

what are friends for?

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/30390690) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/30390690>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	F/F
Fandom:	The Haunting of Bly Manor (TV)
Relationship:	Dani Clayton/Jamie
Characters:	Dani Clayton , Jamie (The Haunting of Bly Manor) , Owen Sharma , Hannah Grose , Flora Wingrave , Miles Wingrave , edmund o'mara (mentioned)
Additional Tags:	Friends With Benefits , except not really , but yeah basically , No ghosts AU , Smut , Explicit Sexual Content , Idiots in Love , Friends to Lovers , people say Swears , this is such a rom com , Not kidding
Language:	English
Collections:	Damie mental Illinois
Stats:	Published: 2021-03-31 Words: 14,358 Chapters: 1/1

what are friends for?

by [andawaywego](#)

Summary

“I-I just don’t want things to be...weird between us,” Dani says, feeling her face get hot under Jamie’s bewildered gaze. “And they are.”

“I love that you think going down on me is going to make things less weird.”

[Dani hasn't been kissed in two years. Jamie offers to fix that. Things get weird.]

Notes

hello wow i hope people are still out there?

i wrote this. it fought me. it's long. so sorry (also for mentioned past Dani/Edmund stuff). it's pretty gay and smutty tho so i hope that makes up for it.

enjoy!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Despite that initial aloof and disinterested act, Jamie turns out to be a pretty good friend.

Dani is a little surprised.

She's funny and thoughtful, just as comfortable cracking jokes as she is letting Dani practically bare her soul.

It's like she's never uncomfortable, which bodes well for someone like Dani who's practically *always* uncomfortable. Even after all that *Eddie* stuff had been unloaded—the sane and the not-so-sane parts—Jamie hardly even blinked. She just offered comforting words, a hug, an origin story of her own until they were standing on equal ground again.

The only other person she's ever felt so close to was Eddie himself, and there are so many things she's shared with Jamie that she never would have uttered to him. It's relieving, really. Exciting even. Dani's never had her *person* before, someone who knows most of her secrets and could guess at the others without being told; someone who she knows and understands well enough to surprise them; someone who will stare at the box containing their gift that Dani's set on the counter with wide, lustful eyes.

"You're kidding me," says Jamie.

"Clearly I'm not," says Dani.

"You went to Brigit's."

"Yep."

"And got me cupcakes."

"Hot Cross Buns cupcakes, yeah."

Her expression is one of a child on Christmas morning. Dani is certain she must be exaggerating, but she can't help the thrill of pride at the reaction anyway. It hadn't been a big deal, really. She was in London already—having driven the children to their uncle for their holiday vacation—and Brigit's wasn't too far out of the way. Plus, Jamie talks about the place enough and the "best cupcakes" she's ever had every other day. Dani could hardly resist the opportunity to do something nice for her dearest friend.

"You're incredible." Jamie flings the box open and tugs one of the cupcakes out, taking a large bite that leaves her lips and nose spattered with frosting. "I love you," she says as she chews. "Seriously. I could kiss you."

Another bite. Even more frosting.

She's grinning now in that way that Dani adores, hair is pulled back messily, cheeks flushed pink from a long day of working in the sun. Affection burbling like steam trapped inside her, Dani rolls her eyes. "Yeah, sure."

“Not kidding,” Jamie says with mock sincerity, crossing her finger over her heart.
“Come’re.”

Taking a step towards Dani, leaned against the counter, she puckers her lips dramatically and leans toward her. “Oh my god,” Dani says, pushing at her shoulders before Jamie can get too close. “Get out of here.”

Jamie blinks, mouth open in shock as she adopts a wounded look. “Are you spurning my advances?”

“I’m not letting my first kiss in two years be with someone who’s covered in frosting and has cupcake crumbs in her teeth.”

It’s meant to be a joke, like the kiss had been. The kind of ribbing you do with your best friend on a warm August evening. But Jamie doesn’t laugh. Instead, she frowns, suddenly serious. She gets that pinch between her eyebrows like she always does when she’s thinking something through.

“Wait,” she says. “No one’s kissed you in two years?”

Immediately, Dani regrets having said anything at all. Her face feels very hot very suddenly. Only getting hotter.

“Um...no.” She swallows thickly. “Not since—”

It’s best to leave that bit unsaid, she thinks. Jamie will be able to fill in the blanks.

Understanding flashes in Jamie’s eyes and it’s kind of silly how contemplative she still manages to be with frosting all over her face. “That’s almost as long as I’ve known you,” she says.

Dani nods, crossing her arms over her stomach. “Yeah,” she says. “Almost.”

There’s something unfamiliar in Jamie’s eyes as they look at each other then. Like she’s trying to puzzle something together without any luck. Like the pieces won’t go together or one of them is missing entirely.

In an instant, though, it’s gone and that easy smirk is back. Dani can’t help but watch the way it curls her red lips to the side, even as she’s nervous about whatever is going to come next.

“Well,” she drawls, “maybe I should have kissed you then. Restarted the clock and all.”

Not for the first time, Dani is so very grateful for Jamie’s calm in any situation. It grounds her enough that she can laugh without choking on it, without letting the flaring heat in her cheeks get to her anymore than it already has.

She grabs a towel from beside the sink and reaches out to cup the back of Jamie’s head so she can wipe away all that mess. Jamie squawks and squirms away, pushing at Dani’s hand.

“Much better,” Dani chirps, releasing her and tossing the towel aside, finding far too much enjoyment at no longer being the only one flustered.

“Christ, what are you?” Jamie asks, grinning despite everything else. “My mum?”

Dani laughs. “No, just someone who’d like to see your pretty face beneath all that frosting.”

Their eyes catch for a beat. Jamie clears her throat.

“Guess this means I could kiss you now if ya’ wanted,” she winces her way through it, trying to maintain a teasing demeanor. “By your rules.”

Dani isn’t sure why she feels so on display, why her skin feels hot with a fever, why it feels like Jamie maybe isn’t joking about this. As if they are each weighing their options and considering the outcome. “I guess that’s true.”

“Yep.” Jamie fumbles for another cupcake, playing with the lid of the box like she’s trying to decide. Trying to look nonchalant. “So...let me know if I need to take one for the team.”

“Would it really be that bad?” Dani asks. Hopefully she doesn’t sound as stung as it feels.

Sobriety pitches over Jamie’s expression like a shadow. “Not like...” she huffs and then scrubs a hand over her face, shaking her head. “I didn’t mean it like—”

“It’s okay.”

“No, Poppins, I was only—”

“Jamie.”

A halt. A pause. Dani has her palm resting warm on Jamie’s pale forearm. This isn’t the first time they’ve touched. Not even close, so there’s no reason for Dani to be feeling like this.

“I’m teasing you,” she lies.

“Okay,” says Jamie. “Good.”

“Yeah.” Her hand stays where it is and Jamie looks so raw and anxious that she sort of wants to fold her into a hug, never let her go. Make her smile again because usually she’s so good at that. Instead she says: “So...are you going to kiss me or what?”

Her inability to keep her mouth in check isn’t the most surprising part. No, that comes in the form of Jamie’s eyes widening, how thickly she swallows. She’s flustered, Dani realizes. What she’s just said has flustered her.

“O-Oh...Right...I mean—” Jamie more mumbles this than really says it and Dani has only a few seconds more to appreciate the effect she’s had on her always-steady friend before there’s more. “I think that’s within my skill set.”

Dani blinks, pondering at the weight the offer carries with it. “Yeah?”

Jamie shrugs. "Sure." She turns herself and leans a hip against the counter, watching as Dani mimics the action, letting go of her arm in the process. "What are friends for?"

Not this, Dani does not say because that feels a bit like hitting the nail on the head.

And anyway, she doesn't actually have much experience with platonic best friends. For all she knows, this *could* be what friends are for after all, though that doesn't seem necessarily true.

But she *likes* Jamie. She's her favorite person and in the almost two years that they've known one another, Jamie has never once hesitated in being there for her. What is this if not that same support in a different form?

Plus, it's not like Jamie is *unattractive*. Dani hasn't necessarily let herself think about that (*much*) or align it with the thoughts and feelings she's been avoiding her entire life, but she knows that Jamie *is* objectively pretty. Beautiful, even.

Maybe *subjectively* too.

"Okay," she says, voice breaking.

Jamie rolls her fingers across the countertop to her right. "Alright," she says.

There's a strange moment where they're just looking at one another, neither of them sure what the next legal move is. Finally, Jamie leans in, eyes wide open and moving slowly, and Dani laughs, halting Jamie in her tracks and making her frown.

"You can't do that," she says.

"Do what?"

Dani flaps her hands. "You can't keep your eyes open like that. It freaks me out."

"Oh. Sorry." She gives Dani a rueful smile and then slams her eyes shut, leaning in for another try.

But, again, Dani stops her, this time by pressing a palm into her bony shoulder. "You're going to wind up kissing my eye if you do that."

Embarrassed, Jamie bites her lip and pulls away again, but only so she can reach up and capture Dani's face in her hands. "For guidance," she explains, smiling when Dani does.

Those perfect, white teeth getting closer and closer and—

It's Jamie who stops herself this time. "Okay, okay," she says. "No teeth."

"Yeah, maybe not."

"This is weird. Is this weird?"

It is, come to think of it, but Dani is worried that saying so will make Jamie run away and want to forget the whole thing. Something in her chest throbs at the thought, and she aligns it to the fact that it has been *two years* since anyone has touched her this way.

“No, it’s not,” she says. “Just don’t...clack our teeth together.”

Jamie laughs, shoulders loosening. “Right. Yeah. That would be rough.”

“Very.”

“Take four.”

They’re still smiling, of course, even though they’re standing in the kitchen where anyone could walk in about to kiss because Dani is lonely and Jamie is kind. Or something like that. The whole thing is completely ludicrous. All the same, when Jamie leans in, Dani’s breath hitches a little. It feels like it takes years—these long, measured breaths that make Dani tremble with anticipation—but then Jamie kisses her.

Everything gets really, really quiet.

It’s a chaste kiss. Just Jamie’s lips softly touching her own. Jamie’s breath puffing out against Dani’s cheek. Dani’s fist tightens in the fabric of Jamie’s t-shirt, right at the neckline and she’s expecting it to be over pretty quickly—actually has to flutter her eyelids open to check to make sure she isn’t dreaming. But, no. It’s real. The curve of Jamie’s cheekbone is just as familiar up close as it is from farther away.

After a second, though, Jamie makes this soft, little sound in the back of her throat that Dani isn’t sure what to do with that. All she’s sure about is the fact that she’s bumping her tongue to Jamie’s lips, tasting them, begging for entrance that Jamie so readily gives. Their tongues slide together, exploring and recalibrating.

Jamie takes a step closer, pressing her thumbs to the corners of Dani’s lips, and Dani gasps, tugs her closer, can’t *think* because—

The first thing she registers when Jamie pulls away is how *cold* it is. Dani is certain she’s not imagining it.

Jamie is right back to where she was standing at the start of this conversation, digging another cupcake out like she’s trying to hide behind it. She looks flushed and her chest is rising and falling more rapidly than can be considered normal, but she seems otherwise unaffected.

Dani is certain the same cannot be said about herself.

“There you go,” says Jamie, eyes fixed far and away. “Now it hasn’t been two years for either of us.”

“Either of us?” Dani asks. “What do you—”

Jamie shrugs it off. “Right, yeah. Remembered halfway through. Been a bit for me, too.”

This settles sharply behind Dani's ribcage. She doesn't know why.

"Oh, well...Guess we both did each other a favor then, huh?"

It comes out stiff and wrong because the moment is tense with a bunch of things neither of them is sure how to say—or else can't put into words in the first place. Dani is certain that Jamie only laughs because she's desperate to have her mouth do *anything* else.

It's a testament to Jamie's stalwart and breezy nature, or perhaps some hidden talent for acting, that things don't become strained or awkward afterwards. By dinner on the night of the first kiss, things are practically normal again and they're sitting around the table after dinner with Hannah and Owen, making light conversation and laughing like they always do.

So what if Dani can still feel Jamie's palm cupping her jaw? Or if she can recall with startling clarity the gentle flick of Jamie's tongue against the backs of her teeth?

Jamie is her friend. Her best friend. Her very dorky, very endearing best friend who spends ten minutes after dinner trying to get her spoon to stick and hang from her nose.

The kiss has nothing to do with why Dani can't sleep that night.

Or the next.

It plays no part in why she feels off-balance around Jamie for a day or two.

Anyway. They don't talk about it again and they certainly don't repeat the experience either.

By the end of the first week without the children, it would be fairly easy for Dani to pretend the kiss never happened at all.

She doesn't, of course. But she could, so she focuses on that part instead.

"Make sure you brush enough of that egg white on," Owen says, peering over at her from the stove where he's roasting vegetables. "We don't want a soggy bottom."

"Stop saying 'soggy bottom'," Dani scolds, but he smirks.

Says, "Soggy bottom," again just for the hell of it.

Dani tries not to laugh. Normally she can at least spare a giggle at his antics when the others are there to even things out, but, having been left alone to help him prepare supper—Jamie out in the garden, Hannah walking the grounds—she's stuck helping him finish this damnable steak and potatoes pie.

She glares.

Owen's grin falters.

"No, keep it up," she says. "Just remind me to sic Jamie on you later."

"Oh, you wouldn't."

"I would."

"*That* would give me a very soggy bottom indeed."

In the moments after, they both come to realize what's just been said with differing looks of disgust and shame.

"Don't—" Dani begins.

"Yeah, I won't," Owen cuts in. "Not what I meant."

"Thank God."

She sets the mostly-empty bowl of egg whites on the counter and takes a step back to admire her work. The pale unbaked crust of the pie glimmers in the light coming in through the windows behind her.

"And how is our dear Jamie?" Owen asks after a moment.

Dani leans back against the counter, almost exactly where she'd been when Jamie kissed her just a week prior. "What do you mean?"

He's got his back to her which means she can't precisely read his tone. "I dunno. She's just been a bit dreamy lately. Head in the clouds and all."

"I haven't noticed."

Not a lie, per se, but not precisely the truth either. She's been so busy pretending everything is ordinary and boring that she's probably been missing loads of things.

"Is that so?"

It's the way he says it that has her stomach twisting.

"What does that mean?" she asks.

"Nothing," he says. "Just...you've been a bit dreamy, too. Couldn't help but wonder if..."

He trails off without finishing, but he really doesn't need to.

Dani digs her heels in. "Dreamy," she says, "that reminds me. How are things with Hannah lately?"

She watches as his shoulders stiffen. He turns to face her, moving slowly and keeping his right hand stirring the vegetables all the while.

“I couldn’t possibly imagine what you mean,” he says.

She quirks an eyebrow. “That so?”

“Very so. A lot so.”

Caught like this, he seems a lot less willing to tease. Dani is grateful for it and takes the opportunity to say, “Jamie and I are friends.”

Owen is momentarily stunned. “I never said you weren’t.”

“No, but you were implying we were...”

Beneath his beard, she watches his lips quirk up into a pleased sort of smile. “You were...what?”

Dani shakes her head, pushing herself upright and stalking for the back door. “Good luck with supper, Owen.”

“Wait!” he calls as she pulls the door open and starts outside. “I was only taking the mickey, Dani.”

She doesn’t respond, even as that brief twist of humiliation loosens its hold on her chest, her stomach, her jaw. Outside, the vegetation is saturated and Ozian. It’s like stepping into a wonderland at the height of summers like this one. The brief rain shower earlier in the afternoon still clings thickly to the leaves and the grass, brushing wet streaks against her shoes as she makes her way to the rose bushes. Jamie is kneeling before them, pruning shears in hand and one of her silly gardening hats strapped around her chin.

“Hey,” she says when she spots Dani. “What brings you out here?”

Dani comes to a stop beside her and shakes her head. “Nothing just...needed some air.”

Jamie smiles. “Well, I’ve got plenty.”

It’s a wonder, really, how quickly her voice settles over Dani like a thick, cool fog. How steady she feels in just an instant simply because they are together again.

“Thanks,” she says and they should probably talk. She feels like they should talk about this, but she has no idea what *this* is or what they would even talk *about* and so she doesn’t.

“If you’re gonna be out here, I might as well put you to work.”

A gloved hand pulls at her own. Dani falls to her knees beside Jamie and takes the bag for the trimmings, holding it open.

“Like this?” she asks.

Jamie smiles, steady as the thin, anemic sunlight cracking through the clouds. “Perfect.”

“No way.”

“Yes way.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Why would I lie about something like that?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

Dani pushes at Jamie’s shoulder and Jamie barely catches herself, the wine in her glass sloshing dangerously. None spills by some miracle and Jamie sits back up, throwing a mock glare Dani’s way.

“Rude,” she says.

“That’s what you get for calling me a liar.”

“Okay, okay.” Jamie holds up a hand in surrender and sets her wine glass on the table in front of the couch. “Okay, fine. I believe you. It just...God, that bothers me on *your* behalf, that’s all.”

It’s strange, but she hadn’t actually given it much thought until Jamie cracked a joke about it. She’s certain that she isn’t the only woman in the world who hasn’t done... *that* . Even if Jamie is acting like she is.

“It’s not that big of a deal,” Dani says, rolling her eyes. “It just wasn’t something we really did.”

Neither was sex, really, but she leaves that part out.

If possible, that wild look in Jamie’s eyes gets all the worse the moment Dani says this, but it’s morphed into something different now. Relief, perhaps? Curiosity? Dani can’t quite pin it down.

Jamie takes a long drink from her wine glass, nearly emptying the thing, then sets it back down out of the way. “So he was just a one and done kind of guy,” she says. Not a question.

Dani frowns. “Well—”

Jamie’s eyes nearly bug out of her head at that. “Oh, Poppins...Don’t tell me.”

“Fine. I won’t tell you.”

“ *Never* ?”

Now the entire conversation is entirely derailed. Dani wonders if it would be possible to sink into the floor, or maybe just up to her bedroom so she doesn’t have to look at Jamie anymore

and

(*wonder about the things she's done, the things she's **had** done, the things she—*)

make things even stranger.

She's already not certain how she's going to come back from this.

"Can we not talk about this?" she asks, and Jamie's expression collapses immediately.

"Oh, shit. Dani...I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay."

"No, it isn't. I should have just—"

"Jamie," Dani says, reaching out a hand to grab the other woman's, squeezing it. "It's okay."

Jamie sort of looks like she still disagrees, but she keeps her mouth shut. She settles back against the couch, her shoulder brushing Dani's, and they pretend to watch the black-and-white film playing on the television on the other side of the room.

And then the strangest thing yet:

"Do you want me to...to help with that?"

Dani freezes, squeezing the stem of her wine glass so tightly between her fingers that it's a surprise when it doesn't snap. She looks to Jamie, eyebrows furrowed in utter disbelief.

"What?"

Jamie is staring at the television still. She shrugs. "I've just...done this bit before and I want you to... *experience* things. So..." She finally turns, the lamp in the corner of the room sparking in her eyes. "I can go down on you if you want."

It would be a lie to say that warmth does not begin to slide down Dani's spine. It rakes down her ribs and her eyes drop to Jamie's lips, remembering that kiss in the kitchen. It shouldn't be this easy to want this.

"Are you serious?" she asks.

Jamie nods. "What are friends for?"

There's that phrase again. Dani is beginning to wonder what Jamie *wouldn't* try to excuse away with it. All the same, she's too bothered already to consider more than the two options stretched out before her:

She could call it a night, go upstairs, attempt to help herself with about as much luck as always or she could just say—

"Okay."

Jamie blinks. “Yeah?”

Swallowing thickly, Dani nods a bit frantically. “Yeah, yeah. If you’re okay to—”

“Yeah, no. I’m *great* to—”

“Okay.” None of Dani’s thoughts are making sense anymore. She manages to say, “Um...when do you want to...?”

Another shrug. Just another day in the life. “I’m good with now,” says Jamie. “Are you?”

“Yeah,” says Dani. “Do you want to go upstairs or—?”

But Jamie is already sinking to her knees on the carpet, her body pressed tight against Dani’s knees. She runs her palms up Dani’s jean-clad thighs, making Dani splutter a bit, as she says, “Kids are gone and Hannah sleeps like the dead,” by way of excuse.

“W-we shouldn’t,” Dani protests. They already shouldn’t be doing this *at all*. Toss that in with the fact that this couch belongs to her *employer* and she’s fairly certain this is what having a heart attack feels like. “What if we—?”

Jamie quirks her lips in this way Dani’s never seen before. There’s something behind the action that’s been hidden away thus far. She can’t help but wonder how many girls have had it turned their way in the past and if any of them felt about it the same way she does.

Some crumbling, sparking melt she is.

Those hands move up carefully, fingers slipping past the hemline of Dani’s jeans to grasp the button and undo it. Those same fingers then unzip them, slip to the side, and begin tugging them down Dani’s hips.

“Hang on, hang on,” Dani says. Her wine glass is still in her hand.

Jamie laughs and reaches for it, setting it on the table beside her own. Dani takes the opportunity to shimmy her jeans down her hips until they’re resting mid-thigh and she’s in a pair of purple cotton panties in front of her best friend.

She thinks Jamie’s eyes catch on the sight when she sees the progress that’s been made. Her pulse is thumping too steadily in her head, her vision a little askew, though so she can’t actually tell. She feels her jeans get tugged the rest of the way off and then Jamie’s hands are running up her bare thighs, parting them as she goes, and it’s been so long since Dani’s been touched this way (has she *ever* been touched this way?) that she keeps having to remind herself that, in order to stay alive, she’s going to have to *breathe*.

“You really don’t have to do this,” Dani says, just one more try before they can’t take it back, even though she thinks she might explode if Jamie were to stop now.

How is she so *ready* just from this?

Fortunately, Jamie just gives her that patented grin. “Little late for that, yeah?” She hooks her thumbs into Dani’s underwear and tug them down her legs.

Dani never gets the chance to answer.

It should probably feel more embarrassing because Jamie is only the second person to see her this way. The first, really, with the lights on like this. But Jamie is careful and reassuring in all she does and she just guides Dani to sit forward on the cushion a bit so she has more room to work.

“All good?” she asks and Dani nods, breath rattling in her lungs.

“Yeah,” she says. “All good.”

Another smile. “Good.”

When Jamie dips her head down, parting Dani with her fingers, and swipes her tongue across the bud of her clit, it’s a wonder Dani doesn’t bite her tongue clean through.

“ *Oh* ,” she gasps, her left fist clenched beside her thigh, right one gripping the armrest.

This is certainly... *new*. Dani can’t even begin to wrap her head around it. Jamie just keeps working, swirling her tongue, pressing her lips against Dani’s slick like she’s kissing her mouth. Their eyes meet briefly and Jamie looks about as caught as Dani feels and—

This is *Jamie* . Jamie is going down on her right now. That’s Jamie’s tongue that’s flicking inside her, lapping at her so fluidly. It’s Jamie’s fingers gripping into her skin and her adorable, messy curls that are tickling Dani’s bare thighs.

Tension curls in her stomach, the muscles of her abdomen clenching and unclenching with every bump of Jamie’s nose against her. Holy *shit* , Jamie knows what she’s doing and how can she move her tongue that fast?

Dani gets it. She finally understands what all the rage is about.

When watching Jamie do this—eyes closed, lashes fluttering, lost in concentration—becomes too much, Dani rolls her head against the back of the couch and looks up at the ceiling. That tongue bumps against her clit once, then a second time, more deliberately. Dani gasps and lifts one hand to press against her mouth. Hannah might be asleep and all the way upstairs, but she’s not exactly willing to chance them being interrupted. Not when Jamie is adding her fingers into the mix, slipping one, then two, inside and curling.

Dani’s back arches. She can’t control it. She is beyond herself in a way she’s certain she’s never been before. It was never like this; it was *never like this* . Is this what was missing all that time?

“ *God* ,” she whispers, pulling her hand away because she needs it to steady herself.

It’s over pretty quick after that. She reaches down and brushes some of Jamie’s hair out of her face, trying not to buck her hips up into a mouth she never *once* thought would be anywhere

near her like this. She presses her fingers to the joint of Jamie's jaw, feeling the muscles work as she goes.

"*Jamie*," she gasps and then she comes so hard she can feel it in her teeth. Jamie keeps her mouth where it is, working her through it, and Dani's vision wavers as she comes back down and it sparks a little still and it's *Jamie*, holy shit. The same Jamie who sprayed her with the sprinkler just that afternoon and cackled at the look on Dani's face; who gets drunk with her and makes her get out every once in a while; who she's patched up one too many times after "gardening accident"; who just gave Dani her first orgasm.

That Jamie.

What is her life?

Her muscles are shivering beneath her skin like willowy branches caught in the middle of a storm. Jamie eventually takes pity on her and stops, pulling away with this proud gleam in her eye. She uses the sleeve of her flannel to wipe her shimmering mouth clean and Dani can't watch her do that. Looks away.

"Did you—?" Jamie starts, leaving it unfinished.

It's funny how they can do this, but not say it directly.

Dani nods, loose-limbed and sloppy. "Yeah," she says. "I think so."

Jamie quirks an eyebrow. "*Think* so?"

"Know so."

That blinding smile. Dani can't help but return it. Later, she'll blame the lingering grip of her first post-orgasmic daze for actually high-fiving Jamie when her hand is offered.

"Success," says Jamie, all-too happy with herself. She laces hers and Dani's fingers together, still on her knees in front of her—Dani still bare from the waist down and trembling.

"Yeah," says Dani.

Something like that.

It's not weird. It's not weird and it's completely normal and everything is fine.

This is what Dani tells herself.

It is a lie and she *knows* it is a lie, but she can't stop from wanting to buy into it. Admitting that it's weird—that something else might be going on—is to entertain the possibility of some kind of fallout. Friendships have been ruined over much less.

And *yes* , this is her and Jamie she's talking about and *yes* , she believes they're strong enough to get past just about anything if only because they're both unwilling to loosen their grip. But they also work together and see each other every day and now Dani knows what Jamie's head looks like between her legs.

When Jamie burns herself making tea the day after, Dani tends to the wound, rubbing salve over her abused fingers and wrapping them up like always. But standing between Jamie's dangling legs as she sits on the table is strange. It makes her think of things she shouldn't think about. Makes her imagine sinking to her own knees and wonder what kinds of sounds Jamie would make if she did just that.

There are flickers every now and again that tell her that she is not the only one feeling this way. Jamie starts spending more and more time out in the greenhouse, even going so far as to take her meals in there, too. Dani spends her time tucked away in the library or staying glued to Owen in the kitchen.

It's not that they're avoiding one another. Not really. It's just that Dani keeps having these *dreams* and Jamie keeps staring at her with her lips parted and everything might be ruined now.

Dani's not sure.

Okay. It's weird. It's weird and it's *not* normal and everything is changing.

Happy?

A few days of tense strangeness pass by and then Dani has an idea.

"I figured it out," she announces as she bursts through the doors of the greenhouse that afternoon.

Jamie is messing with a plant in the back, hair pulled back and cheeks flushed in the stifling heat. She has her t-shirt sleeves rolled up and her coveralls tied around her waist. Dani tries not to stare at her forearms.

"Figured what out?" she asks.

"Why things are...wrong right now."

This is a good thing. Dani doesn't know why Jamie looks so frightened at the possibility.

She turns her back to Dani and goes back to work. "And what's...what's wrong exactly, Poppins?" The back of her neck is shiny with sweat and Dani has trouble looking away.

"We're uneven now," she says and Jamie's shoulders stiffen. She stops working.

"What?"

Taking a few steps forward, Dani comes to rest against the counter beside where Jamie is working. She grips the edge of it with her fingers and tries to get the other woman to look at her. “When we kissed before,” she starts, “you said it was the first time in a while for you, too.”

Jamie winces. “Right. Yeah, I did.”

“And then you...you did something else for me that I’m guessing hasn’t been done for *you* in a long time if you haven’t—” She cuts herself off, not sure how to finish that. “So now we’re uneven.”

“Wait,” says Jamie. She gives up on working for now and turns to Dani, lifting the bottom of her shirt to wipe at her chin and forehead. The pale skin of her stomach catches Dani’s eyes for an extended beat of time. “Dani.” Fingers snap in front of her face and Dani tears herself back into the present.

That shirt is covering Jamie’s stomach again now anyway.

“Yeah?” she asks.

“What point are you trying to make here?” Jamie asks.

Oh .

“Oh.” Dani blinks, trying to remember. Then: “I need to do the same thing for you.” She’d thought that was obvious.

“You *what* ?”

Okay, maybe it *wasn’t* obvious.

“I-I just don’t want things to be...weird between us,” she tries to explain, feeling her face get hot under Jamie’s bewildered gaze. “And they are.”

“I fucking love that you think going down on me is going to make things *less* weird.” She doesn’t look annoyed or disgusted or anything like that, to Dani’s relief. She just looks amused. Curious. That look from the other night is in her eyes again and Dani desperately wants to know what it means, but she hasn’t the courage to ask yet.

She’s too busy coming to terms with the fact that she’s just offered to eat her best friend out.

“Do you think that would help?” she asks and then decides to phrase it another way: “Would you want me to do that?”

Jamie reaches out and brushes some of Dani’s hair over her shoulder. “I don’t want you to feel like you owe me something.”

“I don’t,” Dani rushes to say. “I just—You’re my best friend and I don’t want to ruin everything.”

Some part of her is aware of how counterintuitive her suggestion is to this idea, but she doesn't care. Both of her dreams in the last two nights have included kissing Jamie's hip bones and sliding her trousers down her legs and that's all she's thinking about.

Finally, Jamie nods, expression growing soft. "Okay," she says. "Yeah."

Relief flushes over Dani's skin, taking some of the excess heat with it. "Okay."

"When?" is Jamie's next question and Dani thinks of Owen busy in the kitchen—Hannah laughing at something he'd said as she slipped out into the garden.

"I'm good with now," she says, an echo of Jamie's words just two nights prior.

Jamie's eyes widen. "What, here?"

"Why not?"

A beat.

"You're just full of surprises aren't you?"

As it turns out, Dani really is.

They decide on one of the chairs toward the center of the room and Jamie drags it to a corner. She places an extra seat cushion on the concrete floor in front of it and then sits down.

"For your knees," she explains when Dani gives her an odd look and how does just *that* have such an affect on her?

The coveralls come off first, then Jamie's boots, which Dani is careful to seat aside neatly. Jamie's the one to get rid of her belt and tug her trousers down, which Dani is grateful for because her hands won't stop shaking.

Jamie, for the most part, seems just as off-kilter as Dani. She swipes her palms on her shirt a few times and struggles with kicking her pants off all the way. When Dani actually settles down on her knees and parts her thighs, she takes in a sharp breath.

"It's fine," she says when Dani stops, worried. "Just...having a hard time believing we're doing this."

Dani nods. Understands the feeling.

It's a joint effort to pull Jamie's underwear down and there she is. Dani tries not to be too visibly stunned, but it's difficult because this is the first woman besides herself she has ever seen naked and Jamie really is beautiful. Makes her body react strangely, in ways Dani doesn't understand.

For instance, her mouth waters and something else takes over entirely, all anxiety slipping away and replaced with an eagerness to learn, to explore.

She goes down on Jamie right there in the greenhouse, watches as Jamie falls apart, fever-bright and biting her lip to keep quiet. The effort makes Dani sweat, makes her brush her hair to one side to give herself more room to work. Her shirt sticks to her back in a way that would be uncomfortable if she could care about anything other than what she's doing. There are a lot of surprising things: the rich salt of Jamie's slick, the way her thighs press into Dani's ears, the tight cling of her walls around Dani's fingers when she slips them inside.

Another thing: how quickly she falls apart under Dani's clumsy, experimental tongue.

Jamie's a bit of a moaner. Dani never would have guessed. It's encouraging, at least, even as her jaw begins to smart from all the work, just watching the way Jamie's dark eyes fix on everything she's doing. How carefully she combs her fingers through Dani's hair. Her grateful, awed curses in a voice low and raspy and ridiculously sexy.

And Dani didn't even know she was *into* that, but she is apparently. Very, very.

She has to press her thighs together beneath her weight to try and tamp down the heat that's flaring between them very suddenly. Jamie is pressing her fingertips into the crown of her head, arching up into her mouth and groaning and it's probably the hottest thing Dani's ever seen. And maybe it's the heat or the way Jamie squirms when she hums against her clit, but she's burning. She's absolutely on fire.

And it only gets worse then because Jamie comes only a few moments later, unable to hold back a soft cry as she clenches Dani's hair a little and tosses her head back.

It's a physical ache to ignore how aroused she is as she coaxes Jamie's hand out of her hair and holds it instead, rocking back a little. Lifts the fabric of her t-shirt right at the shoulder to wipe her mouth with.

"How was what?" she asks because she needs to know. Her voice is breathy and a bit lost, but Jamie is flushed and unsteady in the chair, her expression one of absurd amazement.

A breathless laugh. "That's a joke, right?"

"I'm guessing it was okay then."

Jamie shakes her head. "Holy *shit*, Poppins, really? Yes. More than okay. *Fuck*."

Okay. Maybe that shouldn't make Dani as proud as it does, but she can hardly help it. Even the sore, numb tingling in her legs when she gets to her feet does nothing to wipe the smirk from her face.

Jamie hauls her underwear and pants back on while Dani looks away, trying to give her privacy despite the fact that she's just had her mouth between Jamie's legs. Briefly, she imagines crawling onto Jamie's lap and kissing her again, grinding down into her lap and giving into the fever-bright heat trapped beneath her skin, between her legs.

When she looks back, Jamie is staring at her like she wants to say something, like she's barely biting it back. She licks at her dry lips and Dani's eyes track the movement. Eyebrow quirked, silently asking a question she must already know the answer to.

"So, I guess we're even," says Dani, just to cut that train of thought off early. She shouldn't be standing here hoping that her best friend in the world will drag her into her lap and fuck her stupid.

"Yeah," says Jamie. "So we are."

And yet it still feels wrong. Off, somehow. But it's no mystery this time; Dani knows why and based on the raw, open expression on her face, Jamie must too.

The dreams don't stop. They get worse, but that's not the only issue because there's also Jamie to think about. Particularly everything Jamie does. And Jamie is a creature of habit. She eats the same things on the same days of every week unless Owen changes it up. She pairs her overshirts with her overalls over and over again. She takes smoke breaks at the same time. She has tea at the same time.

Rinse. Repeat.

After almost two years living their lives side-by-side, Dani's got her entirely figured out. Few things about Jamie surprise her anymore, which is nice, really. Properly boring in an endearing way. And it's not even Jamie that is the real wild card here.

The wild card, apparently, is Dani's libido.

Because every little look, every slight touch, every bite of food or drag of a cigarette from Jamie and Dani is set ablaze in seconds. Without fail.

Jamie trips over an untied shoelace and Dani imagines helping her tie it and, hey, by the way, while she's on her knees—

Jamie leans against a door jamb with her arms crossed, nary a care in the world, and Dani imagines being pinned to that same spot while Jamie—

Jamie lifts her shirt up to wipe sweat from her face while she's working outside and Dani swoons, imagines licking down Jamie's pale stomach and—

She can't stop thinking about it. Can't stop remembering Jamie's tongue flicking against her own, the way her fingers flexed in her hair, or how firmly she licked into Dani on the couch Dani sits on every single day.

It's a bit of a problem.

She's rapidly becoming a menace to herself. Maybe to everyone else, too.

Because working it out on her own isn't helpful. After that first orgasm, gifted by Jamie as some sort of favor, she hasn't had any luck in achieving the same results when she's by herself.

It's like her brain has entirely short-circuited and rendered any task besides imagining Jamie taking her on every surface of the manor impossible. Hannah starts asking her if she's okay and buys Dani's lies a little less every time. Owen keeps looking at her as if she's grown a second head. And Jamie—

Jamie doesn't say a word. She just continues on as if nothing has changed. As if that quick dalliance in the greenhouse has actually achieved its intention and set the world right again. It's frustrating. *Ridiculous* . It makes Dani want to shake her and say: *don't you feel it too i can't be the only one who wants this* . Makes her want to yell and scream and push Jamie into a wall. Give that devil the kiss she deserves and shove Jamie's hand down her pants, beg her to just *finish the job already* .

She doesn't, of course. The thing about working with children is that, at some point, you figure out how to pretend that everything is normal. It's a skill she learned in university and then again at her first job. Relearned after Eddie and all these months with Flora and Miles have only sharpened it.

In a true testament to her skill, she manages to hold it together for a week. Really, she should have broken within that first moment after going down on Jamie for the first time. But she hadn't. She'd fought it off. She's been trying to be good and she *has* been. Really.

That is, until the exact moment when Jamie cracks a smile at her own stupid joke one evening, turning those blazing eyes Dani's way, nose wrinkling. The purple and tangerine peel of the twilight sky flashing in her eyes. Her hair frizzing in the humidity, the proximity of the lake to their picnic blanket and the stars already winking overhead.

And Dani thinks: *this this i want this* .

She kisses Jamie, pushing herself off the hand she's been leaning on to do it, lifting it to cradle Jamie's cheek. Catching those words she'd been saying in her mouth and shutting her eyes against it because it's better than she remembers.

Somehow it's so much better.

"I thought we were even," Jamie says as Dani pulls away for air. She doesn't sound angry or unsettled or anything but curious. Daring. She reaches a hand up and tucks some of Dani's hair behind her ear.

"We are," says Dani. "I just...You're infuriatingly attractive, you know."

Jamie's eyebrows twitch upwards in surprise. "Am I now?"

"Yes. You are. It's ridiculous. And I keep thinking about you and trying to...But I can't get it to work on my own and so I'm—"

She's not actually sure where this honesty is coming from. All she knows is that it's bumbling its way past her lips before she can stop it or even think it through.

Fortunately, Jamie remains unshaken. "Ah," she sighs, looking all-too-pleased with herself. "You're horny."

Dani flushes. "God, you just have to—"

"Be honest?"

She's smirking. She's smirking and Dani wants to kiss it off her stupid, handsome face. "You're being crass."

"And correct."

"Fine. Maybe a little."

"Just a little."

Dani glares. "I hate you."

"You don't though," says Jamie, that smirk growing even bigger. "You love me and I'm your best friend and you want me to—"

Dani kisses her again.

That shuts her up.

Eventually, she manages to get Jamie's body on top of her own until she's being pressed down into the earth, into the pale blue of the picnic blanket. For all her teasing, Jamie doesn't hesitate for even a moment after that and the only things she says are tiny encouragements, endearments, as she hitches Dani's legs around her hips and fucks her with her fingers right there by the lake.

Dani wants to be angry or annoyed, but she can't be because she's too busy lost to the fact that, somehow, Jamie already knows how to play her just right. The whole thing is really quick in the end. Dani would be embarrassed, but Jamie's wiping her fingers on the blanket beside Dani's head and not pulling away.

"Better?" she asks, not a joke but an actual question.

Probing for reassurance that what they've just done was beneficial.

"Yeah," says Dani even though she's already burning again. "Much."

"Can't say I've ever fingered someone beneath the stars before, so..."

"Can't say I've ever been fingered beneath the stars, so..."

"Hey." Jamie's sweet breath brushes against her lips.. "That's another first, then."

That smile. Dani wants to kiss her again but she doesn't because it doesn't feel like the sort of thing she can do just because. So far it's been used as a means to an end.

"So it seems."

Eventually, Jamie rolls off of her and onto her back and they watch the stars for a long time. She makes up constellations and elaborate backstories for them while Dani laughs and ignores the way everything is shifting between them. How they're tilting and changing to accommodate this new facet of their friendship.

When it gets too cold to stay out any longer, Dani gathers the blanket and Jamie gathers the basket borrowed from the kitchen. Stops Dani with a kind hand on her waist, some touch that only feels intimate for where that hand has been within the last few hours.

Dani turns to her, waiting for whatever comes next. Jamie's expression is conflicted, her lips twisting a bit, and Dani's heart gives a great heavy leap in anticipation for something she can't name.

"Your pants," is what she gets. And then, "They're still undone."

"Oh."

Jamie tucks the basket beneath her arm and zips up Dani's jeans for her, latching the button as well. Gives the spot a little pat. "All good now," she says and then she's heading back towards the house again.

Later, when Dani's walking Jamie out to her truck, her heart feels sick, her stomach twisting and twisting. They say goodnight as always and Dani isn't exactly sure what it is that she's waiting for. All she knows, as she watches Jamie's tail lights disappear down the long drive out to the road, is it hadn't come.

Things change a lot after that. Some great wall torn down, letting everything Dani's been trying to suppress for what feels like years come pouring out. She isn't broken, apparently, like she's thought for so long. Sex isn't something she's not interested in; it's just that her only partner had been lacking something that Jamie wields without difficulty, though Dani struggles to pinpoint *what* exactly.

After the picnic, they're uneven again, so she presses Jamie into the kitchen counter early the next morning and gets her off with clumsy fingers before the kettle begins whistling. The whole thing takes maybe three minutes and Dani isn't sure if she should be proud of herself or sad for the fact that Jamie had been so starved for touch that even her unsure, unpracticed movements had been enough to get her there.

That evening, their eyes linger a bit too long as Dani walks her out and they break oh-so easily all over again. Jamie presses Dani into the back of her truck and hauls her up onto the bed of it, tugging Dani's pants down around her ankles until she's eating her out right there where anyone could see them.

Perhaps part of the thrill is knowing that, any moment, Owen could walk out and find them like that. Maybe it's the cool press of the truck's metal bed to her thighs or the way Jamie echoes the noises she makes like she's getting as much out of it as Dani is. But Dani thinks most of it lies in the way they make eye contact as Jamie laps at her clit, winking cheekily and gripping Dani's hips so hard she knows there'll be bruises later, and then she's coming. Just like that.

"Does that count as car sex?" Dani pants afterwards as Jamie noses at her jaw, wiggling her jeans back up her thighs for her.

She laughs. "I think for it to be car sex, we would have had to have done it in the cab."

"Oh." Dani's cheeks are so warm it's a wonder she hasn't passed out. She cups Jamie's face in her hands and presses her thumbs to the corners of her lips. "Well, I do owe you one, don't I? Get in the cab."

She's never been demanding or confident about things like this, but Jamie's proud, little smirk makes her feel brave. Besides, it's worth it when, not two minutes later, Jamie's got her head tossed back against her headrest while Dani slips her fingers down the front of her jeans and rubs circles around her clit from the passenger seat.

"Another first, then," Jamie says as she catches her breath in the moments that come after.

Dani nods and fights the urge to lick her fingers clean like an animal. "Yeah. For me, too."

There's a learning curve to be sure, but Jamie is patient and Dani is eager and they're fucking regularly enough now that she starts to get the hang of it pretty quick. Pretty soon, doing anything in the house where Owen and Hannah might discover them is too risky because Jamie has a hard time keeping quiet.

That doesn't mean they don't break on occasion, or that Jamie protests when Dani tugs her into the pantry one day and brings her to a rough climax with her fingers while Owen cooks dinner just a door away. She just bites Dani's shoulder through her t-shirt and comes as quietly as possible with Dani three fingers deep inside of her.

They should talk about it. Dani knows that. It's just that she has a hard time bringing it up when Jamie's pushing her up against the rough bricks of the house and fumbling her belt undone. It's so much easier to just let it happen. To swallow down her questions and worries and blindly adhere to the unspoken rules that have formed themselves.

For instance: they don't kiss again. As much as she wants to, Dani thinks it's for the best most days because kissing could complicate things. For the same reason, they never have sex in her bed and she never goes with Jamie to her flat. They don't label it or even really discuss it and, afterwards, they go right back to ribbing each other and laughing and acting the way best friends *should*.

Breaking any of these rules runs the risk of making this whole thing weird and Dani's so desperate for it to continue that she leaves it alone. There's something about having this secret that's so much *fun*. Sneaking around and trying to get a spare moment alone together

during the day, being someone's magic and escape, are things she's never experienced before. Now that she knows what these things feel like, she can't imagine returning to a life where she doesn't.

Plus, she's not the only one getting something out of this arrangement. Jamie gives just as good as she gets, always ready to offer up her quick fingers or expert tongue whenever Dani asks, and even when she doesn't.

Jamie is her *person*. She has been for almost two years. What is this if not another thing they can *be* for one another?

Really, it's best not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Or something.

The kids are due back in five days when Jamie broaches the topic. They're lounging in the garden, Dani sitting with her sunglasses perched on her nose, letting Jamie rip grass out of the ground and create a stack of it on her bare knee.

It's a beautiful day. The kind perfect for just lazing about in the sun and doing nothing in particular. The sway of the trees in the wind, the distant songs sung by the birds within them, the shuffle of puffy, white clouds in the sky, has lulled Dani into a false sense of security and so, when Jamie says it, she jolts up as if she's just touched a live wire.

"Christ, Poppins," Jamie grouses, looking forlornly at the pile of grass that's now lying on the ground beside Dani's leg. "All that work."

"What did you just say?" Dani asks, certain that she's bound to wake up any moment.

Jamie rolls her eyes. "You heard me, you monster." She scoops up her fallen grass in her palm and sets it on Dani's knee again. "Now I have to start all over."

Okay. So Dani sort of wants to scream. "Oh my *god*, Jamie, not about the grass. Why would I mean the *grass* when you just said—"

"Oh, got ya'." Her eyes light up in understanding. "You meant about the strap-on."

Right. So she's not dreaming then.

She makes a very strange noise of affirmation, words failing her.

"Yeah, I mean, only if it's something you'd like to try," says Jamie. She leans back against one of her hands, casual as always. "I just happen to have one and..."

She trails off, either unwilling to finish the thought or doing it for dramatic effect. Dani really doesn't care which because she's not so sheltered that she doesn't know what Jamie's talking about. And now she's picturing it: Jamie bending her over the counter, hand sliding up her spine, how her hips would look moving like that.

This isn't the sort of thing she used to think about. Sleeping with Jamie has made her try all sorts of things, though, and she's hardly one to back down from a challenge now.

"Have you, um—" She stops to clear her throat, lifting her sunglasses to rest on top of her head so she can see Jamie properly. "Have you used it before?"

Jamie shakes her head at once. "Never."

Dani frowns. "Then why—?"

"Some of my old friends in London thought they were clever. I think it was meant to be a joke but it should work all the same."

Work .

Dani swallows thickly. "Okay."

"Wait," Jamie says. "Okay as in okay to how I got it or okay as in—"

"I'm interested," Dani says, fighting through the urge to look away.

She's glad she doesn't in the end, because Jamie, having no poker face whatsoever, is visually delighted by this answer.

"Yeah?" she asks, sitting up a little straighter.

"Yeah."

"Feel like coming 'round to mine?"

She's so eager that Dani barely bites back the urge to kiss her. "How's tonight?"

Because *fuck* the rules. She'll go to Jamie's flat if she wants to.

So they're standing in Jamie's tiny living room just a few hours later and Dani feels like she is someone else, living a different life than any that Dani Clayton ever could. Dani Clayton lives her life in fear of consequences, in fear of actually wanting anything because that's never seemed to really work out for her in the past. Dani Clayton makes pros and cons lists before making major life decisions and definitely wouldn't wind up in any situation where her best friend is slipping her fingers into her panties.

Yet here she is.

It's some other unspoken rule that they never take off all of their clothes when they do this. So her t-shirt is still on and so are her panties and Jamie is still mostly dressed, save for her pants which are somewhere by her bed. The flannel she's wearing is baggy and does a marvelous job of hiding the extra appendage she's now sporting, which is really for the best. Dani thinks seeing it again and giggling at how silly it seems would ruin the moment.

And the moment? It's pretty good.

"*God*," she sighs, eyes closed and forehead rested against Jamie's. Her arms are flung around the other woman's shoulders and Jamie's got her free hand gripping Dani's hip to keep her from falling.

"I usually go by Jamie."

A puff of laughter against Dani's lips. She's not so far gone yet that she can't give Jamie a little scolding pat on her back. "Shush," she whispers, closely followed by, "Oh— *there*, yeah—" as Jamie crooks her fingers inside her.

"Yeah? That good?" She scissors her fingers a little and Dani nods helplessly.

"So good."

"Yeah. Yeah, it is."

She's just about *there* when Jamie pulls her fingers out and tugs back a little. Dani's eyes fly open to find her shifting her oversized shirt out of the way. At once, her protest dies in her throat.

When she realizes she's being watched, Jamie looks up, a little nervous, and smiles. "Bed?" she asks, but Dani shakes her head. Turns around and grips the back edge of Jamie's sofa.

"Here work?" she asks.

Jamie's cheeks flare red. She looks from the sofa to Dani's face. "Uh, yeah. Yeah, that's...that works."

Turning back, Dani widens her stance a little, gasping when she feels warm fingers tugging her panties down her legs. A hand presses against the base of her spine, encouraging her to bend over, and she has no trouble doing just that. It's a bit of a strain, but all thoughts of discomfort are lost when Jamie's warm palms slide up her thighs.

"Okay?" Jamie asks.

Dani nods. "Yeah. Okay." Her own hand slips down because she can't wait any longer, has to touch herself to keep herself steady. She thinks she hears Jamie moan quietly and imagines that she must be quite the sight, bent over the couch, fingers between her own legs. "Please, Jay. *Please*, do it already."

And she's been desperate before but this is the first time she's ever done anything that could qualify as begging. Its effect is instantaneous. Jamie makes a noise that's maybe a groan but sort of sounds like a *growl* and then she's slipping the toy inside, pushing in slowly, and pulling Dani's hips back until they're pressed flush to one another.

It feels so good that Dani is momentarily worried she'll go blind from it, but she doesn't. But it's the first time this—which she has experienced some of before just in a different way—actually feels the way she thinks it's meant to.

“*Fuck*, Dani,” Jamie breathes behind her. “You’re so beautiful like this.”

Dani moans at the compliment and then Jamie is moving, pulling out slowly and then thrusting back in. She grips the back of the couch so tightly it hurts, closing her eyes and letting herself give in to the pleasure sparking through her veins.

“Faster,” she gasps. “Be rough.” She doesn’t know *why* she needs Jamie to fuck her so hard she’ll feel it for days, she just knows she *does*. And maybe she would feel embarrassed asking for something like that with anyone else, but this is Jamie and they have nothing to hide from one another anymore, if they ever did in the first place.

The request surprises Jamie and her rhythm stutters for a second and then comes back strong. Hard. Quick. An arm reaches around her waist, fingers fumbling for her clit and when Jamie finds it Dani can’t help the sound that comes out of her. Some mewling noise she’s never made before that’s shaped like Jamie’s name.

Behind her, Jamie whispers encouragements and soft praises, fingers digging into Dani’s waist as she quickens her pace impossibly. “Yeah, just like that, Dani. *Fuck*. Come on, doll. You’re so good. God, you’re perfect. Come on.”

And so on.

Dani lets the words wash over her, holds on to the sound of Jamie’s voice and her rough breathing. Arms resting on the back cushion of the sofa, she drops her forehead and presses it down, warm skin to warm skin. She’s so dangerously close to the edge, hovering right there with outstretched fingers, trying to grab for it. But she can’t. Not yet. She’s waiting for something.

She’s not sure what.

Jamie’s warmth pressed into her back, lips pressing a kiss to her shoulder. “I’ve got you, doll,” she murmurs, still fucking into Dani with that fevered pace, her words a sharp contrast in comparison. “I’ve got you. Let go.”

“Jamie,” Dani huffs, pushing back with each thrust. “I’m so close.”

“I know, I know.” The lazy circles she’s been making around Dani’s clit all this time speed up then, pressing into her more directly and making Dani bite into her own forearm. “Come for me, love. Come on.”

And Dani does. She falls over the edge, vision white and every muscle in her body fit to snap. Grinding her teeth together, pushing back and down against Jamie every way she can while Jamie grinds into her, finding her own release with her forehead pressed between Dani’s shoulder blades.

In the quiet that follows, Jamie pulls back and out, making Dani whimper a bit as she lifts herself back up on shaky arms. She’s trembling like a leaf, barely able to hold herself up as she leans back against the sofa and watches Jamie discard the toy, leaving it on the ground so she can scoop Dani into her arms, hug her tightly.

Dani's not sure why, but the way Jamie is holding her sort of makes her feel like crying. She's so steady and warm and Dani feels so wrung out and boneless after that, raw and emotional in a way she wasn't prepared for. She feels different somehow. That's all she can say.

She doesn't realize she's crying until Jamie pulls back and cups her face, brushing some of the tears away. Her eyebrows are pinched, forehead crinkled in concern, and she's so lovely that Dani just sort of sobs helplessly and cries harder. It's like she's feeling everything at once—every emotion she's ever felt, everything that's been building and growing since the first time she ever saw Jamie, sauntering into the kitchen like she owned the place. It feels like she's drowning in this surge of raging affection and love for the woman holding her. Her best friend. Her *best fucking friend*. Her *person*. Everything she's ever wanted wrapped up in this small, strong body that's holding her tight.

Jamie doesn't ask what's wrong. She doesn't say anything at all other than, "Oh, Dani," and, "It's okay," and, "I know, love, I know."

Tucked into her body, crying into Jamie's shirt in her flat, neither of them wearing pants, after everything, Dani allows herself to consider for the very first time that maybe— *oh*, maybe— Jamie really *does* know.

"What's different about you?"

Dani looks up from the toast she's buttering. "What?"

"Is it the hair? No." Owen shakes his head, narrowing his eyes at her and flipping his omelet over without looking at it. "New shirt?" His eyes drop down to her t-shirt and he frowns. "Not that. Seen that one before."

"What's going on?"

Standing by the oven in the early morning sunlight, Owen has his head cocked like he thinks he's some sort of detective. Like there's a case to be solved and its mystery lies somewhere within Dani herself. She shifts uncomfortably beneath his heavy gaze.

"Something is different," he explains. "And I can't decide what it is."

Owen, ever the enigma, is a hard one to figure out even after all this time. Dani can't actually decide if he's genuinely baffled or only pretending to be. He isn't wrong, after all. There *is* something different about her. About Jamie, too. There's been something *different* for the better part of the month now, but she doubts it's something Owen can guess at just from looking at her.

Unless he knows more than he's letting on, in which case—

"You just seem...different. Gold. All...shimmery and satisfied." He gestures at her helplessly, then turns back to his omelet, scooping it out of the frying pan and onto a plate.

Dani rolls her eyes. “You’re imagining things.”

Owen huffs. “I am not. I’m certain it’s something, I just can’t put my finger on it.” He pauses for a moment, considering. Turned toward her now, he leans back against the counter and crosses his arms over his apron, spatula still held in his hand. “Let’s see...what makes people all grinny and silly? You haven’t got a new job, so that’s out.”

He smirks at his own joke. Dani goes back to buttering toast, wishing that Jamie or Hannah would interrupt them.

“Taken up a new hobby?”

“No new hobbies,” she tells him, then shakes her head at herself for playing along.

“Okay, okay. Learned a new skill or...trade?”

She turns to him, frowning. “Really?”

He throws his hands up in defeat. “Well, I don’t know. Unless you’re pregnant—”

“Rude,” Dani says, heart biting her throat.

“—or living out the plot of some romantic flick, then I’m all out of ideas.”

She means to tell him *no*. That he’s being silly and imagining things, but the memory of Jamie’s arms around her just the night before comes back. How softly she’d kissed away Dani’s tears and helped her get washed up. The way she smiled, subdued and lovely, as she drove Dani back to the manor after. She shifts her weight a bit, and pain twinges a bit between her legs because she’d been right—last night certainly left its mark.

The trouble is that she hesitates to cut him off and, by the time she realizes this, he’s grinning like he’s just won the jackpot.

“Well, well, well,” he says, all white teeth and glaring joy. “What do we have here? Could it be that our dear Miss Clayton has taken a lover?”

She does her best to seem over it, but she knows she’s failing because he doesn’t relent. “Really?”

“Could it be,” he continues, taking a step nearer, “that her and our eremitic, enigmatic gardener have finally figured it out?”

No use in hiding in the breakfast food. Dani drops her butter knife and turns to him, wiping her fingers on the hand towel she has draped over her shoulder. “What are you talking about?” she asks because her stomach is twisting a bit and she’s gotten pretty good at playing *normal* over the last few weeks.

Or so she thought anyway.

But Owen just gives her this *look* . “Come on now,” he says. “We’re all friends here.” He gestures around the room even though it’s only the two of them. “I think we can speak plainly about this.”

“About *what* ?” Dani presses, unyielding because she doesn’t know what else she’s supposed to be.

He clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth and wiggles a finger at her. “Now, now, my dear Dani. I won’t be having that. I want details on your romantic revelations. Spill the beans.” He gestures vaguely at the counter as if there are literal beans to spill. “Come now.”

Dani huffs out a dramatic sigh and leans back against the counter by the sink. “There haven’t been any... ‘romantic revelations,’ ” she says.

“Contrary to what you may believe, I was not, in fact, born yesterday.”

“Oh, really?”

“I thought the facial hair might have given it away. How many newborns have facial hair?”

She fights the urge to laugh, reminding herself that she’s supposed to be annoyed at his pestering. “We’re not...Jamie and I aren’t together or-or dating or...romantic.”

Owen shakes his head. “I don’t buy it. You’re a dreadful liar.”

“I’m not lying,” says Dani. “Really. It’s not like that.”

This catches Owen off guard. “ *What’s* not like that?” he asks.

And, well...Chalk it up to the fact that keeping this a secret is one of those many things they’ve never discussed, but Dani stops fighting him. Lets the weight she’s been suffocating around finally slip free.

“We’re just...Sometimes we just—” She stops there, unwilling to actually *say* it.

Fortunately, Owen understands. His eyebrows lift up in surprise. “Ah. Well...” He clears his throat. “So...you’re not *together*, you’re just—”

“Yeah.”

“—sleeping together.”

Ice slips into her veins, numbing her solid. “We’re not...sleeping together,” she says because that sounds too serious for what she thinks this arrangement is supposed to be. “We’re just —”

Owen waits expectantly, but she never figures out another way to say it. When it doesn’t come, he sighs. “Dani, love, if you’re doing it, you should be able to *say* it.”

She swallows, words tight in her throat. “Fine, yes,” she says. “We’re sleeping together. Happy?”

“No. Not at all.”

He’s not joking. Dani doesn’t think she’s ever seen him so serious in the time that she’s known him. “So, let me get this right,” he says. “You and Jamie actually sat down and talked about this and decided that neither of you wanted to make this into something official or real. That you were both completely happy with the physical bits, hang the rest.”

And, well—

“No. Not exactly.”

“The plot thickens.”

“We never actually...talked about it,” Dani says and it’s the first time she’s ever acknowledged this aloud. She feels vaguely nauseated. “We just...hadn’t been with anyone in a while and decided that we would...be together.”

“Except not really,” Owen cuts in.

“Right.”

He takes his glasses off and scrubs a hand over his face, frustrated by something he hasn’t named yet. The silence feels thick and terrible. Dani is a little shocked she hasn’t choked on it yet.

“Look, Dani,” Owen begins eventually, “I’m saying this because I love you and I love Jamie, alright?”

Her breath stutters. “Alright.”

He slips his glasses back on and stares her down. “Go outside right this second, young lady, and *talk* about this like an adult.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” He lifts an arm and points to the back door with a stern expression—one she’s only ever seen turned on the children when they’re misbehaving. “Sit Jamie down and hash it out or so help me *God*, I’ll—”

Okay. So, Owen is a little scary when he means business.

She throws her hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’m going.” Stepping slowly around the counter, she makes her way to the kitchen under his heavy gaze, only putting her hands down once she’s at the actual door so she can twist the knob, open it, and step outside into the stiff August heat.

Jamie is out in the gazebo, leaning on the railing and smoking a cigarette. When she sees Dani coming up the path, she exhales a white stream of smoke and drops the thing to the wooden floor, grinding out the sparks with her boot.

“Hey,” she says. “Breakfast all set?”

This is the first time they’ve seen one another since the night before and Dani is struck, standing there in the gazebo’s shade, by how stunning Jamie is even when she isn’t trying. A thousand images collide and shatter like glass in her mind, all those times Jamie’s looked at her like *that*, made her feel like *this*, and she has never in her life felt more foolish than she does in that moment.

“You okay?” Jamie asks next, frowning in concern. “Shit, are you—?” She flicks her eyes frantically to Dani’s waist and then back up. “’Cause *I’m* a bit sore if I’m being honest, so I can only imagine how you’re feeling.”

“Jamie,” Dani says softly.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so...rough. I just thought—”

“Jamie.”

Firmer this time. Jamie stops talking. Stares at Dani for a long time as the breeze flutters through her curls to the sound of the birds singing in the trees. The ripple of the lake’s soft surface so nearby. “Yeah?”

“Why did you...” Dani stops just long enough to gather her thoughts. “Why did you offer to kiss me that day?”

Caught off guard, Jamie flummoxes for a second. “What?”

“Was it just an act of charity or...a momentary lapse in judgment?”

“No, Dani, it wasn’t like that,” Jamie cuts in.

“Then what was it like, Jamie? Why did you kiss me?”

A sigh that isn’t her own. Jamie turning her head to fix her gaze somewhere else. “Because I...” She turns back to meet Dani’s eyes. “Because I thought...if I couldn’t have you how I...how I want, then at least I could do that for you. Know what it was like. Just once.”

Dani feels the fight go out of her. Her shoulders slump down. “And...when you offered to...to...”

God, Owen is right. She can’t even *say* it.

Right now, though, she’s willing to chalk that up to the way Jamie is looking at her. Eyes filled with something she’s only been exposed to in brief seconds before.

“Yeah,” she says. “Same thing.” She licks her lips and looks away again. “Christ, I didn’t think you’d actually...want to *return* the favor.”

“So all this time,” Dani says, stuffing her hands into the pockets of her jeans just so she has something to do with them, “you’ve been doing this because you...you like me. You have feelings for me.”

Jamie stares at her for a long moment. “Yeah,” she says after a little while. “Yeah, Dani, that’s one way of putting it.”

She can actually hear her heartbeat, can feel her heart chipping away at her ribcage, trying to break free. “What’s the other way?” she asks because she has to be brave *sometime* and now is as good a time as any.

“I did it because I love you, Dani. I have for a long time.”

And, okay. So maybe Dani had been hoping that was why. Maybe she’s only just now letting herself understand that. Understand *why* she’d been hoping for that. But none of what she wants to say makes any sense, so she lets the silence have its very long turn.

But Jamie isn’t satisfied with just that.

“The last person I was with—the last girl—I...” She stops. Shakes her head. Tries again. “It was two days before you showed up. I was supposed to see her again. That weekend. I never went and I never called and I—”

“Why?” Dani asks. Can’t help it. Has to know.

“Because from the moment I saw you, you were all I could think about.”

Oh .

“Oh.” Dani swallows. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” Jamie says stiffly. “*Oh* .” She goes to turn away then, saying, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have...taken advantage of the situation like that. It was wrong and it shouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

Before she can get too far, Dani reaches out and grabs her arm, bridging the distance between their bodies until Jamie is facing her and they’re as close as they’ve ever been.

“I wanted it to happen,” Dani says before she can chicken out. The birds are still singing and the lake is still rippling and Dani is standing in front of her *person* . The one person in all the world that she can always rely on. Every time. “All of it. I wanted to kiss you. I wanted to—” and *fuck it* : “—have sex with you.”

Jamie blinks. “Wait, Dani, you—”

“I *want* to have sex with you. Like all the time,” Dani clarifies. “I think about you constantly and I can’t stand it when you leave at the end of the day. You’re my best friend, Jamie, and I

want it to stay that way but I also want us to keep doing what we've been doing because I love you and I think we're supposed to be together."

"We're supposed to..." Jamie trails off, shaking her head. "You're not...Dani, you should be angry at me. I used this. I used *you*."

Dani runs her hands up Jamie's arms and rests them on her shoulders. Presses into her. "You didn't use me, Jay. I wanted this. I want *you*."

It's strange how good it feels to actually say that aloud. To acknowledge it and bring it into existence as something more than wishful thinking. She watches as Jamie reaches down and pinches her own arm, wincing from the pain of it.

"Did you just pinch yourself?" she asks, laughter bubbling in the question.

Jamie nods. "Yeah, I'm...Just making sure."

"You're not dreaming," Dani tells her, wrapping her arms around Jamie's neck and pressing their foreheads together. "You're awake."

"Okay," Jamie breathes. "Okay. Cool."

"Yeah. Cool."

"Can I kiss you?"

"*Please*."

Jamie kisses her and their teeth clack together because neither of them can stop smiling. It reminds her of that first kiss and how they'd laughed and laughed until they got it right. This feels like that. Feels like flying. Jamie wraps her own arms around Dani's waist, kissing her harder, and everything slides into place.

When Dani opens her mouth, flicking her tongue out, Jamie gasps against her lips. Lowers a hand to press into the dip of Dani's spine, then slides her palm a little lower. Gently squeezes Dani's ass through her jeans and *okay*.

Apparently that's something else she likes. Or maybe she just likes Jamie and so it doesn't really matter *what* she does so long as she does it.

"Got a question," Jamie whispers as Dani presses a kiss to her jaw, then neck.

"Yeah?" she asks.

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

Another squeeze. She gasps against Jamie's collarbone. Kisses her again.

Eventually, the question comes.

“Ever had sex in a gazebo?”

“No. Never.”

Jamie’s already walking Dani backwards until she collides with the closest railing. “Want another first?”

Dani pulls back and looks at her—this woman she loves—and can’t imagine wanting anything more. “Always,” she says and Jamie laughs, already kissing her again.

“Oh, it was so much fun, Miss Clayton. It was perfectly *splendid*,” Flora babbles as she spins in a circle until she’s too dizzy to do anything but fall back onto the grass beside where Dani is sitting.

“It certainly sounds like it,” Dani says. She reaches out and combs her fingers through Flora’s pale hair, starting a braid while Flora blooms beneath the attention.

“Was it very boring here without us?”

Dani smiles and shakes her head. “Oh, terribly,” she says. “There was nothing to do without you.”

Flora smiles and smiles.

Up ahead, Jamie is “dueling” with Miles, wielding one of the wobbly plastic swords Henry bought him in Greece. She keeps letting Miles knock her sword out of her hand and then grabbing it back up, saying, “You win again,” while Miles cackles and does a victory dance.

They’re on their twentieth duel *at least* and Jamie is still going, looking sun-bright and free in a way Dani’s not certain she’s ever seen before. Something in her chest squeezes at the sight and then even more so when Jamie catches her looking. Gives her a wink and a grin until Miles jabs her in the stomach and shocks the moment away. And then she’s chasing after him and he’s screaming and running from her, swords forgotten entirely.

Behind them in some of the garden chairs, Owen and Hannah are talking quietly to one another, looking serious and affectionate in equal measure. When Dani catches Owen’s eye, he gives her a grateful little smile and then turns back to Hannah, who reaches out and touches his hand. He catches it in his own and they look at one another, laughing at some inside joke, happy and in love in the late summer sun.

Dani’s glad for it. The first thing she’d done after her and Jamie stumbled inside from the gazebo the other day was ask Hannah to dinner on Owen’s behalf while he spluttered behind her. There were better ways to do it, maybe, but if he was tired of watching her and Jamie circle one another and chickening out every time they got close to something real, she was *exhausted* from watching him and Hannah do the same thing.

It worked out. Hannah said yes, didn't she? And dinner must have been good. When her and Jamie got to the house the next morning, having struggled all morning to get out of Jamie's bed, the two of them had been kissing in the kitchen.

Jamie keeps calling it a Shakespearean comedy, everyone pairing off in the end.

Dani doesn't call it anything. Just laughs and curls into Jamie's arms.

Good things all around.

Miles gets away from Jamie at the last moment and Jamie gives a dramatic groan, looking over at Dani and Flora.

"Dani!" she calls. "Would you please come and defend my honor from this scoundrel?"

Miles laughs. "You're just sore because you keep losing."

"No," Jamie says. "I'm sore because I keep letting you win and this is the treatment I get." She lunges toward him, arms outstretched, and he just barely manages to escape.

Dani gets to her feet, patting the seat of her jeans clean, and crosses the yard to where they're standing. "What am I supposed to do?" she asks, looking between Jamie and Miles.

"Show him who's boss," Jamie says. "That's all." She holds out her sword and Dani gives an over dramatic sigh before taking it. "Oh, come on. You might not have my expert handwork, but you're quick on your feet."

"Handwork, huh? Is that what we're calling it now?"

Jamie smirks in response.

Dani rolls her eyes behind her sunglasses. "Fine, fine. I'll...defend your honor or something."

Jamie grabs her hand and bows her head, giving her knuckles a kiss that Dani tries to pretend doesn't get to her like it does. "For luck, then, m'lady."

Behind her, Miles gives her a menacing look, drawing a line in the air in front of his throat with his index finger. She gives him a fake snarl in response and he laughs again, young and unfettered in the glinting sunlight. Not a cloud in the sky.

Flora comes up beside her and reaches for Jamie's hand, tugging her away. "It's safer to watch from back here," she says.

Left alone, she faces Miles and lifts her sword.

"Ready?" he asks.

"I was born ready," Dani says and her knuckles are still warm and tingling where Jamie kissed them. She feels lighter than she has in months. Ever, maybe. And, standing there in the

heat—surrounded by this family she’s found, her best friend and girlfriend cheering for her from the picnic blanket—she doesn’t really care how cliché that sounds.

Something like two minutes later, she catches Miles off guard and knocks his sword from his hand while Flora and Jamie hoot and holler for her.

“Fine, you win,” Miles says. “I forfeit.”

Dani drops her sword and lifts her hands above her head like a boxer. A moment later, Jamie is tackling her into a hug while Flora bounces up and down excitedly beside them. From their chairs, Hannah and Owen roll their eyes, clapping all the same.

“Ha!” Jamie crows. “I knew it!” She sticks her tongue out at Miles and he does the same, smiling despite everything. Turning back to Dani, she takes the opportunity to press a kiss to the corner of her mouth. “Aren’t you just my knight in shining armor?”

“What are girlfriends for?” Dani says and it’s hot in the sun—she might be a little sunburnt. She’s sweaty and a little uncomfortable. Stiff from sitting on the ground for so long. A little sore from the night before, spent tangled with Jamie in her bed. Jamie is practically a *furnace* wrapped around her like this, but Dani can’t even care because she’s too busy counting her blessings which, in short, boil down to six of her favorite things:

Summer and freedom and love and them and *this* and Jamie.

Despite the rough beginning, the miscommunication, the longing and moments of *hurt* , Jamie turns out to be a pretty great girlfriend.

Dani’s not even surprised.

..

End Notes

...yeah?

okay. i'm not above begging so pls come see me on [tumblr](#). i'm lonely and have a lot of Bly feelings.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!