveling, and he has to admit that he can’t help but be touched by how, fake marriage or not, she is really invested in him getting to know her friends.

Grant hoists his bag onto his arm as the driver comes around to let him out, waving him off as he makes his way to the buzzer outside Jemma’s building. He’s a bit surprised at how long it takes for the garbled ringing to be answered, considering Jemma’s expecting him, but then again, she’s mentioned several times that her friends can be quite “lively”. It’s like she thinks he needs a warning. It’s honestly adorable.

“He, please be the pizza guy,” comes a breathless, tinny voice through the machine. American accent, so Bobbi or Daisy, probably, based on the pitch though he concedes to himself it’s not out of the realm of possibility that it could be Mack.

“No such luck,” he replies wryly. “It’s Grant.”

“Oh, c’mon up, then. Pull hard, the door sticks.”

Before he can answer, the grating sound of the door lock is buzzing. It does take a good yank to get it open, and Grant grimaces at the grinding sound it makes. No doorman, either, though he knows it’s mostly luxury buildings that have that level of security feature. He makes a note to check into how safe the neighborhood is, even though he has a feeling Jemma would laugh off his concern.

He makes his way to the elevator. It’s seen better days, but a glance at the inspection papers shows it is up to date, even if it takes an abominably long time for to travel.

He’s been spoiled and privileged, he knows. This is Jemma’s home, for all that it is older and more run down than he’s used to buildings being. The carpet down the hallway is worn, but it is clean, and
the hall itself is relatively quiet, though he does hear the buzz of a few televisions as he passes the doors on the way to get to Jemma’s.

He knocks confidently, and it swings open quickly, a woman nearly as petite of Jemma with long dark hair at the helm.

“Jem, your boyfriend’s here,” she calls out in a teasing tone, then turns back to Grant reaching out her hand. “Yo. I’m Daisy.”

“Grant,” he says, giving it a firm shake.

“Nice. Go Jemma,” she says giving him an exaggerated once over, and he isn’t even given a chance to follow up before Jemma is coming around the corner, eyes going wide with something akin to panic.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he says casually, pulling her in to drop a quick kiss on the corner of her mouth.

She’s still tense, but then Daisy is nudging her and winking in what could only be described as an obnoxious. “Seriously, babe, good job landing that. Better than the pictures, even.”

“Oh my GOD, Daisy!” Jemma says, some of the tension draining out of her. “You promised you’d wait at least ten minutes before trying to embarrass me.”

“Nope,” Daisy says cheerfully. “Must have been Lance. I did no such thing.”

“You all promised,” she cries.

“And we all lied,” comes a voice from the living room.

“Contrary to what I might have said before,” Jemma sighs, “my friends are the actual worst.”

“You love us,” Daisy says, bumping Jemma with her hip.

“Oy, pizza delivery boys have upped their game, love,” a blond with a goatee comes around the corner and gives a low whistle.

“Very funny, Lance,” Jemma says. “You know full well this is Grant.”

“So he’s not brought pizza then?” he tsks.

“I brought beer,” Grant volunteers, lifting the insulated bag he’d sent an assistant to fill in Boston.

“You didn’t have to bring anything,” Jemma protests even as Daisy takes the proffered bag. “I told you we had tonight covered.”

“I know,” he says, “but I was taught never to show up as a guest empty-handed.”

“Yeah, Hunter,” Daisy turns on the Englishman. “Unlike some friends' boyfriends who just show up and eat all the pretzels.”

“Lance ate all of Daisy’s pretzels,” Jemma explains.

“I gathered.” Grant says.

“Lance Hunter.” The man in question gestures at himself.
“It’s nice to meet you, Lance.” The man’s expression turns almost comically disgusted. “I’m guessing you prefer Hunter?”

“Yeah, mate. Only mum gets to call me Lance.”

“And Jemma,” Daisy chimes in.

“Well, yeah, her too,” Hunter says, eyes softening fondly. “Little sister’s privilege.”

“We are not actually related,” Jemma feels compelled to explain to him.

“Oh, yum,” Daisy crows as she finally starts digging through the bag, sparing him from having to puzzle out the train of Lance Hunter’s thoughts. “Is this craft beer?”

“Best of Boston, or so I’m told,” Grant nods.

“Very nice,” Daisy says. “I mean it’ll take more than a bag of beer to win our very sought-after approval, but good start, dude.”

Jemma rolls her eyes fondly as Daisy flounces off, presumably to the living area, the grumbling Englishman not far behind. It leaves him alone with Jemma. He tilts his own voice into a teasing tone. “So… should I come in, or are we going to watch this terrible movie in the entryway?”

“Oh!” Jemma blushes. “Sorry. Yes, do come in.”

He pushes his shoes off with his toes at her direction. She doesn’t move right away despite her invitation, twisting her hands nervously together. He holds back to give her the space she needs, and the moment stretches out long enough that he starts to internally debate the merit of pushing her a little. He’s relieved when she straightens her shoulders, her face settling into a determined expression.

“We should… I’ll just take your hand, okay?” she whispers.

“Of course,” he says, holding his out for her to grip tightly as she pulls him toward the living room, waving toward the hallway where the bathroom is currently occupied by Bobbi, who is just starting her day, and the doors to the bedrooms. He squeezes her hand gently so she knows he’s in this with her, and she relaxes her grip slightly.

“So…” she says, hesitant. “It’s a bit more cramped than you’re used to, I know, but it’s home.”

“And I’m glad you’ve invited me,” he says quietly and not insincerely as he gets a look around him. It is small, but as warm and cozy, as he had come to expect Jemma’s home might be.

A large television takes up much of the wall of opposite the somewhat lopsided couch where Daisy and a curly-haired man who he recognizes from Jemma’s description as her long-time friend Fitz, who she’s met when they were both foreign students getting degrees at NYU, are seated. Hunter has sprawled out in an overlarge beanbag chair wedged against a bookshelf that features an eclectic selection of books and knick-knacks. He’d bet money the Rubik’s cube belongs to Fitz, and the framed embroidery that hilarious reads “Chemists do it on the table periodically” in even stitches, if he had to hazard a guess, had been gifted to Jemma.

That would make the giant of the man with a shaved head and carefully-groomed goateed who barely fits in the armchair Mack. Jemma had said he was very tall, but he’s thought that was just her perception, given she’s all of 5’4. Grant isn’t a short man at 6’2, but he’s positive Mack stands taller than him. This is confirmed when Mack stands to shake Grant’s hand. The man got at least two inches on him and is built like a brick wall, but seems laid back and friendly.
Leo Fitz, on the other hand, is a contrast to his roommate, and not just in looks with his pale skin, baby-smooth face, and mop of curly hair. He’s not much taller than Daisy and decidedly stand-offish in nature, though Jemma had warned him that Fitz was a bit of a curmudgeon as a rule, so Grant doesn’t take it personally. He does thank Grant for the beer, if begrudgingly, but follows it with a cranky complaint that Bobbi is taking too long in the shower.

“Don’t worry. He’s a cranky little hedgehog,” Daisy says, “but he’s our cranky little hedgehog.”

“Far less prickly than a porcupine, at least,” Mack says, earning himself a cushion aimed more expertly at his head than Grant would have guessed, which he catches out of the air before it hits him and tucks it behind his head as though it was his intention all along.

“What’d I miss?” A tall blonde strides down the hallway with a casual confidence that makes the loose sweats and tank top look like they could have come off a runway, even as she snaps an elastic band around the end of the tight braid she’s pulled her hair into.

“Leo being cranky,” Jemma says.

“Meh, there’ll be a repeat showing in an hour. I’m Bobbi,” she introduces herself.

“Alright, now that Dr. Delay is here, can we start?” Fitz grumbles. “I don’t know why everyone is taking the mickey out on me. I’m no’ the one whose brought her boyfriend.”

“No one else is joining us?” Bobbi raises her eyebrows in surprise.

“Joey’s working, and Piper finally got up the nerve to ask out that cute girl she likes at the Bodega, unlike Mack, so Elena won’t be joining us either.”

“Oh, boo, you chicken,” Bobbi says to Mack before nudging Hunter with a bare foot. “Shove over.”

Hunter spreads out like a starfish over the beanbag, looking disinclined to move, but Bobbi stares him down. She drops down next to him, waving off the sip of beer he offers. Mack gets up from the armchair even as Jemma pulls Grant to the couch, returning moments later with a mug of coffee he passes to a grateful Bobbi. For all his bluster earlier, Fitz moves easily into the side opposite Grant on the sofa so Jemma can wedge in next to Daisy.

“It’s a tight fit, I know,” Jemma says as though an apology is on the tip of her tongue.

“More comfortable than my couch,” Grant says, and Jemma tips her head back and laughs, even though her friends can’t possibly understand what’s funny about it.

“We going to get started on this, or what?” Fitz asks, practically vibrating in his seat.

“Slow your roll, Antsy Pants,” Daisy says. “Pizza’s not here yet. What’s your hurry? It’s not like it’s going to be a better Bad Movie than Hard Ticket to Hawaii. My crown’s safe.”

“Crown?” Grant turns to Jemma.

“Yes,” she says. “At the end of the night we debate whether this Bad Movie selection beats out the last pick.”

“And the winner gets a metaphorical crown. I see,” Grant says.

“No, crown’s real,” Mack says.

“It’s made with the finest tin foil and glitter,” Daisy deadpans as she drapes herself over Fitz to fish
around off the end of the couch, then sitting up triumphant with said crown in hand. “A very coveted prize that you are not going to win, Leopold Fitz.”

“We’ll see,” he says. Daisy looks at Fitz head on before very deliberately setting the crown on her head with the kind of grandeur Grant imagines Napoleon Bonaparte might have shown when he made himself Emperor of France.

The cordless phone Daisy set on the coffee table in favour of holding her beer rings, and she lunges for it. “Pizza guy?”

“Do you want anything to drink? One of your beers perhaps? Or I could start popcorn?” Jemma says quietly as Daisy confirms that the food has, in fact, finally arrived.

“I’m good with a beer and pizza for now,” he says. Jemma digs through the bag, which he sees Daisy has dropped on the floor next to her feet, examining the bottles and holding one out to him. He nods – she’s picked one he knows he likes already, and she hands it to him, and Fitz helpfully passes him a Swiss army knife with a handy bottle opener, so he pulls off the top then holds a hand out until Jemma hands him hers so he can do the same.

Daisy gets up with the delivery guy knocks, straightening her crown, then shaking glitter out of her bangs when the movement inevitably knocks some of it loose. “Hunter’s treat, since he didn’t bring beer, ate my pretzels, and hasn’t pitched in for the last four rounds.”

He squawks, but sighs and pulls out his wallet to hand her his credit card. In short order, napkins are being passed around and everyone has a slice in front of them, except for Fitz who has balance his on the arm of the couch to stand in front of the television and clears his throat.

“Alright, Fitz,” Daisy drawls, propping one foot on the coffee table and immediately putting it back down again when her roommates simultaneous give her a look. “What’s this amazing yet terrible movie you think can knock mine from the top slot?”

“Tonight’s in veritably bad selection,” Fitz says, pulling a DVD from behind his back as he straightens to address the challenge, “is Troll 2.”

“Point of order, mate!” Hunter says, one finger in the air although he barely stirs from where he’s semi-cuddled up with Bobbi – they must be officially on again. “Rule was no sequels.”

“It’s not a sequel,” Fitz says smugly.

“Dude, it’s literally called Troll 2,” Daisy points out. “I’ve gotta side with Hunter on this one.”

“Rules are rules, Turbo,” Mack says.

“We can still watch it,” offers Jemma, ever the peace maker. “But I’m afraid you won’t unseat Daisy with it.”

“It’s not a sequel,” Fitz repeats.

“Wait, what? How is that even possible?” Daisy says, and Grant feels Jemma sit a little straighter in the seat next to him. He glances over at her and can’t help but smile at her expression. She has her eyes narrowed in suspicion but her head is cocked in clear interest.

“It was a marketing gimmick,” Fitz says, completely satisfied with himself if his expression is any indication as he puts the disc in the DVD player and Mack powers on the television. “It is absolutely unrelated to the first Troll movie. You’ll see.”
He marches over to resume his seat as the movie begins, and Bobbi stretches up just long enough to turn off the living room lights so they are lit only by the flickering screen. Grant settles back into the couch, one arm around Jemma as narration begins.

“Oh God,” Bobbi says all of a sudden. “It’s already like a bad version of The Princess Bride.”

She’s not wrong, though he hasn’t seen it since he was a child. Only the grandpa reading is apparently imaginary and the actors, if they can even be called that given their flat delivery of the lines, are so stunningly terrible his mouth would be open in horror if he weren’t too dignified. As for the badly-costumed and entirely unconvincing trolls… well, it turns out they aren’t trolls.

“They’re goblins,” Daisy groans. “They aren’t even trolls.”

“I told you the crown is mine,” Fitz crows around a mouthful of pizza, only to be chastised by Hunter, of all people, for talking with food in his mouth.

It is, by far, one of the worst movies Grant has ever seen, and he finds himself shaking with laughter more than once over the course of the movie. He can’t help it. It’s like they made it terrible on purpose, and the result is just laughter like he hasn’t indulged in in a long time, especially when Daisy takes the scene of the head goblin inexplicably drowning a character in popcorn as a cue to go make some for the group.

Quite by accident, the experience also serves to solidify the fake relationship in the mind of Jemma’s friends, too. The nerves she’s felt over when she first introduced him to her friends would have been there naturally, and she’d relaxed more and more over the course of the evening just by being in the company of her friends and perhaps in seeing how seamlessly he could slip in without presenting any over lies. She’d spent a third of the movie with her face buried in his t-shirt (and another third clutching at Daisy’s hand), completely over “second hand embarrassment”, as she’d ruefully explained. He couldn’t blame her. Lines like “Nilbog! It’s goblin backwards!” and a scene where the little boy pees on his family’s dinner to keep them from eating the food that transforms the people into plants so they can be eaten by the vegetarian goblins – why they don’t just eat normal plants, he can’t fathom – are gems that have Fitz parading around the living room wearing a crumpled crown while Daisy buries her face in her hands.

“That was fun,” he says honestly to Jemma as the movie winds up.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” she says. “Even though it was the most terrible movie I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, I did know what I was in for,” he says. “You didn’t call it Good Movie Night, after all.”

“Well, I’m glad anyway,” she says, glancing around the room where Mack is stacking up the empty pizza boxes and Hunter, to Grant’s surprise, is refilling Bobbi’s coffee cup in unexpected thoughtfulness.

“And you know you’ll have to be up for the next one,” Bobbi says, standing up from the bean bag chair and stretching.”

“Yes,” he says easily. “Jemma can let me know when it is.”

“No, I mean you’re up,” Bobbi grins at him. “You’re in the rotation now, and you’re going to have to try to knock Fitz from his title.”

“And no cheating and getting some fancy assistant to research!” Daisy says.

“I won’t need to,” Grant promises.
“Are you quite sure?” Jemma asks as they make their way to the entry way. “It might do Fitz some good to be knocked off his pedestal quite quickly, and no one else had rules against research. Though I’m not sure that would help. I’m fairly certain we just finished watching the worst movie ever to be unleashed on the world.”

“Possibly,” Grant concedes. “But it just so happens I invested in a failing production company almost ten years ago and may have in my possession an unreleased film called Action Doctor featuring the then-unknown Steve Rogers that was so bad, it tanked the studio.”

“No!” Jemma gasps, and he grins at her.

“Yes,” Grant says. “I think it is probably to Rogers’ great relief that it never even made it to distribution.”

“Well, that might do nicely, then,” Jemma smiles. “Oh, your bag! You nearly forgot to take it home! I’ll go grab it for you.”

“Why not grab your bag, too,” he says, reaching out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “You should come home with me.”

“Oh,” she says. “I suppose that would look…”

She cuts off as a peal of laughter from the living room startles her, and doesn’t get a chance to finish as Bobbi rounds the corner, now dressed in a pair of navy scrubs and socks on her feet.

“I’m heading out, Jem,” she says. “It was nice meeting you, Grant. Don’t be a stranger. We only bite on Tuesdays.”

He uses the excuse of Bobbi passing in the small hallway to step closer to Jemma. He leans close to her. “Come home with me,” he repeats softly as Bobbi eyes them with interest as she tugs on her shoes. “I’ll do that thing you like,” he bends to her ear, dropping his voice to a low whisper so Jemma’s friends can’t hear him, “with the Great Wall of Cushions.”

As he’d hope, it startles a laugh from her. “Alright, you troll,” she says as the door shuts behind Bobbi.

“Don’t you mean goblin?”

She laughs again as she goes to pack a bag, calling to Daisy that she can take the bed as she’s spending the night at Grant’s, followed by a chorus of teasing “oooooohs” that make him smile all over again.

Jemma’s friends are a lot of fun, and he doesn’t think he’ll dislike spending time with them over the next two years. It will be nice, he thinks, having this built in friend group over the course of his fake marriage. He can’t remember when he’s laughed quite so much or so genuinely.

His musings are interrupted as Jemma returns to the entryway, her overnight bag and the one he’d brought slung over her shoulders. He wordlessly takes both from her and her hand finds its way into his without prompting as her friends wave them off down the hall, sounds of amusement in their wake.
Comments are like cookies. They make me really happy.
Hello, lovely readers! I’m sorry this took so long, but between my beta being swamped with family visits and work and my getting ready and then going on holiday, this was put on the back burner a little while. But maybe I get extra points for posting while holidaying? Extra cookies, perhaps? Either way, without further ado, all the way from Peru, here’s the next chapter!

Jemma yawns as she fumbles with her keys, nearly dropping them with hands made clumsy from a long day in the lab. It takes her a moment longer than it ought to find the right keys, though at least this time she didn’t accidentally force her office key into the lock. She didn’t want to once again spend several long minutes yanking on it with increasing urgency while worrying she’d have to resort to a call to a locksmith or the super.

She shuffles in, yawning again as she turns the deadbolt and locks the handle for good measure, slipping off her shoes and nudging them tidily against the wall.

“I thought I heard you,” Daisy says, peeking around the hallway, before calling back to the living room. “Bob, miracle of miracles, Jem’s actually come home!”

As tired and hungry as she is – she’d worked long past when she should have stopped for dinner – she follows Daisy, dropping her purse and bag next to the armchair and making a mental note to pick them up and put them into her bedroom before she goes to make dinner.

Daisy has dropped back onto the couch in flannel pyjamas. Her legs are tucked under her to avoid the coffee table, which is pushed up against it so Bobbi has room to spread her yoga mat onto the carpet. Her ever-present laptop is propped on the arm, and she’s surfing idly while she peels and eats a piece of string cheese.

“Hey, stranger,” Bobbi teases, her voice partly muffled by her knees as she doesn’t come out of her standing forward bend.

“Can’t sleep?” Jemma says, sympathetic as she recognizes the pose as one of the asanas the medical resident does as part of the set she does she has insomnia.

“First day of the swing back to the day shift,” Bobbi confirms, folding forward a little more deeply. “Switching up my circadian rhythm’s a bitch.”

“Come, sit,” Daisy leans over to pat the seat next to her.
“Just give me a minute to whip myself up a little dinner,” Jemma says.

“What, Grant didn’t feed you?” Bobbi says, flowing seamlessly into downward dog.

“Oh, he’s had to go out of town on business,” Jemma says. “I was at work.”

“This late?” Daisy says, glancing at her screen. “It’s past nine.”

Jemma nods. “A couple of my compounds look promising enough to start trials, but I need to make up enough samples to start before the weekend, and I need to have enough done that the students can administer them.”

“Does this mean you are going to try to have an actual whole weekend off, Dr. Simmons?” Bobbi smiles, lowering herself slowly to the floor, then pushing back into child’s pose.

“Yes,” Jemma says, sticking out her tongue at her friend, even though she can’t see it with her head resting on her hands, then mutters, “I don’t work all the time.”

“Says the girl who worked through dinner, yet again,” Bobbi says without looking up, though Jemma can hear the smile in her voice.


“Oh, but that’s your food!”

“Dude, I’ve been crashing in your room for weeks and you won’t let me give you a dime, plus I am literally wearing your PJs right now. You can go to town on my ginger beef, babe.”

Jemma thought that kitten pattern looked familiar.

“Thank you,” she says, her grumbling stomach overruling any desire to protest further. She finds the containers in the fridge and fills a plate with fried rice, ginger beef, and a veggie mix that she’d hazard a guess Daisy only got to appear to make healthy choices because the container is practically full. She doesn’t even both to heat it first, instead grabs a fork and walks her plate to the living room where she drops herself down next to Daisy on the couch. Bobbi is laying in corpse pose on the floor, her routine clearly done.

“No boys tonight?” she asks once she’s had a couple of bites to tide her over long enough to start a conversation.

“Fitz’ll be back before eleven, probably,” Daisy says. “He’s been going to trivia nights at the pub, supposedly because of some work friends, but we think there’s a girl.”

“Really? He’s said something?” Jemma asks. Fitz is her oldest friend, and he usually confides in her first. She knows that spending time with Grant so their coming “elopement” doesn’t seem completely impossible is necessary, but she doesn’t want to become a bad friend over it, the kind of friend who seems to have no outside interests beyond their significant other.

“Nah,” Bobbi says. “He’s doing that thing where he’s not saying anything. I wouldn’t have even noticed except I asked him an innocuous question about what kind of trivia, and he spent the next half hour telling me every single question that had been asked.”

“Ah,” Jemma says, feeling a bit relieved. “Like he’s trying to prove to himself that he is absolutely there for the trivia, not something else, and getting far too adamant about it?”
“Exactly that,” Bobbi says. “Thank God I had to run out for my shift, because next he started going into the bar cocktail menu.”

“He doesn’t even drink the cocktails!” Jemma says.

“I know, right?” Daisy laughs. “I’m tempted to offer to go with next week, just to see how flustered he gets.”

“Ooh, you should,” Bobbi says.

“We all should,” Daisy says. “I’ll text Mack so when I bring it up…”

“We can all do the, “ooh, that sounds fun!” and “let’s go as a group” thing?” Bobbi grins from her spot on the floor.

“Don’t worry, Jem,” Daisy turns to her. “We know your subterfuge skills need some serious work, but if you just sort of nod along, you won’t give us away.”

Her subterfuge skills are not nearly as bad as Daisy and Bobbi believe, Jemma thinks to herself, but pushes the thought out of her mind. “Speaking of Mack…”

“Oh, right,” Bobbi says. “Things are slow at the shop, so he’s taking a long weekend.”

“He borrowed my van,” Daisy says as she plucks a beef of Jemma’s plate and pots it in her mouth. “Drove to New Haven for the weekend, help his mom and dad out around the house.”

“Eat his weight in his mama’s cooking more likely,” Jemma draws out.

“If he doesn’t bring us some of her famous cinnamon rolls, I might actually die,” Daisy says, throwing herself back over the armchair dramatically.

“Well, considering you told him that no less than three times in the time it took you to hand over the keys,” Bobbi says dryly, “I think it is pretty safe to say that he’ll sweet talk his mom into sending him home with a few.”

“That’s all I ask,” Daisy says grandly.

“And, um, Lance?” Jemma says. “Is he…?”

“You mean is Bobbi pretending she’s never going to sleep with him again so they can do the make-up thing two days later?” Daisy says.

“Hey!” Bobbi sits up in half protest, then shrugs because even she knows it’s a fair point. “No, we’re not doing the fight-then-make-up thing. There’s some UFC fight thing on and I told him I see enough of people’s insides in the OR, so he had to find somewhere else to stream people beating each other into a pulp.”

“Gross,” Daisy says.

“Exactly,” Bobbi confirms. “So it’s girls night for us unless you intend to text your boyfriend all night instead.”

“Oh no, he’s literally on a plane right now,” Jemma says. “Red eye back from Belgium, actually. Ward Enterprises has a subsidiary there, and there were meetings he couldn’t miss.”

“I hope he brings you back chocolate,” Daisy says.
“You mean you hope he brings me back chocolate that I bring home to share?” Jemma tilts her head in Daisy’s direction.

“Duh,” Daisy says. “What’s the point of having a friend with a jet-setter boyfriend if you can’t get some hella good chocolate out of it?”

“How do you know it will be good chocolate?” Jemma counters. Daisy simply looks at her and Jemma laughs in concession.

“Maybe we’ll get lucky and he’ll take her along next time, and she can play chocolate Sherpa for you in truth,” Bobbi teases.

“Like you wouldn’t make her bring you back a box or six,” Daisy says.

“Actually, he did invite me,” Jemma ventures, blinking and hoping that her friends don’t get whiplash given the speed their heads turn toward her.

“Did he, now…” Bobbi says thoughtfully.

“And you said no?” Daisy is incredulous.

“I had to work,” Jemma says. “I can’t just leave at the drop of a hat, especially since it’s so close to the end of the semester.”

“Boo, adulting,” Daisy responds glumly. “Ruining all our fun.”

“Yes, boo,” Jemma says. “Anyway, he’s got some other meetings this weekend and he’s invited me to go with for that one instead, so…”

“Ooh, where’s this one? France? Italy?” Bobbi says. “I wouldn’t say no to a souvenir bottle of wine from either, just saying.”

“Not nearly so far as that,” Jemma shakes her head.

“Canada?” Daisy asks incredulously. “You know it’s cold there, right?”

“No, he’s got a meeting in Las Vegas, actually,” Jemma says.

“Las Vegas, huh?” Daisy says. “I’d be worried, but you know, it’s you, so it’ll be fine.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Jemma squawks.

“It means we don’t have to worry about you doing something stupid,” Bobbi says diplomatically. “Fitz, Mack? They go to Vegas with a girl and it’s even odds whether they come back with a ring, a bad tattoo, or a credit card bill that requires a second job to pay off. And Daisy? You I wouldn’t trust to go even without a significant other. Don’t look at me like that, you’d totally marry a stranger.”

“Well, you’d marry Lance and that would be worse,” Daisy tosses back without rancor. “But yeah. Jemma is the only one of us who can be trusted to go to Sin City without ridiculous consequences. Well, maybe Fitz if he went alone.”

“Actually,” Bobbi says, “Believe it or not, Fitz is the worst. He got super drunk at his cousin’s bachelor party a few years ago and tried to propose to a prostitute, so…”

“No!” Daisy says.
Jemma nods, hoping this will distract them from the topic. “I’m afraid so. Anyway, it’s why I’ve worked so late tonight. Grant’s picking me up at four, tomorrow, so we can fly out and have some time to explore in the evening. Speaking of which, Bobbi, can I borrow the blue dress again?”

“Of course,” Bobbi says. “Do you want to borrow anything else?”

“No, I think I’ll do a little shopping there,” Jemma says. “I’ve heard the outlet malls have some lovely, inexpensive selections there and I really need a few more things to wear out. Especially since I don’t want to end up on that gossip blog in the same thing for the third time.”

She says the last bit under her breath, but it would appear not quietly enough because Bobbi is immediately bombarding her with questions while Daisy’s fingers fly over the keys on her laptop. Grant hadn’t been overly impressed with them either, for all that the public confirmation of their relationship was necessary.

Perhaps because the blog posts had been rather unnecessarily nasty about Grant and, by extension, her.

Daisy gasps, clearly having found the post Jemma meant. “Oh, fuck her,” she says aloud. “Oh, she did not.”

“What?” Bobbi asks. “Who is she and what did she do?”

“It’s that Christine Everhart blogger, you know, the one who sucks up to B-list celebrities?”

“Know By (Ever)Hart?” Bobbi shrugs when Daisy nods. “What’d she do?”

“Well, B-list or no, she isn’t exactly sucking up to Grant Ward. She’s basically calling him a commitment-phobe and if I’m reading this thing about the outfit right, she just implied Jem’s an escort.”

“She did what?” Bobbi stands, moving to read over Daisy’s shoulder.

“Yes, yes,” Jemma holds up her hands as if to try to calm them down. “Grant was furious, too. He’s not sure why she’s- “

“Being a bitch who is going to get her site taken down?” Daisy cuts her off.

“Say the word. A couple of hours, and she’ll never be able to get it back online again. I can even enlist a few favours from old buddies and have it done in half that.”

“Do not do anything illegal, Daisy Johnson,” Jemma says firmly. “It’s fine.”

“Uh, this is not fine, Jem,” Bobbi says, looking up at her and reading from the blog. “Ward’s ‘girlfriend’, who introduced herself as “Gemma” is supposedly a doctor, and perhaps the consummate bachelor is helping her pay off those med student loans by way of a slightly older profession…Fuck.”

“Well, it isn’t fine,” she concedes. “But she didn’t say anything that can actually stand for slander at this point.”

She knows this because she’d been with Grant when he was alerted about the post, and he’d gone cold with fury before whipping out his phone so he could tersely have someone start looking into it. Everything had happened so fast it nearly made her head spin, but before she knew it he had his lawyers on the line to see if it was actionable, plus the P.I. he had one retainer seeing if it had anything to do with his older brother. It wasn’t likely, from what they could tell. In fact, it was more
probably that Christine Everhart had a grudge against the Wards in general because a picture of Anna Ward and her growing baby bump had also made the blog with some equally unflattering commentary.

Jemma sighs because, while she isn’t happy about it, her friends are clearly in need of talking down from a ledge. “It’s not like she was able to identify me or get a good picture. She even spelled my name wrong, so… Grant’s lawyers are keeping an eye on it, I promise. Daisy, do not jeopardize your job or break the law over this. And Bobbi, no breaking anyone’s noses.”

“Fine,” Bobbi says. “I won’t track her down and make her need my services as a surgeon.”

“Daisy?”

“… Fine. For now.”

“I’ll take ‘for now’,” Jemma says, sighing again. “Now, can we please leave it be for the night at least? Perhaps watch an episode of something light and girly before the boys come home?”

“What’d you have in mind?” Bobbi graciously lets her change the subject.

“You’re going to let her pick when you know she’s just going to fall asleep halfway through?”

“Well, at least that way you can take her bed instead of Mack’s and don’t have to put up with Leo’s snoring,” Bobbi says, going over to roll her yoga mat up and tuck it out of the way.

“Oh, Daisy! I didn’t think. I don’t mean to kick you out of the bed-”

“Your bed,” Daisy says.

“I can go stay at Grant’s, if you want,” Jemma continues as though her friend hasn’t spoken.

“Your bed,” Daisy repeats, then stops. “Wait, I thought you said Grant’s not home.”

“He’s not,” Jemma says. “I’ve got keys and can go there to sleep. It’s just I don’t sleep that well when he’s not there, so I thought I’d come home.”

The fact that it is the absolute truth means it rolls off her tongue easily.

“Okay, first of all,” Daisy says, “that’s frickin’ adorable. Jemma can’t sleep without her boyfriend.”

“Awww,” Bobbi draws out in a teasing drawl. “I’m getting a toothache, it’s so sweet.”

“And second of all?” Jemma asks, just shaking her head at her friends.

“Second of all, he gave you keys? Already?”

“Um, yes?” Jemma ventures, her heart beating hard in her chest. She tucks her hands beneath her thighs so she doesn’t tighten them into balls in her panic, reminds herself not to babble and reveal herself.

“Dude’s gone on you,” Daisy says. “Commitment-phobe my ass. You really are practically living together.”

“Well, can you blame him?” Jemma says and, by some miracle, it comes out in the teasing tone she’d aimed for. “I am fairly spectacular if I do say so myself.”
“Well, you just did say so, so…” Bobbi says dryly. “Alright, now, shove over, lovebird. You said you wanted to watch something fluffy and light so… Daisy, anything only slightly shady you can do to hook us up for tonight?”

“One slightly shady access to a bit torrent download coming up,” Daisy says as they settle back onto the couch, and if Jemma’s mind is going a mile a minute and her heart beating like a hummingbird who’s flown too far to turn back, well, they’ve no way of knowing.

Chapter End Notes

The Muse thanks you for your comments, which taste like sunshine, sparkles, and cookies, as ever. <3
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

In which Jemma and Grant go to Vegas

Chapter Notes

Apologies for this taking so long, but sometimes the Muse does not cooperate, and also sometimes real life gets in the way of my writing. If it's any consolation, I have some very awesome Northern Lights photos as a result of going Aurora hunting instead of storying. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Grant can tell Jemma is nervous as they prepare to board the plane to Las Vegas. He’s known from the moment the town car had pulled in to pick her up at work just after noon. There’s a pull at her eyes she can’t quite hide, and while she’s tends to fidget at the best of times, he can see the anxiety in the way she pulls at her cardigan before checking her phone as though the time would have passed exponentially in the three minutes since she last took it out of her pocket. He’s not surprised, given what they are secretly traveling to do, for all that the other passengers probably just think she’s afraid of flying.

When her hand flutters over her pocket again, he reaches out to still it, then links his fingers with hers.

She glances at him in surprise, but seems to take solace in it, because she keeps her death grip on his hand until she has to drop it to get her ticket out to board the plane. The smile she shoots him when he scoops both their carry-ons is dimmer than her usual, but he’s glad to see it regardless.

He’d be worried that she might choose to back out at the last minute if not for the subtle, stubborn steel in the line of her jaw as she moves through the cabin. She might be nervous, she might be second guessing her decision to even consider the plan, but he has no doubt that she’ll go through with it in the end. He’s sure he’ll have other wrenches to come with Christian once he’s evened the playing field again, but this is not going to be a battle he’ll have to fight. Thanks to Jemma, he’s buying enough time to win the war.

He tucks their carry-ons in the overhead bins as she settles into the window seat, then takes her hand again. She gives him another tight yet grateful smile.

“Can I get you anything to drink? Orange juice? Water? Champagne?” a flight attendant drawls when their section is cleared of passengers seeking their seats, her candy-floss painted lips tipped in a friendly smile. If her accent didn’t give her Texas origins away, the height of her teased auburn curls would have.

“Champagne?” he smiles back, and he offers a flute to Jemma, who was looking out her window with such intense distraction, he knows she missed the flight attendant’s question entirely.
“Isn’t it a bit early?” Jemma whispers, worry tugging at the corners of her eyes.

“We’re going to Sin City,” he whispers back in as teasing tone as he can manage at the volume. “Pretty sure its par for the course.”

“Oh. Right.” She takes the glass and lifts it to her lips and takes a tiny sip as he takes one of his own, then seems to rethink it an takes a long pull. He winks at her, then leans out to catch the eye of the flight attendant to gesture for another. Jemma looks at him with wide eyes when he hands her his untouched flute. “I couldn’t possibly…”

“And you don’t have to,” Grant says. “But if it helps with nerves, you are welcome to it. It’s a vacation.”

“Alright,” she says, worrying at her lip. “Perhaps it won’t hurt to have a second.” She takes another pull at her glass, finishing it and putting it down on the rest between them. “But if you have to carry me off the plane, that’s on you.”

“Noted,” he says, then watches, pleased, as she settles back, determinedly more relaxed, into her seat.

*-*-*

Jemma’s fears about needing to be carried from the plane were fortunately unfounded, though he can tell she’s a little buzzed by the time they set down in Las Vegas. It works out in their plan’s favour, really; she’s more tactile with him, the way he’s seen her interact with her friends. It’s less deliberate, more open than their planned handholding and public kisses have been. With her inhibitions lower, she treats him with the easy physical affection she shows to her close friends, from the way she rests her hand on his forearm when turning to speak to him, to how she leans into his side when something particularly funny happens on the movie she watches during the flight. He’s not usually this demonstrative with anyone, yet he finds he likes it. It’s friendly, comfortable, and that’s not something that’s come easily into his life.

He gets them checked into their hotel, Jemma tucked into his side while the desk staff fawns all over them. He’s had them booked into the Bellagio, which is not where he usually stays when he goes to Vegas, but it was a clear winner for giving an air of romance as well as being five star. He’s vaguely amused at Jemma when they get to their room, as she unpacks her suitcase meticulously even though they are only taking an extended weekend trip. He knows better than to laugh aloud when she frowns as though in deep thought when the creases don’t shake out of the blouse she’s hanging in the closet.

“I’m going to have to run out, for a little while,” he says. “I’ll probably be a couple of hours, depending on traffic there and back. You can obviously stay here, if you’d rather just relax, or we can arrange a time and place to meet after my errand is done, if you’d prefer to wander. The casinos can be fun, or there’s a wax museum nearby…”

He trails off when she whirls around to look at him, her mouth dropping open in a little moue of surprise.

“Oh! You really do have business in Vegas,” she says. “I thought it was just a…” She waves vaguely in the air.”

“Ruse to be in Vegas so we could spontaneously elope without tipping our hand to Christian?” he
She nods. “I was a bit surprised you suggested Vegas for that reason.”

“Well, Vegas is actually a move Christian has likely expected me to make before now, to be honest,” Grant says, his mouth pressing into a tight line. “In fact, I expect he’s made the trip here at least a little before me.”

“Well, I’m not making heads or tails of that,” Jemma says. “And it isn’t the champagne, either, because I only had two… or was it three glasses? But anyway, that’s very much wearing off now.”

“I can see that, sweetheart,” he teases, leaning very far forward to catch the socks she lobs in what was probably meant to be his direction. “But Vegas is the most obvious move I can actually make,” Grant continues grimly, tossing the folded pair perfectly into the draw she’s left open. “Because our younger brother Thomas lives here, and if he’d marry the woman he’s been with for nearly a decade, I’d have the votes I need to counter the proxy that will come with this next kid.”

Jemma’s eyes go wide and she drops onto the bed at the same speed as her mouth falls open, surprise written over her face. “You have another brother.”

“Yes,” Grant says.

“Was I supposed to know you had another brother?”

“No,” Grant says, and he amends as she glares at him. “I mean, I probably should have mentioned it, but… he lives here, out of the limelight and the papers for a reason. For a lot of reasons, really, but the big one is that he stays as far away from the family as he can. And as much as I can, I’ve tried to respect that.”

“Okay,” Jemma says slowly.

“People mostly forget there are three Ward brothers, and that’s the way he likes, maybe even needs it. So I didn’t say anything until now…”

“So I couldn’t say anything,” Jemma concludes.

“Yeah,” Grant says, the apology in his tone. “An accidental mention, one of your friends starting to dig…”

“You didn’t want to tip your hand, I get that. So will he?”

“Will he what?”

“Marry his partner,” Jemma says. “And, goodness I hate that this sounds selfish but, if he does, marry his girlfriend that is, where does that leave me, our deal in all of this?”

“You’ve kept our deal, and I’d keep my end. But it won’t come to that.” Grant says bitterly. “Christian has made it so Thomas won’t, believe me. I’ve got to make it look like I tried, but Tom won’t risk it. He doesn’t trust me to be able to protect him.”

She looks sad at that, sad and worried. He feels a pang of something akin to guilt, and moves to sit on the bed next to her. He keeps his eyes on the wall, draws a breath.

“The risks Tom is worried about, they don’t apply to you, and I’ll do everything in my power to counter everything he tries to throw at you. But if you want to back out, to walk away… I won’t
“Grant,” Jemma says. She rests her hand on his arm, and he turns to look at her. Her face is serious, and if there’s concern on her face it is for him. Has anyone ever been concerned for him before? She locks eyes with him as though to make sure he knows the words about to come out of her mouth are nothing but honestly. “I trust you.”

“Okay,” he says, and it comes out almost like a sigh of relief.

“Okay,” she says. “Now, about your meeting… I assume with your brother?”

“Yeah,” he says. “He works at one of the casinos on Fremont Street, the old strip. I planned to catch him on his shift. Did you want to check that end of town out, or…”

“I should come with you. Meet your brother.”

“No,” he says quickly, and a flit of hurt flashes across Jemma’s face. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that to sound harsh. And honestly, of all the Wards you could meet? Thomas is actually one of the good ones. But he’s also smart enough to put two and two together if I turn up with my girlfriend…”

“And you don’t want him to figure out the plan,” she says, nodding to herself.

“Something like that,” he says. It comes out more cryptically than he’d intended, so he moves on quickly. “So… Fremont Street? There’s a light show every hour, or I think there’s a neon museum somewhere on that end. The zipline’s probably not your thing, but I could be wrong,” he slips into a teasing tone.

“No, thank you,” she says at that, and he’s relieved to see a bit of a smile start to tug itself at the corners of her lips once again. “Actually, if you don’t mind, I’d rather do a little shopping first,” she says. “Daisy says the outlet malls here are quite good, and I’ve a few things I should really get. I’d really rather my picture not appear in the tabloids in Bobbi’s dress again.”

“Yeah,” Grant winces. “Everhart is a pill, but unfortunately not yet a libellous pill I can deal with, beyond subsidizing a bigger wardrobe for you.”

“Don’t fret about it, Grant,” Jemma waves in dismissal. “I’ve not spent anything on my wardrobe in ages, it’s past time I got a few new things. But could we meet somewhere for dinner, perhaps, like you suggested?”

“Sounds good,” Grant says. “I’ll have the concierge make reservations on my way out, and text you the address.”

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The noise of the casino Thomas works in is a blur of sound around Grant, but he tunes it out, his focus honed on his plan. A discrete inquiry had confirmed his brother is one shift that night, but Tom isn’t at any of the tables quite yet. He kills time by playing a few rounds at a poker table, collecting his mound of chips, slightly bigger than when he’d started, when he spots his younger brother from the corner of his eye.

Thomas is setting up his blackjack table, getting ready to deal in gamblers, when Grant slides elegantly onto a seat across from him.
“I’ll be a few minutes,” Tom says before looking up, his mouth hardening into a line not unlike an expression Grant has seen cross his own face in the mirror. “Grant.”

“Thomas,” Grant says evenly.

“I can’t say I’m surprised to see you, though I will admit I did think it would be sooner,” Tom says, continuing to set up his table. “I’m guessing this isn’t a fun side trip while you’re in Vegas wooing investors.”

“I honestly wish it were,” Grant says.

“Me too,” Tom says.

“So you know why I’m here, I gather,” Grant says.

“Christian’s been through. Twice,” Tom says grimly, nodding to another patron takes the seat one away from Grant. Tom begins to deal with deft fingers as the bet is placed, turning to Grant as the first cards are down. “If you want to bet, you’ll have to hit someone else’s table. I’m not going to get accused of cheating if you won.”

“When I won,” Grant says. “I don’t play hands I can’t win. But I’d never jeopardize your job.”

“I know,” Tom concedes, turning cards and sliding the chips away from the customer when he busts. The man sighs something about the table being unlucky and slinks off, toward what he likely hopes are greener pastures, leaving Grant and Thomas alone at the table. “And I know you’re not going to ask me to jeopardize things with Dom, either.”

“You’ve been together for a long time. You can’t tell me you’ve never thought of marrying her.”

Tom laughs humorlessly. “Yeah, I’ve thought about it. I’ve thought about what hell Christian would wreak on us if I did, and how I’m going to keep the poison that is the Ward family away from her as best I can. God, maybe you should just let Christian take the damned company, do the same. Damned if it hasn’t been good for me, and it’s not like you don’t have your own money he can’t touch now.”

“Well, too bad the many employees of Ward Enterprises who would be out of a job when Christian drives the business into the ground can’t necessarily say the same.”

The brothers lock eyes, the tension crackling between them. Thomas finally sighs, running a hand over his face. “That wasn’t fair of me. I do know what you’ve built, and that this isn’t just some… penis measuring contest between you and Christian. But I still can’t marry Dominique. Not so long as it is the one thing keeping Christian from coming after Dom and me. After Dom.”

“Tom, if you married her, it would be over. It would cement my position. I’d protect you, Tommy, you know that.”

“Like you did when we were kids?” Tom says, his eyes dropping automatically to his right leg, the one that had broken when Christian “accidentally” bumped him down the stairs. Grant winces at the reminder, and Tom has the grace to look at least somewhat apologetic.

“I know you’d try,” he says quiet. “But he threatened to get Dom’s kids taken away. She worked hard to get her life back on track, to clean up to be a good mom for those kids, and I’m not letting that get ruined because she fell in love with a guy with a sociopath older brother.”

Grant winces, but it isn’t as though he can argue the point. They both know all too well the lengths
to which Christian will go. “I’m less than two years from keeping him out for good. For good, Tom. And then….”

“What, you think he’ll just walk away? Take his defeat and be content to lick his wounds?” Tom says, not unkindly. “Even if you could keep him from taking the reins of the company, he’s still got connections, he still has power. He’d retaliate just for the sake of it. And we can’t take the risk. Not with our kids.”

Grant breathes out, closing his eyes a moment. He nods, then moves to stand.

“For what it’s worth,” Tom begins, and Grant stills, “I am sorry. And I wish things were different.”

“I know,” Grant says. “Me too.”

*_* *_*

He’s already seated at their table in the restaurant when he sees Jemma walk in, tucking her hair behind one ear then untucking it, as though she’s reminded herself not to fuss, as she approaches the hostess. Her shopping venture must have been at least somewhat successful, because while he recognizes the white cardigan she’s wearing over it, the cheery yellow lace dress she’s wearing is definitely not one she unpacked early. He’s also fairly certain she’s have worn it before this if it had been part of her wardrobe before.

He mentions it to her once the hostess has guided her to their table and the waiter, clearly watching discreetly, has poured her glass of wine. The dress itself is not unlike her in some ways, he muses as she tucks her napkin onto her lap. A bit conservative, with a high vee of a neckline and a skirt that comes to midcalf, but not without a bit of flirty fun in the flounce of the hem. The sunshine of the colour like the light of her undimmed smile.

“Oh, yes,” she answers once she’s settled, ducking her head shyly, then peeking up at him through her long lashes, completely unaware of her effect when she does so. “Do you know, I didn’t even make it to the outlet malls Daisy went on and on about? The driver suggested I stop at Macy’s, as they were having a sale, and I’m afraid I got a little carried away. I spent nearly my whole budget!”

“We’ve got plenty of time tomorrow, if you want. And don’t worry,” he teases when it looks like she might protest, “I’m fairly sure my budget can cover it. Or we can explore the strip, if you’d prefer. Maybe hit the wax museum.”

“No, thank you,” she says rather abruptly, then covers her mouth with her hand, as she clearly hadn’t meant to say that. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to sound rude, of course we can go if you really fancy, but I’d really rather not. I’m not particularly… fond… of things that look like people but not quite.”

He can’t help but bark a laugh. “You’re afraid of the statues.”

“Not afraid!” She shakes her head, but if she’s trying to deceive anyone here it is obviously herself. “They’re just… creepy.”

“Well, don’t worry. I’m not going to make you visit the creepy, scary dolls.” He smiles when she rolls her eyes fondly at him. “There’s plenty else we can do. We can even take a helicopter over the Grand Canyon, if you want to make a half day of it.”

The way her face lights up, that sunshine again, he can tell that is absolutely what they are going to
do. He makes a note to himself to stop by the concierge desk again when they go back to the hotel, to make the arrangements.

They settle into a comfortable conversation when the waiter sweeps in to take their order, topping up Jemma and Grant’s drinks with the careful service he’s become used to when restaurants put two and two together at the last name attached to the reservation. She asks after his own meeting with Thomas, her face settling into a concerned sympathy when he says it went as expected, reaching to set her hand on his as though she can see beyond the front he puts on to the long-known wound that lies beneath. She looks as though she is about to say more when their food arrives, and he finds himself relieved at the reprieve, that he doesn’t have to share but that he also doesn’t have to hurt her feelings by shutting her out.

The food is incredible, and Jemma remarks on it several times, insisting he taste a little bit from every course of her meal. It’s dessert, though, that has surprises her, and not just because of the tray of exquisitely plated, gleaming truffles that is set between them. Instead, it’s the gleam reflecting on the cushion-cut diamond in the centre of the Edwardian-style ring he’d picked up in New York a few days ago. The waiter steps back discretely and it seems other patrons have clued in because a hush falls around the table.

“Grant,” Jemma breathes, looking from him to the ring. “Is that…”

He’s surprised her, he knows, but whatever the reason for their upcoming marriage, he knew he’d have to do this right. He doesn’t get down on one knee – that would be too much, would embarrass the both of them – but he does reach out to take her hand in his. Dropping a kiss on the back seems natural.

“It is,” he confirms. “I know it might seem soon, but I’m a man who knows what he wants and he isn’t too stupid to know something amazing when he comes across it. When you know, you know… and I hope you know too, and that you’ll say yes. Jemma, will you marry me?”

He knows what the answer will be, but it doesn’t stop a feeling of triumph from coursing through him when she nods and squeaks out a yes. Before he knows it, he’s slipping the ring onto her finger and sweeping her into a kiss even the most jaded eye would be sure to believe. The other patrons clap as they part breathlessly, and the sommelier opens a bottle of champagne as Grant let’s Jemma hide in the circle of her arms. To the other diners, it must look as though she’s quivering with joy, though he knows it’s anxiety and adrenaline from the lie that has her trembling in his embrace. He runs a comforting hand up her back and promises himself that he won’t let her regret this.

Chapter End Notes

C is for comment, that's good enough for me, comment comment comment starts with C! (In case you couldn't tell, I love comments. Also cookies. Both are awesome.)
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

In which Grant and Jemma do in Vegas what one might expect folks to do in Vegas.

Chapter Notes

Goodness, this chapter fought me so hard, but in the end I am quite fond of it. Thank you for your patience waiting for it. Between my beta and I, we’ve had a bit of a time getting to this one! But it’s here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There’s a general blurb of noise in Las Vegas, even in the upscale Bellagio Hotel, which Jemma appreciates because she feels like otherwise someone might be able to overhear the pounding of her heart and guess that she’s a big fat phony. A big fat phony as large as the big, fat, very not phony diamond currently on her left ring finger.

She can’t seem to stop looking at it.

It’s actually not ostentatious, she notes as she tries to subtly hold her hand out as she feeds a bill into one of the noisy machines. She appreciates that Grant hadn’t gone for something overly showy just because a man of his position can. The ring suits her, really, for all that the diamond is much more than she’d ever contemplated, with its classic square shape surrounded by smaller, shiny stones around it and a band in what she’d hazard an educated guess is platinum and not white gold. It’s beautiful yet simple, striking without being showy. Something she might have chosen for herself, had she even begun to contemplate a ring as part of this charade.

Grant has gone to get them chips – of the gambling and not eating kind – and so she’s on her own for a few minutes at least, trying not to let her nerves get to her. A waitress swings by, so Jemma takes advantage of the opportunity to order some liquid courage. She’s very much going through with this, and it’s almost overwhelming, to think that in less than 24 hours she’ll be married. On paper, at least, she reminds herself, poking randomly at the buttons.

“You know, the slots have some of the worst odds at the casino,” Grant says, making sure he’s in her eyeline before he wraps an arm around her waist like a doting new fiancé would.
“Oh?” she asks, turning away from the screen to glance up at him. “I hadn’t thought of it, really, but I suppose that makes sense.” She looks back at the machine, frowning at it a moment before poking another few buttons thoughtfully, even though she knows she’d need a significant amount of time more than she has to figure out the algorithm to beat the odds at this game.

“And yet you’re not cashing out, Lady Logic,” he teases.

“Soon to be Mrs. Logic, it would seem,” quips the waitress, returned with Jemma’s very yummy-looking drink, which she gratefully accepts even as Grant easily slides a tip at her.

“That would still be Dr. Logic,” Jemma reminds without rancor. “But yes, we’ve just become engaged tonight. How did you know?”

“You’ve got that blissful glazed look,” the waitress smiles. “Work around here long enough, it becomes easy to spot. Plus you keep looking at your left hand like you’ve never seen it before. Congratulations, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Jemma says, ducking her head shyly into Grant’s shoulder.

“Can I get you anything?” the waitress asks Grant, who shakes his head.

“Just going to let my fiancée finish up and then see if I can convince her to join me at a Blackjack table. I’d suggest poker, but the House would clean up.”

“I’m afraid my poker face is terrible,” Jemma explains ruefully.

“Well, you never know. Seems like it could be your lucky night,” the waitress winks, tilting her head toward the ring glinting on Jemma’s finger.

“I’d say it’s my lucky night,” Grant says, “considering she said yes.”

“Very smooth,” the waitress says approvingly, then turns to back to Jemma as she walks jauntily away. “Honey, you want to lock this one down fast, we’ve got some great wedding packages here.”
Whatever Jemma might have said to that is interrupted by the sound of her machine happily beeping, the numbers creeping up higher and higher as her mouth drops open.

“Well, would you look at that,” Grant says, his face breaking into a sly smile as he chuckles a little. “It’s so good, I’d think we’d hired actors to pull this off if I didn’t know any better.”

“I don’t…” Jemma says faintly. “What do you mean?”

“You were worried about pulling off a story without lying to your friends,” he gestures as the screen, where her winnings have now come to a stop at more than twenty times the fifty dollar bill she’d played. “But now… just after a stranger suggests you get married right away after winning big…”

“I win big,” Jemma breathes out. She spins to look at him, her mouth still hanging open. “Did you… did you do this so I wouldn’t have to lie?”

“I honestly wish I could take credit for it,” Grant says, and she believes him. “Just luck. God, this is perfect. What do you say, sweetheart? Wanna cash out and see if that luck holds at the Blackjack table, add some reasons we decided to go big before we go home?”

“Oh, I don’t think they’ll let me play,” Jemma says as she cashes out. “I may have a slight talent I hadn’t mentioned.”

“Oh?”

“I might be able to, you know,” her voice drops to a whisper, “count cards. And since I have no poker face, as it were…”

“You have no way of hiding it,” Grant says. “Well, that I can work with, too.”

She lets him lead her to a table and pull her into his lap, putting his chips forward and playing and losing, before playing and winning, then playing and winning some more, likely by reading her own reactions as she watches the cards. She’s a bit worried someone will catch on and kick them out, but Grant seems to know what he’s doing. A waitress brings them drinks, and then more drinks. He must know when to throw a hand or two to allay suspicion, growing his pile of chips with the sly skill
she’d wager he also brings to the boardroom, before whirling her to a new table at some subtle read of the dealer.

Grant grows his pile of chips quite impressively before convincing her to take a few bets on a roulette game, though she refuses to lay down more than the table’s minimum on red or black. She comes out ahead and the buzz of the alcohol has her feeling absurdly proud of her little stack of chips. She’s having fun, letting Grant tease her about her new gambling ways, relaxing enough that she forgets to be stressed about what is coming. And maybe Grant reads that too, because before she can second guess herself, they are in the back of a limo heading to the County Clerk’s office to grab a marriage license before they close at midnight.

The alcohol in her system makes the whole thing seem rather unreal, even as she’s looking at the forms filled out in her own hand in the comfort of their suite. Grant has shucked his suit jacket and tie, and leans against the door of the bedroom with his shirtsleeves pushed up, watching her.

“If you ask me if I am sure about this one more time,” she says as she sets the papers on the bedside table and starts pulling pins from her hair, “I will throw a lamp at you.”

Grant chuckles and moves into the room. “Wouldn’t dream of it, sweetheart.”

“Well, good,” she says, trying to put the hairpins on the table as well, but somehow they end up on the floor, and she looks at them in genuine confusion. She forgets it a moment later, going to pull her dress up over her head and getting twisted in the lining. Now how did that happen?

“I think this dress is faulty,” Jemma says, and feels gentle hands untangle her.

“I think you probably shouldn’t have had that last glass of champagne in the limo,” Grant counters as he helps her stand up right.

“I’ll have you know I’m very good at drinking,” Jemma says. “I used to drink way more than a couple of glasses of wine in uni, easy as… what’s an easy thing again?”

“Pie?”

“Yes, pie!” Jemma narrows her eyes at him. “Are you laughing at me?”
“Just a little,” Grant teases. “And sweetheart, you had way more than a couple of glasses of wine.”

“Oh good,” she says. “I’m ver’ glad I haven’t lost my touch.”

She stumbles to the bathroom and manages to wash her face and brush her teeth, coming out and crawling onto the bed. Grant holds out some dark material, which she realises is his t-shirt after a long moment of staring at it. Right, she’s in just her underwear. She pulls it over her head, not bothering to take off her bra, then scoots under the blankets and to the very edge of the bed. She pats the side next to her before turning over to hug the edge. Then the wine does its job and she’s out before she even feels him crawl in next to her.

When she blinks awake the next morning, she’s alone in the bed. There’s a glass of water on the bedside table in her eyeline, a folded note leaned carefully against it.

Getting a few things in order for this afternoon. No rush; take as long as you need – and there’s aspirin in my shaving kit if you need that, too. Back by 11:30, feel free to order room service. -G.

She pushes herself out of bed, thanking her lucky stars or genetics that she’s not feeling terribly off, considering how much wine she had, and cursing them a little too, because really, what must Grant think? She shoves the thought to the side and downs the whole glass of water, then heads to the bathroom for the aspirin and another glass, just in case. She glances at the clock; it’s nearly 11. She vaguely recalls Grant speaking to the concierge on the phone when they got in last night, being reassured someone would find a chapel for them sometime this afternoon. She’s got some time to get ready. Both physically and mentally.

She has a long shower, washing her hair even though it means she’ll have to dry it and it won’t curl as well after she sees the impossible case of bedhead she’s managed to incur over the night. It also gives her more time to lock herself away in the bathroom before facing Grant. She debates keeping the closed door between them while she styles her hair as well as dries it, but decides she’s being a complete coward. Still, it takes her nearly a full minute – she counts! – with her hand on the door handle before she’s able to talk herself into opening the door.

She gets an excellent view of the abs Bobbi had said a businessman had no business having, because he’s just changing into his suit, it would seem, and he hasn’t yet pulled on more than pants that are doing very good things for his ass. She feels a flush rise to her cheeks as he turns to smile at her.

“Good morning, champ,” he says. “How’s your head?”

“I’ve had no complaints,” she says without thinking, then covers her mouth in horror. She’s clearly been watching reality television with Daisy far too often, that that is the first thing that drops from her mouth. It startles a laugh out of Grant, but she’s absolutely mortified. “Oh my lord, can the world just open up and swallow me whole right now?”

“I’m afraid not, sweetheart. But if you like, we can pretend it never happened?”

“Yes please, and my embarrassing bedtime performance as well, and you have a deal.”
“You’re an adorable little lush, so I don’t know what you’re worried about, but sure. Deal.”

“Excellent,” she breathes out in relief, though she’s sure her face is still scarlet.

“I didn’t see a tray. Did you order room service?”

She shakes her head. “No, I never got around to it, and to be honest, I’m not sure I could eat anything.”

He watches her for a moment with that intensity she’s getting used to, and she plucks at the tie of the robe the hotel provided to give herself something to do with her hands. “Nervous?”

She nods tightly.

“Me too,” he says, and she almost believes him. “But you might feel better if you eat something. A little sustenance to get you through…”

“The alcohol we’re not going to mention I need to burn off?” she says wryly.

“I was going to say our big fat fake wedding, actually,” he smiles again, and she can’t help but smile a little back.

“Alright,” she concedes.

“Anything in particular you want?”

“Something light, please. Maybe just some toast and jam.”

“Coming up,” he says.

“I’m just going to finish,” she gestures back at the bathroom. “I was going to curl my hair, but if you need the loo, let me know.”

“I’m good for now,” he says, so she nods and ducks back in.

She’s just finding the few stray locks she missed when he brings her toast and a cup of tea, made up just how she likes it, already dressed in his perfectly pressed grey suit and burgundy dress shirt, complete with jacket though he hasn’t yet tied his tie. It’s funny, how domestic it all feels, getting ready for their day together. It’s strange, really, that this is about to be her life for the next two years.

She bites hard into her toast, chewing it as purposefully as she’s choosing to ignore the absurdity of her life.

Though Grant says there’s no rush, she finds herself pushing through the rest of her breakfast and makeup routine, though she sticks the basics of foundation, blush, lipstick and a little mascara when she finds her hands shaking a bit much to do more. Then she’s pulling on one of the dresses she picked up, a simple pink floral printed sheath dress with a modest boat neck, smoothing her hair one last time and nodding resolutely.

“You look lovely,” Grant says as she steps into her shoes.

“Thank you, so do you. Lovely. Or handsome, if you prefer.”

“Either works,” Grant smiles reassuringly at her.

She smooths her hands down her dress to brush out any wrinkles that might have come forth, fussing
a little with the hem, when she sees Grant move out of the corner of her eye, over to the cart their lunch must have come on.

“Here,” he says, and it sounds almost shy, though she might be imagining things. “I thought you might like to carry these.”

He holds out a bouquet of roses in a creamy pink that complements her dress, though he couldn’t have known what she was going to wear, since she’d only just unpacked the shopping bag herself this morning. They’re perfect, and she’s left speechless for a moment. Before she can think better of it, she’s standing on her tip toes and pulling Grant down to drop a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you, Grant. It was very thoughtful and I… just thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he says. “Are you ready?”

“No,” Jemma says, “But that isn’t going to stop me, so…”

He holds out his arm, and she loops hers through it, leaning in to him as they walk out their door, clutching at her bouquet and trying to look every inch the blushing bride. She thinks of Katie, of all the other children who will be helped by her research, about possible breakthroughs and less pressure from the dean, and lets it paint a genuine smile on her face.

It carries her through the short wait for the Terraza to be free and then the even shorter ceremony, with the standard vows. She also smiles and giggles a little because the woman who performs the ceremony is nothing like the gaudy Elvis impersonator she couldn’t help but picture when Grant had first mentioned Vegas, and the officiant just smiles at her knowingly.

Before she knows it, she and Grant and pronounced Mr. and Mrs., and she’s being kissed quite thoroughly and convincingly by her new husband. Then they are heading back up to the room as though they are about to spend the next ten hours consummating and not figuring out how on earth she’s going to break the news to her friends.

Chapter End Notes

Comments make my heart smile like it's been touched by a unicorn and filled with rainbows. You know, the usual. :D
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which Jemma tells her friends she got Vegas married.

Chapter Notes

I really did not think I'd have time to get to my beta's notes before next week, but found myself with a little more energy than expected after hosting a Northwords Writers Festival event. So what better way to celebrate writing than getting on with a little more of my own?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jemma paused outside the door of her flat, her key gripped tightly in her hand as though it was a lifeline. Through the door, she could hear her friends’ voices, their rambunctious tones carrying through the wood. This was good, she reassured herself. Better to tell everyone at once. Like ripping off a plaster.

A peel of raucous laughter makes her jump, and she begins to second guess her insistence that Grant wait for her in the car.

It takes her three more deep breaths to screw her courage to the sticking point and make her way inside, but she does it. There’s an extra pair of hideously dirty boots in the entryway, sure enough, when she rounds the corner to the living room, she finds that Fitz, Mack, Daisy, and Bobbi have set up a folding table to wedge around with Lance, playing what appears to be an ill-advised team version of Risk in her absence. Had they been playing any other game, it might have hurt her feelings to be left out of game night, but she categorically has refused to play with them since the Incident of 2017, and from the look on Bobbi’s face, Jemma suspects a complete ban may be imposed in the near future.

“Jemma!” Daisy shouts gleefully as she spots her round the corner, and she gives a small wave as the group greets her, then tries to shush each other even as their downstairs neighbour can be heard roaring at them to “shut the hell up already”.

“I’m surprised to see you back, I thought you were going to stay another night at Grant’s,” Mack says, rolling the dice. Lance sticks his tongue out at him when he rolls a dud, earning an elbow from Bobbi, as if he actually had some form of manners to tap into.

“I was, I mean I am, but…” Jemma fiddles nervously with her gloves, and perhaps it’s the movement of her hands that draws their attention to the ring on her finger, or perhaps they’d just have noticed regardless, but the conversation dies off to sudden silence, and then just as she’s opening her mouth to break it, there’s a roar of noise in their living room all over again as they begin talking over one another.

She takes a step back against her will at the cacophony, wishing she hadn’t been so adamant that
Grant stay downstairs.

A shrill whistle breaks through the noise.

The hubbub quiets, and Bobbi removes her fingers from between her lips.

“Everyone, take a moment to chill.”

The room seems to take a collection breath. Lance looks about to say something, but a pointed look – glare, really - from Bobbi stops him. Jemma,” she says evenly. “You understand that this is very uncharacteristic, and that’s why everyone is freaking out?”

Jemma shrinks a little into herself, and nods.

“Everyone, you understand that while this is uncharacteristic, for Jemma, she’s a smart adult woman and deserves, at the very least, to be able to share news with her friends without being shouted at?”

Jemma’s friends nod sheepishly and settle back into their seats, though she can still feel their eyes on her.

“So… Jemma,” Bobbi says. “Do we need to google how you get an annulment, or do you need our help finding a lawyer, or…”

“No,” Jemma shakes her head.

“Ward’s got that covered, I bet,” Fitz says. “Man like that, must have someone or twelve on retainer.”

“No,” Jemma says again. “Well, yes, but… we’re not getting an annulment.”

The room looks about to erupt again, but Bobbi simply holds her hands up and her friends shut their mouths.

“Okay,” Bobbi says firmly. “Deep breath, everyone. Remember that part where Jemma is going to share her news without being shouted at?”

Her friends look chastened.

“Okay,” Bobbi says. “You’re not getting an annulment.”

“No,” Jemma says. “I know it’s sudden, I do. But he proposed, and I said yes. And then we were in Vegas and celebrating and some said we could just get married all in one go and then it seemed silly to wait and…”

“Because you were headed in that direction anyway,” Daisy says.

“Yes,” Jemma says, twisting her hands and focusing on the truth of it to keep from giving herself away and ruining the whole thing. Daisy is kind of nodding to herself although the weight of her gaze seems heavy, and Jemma has to remind herself not to flinch when she cocks her head thoughtfully as though she could read right through what Jemma isn’t saying.

“Okay,” Daisy says, tipping her head at Jemma then shooting a look at Mack and Fitz that Jemma can’t quite read.

Fitz raises his hand timidly, and Daisy snorts a laugh at him as Bobbi magnanimously gestures at him to proceed. Even Jemma cracks a smile despite the whirling nerves in her stomach.
“Are you gan quit your job?”

“Oh, no!” Jemma shakes her head vehemently. “No, absolutely not.”

“Bummer,” Daisy teases, then shoots a grin at the confused guests. “Her boss is a dick.”

“He’s…” Jemma starts, but trails off, since it really as an apt description of the dean. “Well, no matter, I hadn’t any plans to leave any time soon, and that’s not changed just because I’ve got a ring on my finger.”

“What about bank accounts? You going to keep those separate, or…” Bobbi waves.

“Well, that would really be more of a concern for him, given our … differing economic statuses,” Jemma points out delicately. “We haven’t got that fully sorted yet, but I am keeping my own bank account, of course.”

“Oh my God, you don’t want to let him put money into it!” Daisy realises with a laugh. “He’s going to have to talk you into spending his money. Oh, that’s rich!”

“Quite literally,” Mack interjects, not at all helpfully.

“Anyway,” Jemma blushes. “I’ve agreed to a credit card at least, and he’s agreed to a post-nup of sorts if only we both have lawyers look at it for both our interests and…what?” Her train of thought is entirely interrupted when Bobbi snorts.

“Nothing,” Bobbi says, hiding a smile behind her hand. “It’s just… you two dorks are kind of adorable.”

“No, I won’t take your money, darling!” Daisy squeaks in a terrible impression of her before segueing an even worse impression of Grant. “Oh but you must, my lovely crumpet!”

“Okay, that British accent was terrible,” Bobbi says. “And vaguely … Scottish.”

“That’s no’ Scottish,” Fitz protests.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Daisy grumbles.

“What about your room, hen?” Lance says, tipping back in his chair and only just catching himself before it tilts over.

“What about it?” Mack says, looking at him pointedly. “Obviously, she’s going to want to move in with her husband, but that still doesn’t mean you get to horn in.”

“Yeah, because there’s like a line of people who get to move in before you do, and only two of them already live in this apartment. Three if you count Jemma,” Daisy says.

“I was thinking I could keep paying the rent on it for a few month, at least,” Jemma hastens in. “Because obviously, yes, I am going to move in with my husband, yes. But we talked and we didn’t think it was fair to leave you with my share all of a sudden, so I can continue to pay rent for the next six months, while you decide what to do?”

“But nothing,” Daisy says practically. “It was one thing when I was living the drifter life, but dude. I
have a regular job now, and I can definitely afford to pay my share.”

“And they kind of talked about it already,” Lance throws out. “Since you were practically shacking up with the bloke already.”

“Jesus, Hunter,” Bobbi says, rolling her eyes. “But yes, while it was somewhat… sooner than we anticipated, we figured you might want to move on and talked about what we’d do if and when you mentioned it. But you’ll always – always have room here, okay?”

“Long as you need it, babe,” Daisy said, coming over to wrap Jemma in a hug. “I can go back to the couch anytime.”

“Oh, but…”

“No buts,” Daisy says firmly. “Now, I think this calls for a celebration. You should call that new husband of yours, tell him to stop being a chicken and to head over.”

“Oh, he’s actually already here,” Jemma admits. “I made him promise to stay in the car. What? You lot can be a little much and I didn’t want him to get upset when you shouted at us!”

“No one shouted at you,” Fitz scoffs.

“Actually, we all kind of shouted at her,” Mack points out.

“Anyway,” Daisy says. “Celebration. I think there’s some tequila stashed somewhere that Elena left behind.”

“Nope. Drank it,” Lance says.

“I’ve got some beer in the fridge,” Mack starts, only to sigh when he sees Lance unapologetically shake his head. “Dammit, Lance, that wasn’t even the cheap stuff.”

“Then he can order us celebratory pizza,” Bobbi says. “And spring for extra pineapple on one. And can it, Hunter, we don’t all have to forgo it because you don’t like it.”

Lance groans, but starts pulling out his wallet. A knock on the door interrupts him.

“That’ll be Mister Plays Opera at 7 am on Saturday but can’t let us have a game night every now and again from downstairs,” Bobbi sighs.

“Not it,” Daisy says quickly and they all scramble to avoid the task, Jemma coming in dead last as usual.

“Oh, that’s not fair, I wasn’t even hear until ten minutes ago!”

“You’re so good with him, Jem,” Fitz wheedles.

“It’s her wedding, and even though she went and eloped just so she didn’t have to choose between Bobbi and me for Maid of Honor…”

“That’s not why I…” Jemma began to protest though Daisy kept going over top of her.

“Or so she could avoid the totally epic Bachelorette that we can still totally make you do, by the way, the least we can give you as a gift is letting you answer this door.” The magnanimous tone of her voice does nothing to mask the teasing twinkle in Daisy’s eyes.
“That’s a terrible gift, and you know it,” Jemma sighs, but moves to answer the door regardless.

“Oh, everyone, it’s not the knob from downstairs” calls Lance, who in their distraction had got up to get the door, and Jemma spares a moment to be thankful that is wasn’t their neighbour, as sic’ing Lance on anyone is a bridge they could not unburn. “It’s the knob Jem married!”

“Jesus, Hunter,” Bobbi hisses.

“I know you wanted me to wait in the car,” Grant says coming round the corner. “But I thought we could celebrate a little, with your friends.”

He’s carrying a couple of pizza boxes, Jemma sees, from the place around the corner, which he hands off to Bobbi so he can pull a plastic bag from off his wrist.

“They didn’t have champagne at the place down the street,” he continues apologetically. “But they did have some bottles of sparkling wine.”

“I’ll get some glasses,” Daisy says, nudging Jemma knowingly. It spurs her into moving, and she lets him tuck her under his arm, her own going instinctively around his waist.

“Thank you,” she says quiet, then leans up impulsively to kiss him on the cheek.

“You’re welcome,” he says, squeezing her lightly before accepting the paper cup Daisy passes to him.

“We really need to do dishes,” she says sheepishly, passing Jemma one as well.

“To Jemma and Grant,” Mack says, raising his paper cup that looks ridiculously small in his large hands. Her friends whoop and cheer, and she ducks her head into Grant’s shoulder as she blushes.

“Shut UP,” yells the cranky old man downstairs.

“You shut up, you joyless wanker! Our friend got hitched!” Lance yells back.

Bobbi drops her face in her palm and sighs as the rest of them dissolve into giggles. Quietly.

Chapter End Notes

Comments make the Muse happy. They also make this writer happy, whether they are here on on my Tumblr (where I'm @thestarfishdancer).

End Notes

Comments make the world go round. Or, at the very least, they make me super happy and tend to help me give the Muse a kick in the pants. I'm also on Tumblr as @thestarfishdancer if you want to say hello!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!