

Backstage

Harmony Kent

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By

Harmony Kent

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For Paul.
The light in the dark.
Love of my life.

Dear Reader,

Backstage uses British English spellings and punctuation throughout, being written by an English author. Therefore, some words will be spelled differently to the way you might expect. Also, in general, I favour the Oxford (serial) comma, which also might look different than you are used to. Other words will just be plain different, such as 'lift' not 'elevator' and 'leant' not 'leaned', etc. In addition, one of my characters is of Irish descent, and thus often says things like 'yous' instead of 'you', ends some of her sentences with a 'but', and in one instance uses an Irish insult ... Langer, which basically means a foolish person.

These are not mistakes but simply differences between countries and conventions.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this book and would be deeply grateful if you would consider leaving a review for me once you've finished.

All the very best
Harmony

CHAPTER ONE

Role Play

Nervous, Emma perched on the edge of the hard, worn wooden chair. In the dim lighting, she could make out patches where white paint had once covered the light oak. At least, she guessed it might be oak—really, it could be anything, for all she knew. Poorly educated for the most part and an out-of-work actress, she hardly qualified as a wood connoisseur. Didn't qualify as a connoisseur of anything, actually.

The blackness that surrounded her hid anyone who might sit watching. Only the stage caught any of the meagre illumination. Most likely, he had done that on purpose. It wasn't like this was an audition or anything. So, why had he done it? Set it up like this? Way too

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spooky.

She coughed once, short and sharp, then fidgeted with the heavy skirt that covered her crossed legs. With her lower leg, she tapped her foot on the bare boards but soon stopped when it made a loud thumping sound on the hollow box-stage. Why hadn't he spoken? Announced his presence in some way? Annoyance dulled some of her nervousness.

Then, as if he'd read her thoughts, John's voice drifted out of the unseen auditorium, 'Okay, Emma. Are you ready?'

For what? She cleared her throat. 'Um, yes. Where are you?'

'A coupla rows back. You look nervous.'

Emma shifted position. 'I don't like the dark. Why haven't you put on more lights?'

When he replied, she could hear the smile in his voice—his attempt to soothe her, 'I thought we'd do some role play today. The lack of visual input will help you get in character.'

'Oh.' She'd thought she'd done well so far, but John must see something lacking, or he wouldn't have set this up like this. He wouldn't have put so much time aside for her. At least he'd taken an interest, though, instead

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of casting her aside as had so many others. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Just sit there. Try and relax. I want you to get in touch with your inner you. Think you can do that?'

'Sure.' A knee-jerk response and not too true—she didn't feel sure she could do any such thing.

Until now, she'd kept her inner life hidden, believing that no one would like it particularly much. Had he picked up on that? On her reticence? Maybe she could wing it. She was, after all, an actress ... or, well, a budding actress.

'So, what do you want me to do?' Her voice trembled a bit, and she chewed on her bottom lip.

He laughed. 'Just relax. Sit there for a minute or two. See what comes up. Feel what mood you're in. Work with that. See what kind of character pops up.'

'Okay.' Now, she felt more nervous than ever.

A thought struck her. She peered, fruitlessly, into the darkness. 'Um, are you alone? Did anyone come with you?'

Another chuckle reached her. 'Just me.'

'How do I know?'

'Well, I suppose you'll have to trust me on that one.'

Trust him? Could she believe what any man told

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her? But ... her career. To Emma, right then, it seemed like everything hinged on this session. Make or break time. Despite all his promises, and all the 'favours' she'd done for the man, she no longer believed that the bastard Derek Prentis would ever deliver.

She shrugged, nodded, and dug deep for some resolve. 'Right,' she told John. Even though it remained dark, she closed her eyes to better concentrate. To go into herself, as it were.

While she sat there, much stiller than previously, he spoke to her, 'Get in touch with your emotions. Right now, you can be whoever you want to be. No rules. No judgement. Just the two of us. Let yourself go. Set yourself free.' His voice came out slow and measured and soft ... soothing. When he stopped speaking, she missed the reassurance it had offered.

Eventually, a smile tugged the corners of her mouth upward. John, the best mentor she'd ever had, picked up on it straight away. 'Good. What's your name?'

Emma. She bit down hard. Swallowed. 'Jayne.'

'And what does Jayne do for a living?'

'She's a prostitute.'

After a pause, John asked, 'Do you enjoy your work?'

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Emma laughed, more in role now. In a rough Cockney accent, she said, 'Well, let's put it this way ... if I won the lottery tomorrow night, I wouldn't be giving any skanky old men any blowjobs.'

'Why do you do it?'

Emma let the anger through, 'Why do you think? My kids have got to eat.'

'What about the dope?'

Her voice came out at a near snarl, and she leant forward on the chair, 'There is no dope, you moron. Not every prostitute does drugs, you know.'

'So, why can't you earn money another way?'

'Believe me; I've tried.'

'Well, what about the dole? Job seekers allowance and all that?'

He's playing devil's advocate. Emma played along. 'Did you watch the movie, "I, Daniel Blake"?'

'I did.' He sounded somewhat impressed—or was that her imagination? 'He died of a heart attack in the end, right?'

'Yes.'

Now, his voice sounded surprised, 'Ah, right, and that young woman with the kids, she ended up working in that sex shop.'

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Emma nodded. 'Well, then, now you see. I'd just as soon not go through all that. At least this way, I keep control.'

'Do you believe that? Really?'

'If I didn't, I wouldn't be doing this crap.'

As they conversed, back and forth, Emma slipped more into the background and let Jayne take over.

She asked, 'Why you so interested? You want some?'

John couldn't quite mask his sudden intake of breath.

Emma chuckled. She pushed further, 'What? Not good enough for ya?'

'Not quite.'

That took her aback. Knocked off some of that confident swagger she'd shown. Her silence asked the question.

'You're masking with that anger and hardness. I want more. Let your emotions through. When she's not on the job, what does Jayne really feel? You still haven't let me in.'

Emma gripped the edges of the chair. A couple of deep breaths helped to steady her. She had to remain in role here. But to do that, she would have to let some of

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herself through—just like the best writers did in the stories they made up. That was right, wasn't it? Hadn't she read that somewhere once?

'Actually, it pisses me off. All right, I might not be too clever. Might not have gone to the best of schools. But that shouldn't mean I have to let dirty, sweaty bastards maul me all night long. Not having any money shouldn't mean I have to live my life feeling so ashamed and dirty all the time. I shouldn't have to leave my twelve-year-old girl in charge of my four-year-old. And that worries me; he's a handful at the best of times.'

Shocked at her rant, Emma paused.

John said, 'You don't like sex? You don't like men touching you?'

She gave a bitter laugh. 'You think? Come on. You're not that stupid. None of the men who come to me know how to use a woman's body. Not a single one of them knows how to get more out of it. It's just sordid and quick and pointless.'

'And sometimes violent?'

'Oh, honey, you wouldn't believe the bruises.'

'Just bruises?'

'Scars too. Only those, you don't see so much. Most of them are on the inside.'

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‘Just from the ... from your job?’

‘I wasn’t abused as a kid or anything, if that’s what you think. Never had an abusive husband either. But I never asked for this life.’

‘What about the father?’

‘What?’ She sat up straight.

‘Your kids. Your girl and ... a boy was it? Or two girls?’

Her fictitious life picked up momentum. ‘Yes, a boy and a girl. Vicky and Tommy. Different dads. Never had a long relationship with either of them. Just a bit of fun, really.’

‘And you hadn’t heard of contraception? Safe sex?’

Hub, what about all that crap about no judgment?

In her anger, she told him to eff-off. Then shut up abruptly, shocked. She started to apologise, but he cut her off.

‘No, no, this is good. Keep going. Make yourself vulnerable—tell me why.’

‘Why?... Oh. Well, she—um, I—I was only fourteen. Didn’t know no better, right. Nobody never told me about that stuff. Next thing I know, I’m up the duff.’

‘But then you got caught again. Eight years later. How come? You must have learned better by then.’

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She snapped back at him, 'Of course I knew better. You little prick.' Then she caught herself. Calmed down some. 'Condom broke, didn't it. Some punter I never saw again.'

John picked up on the mismatch right away, 'I thought you said they both came from relationships.'

'I lied. So what. It's none of your bloody business.'

At that, John laughed good and loud.

Emma smiled.

She quite enjoyed this.

Then he asked, 'How did that make you feel? Twenty-two-years-old, a kid already, a prostitute, and pregnant again.'

That question killed the budding enjoyment. In a near whisper, she said, 'I wanted to kill myself. Couldn't see how I could carry on.'

He lowered his voice too, 'What stopped you?'

'My girl. I couldn't do that to an innocent eight-year-old. I'm not a monster.'

Her eyes filled. A tear escaped down her left cheek. Emma swiped it away, impatient—fully in role now.

'Did you ever try and get out of it? Find another way?'

He no longer sounded accusatory. More curious

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and sympathetic.

Emma shrugged, hung her head, and mumbled, 'Sure. All the time.' Then she raised a tortured face up toward the auditorium. 'Every single day of my miserable life.' Her voice broke. 'But you get stuck, you know? It's like this vicious circle ... is that the right phrase?'

'Spot on. Well done. Now, we've gotten somewhere. We've tapped into actual real emotions. Are you okay to continue?'

To be honest, she felt utterly wretched. However, she nodded her assent.

John pushed some more, 'Tell me how you feel when some disgusting bloke's got his thing in you. He's doing it to you right now.'

Emma shuddered. What John had no idea of was that she didn't have to do too much pretending for this part. And she would do everything in her power to make sure he never found out that fact. Ironically, he'd never realise just how good an actress she could be. Not if she had anything to do with it.

For the thousandth time that month, Emma berated herself for agreeing in the first place. But she'd believed the big man when he'd promised her a big job on the

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big stage or in the movies. What a bloody idiot. And now he was blackmailing her. Saying that if she ever told, he would end her career—*ba, what career?*—and tell everyone what a slut she was. Desperate and demoralised, she just couldn't risk it.

The awful timing of it. If she'd held on for just another couple of weeks, she would have seen that her teacher had taken an interest in her that went over and above the attention he showed the others in the class. She could have waited and seen. But now, she'd gotten herself trapped good and proper.

Emma's shoulders slumped in defeat. Even if John did see something in her—enough to help her catch a break—then big-man Derek still ran the business. He decided who got what roles when it came right down to it. The producers and directors and casters might think they had the final say, but it always came back to the man with the money. The man with the connections could launch or destroy any of their careers with just one phone call. No, it was for the best that she stay on his good side, no matter what.

'Jayne?'

Emma jumped. With an effort, she sat up straighter. Then pretended it was all still in role. 'How do you

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think I feel? What are you, some kind of pervert? Do you get off on this?’

She threw a glare out into the fictitious audience. ‘I just want him to stop. I want it all to be over. I wish I’d never let him anywhere near me in the first place. But then you don’t get to choose, do you? Not in this kinda work.’

‘If you could do anything—anything at all—without getting caught or arrested or having any consequences whatsoever, what would you like to do to him?’

Emma and Jayne morphed. ‘I’d string him up by the balls. With piano wire. Teach the bastard a lesson. He thinks he’s pulling the strings. He needs to think again.’

Silence met her. She held still, waiting.

‘Is that everything?’ John’s voice sounded strained. Had she gone too far?

Once more, Emma shrugged. He had asked for this, after all. She went for all or nothing, ‘I’d make him feel the way I feel. Whatever it took, I’d do it. Find his weak spot ... his heel ... you know what I mean.’

‘His Achilles heel.’

‘Right. That. When I finish with him, he won’t be the big man anymore.’

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‘Does your demon have a name?’ John sounded cautious but compelled.

Emma nearly blurted it out but stopped herself at the last moment. ‘He’s everyman. Whichever of my customers. I want to choose who I have sex with, and not for money either. I want full ownership of my body. I want a man who can love me, make love to me. Make me feel like a woman.’

She couldn’t help it. The whole thing had become too much. Grown into something she had never wanted. To break free of the emotions that threatened to overwhelm her, Emma broke into song, repeating the lyrics from ‘Man! I feel like a woman’ by Shania Twain. Amazingly, he let her get all the way through without interruption.

At the end, a heavy, baited silence fell.

It took what felt like an hour for him to say something, but only a minute could have passed—probably even less.

‘Wow. I never knew you could sing. With your talent, you’ll go far.’

Emma had to forcibly hold off the shudder. He couldn’t have any clue how exactly his words had just echoed Dirty Derek’s. Instead, she did the expected

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and beamed out her biggest wide-eyed smile. In an excited, girly voice, she said, 'Really?'

John laughed. 'Okay, can we have Emma back now, please?'

She sat on her hands. He hadn't bought it. Still, at least he believed her to still be in Jayne mode. Probably safer that way. In her normal tones, she said, 'Sure thing. If we're done, can we have the lights on now?'

A few seconds of distant shuffling preceded the auditorium lights blazing to life and leaving her temporarily blind. Emma blinked, let her vision adjust to the brightness. Her eyes found John, standing by the wall at the front of the forward-most seats, hand still poised over the switch. His frozen expression focused off to the side.

Her gaze moved to the third row back. John had lied to her. They were not alone. Bastard Derek sat there, smiling smugly.

In total ignorance of the situation, John grinned and called over to the man, 'See. I told you she was good!'