



Beauty and the Billionaire: Billionaire Boys Club Novel

By Jessica Clare

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for the *Billionaire Boys Club* novels

“A fast, sexy read that transports you to the land of the rich and famous.”—*Fiction Vixen*

“I am in love with this series.”—*Love to Read for Fun*

About the Author

Jessica Clare is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Billionaire Boys Club* novels and the *Bluebonnet* novels, and is featured in the anthology *Hot Summer Nights*.

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Billionaire Boys Club

The Girl's Guide To (Man)Hunting

Someone had entered the town house.

At the sound of voices, he paused in the foyer of the enormous home. Out of habit, he moved into a shadowy alcove, lest they catch him unawares and stop to stare at him. Even after years of being a scarred, ugly bastard, he was still bothered by the expressions people made at the sight of his face. It was easier to just blend in with the shadows until they were gone. He waited, his ears straining to determine who was there. The only people he'd expected to stop by were Logan's assistant, who'd insisted on picking up some of his books for a donation, and the movers who'd come to clean out the rest of what was left in the house.

He'd thought the place would be empty, so it would be a perfect time for him to inspect it. He hadn't realized someone else would be coming in, much less two women.

There was a shuffle of footsteps, and then the sound of a box thumping onto the ground.

“What is this place?” A soft, pleasant female voice asked. “It's lovely.”

“Some dead celebrity's home or something. I don't care.” The other woman's voice seemed full of laughter and amusement, but her tone was cutting. “All I care about is how we're supposed to get these damned boxes back to SoHo. What the heck was Audrey thinking?”

“Could we call a cab?”

The women approached Hunter's shadowed hiding place, and he stilled, waiting for them to pass without noticing him.

The redhead was standing not ten feet away from him, her head bent. He couldn't see her face, but she was curvy and tall, her ass a perfect heart from where he was standing, and her hair was a brilliant shade of red. The other girl—a pretty brunette with wide eyes—balanced two boxes and was waiting for instructions from the other woman.

"I don't know about a cab," the redhead said. "That'll clean us out, and I still want to order that pizza."

"So?" the dark-haired one asked.

"Brontë," the redhead said in a crisp voice, and Hunter came to attention. That was a familiar name.

But the redhead was still talking. "You have to understand something about my sister. She's not the most practical creature."

"She's not? She seems practical to me."

"Not when it comes to work. She thinks we're mules or something, as evidenced by all this. And if I need to call and gripe at her to get her in line, then, by golly, I'm going to do it." She put the phone to her ear. A few seconds later, she made a frustrated sound. "Voice mail. I can't believe her. She said there were two boxes. Not five boxes of hardbacks. Does she think we're bodybuilders?"

"It's not that bad," the brunette placated her, adjusting the boxes in her arms. "I'm sure we can manage."

"I blame Logan Hawkings," the redhead exclaimed, catching Hunter's attention. "He thinks the world just belongs to him, doesn't he?"

The look on the other woman's face was sad. "I suppose."

"Ugh. Look at that hang-dog expression. You're still in love with him, aren't you?"

The brunette turned sad eyes on her friend. "I hate and I love. Perhaps you ask why I do so. I do not know, but I feel it, and am in agony."

"Oh, quit quoting that crap at me. You're being dramatic. He's a jerk. You'll get over him."

The redhead turned, and Hunter got a good look at her face for the first time. She was unusual-looking, with a round cheeks smattered in freckles. Her expressive eyes dominated her face despite being hidden behind square, scholarly glasses. Her chin ended in a small point, and she looked fascinating. Smart. Annoyed. "Save me from rich, attractive alpha males. They think they're the heroes from a fairy tale. Little do they know, they're more like the villains."

"That's not fair, Gretchen," the one called Brontë protested.

"Life's not fair," Gretchen said in a cheerfully acerbic voice. "I'd rather have a man who isn't in love with his own reflection than one who needs hair product or designer labels." She bent over, and that heart-shaped ass was thrust into his vision again, and his cock stirred with need.

"So you'd rather have a pizza guy with a weak chin and a knight-in-shining-armor complex?"

"Yes," Gretchen said emphatically, and a dimple flashed in her pointed little face. "His looks aren't half as important as his brain."

So she said. Hunter knew from experience that what women said they wanted in a man was soon forgotten if his physical appearance was unappealing. Still, he was fascinated with her. She was brash and clever, and a

little sardonic, as if she were as weary of the world as he was. He watched as the two women, arguing and laughing, stepped out of the foyer of the empty home with the boxes of donations that he'd left for Logan's assistant.

Her name was Gretchen. Gretchen. He racked his brain, trying to think of anyone who knew a Gretchen. A lovely redhead with a charmingly unusual face and a cutting tongue. He wanted to know more about her . . .

Hunter touched the jagged scars running down the left side of his face and frowned. Would she find him as hideous as the rest of the world did? Probably. But she'd also said she could look past that. That she wasn't interested in a face as much as the brain behind it.

He was curious whether she'd been telling the truth.

Not that it mattered, since she'd just walked out the door and he'd likely never see her again.

A half-buried memory stirred in the back of his mind as he stared at the now-shut door. The other woman had an unusual name. Brontë. He knew that name, and where he'd heard it before.

He dialed Logan's number, still thinking about the unusual redhead.

"What is it?" Logan said. "I'm about to head into a meeting."

"There can't be more than one 'Brontë' running around New York, can there?" Hunter asked.

The voice on the other end of the line got very still. "Brontë?" Logan asked after a moment. "You saw her? Where is she?"

Hunter stared at the door, half wishing the women would come back through it again, and half relieved they wouldn't. "She just left with a redhead named Gretchen. I want to know more about her."

"About *my* Brontë?" Logan's voice was a growl.

"No. Gretchen. The one with red hair. I want her."

"Oh." A long sigh. "Sorry, man. Haven't been myself lately. She left me, and I've been going crazy trying to find her." Logan's voice sounded strained, tense. "I can't believe she's still in New York. Where are you?"

"At the townhouse on the Upper East Side." Hunter had been overseeing it to ensure that nothing was out of place. Plus, he'd been bored and restless. And more than a little lonely.

He wasn't lonely any more, though. He couldn't stop thinking about that redhead. Gretchen, with her big glasses and pert comebacks and red hair.

"Your assistant didn't come by to pick up the boxes," Hunter said after a moment. "This Gretchen did, and your Brontë was with her."

"I have to go," Logan said. "I'll call Audrey and see who she sent over."

"Send me information about this Gretchen woman," Hunter reminded me. *I want her.*

"I will. And thanks." Logan's tone had changed from dejected to triumphant. "I owe you one."

"You do," Hunter agreed. "Just get me information on her friend, and we'll call it even."

Things had suddenly gotten a bit more . . . interesting. Hunter glanced at the empty townhouse and smiled to himself, his mind full of the unusual woman who had been there minutes before.

Hunter Buchanan didn't believe in love at first sight. Hell, he didn't much believe in love at all.

But the moment he'd seen the tall redhead standing in the foyer of one of his empty houses, a box of books in her arms and a skeptical look on her face, he'd felt . . . something. She'd been bold and fearless with her words, something that attracted him as a man who clung to the shadows.

And when she'd admitted to her quiet friend that most men bored her and she wanted something different in a relationship than just a pretty face?

Hunter knew she was meant for him.

She was pretty, young, and single. She had a smart mind and a sharp tongue. He liked that about her. She was unafraid and laughed easily. Days had passed since he'd glimpsed at her and he still couldn't get her out of his mind. She haunted his dreams.

Hunter was smart and rich and only a few years older than her. It shouldn't have been unattainable.

Unconsciously, he touched the deeply gouged scars on his face, his fingers tracing the thick line at the corner of his mouth where damaged tissue had been reconstructed.

There was one thing preventing Hunter from pursuing a woman like that. His face. His hideous, scarred face. He could hide the scars on his chest and arm with clothing. He could clench his hand and no one would notice that he was missing a finger. But he couldn't hide his face. When he chose to leave his house, people crossed the street to avoid him. Men frowned as if there were something unnerving about him. Women flinched away from the sight of him.

Just like the woman next to him currently was doing.

Brontë, Logan's big-eyed girlfriend, sat next to him at the Brotherhood's poker table. The dark basement was filled with a haze of cigar smoke and the scent of liquor. Normally the room was filled with his five best friends, but they'd gone upstairs to talk to Logan about the fact that he'd brought his new girlfriend with him to a secret society meeting. Brontë had stayed behind with him. It was clearly not by her choice, either. She sat at the table quietly, nursing her wine and trying not to look as if she'd wanted to bolt from the table once she'd gotten a good look at his face. Her gaze slid to his damaged hand, and then back to his face again.

He was used to that sort of thing. And he wondered if the redhead who was her friend would react the same way to his face.

Experience told him that she would. But he remembered the redhead's sarcastic little smile and that shake of her head. The words she'd said.

"Save me from rich, attractive alpha males. They think they're the heroes from a fairy tale. Little do they know, they're more like the villains."

And he found he had to know more.

"Your friend," he said to Brontë. "The redhead. Tell me about her."

She looked over at him again, those dark eyes wide and surprised, pupils dilated from alcohol. "You mean

Gretchen?”

“Yes.” He knew her first name, but he wanted to know more about her. “What is her last name?”

“Why? How do you know about Gretchen?”

“I saw her with you the other day. Tell me more about her.”

She frowned at him. “Why should I tell you about Gretchen? So you can stalk her?”

Hunter glanced down at his cards and tried not to suppress the annoyance he felt at her caginess. Couldn't a man ask a simple question? “I am an admirer of hers . . . from afar.”

“Like a stalker.”

“Not a stalker. I simply wish to know more about her.”

“That's what a stalker would say.”

Hunter gritted his teeth, glancing over at her. She automatically shied back, her expression a little alarmed as she studied his scars. He ignored that. “Your friend is quite safe from my romantic interests. I simply wish to learn more about her.”

After all, what woman would want to date a man with a grotesque face? Only ones who wanted his money, and he wasn't interested in those. He wanted a companion, not a whore.

“Oh,” Brontë said, studying her wineglass as if it were fascinating. “Petty. Her last name is Petty. She writes books.”

Now they were getting somewhere. He mentally filed the information away. Gretchen Petty, author. He could see that. “What kinds of books?”

“Books with other people's names on them.”

He gave her an impatient stare, hating the way she shrank back in her chair just a bit. “A ghost writer?”

Brontë nodded. “That's right. And Cooper's in love with her.”

“Cooper? Who is Cooper?” Whoever it was, Hunter fucking hated him. Probably good looking, smug, and not nearly good enough for her. Damn it.

“Cooper's her friend. It's okay, though. He won't make a move. He knows Gretchen isn't interested in him that way. Gretchen likes guys who are different. She likes to be challenged.”

He snorted. Well, she'd definitely get a challenge with Hunter Buchanan.

They chatted for a bit longer, the conversation awkward. Brontë kept turning her face to the door, no doubt anxiously awaiting Logan's return. Logan was a good-looking man, tall, strong, and unscarred. Brontë was a soft, sweet creature, but he doubted she'd ever look at someone like him with anything more than revulsion or pity.

He'd had his share of pity already, thanks.

“Gretchen Petty,” he repeated to himself. A ghostwriter. Someone who wrote books for others and hid

behind their names. Why, he wondered. She didn't seem like the type to hide behind a moniker. She didn't seem like the type to hide behind anything. And that fascinated him. What would draw a woman like her to him? Did he even want to try? Did he want to see if she looked at him with a horror that she was trying desperately to hide for the sake of politeness, just like Logan's woman? Or would she see the person behind the scars and determine that he was just as interesting as any other man?

He remembered the first time he saw her, standing next to Brontë in the foyer of an empty mansion. She'd declared, *"I'd rather have a man not in love with his own reflection than one that needs hair product or designer labels."*

A plan began to form in his mind.

It wasn't a nice plan, or a very honest one. But he didn't have to be nice, or honest, if he was rich. The good thing about money was that it allowed you to take control of almost any situation, and Hunter definitely planned on using what he had to his advantage.

The Brotherhood played poker into the night while Hunter's bodyguard stood at the door, keeping out anyone that would disturb them. They drank, they smoked cigars, and they played cards. It was one of their usual meetings, if one could ignore the quietly sleeping woman curled up on the couch in the corner of the room, Logan's jacket acting as a blanket over her shoulders. Business was discussed, alcohol drunk in quantity, and notes taken for analyzing in the morning. Tips were shared back and forth, investment opportunities and the like.

The Brotherhood had met like this once a week since their college days, vowing to help one another. At the time, it had seemed like an idealistic pledge—that those born with money would help the others succeed and, as a result, they would all rise to the top of the ladder of success.

It had been an easy vow to make for Hunter. When Logan had befriended him in an economics class, he'd been oddly relieved to have a friend. After being home schooled for the majority of his education, Dartmouth seemed like a nightmare landscape to him. People were everywhere, and they stared at his hideous face and scarred arm like he was a freak. He had no roommate or companions to introduce him to others on campus, and so he'd lurked in the background of the bustling campus society, avoiding eye contact and being silent.

Logan had been popular, wealthy, handsome, and outgoing, and he knew what he wanted and pursued it. Women flocked to him and other guys liked him. It had surprised Hunter when Logan had struck up a conversation with him one day. No one talked to the scarred outcast. But Logan had stared at Hunter's scars for a long moment, and then gone right back to their economics homework, discussing the syllabus and how he felt the class was missing some of the vital concepts they would need to succeed. Hunter had privately agreed, having learned quite a bit of his father's business on his own, and they'd shared ideas. After a week or two of casual conversation, Logan had taken him aside and suggested that Hunter attend a meeting he was putting together.

It was a secret meeting, the kind legendary on Ivy League campuses and spoke about in hushed whispers. Hunter was immediately suspicious. As a Buchanan, his father was one of the wealthiest men in the nation, a legend among business owners for the sheer amount of property he owned. Their family name was instantly recognizable, and several of their houses were landmarks. His father's real estate investments had made him a billionaire, and Hunter was his only heir. He'd learned long ago to suspect others of ulterior motives.

But Logan was incredibly wealthy in his own right. He had no need for Hunter's money. And Hunter was lonely, though he would never admit such things to anyone who asked. So he'd gone to the meeting, expecting it to be a scam or a joke—or worse, a shakedown.

Instead, he'd been surprised. The six men attending had come from all walks of life and had a variety of majors. Reese Durham was attending college on a scholarship, and his clothes were ill-fitting hand-me-downs. He'd been ribbed about being a charity case by the other wealthy students, and he had gotten into a few fistfights. Ditto Cade Archer, though he was a favorite on campus with his easy, open demeanor and friendly attitude. His family did not come from money, and were up to their necks in debt to send Cade to college. He did recognize Griffin Verdi, the only foreigner. European and titled, the Verdi family was well connected with the throne of some obscure tiny country and still owned ancestral lands. And there was Jonathan Lyons, whose family had some wealth, but had lost it all in a business scandal.

It was an eclectic group to say the least, and Hunter had been immediately wary. But once Logan had begun to speak, the reality of their gathering came to light: Logan Hawkings wanted to start a secret society. A brotherhood of business-oriented men who would help one another rise to the top of their selective fields. He believed that the ones that had power could use that leverage to elevate their friends, and in doing so, could expand upon their empire. And he'd selected like-minded individuals that he hoped would have the same goals as him.

Hunter had been reluctant at first, since his family had the most money of all of the attendees. The others had been equally skeptical, of course. But once they began to talk, ideas were shared and concepts and strategies born. And Hunter realized that these men might not be after his family's wealth after all, but to make some of their own.

He'd joined Logan's secret society. The Brotherhood was formed, and over time, he'd gone from no friends to having five men who were closer to him than brothers.

And even though years had passed, they still met weekly (unless business travel prevented it) and still caught up with one another and shared leads.

Until tonight, a woman had never been invited. The others had been unhappy at Logan's invitation to Brontë, but Hunter didn't mind. He was actually inwardly pleased, though he'd shown no outward reaction.

Brontë's inclusion into their secret meant that she would be around a lot more. And Brontë was good friends with his mysterious redhead—Gretchen.

This was information that Hunter could use. And so he didn't protest when Logan had brought her in. She'd given him plenty of information, too. His Gretchen was a writer. A ghostwriter. There had to be a way to get in contact with her. Spend time with her without arousing her suspicions. He simply wanted to be around her. To have a conversation with her. To enjoy her presence.

Of course he wanted more, but a man like him knew his limits. He knew his face was unpleasant. He'd seen women clutch their mouths at the sight of him. He'd never have someone like Gretchen—smart, beautiful, funny—unless she was interested in his money. And the thought of that repulsed him.

He'd take friendship with a beautiful woman, if friendship was all he could have.

Gretchen Petty picked the lemon off her water glass. "Do you suppose if I take enough of these home, it'll make me a decent dinner?"

Across from her, Kat Garvey reached over the table and snatched the lemon wedge from Gretchen's hands. "Stop it. You're not that broke."

"I'm almost there," Gretchen said glumly, shoving a straw into her glass and sipping her water. "The

cupboard's bare, and I'm weeks away from an acceptance payment."

"So I take it lunch is on me this time?" Kat asked dryly.

Gretchen set down her glass and fluttered her eyelashes. "Why, Kat. It is so generous of you to offer."

"Don't thank me. I'm taking it directly off the top of your next royalty check."

"In that case, I'm ordering dessert."

Kat just shook her head, grinning, and Gretchen blew a kiss at her. They'd started out as agent and client and over the last five years, had ended up as something more like friends and less like coworkers. It suited Gretchen just fine. Considering that she spent most of her days in front of the computer trying to keep ahead of deadlines, the only friends she got out to see were usually due to business lunches.

"So how's the book coming, Gretchen? As your agent, I'm obligated to ask you." Kat took a bite of her pasta. "I know it's not your favorite project."

"Favorite would be a grand overstatement," Gretchen said, morosely jabbing her fork into her salad. "Something more like 'greatest torture known to mankind' would probably be closer to the mark."

Kat grimaced. "That well?"

Gretchen shook her head, internally debating how much to share with her agent. She and Kat were good friends, but once she knew how much Gretchen had struggled with this project, it could be tricky. Kat would take the publisher's side, not Gretchen's. Kat was fun and a good friend, but when it came to work, Kat would follow the money.

"Are we on track to turn in at the end of the month, at least?"

"Mmmmsure." Gretchen gave a tiny shrug of her shoulders and didn't make eye contact. "Or a week or so after. Maybe two."

"Gretchen," Kat said, exasperated. "Are you serious? This is the fourth project you've been late on this year."

She grimaced, expecting this reaction. She didn't have excuses to give, either. She stayed home and worked all day, but the projects she was getting were less than . . . exciting. And it made it damn hard to sit down and work on them every day. "I had to do a lot of science research," Gretchen mumbled.

"For *Astronaut Bill and the Space Vixens of Dark Planet*? Are you kidding me? It's pulp, Gretchen! Granted, it's pulp with a huge following, but it's still freaking pulp. Just write."

"Yeah, but have you read those books?"

Kat snorted. "Not my type."

"Yeah, well that makes two of us. I had to read a few of them, too. And you know what happens in *Astronaut Bill Conquers the Moon Maidens*? He razes the planet of all greenery. All greenery, Kat! How the hell are they supposed to breathe if there's nothing to produce oxygen?"

"It's space fantasy." Kat waved a hand in the air. "Write in some robot oxygen makers or something."

"But it has to make sense," Gretchen insisted. "I can't just phone it in. I can't write loopholes like that in the

story.”

She didn’t know why it mattered so darn much, but the thought of those stupid, big-breasted moon maidens asphyxiating under her watch made her annoyed as hell. Details mattered. And if she got the details wrong, she’d be blasted by legions of fans for doing a bad job. If she did a bad job, the sales would suffer. And if sales suffered? Astronaut Bill would be assigned to a different ghostwriter.

“I don’t know why you get so hung up on that misogynistic crap, Gretchen. Just finish the book and have the copyeditor fill in the holes. That’s what they’re there for.”

Gretchen chewed, saying nothing.

“You know if you turn in late again, they won’t re-up your contract. You need this contract.”

“I know. I’m just . . . struggling.” Every page of Astronaut Bill was painful. They were only fifty thousand words long and the plots were simplistic. Bill gets a mission from headquarters. Bill goes to explore a new planet. Buxom babes are encountered and they need rescuing. Bill ends up saving the day after some spectacular laser gun battles and sexual tension. Piece of cake.

Except she kept getting hung up on the details. And she didn’t much like Bill, which made it really hard to spend time with him every day. But Bill was a paycheck, and a good one, so she struggled on.

“Just tell them I’m sick. Maybe someone died and I had to leave town for the funeral.”

Kat glared at Gretchen. “I’m not going to lie about your family. I’ll just tell them you need another week, max.”

“Two?”

“One week,” Kat said firmly. “But you know they run on tight deadlines and they won’t be happy.”

“I know,” Gretchen said glumly. The rent was due and now was not exactly the time to have a crisis of faith. “I’ll get it finished, I promise.”

“Gretchen, you know I adore you, girl. You’re my favorite client. But I say this with love—you need to get your act together.”

“Consider it together. I promise.”

Kat gave her a wary nod. “Well, did you want to hear about another ghostwriting contract? They asked for you specifically.”

“Me?” Gretchen sat up straighter, surprised. “You serious?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. Do you have connections at any publishers I don’t know about?” Her mouth quirked in amusement. “Especially brand-new ones?”

“Brand-new ones?”

“Yeah, someone’s launching a small publishing line. I don’t know anything about it other than they headhunted one of the best editors I know to head it up, and for their launch title they want you on board.”

This sounded . . . odd. Appealing but odd. “I don’t understand.”

“Me either, kiddo. But they were very clear that they wanted you on this project. Said you had a reputation for ghostwriting and they wanted you on board.”

Gretchen stabbed another forkful of salad into her mouth, thinking. She had a reputation all right, but she wasn't so sure it was a good one. She took on a lot of projects to pay the bills, but she was also late a lot. She hadn't been feeling very inspired, and writing could be a damn hard job when you didn't want to do it.

And lately she hadn't wanted to do it. But money was money, and rent didn't pay itself. Her sister Audrey would shake her head and suggest that Gretchen see if she could borrow money from their famous sister, Daphne, but Gretchen hated the thought of it. Being indebted to Daphne ended up being more trouble than it was worth. Gretchen speared another piece of lettuce idly. “So what kind of job is it and what does it pay?”

“It pays three hundred grand.”

Gretchen stopped, fork poised in midair. “Three . . . hundred grand? Seriously?”

“So I'm told. Lead title, you know.”

“And this is a legit publisher? Really? They're putting out that kind of money?”

“Yeah. Weird terms, though. Ten percent up front, ninety percent upon turn in of an acceptable manuscript. And that's not the weirdest.”

Most publishers paid half upon signing. Still, thirty grand up front was more than she'd gotten for her last book, so even if the contract went south early, it was still a good investment of her time, all things considering. “What else is weird?”

Kat suddenly looked uncomfortable. She reached for her wineglass. “Well, there are unusual working terms.”

“Uh-oh. Am I going to like the sound of this?”

“Probably not, which is why I didn't mention it when we first sat down. It's strange, Gretch. Really strange. Apparently the project they want you to do is an epistolary novel of sorts. There's some old letters someone found in an attic of a very old, very famous mansion. The publisher said the letters were really romantic, so they're seeing this as some sort of quasi Anne Frank meets *The Notebook* sort of project. They think it'll be huge. But there's a catch. You can't take the letters off the property.”

“Okay, that's a little picky, but do-able.” She was starting to get excited about this project. Anne Frank meets *The Notebook*? Launch title of a new publisher? With that kind of money for an advance, it sounded promising. “Who's name am I writing under?”

“Don't know yet. They didn't want to release it until the project was agreed upon.”

“So where's this house?”

“Mansion,” Kat corrected. “And it's in Hyde Park.”

Her mouth went dry. “Like . . . the Vanderbilt one?”

“Close. You know the one with the white columns and the crazy rose gardens?”

“Holy shit. Yes, I know that one. Buchanan Manor.”

“That’s the one. And that’s the location of our letters.”

“That’s so cool,” Gretchen said, fascinated. “I’m totally in on this project.”

“I think you need to think about it.”

“Why? The money’s awesome, the house is fascinating, and it’s a lead title. What is it you’re not telling me?”

“It’s the house. You heard the part about the letters not being able to leave the premises?”

“Yeah, but what’s the big deal? I’ll just drop in on some weekdays and take photos. I don’t mind going on location if the pay is right—which it is.”

“You’re going to be very on location. As in, if you take the job, they want you to live on site for the duration of the project. They don’t want you coming back and forth. The owner’s a bit of a recluse and doesn’t seem to like traffic much, so he’s insisting that the ghostwriter live on the premises with him.”

“Do *what*?”

“Live. On site. With the owner. He’s the one who doesn’t want them leaving the premises.”

“That’s a little . . .”

“Creepy? I know. That’s what I said and that’s why I think you should turn it down.”

She thought for a long minute. The money was nice and the house was intriguing, but the thought of living there with a stranger? That tipped things over from eccentric to downright bizarre. “Exactly how many letters are there, again?”

“Several hundred.” Kat gave her a curious look. “You’re not considering it, are you?”

“Not seriously,” she admitted. “Though it would be cool to visit the house and see what it’s like on the inside. And the money would be nice. But . . .”

“Yeah, it’s that ‘but’ that makes me keep pausing. You want me to turn them down?”

Gretchen toyed with her fork, thinking of the expensive salad on her plate that she couldn’t pay for, at least not until a payment came in. “Not yet.”

Kat shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

She shoved a crouton around her plate. Three hundred grand could be several years of financial security, even in pricey New York City. “And they asked for me, huh?”

“Who knows. Maybe the recluse is a big fan of Astronaut Bill.”

Yeah, right. Or maybe she was the only idiot available who would actually consider the job. Gretchen sighed to herself and then nudged Kat’s fluffy wheat roll. “You going to eat that?”

“Never worry, Uranea. I’ll stop them with my trusty laser sword.” Astronaut Bill put his hand on the sheath at his waist.

Urania gasped, her small hands flying to her mouth. Her bosoms quivered with distress. "Oh, please be safe, Astronaut Bill!"

"They won't know what hit them," Bill said grimly, dragging his immense blade from its sheath. Urania gasped again, clearly impressed by the size of it. "Now I'll send them on a one-way ticket back to the stars . . ."

Gretchen rolled her eyes at her own page and took a sip from a water bottle. Garbage. Pure and utter garbage. If Urania walked into Cooper's Cuppa and ordered a drink, Gretchen probably would have hauled across the counter to punch her in the face.

Hmm. She made a note to herself: have Urania punched in face in next chapter.

Stupid Astronaut Bill. Stupid Urania. She kept hoping for a black hole to suck them into another dimension and then she'd never have to write about them again, but nope. No such luck.

Gretchen checked the timer on the oven again. Ten minutes until the next batch of her cookies were done. She could get in a bit more writing. Bracing herself for a few more paragraphs of the hated duo, she began to type once more. The bell at the counter chimed, and she looked up from her tablet, where she'd been drafting the next scene between handling the store's customers.

Cooper moved past her before she could get up, a bustle of white shirt and bright red apron. "I'll get it, Gretch. You're busy."

She was . . . busy? She raised an eyebrow at his back. Here she was, slacking on the job at his business, and he was going to let her? He was either the nicest boss in the world, or . . . hell. Brontë had been right when she'd pointed it out to Gretchen the other day: Cooper was totally in love with her.

Well didn't that just make things uncomfortable.

Cooper was an old friend, a college buddy. They'd both moved to New York at about the same time—him to start his coffee business, and her to pursue a career in journalism. It had seemed natural for them to stick together and remain friends, and when she was lean on money and between checks, Cooper let her work shifts at his cafe for some extra pay.

Except right now? He was being a little *too* understanding.

Brontë had tried telling her a few weeks ago that Cooper was in love with her. Gretchen had denied it. Cooper was just a friend. They were buddies. They hung out together and had each other's backs. There was nothing more to it than that. But as time went on, she began to have doubts that maybe she wasn't quite as aware of Cooper's feelings as she thought. She gave him a wary look as he made lattes and handed them to the waiting customers. When the bar was deserted again, he turned and glanced back at her, his smile too broad for her liking.

"How's the book coming?" he asked. "Still giving you trouble?"

There was one way to find out, she supposed, if Cooper was going to make things uncomfortable for her or not. "Oh, just struggling with a love scene," she said idly. "You know how it goes."

Cooper flushed bright red and his goofy smile got a little bigger and a little, well, goofier.

Hell.

She saved her file and exited out of the app. Maybe it was time to be spending a little less time at Cooper's

Cuppa. Usually she only showed up for a shift about once a week, just to pick up some extra money. But ever since her last roomie had moved out, she'd been coming in more or less every day. She needed the cash, and it was a good excuse to avoid writing more of Astronaut Bill and Uranea.

Clearly her coming in so often had backfired.

"Actually, I need to get this scene knocked out," she told Cooper, forcing an apologetic note into her voice as she tucked her tablet under her arm. "If it's okay with you, I'm going to head out early."

"Of course," Cooper said. "Oh, and I wanted to talk to you about something."

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. *Oh, God.* Cooper was a friend, but that was all he was. He was more like a little brother to her. A little brother with a cowlick in the back of his hair, barely an inch in height on her, and pit stains on light-colored shirts. Cooper was sweet, but definitely not her type. If he was going to ask her out, it was going to absolutely ruin any sort of easy friendship they had.

It already felt ruined, and that was depressing enough.

She tugged at the strings of her apron, turning her back to him so he wouldn't see her wince. "Can it wait, Coop? I really do need to get going. The cookies will be ready in a few minutes, if you can pull them out."

"Oh, sure. I was just going to let you know that I think you'll like your next check."

She turned to face him. "Why?"

He beamed at her. "I gave you a raise."

"A raise? Why? I'm your worst employee."

"Don't say that. You're my favorite employee." The smile on his face grew a little softer.

The discomfort Gretchen was feeling grew. When had Cooper turned the corner from being a friend? Why hadn't she paid attention before now? This made things so incredibly uncomfortable. "You shouldn't give me a raise, Coop. Anyone else would have fired me at this point. I'm late, I'm lazy, and I work on other stuff when I'm tending the counter."

"Yes, but you make an incredible cookie. All the customers love your recipes."

She snorted. "Did you not hear me say the part about being late and lazy?"

"Yes, but you work hard."

"On my books, yes. Not on slinging coffee."

He chuckled. "You shouldn't tell me that. I'm your boss."

"You're my friend," she emphasized, feeling like an ass when his smile faded a little. *Floor, swallow me up right now.* "Actually, I wanted to tell you that I might be scarce for a few weeks," she found herself telling him. That crazy assignment Kat had mentioned was looking better and better. A month away from Cooper might be just the thing to cool his jets and refuel her pocketbook. "I just got handed another contract and it's an on-location one."

"Oh?" He looked crestfallen. "I'll miss seeing you around."

“Yeah, well.” She shrugged a little, feeling like she wanted to flee. “I’m sorry. Debbie always wants more shifts. Can you give her mine?”

“Hey,” he said, reaching out and squeezing her upper arm as if to comfort her. “Don’t stress. You do what needs to be done. You know I’ll always be here for you.”

Gretchen nodded. “Thanks, Cooper. You’re a good friend. I really do mean that.”

“I know you do.” *Was that a hint of sadness in his voice?*

Now she felt even worse. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Cooper. Okay, actually, that wasn’t true. The last thing she wanted to do was *date* Cooper. The second to last thing she wanted to do was hurt his feelings. “I appreciate it, Cooper. Sorry to run out on you.”

“Not a problem,” he said cheerfully.

They stared at each other for a long, uncomfortable moment, and then the bell on the counter dinged, saving them from further awkwardness.

“I’m going to head out,” Gretchen said, pulling off her apron. “See you around, Coop.”

He nodded, taking a client’s order, as if nothing was wrong and they hadn’t just gotten all weird with each other.

But she felt his eyes on her back as she left the coffee shop.

As soon as she was out the door, Gretchen pulled out her phone and dialed her agent.

“Kat Geary.”

“It’s me. Is that weird-ass job at the Buchanan place still available?”

“You’re not seriously thinking about taking it, are you?”

“I sure am.” The more she thought about it, the more this seemed like a good idea. It was a little unorthodox, sure. But the thought of spending time away from Astronaut Bill and his ladylove was more appealing by the moment. And speaking of uncomfortable love interests . . . getting away from Cooper for a few weeks would do a lot to ease the discomfort she was currently feeling. The money was just a very nice, very pleasant bonus on top of things. “I could use a distraction and this project sounds like the perfect one. When do I get to start?”

“As soon as we get a handshake on it. Gretchen, are you sure? It means living on the premises.”

“Yeah, but I’ve seen the outside of the house. It’s huge.”

“What if it’s filled with coffins and decapitated doll heads inside?”

“Jeez, Kat. You been trolling through the horror fiction section lately? It’s a mansion. I’m sure it’ll be fine. It’s probably so big that I won’t see anyone ever. It’ll just be me and some dusty library. No big.”

Kat sighed gustily into the phone. “Well, as your friend, I think you’re crazy. As your agent, I just want to say thanks for the commission.”

“You’re welcome. I think. Now, can you call my Astronaut Bill editor and tell her I need an extension?”

Gretchen stared up at the Buchanan Mansion from the window of the cab as it pulled up the driveway. “Holy doughnuts. This place is insane. I can’t believe I’m going to be living here for the next month.”

“I can’t believe it, either.” At her side, her sister Audrey’s voice sounded prim and disapproving. “The money is good, but I still think you’re crazy for taking this job.”

Gretchen was pretty sure that made two of them. “It’s a pretty lucrative job, Audrey. And you didn’t have to come.”

Her sister gave a derisive snort. “Oh, yes I did. You haven’t met Buchanan. I have. He’s surly and unpleasant and that house is a mausoleum. It’s bad enough that you’re taking a job that forces you to live in someone else’s home. I don’t care if he’s Mr. Hawkings’s best friend—I’m not letting you shack up without checking out the place first. That’s so they know you have someone looking out for you. I don’t want to have you disappear for a month and then we’re calling the news and insisting that someone digs up the gardens looking for you.”

Gretchen rolled her eyes. “I’ll probably never see the man.”

Audrey just gave her a prim look. “Don’t argue with me. You know I’m the responsible one in this family.”

And because she couldn’t really refute that, Gretchen just grinned.

The car moved slowly down the winding drive and, as it did, they passed intricately clipped flowering bushes in fantastical shapes. Spirals, moons, and stars adorned the colorful fall gardens. “I don’t think they’d bury me in the backyard, Audrey. Did you see the landscaping? It probably costs more than we both make in a month.”

“If you need money,” Audrey began for the millionth time that day.

“It’s not just the money,” Gretchen said. “It’s an adventure. Haven’t you ever wanted to have an adventure?”

“Not if it involves living with a stranger, no.”

Spoilsport. It wasn’t as if she and the owner were going to get in their jammies and have pillow fights and cuddle up in the same bed or something. “Look at the size of this place. Odds are that I never see him.”

Buchanan Manor was as big as a shopping mall. Seriously. She tried counting windows at the front of the building, but there was too many. Pointed gabled roofs in a dark green decorated the roof, and the building itself was a pale shade. There were windows everywhere, looking out on the spectacular lawns. If she counted up, it looked like the building was four floors. Good God, how many rooms did one billionaire need? He could fit an entire school into this building.

The taxi pulled up to the cobblestone driveway and Audrey paid the cab driver as Gretchen got out of the car, Igor’s cat-carrier tucked under her arm. The cat meowed angrily, and she made a shushing noise even as she continued to stare up at the mansion.

She was wearing jeans and a sweater and felt hideously, conspicuously underdressed. And here this was one of her better outfits. Since she didn’t leave the house much, she normally spent her time in yoga pants. But this house made her think anything less than starched collars and tweed jackets were underdressed. Gretchen swallowed hard as her suitcases were set down on the driveway. “This is uncomfortable.”

Audrey shouldered her small weekend bag and gave Gretchen an odd look. “Where’s all your bravery?”

“I didn’t realize I was going to be living at frickin’ Hogwarts! I—”

The massive wooden front door opened, and a tall, thin man with a bald head and long neck stepped out of the house. Both women fell silent and watched him descend. Gretchen looked at him with keen interest. He wore a small plaid bow tie and a tweed jacket with patches in the elbows. *Fascinating*. Was he the owner, then? Come to greet her? He didn’t look very friendly.

“Good afternoon,” the man said in a sonorous voice. “Which one of you is Ms. Gretchen Petty?”

She raised a hand. “Here.” She immediately lowered it, feeling like a fool. This wasn’t class. “I brought my sister for the weekend so she can see me settled. I hope that’s okay?”

He gave her a piercing stare, as if she’d displeased him greatly.

At her side, Audrey cleared her throat and stepped forward, iPad in hand. “My employer is Logan Hawkings, a friend of Mr. Buchanan’s. When I told Mr. Hawkings that we would be coming here for the weekend, he told me that he had cleared it with Mr. Buchanan and that it would not be a problem for me to tag along.” Audrey’s tone was direct, crisp, and absolutely business-like in the face of this man’s disapproval.

Gretchen wanted to kiss her sister for putting the man in his place. He must not be Mr. Buchanan, then. Thank God. He looked like he had a massive stick up his ass. Not exactly Gretchen’s kind of person.

After a long moment, the man nodded. “I am aware of Mr. Hawkings’s involvement. If you would please follow me, I can show you to your rooms.”

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