

Matched Set

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Matched Set

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Summary

Sisters do not always make the best roommates, and witnesses to the end of days do not always make the best shopping buddies. Abbie's got to deal with both.

The morning Abbie's supposed to pick Jenny up from the hospital for good, she's still shuffling around her kitchen in sweatpants waiting for the coffeemaker to perk when she hears a thump outside her door like something heavy hitting the stoop.

Her heart smacks her sternum. She manages to swallow the gasp, but her pulse is galloping, just like that. The fog of sleep lifts as she rises to the balls of her feet, moving as quickly and quietly as she can to the hook where she hangs up her piece each night. Muffling the sound with her cupped hands, she slots a clip into place and thumbs the safety, then moves, low and careful and quiet, across the kitchen toward her door—

There's a knock.

A really loud one, but shy of hammering. A knock, like civilised people make.

Abbie feels stupid for about a second before she remembers that she absolutely has every reason to worry that some asshole from a secret society of demon-worshippers is going to break down her door one day. She straightens, puts the safety back on her weapon, tucks it into the small of her back, and puts an eye to the peephole.

In the fisheye lens, Jenny's face glares impatiently back. Her voice is only slightly muffled by the door as she calls out, loud enough for Mrs. Pendleton next door to hear, "I know you're home, 'cause your car's outside. Are you going to open up or what?"

Abbie yanks the door open, lips tight, and the duffle bag that had come to rest against it rolls over the sill. Jenny leans back, expression clearing, and says, "Oh, you were right there!" She bends down and picks up the duffle, and shoulders her way inside. "You got enough coffee there for me?"

Abbie knows she's glaring. She can't help it. She tries to rearrange her face, and settles for speaking as calmly as possible. "I was supposed to pick you up."

Jenny shrugs, dropping the duffle on the kitchen floor. She's found an apple in the bowl on the counter (which Abbie frankly doesn't eat from often enough, so who knows what condition the fruit there is in), and is inspecting it casually. "I took a cab."

"I was supposed to *sign you out*," Abbie says, sharply. The gun digs into the small of her back; she knows Jenny's seen it. She ejects the clip and puts it away, fingers moving roughly over the textured metal.

Jenny produces a sheaf of papers from her jacket, taking a bite out of the apple as she does. "Guy at the counter said you could sign 'em later," she says indistinctly. She swallows and amends, "Well, he let me walk out of the door with them."

"*Jenny*," Abbie barks before she can bite her tongue, and her reward for losing her temper is seeing Jenny's breezy, casual face get replaced by the set, angry one that Abbie dreads.

"What's the big deal?" Jenny says mulishly. "They knew I was going today. They know *where* I'm going. Any of them worrying about me running loose yelling about demons, they

can just call you up and you can tell ‘em where I am.” She takes another bite out of the apple and chews it sullenly.

Abbie wants to yell at her – for freaking Abbie out, for breaking the hospital’s procedures, for behaving like a moody teenager instead of a grown damn woman – but she instead takes a deep breath and lets it out, slowly. Okay. Half of this is just her feeling wrong-footed. If she can deal with witches, Hessians, Horseman of the Apocalypse, and Ichabod Crane’s opinions about sales tax without flying off the handle, she can deal with her own sister. She holds out her hand for the papers, and says, “I just don’t want them to have any excuse to rethink this.”

Jenny hands them over, eying her warily as Abbie grabs a ballpoint pen off the table and begins to sign and initial each page. “Yeah, well,” she says in a low voice. “Just... wanted to get a head start.”

Abbie’s eyes pause in the middle of scanning the page, and she is hit with the image of Jenny waiting impatiently for this morning to come – the morning when she could say goodbye forever to the white walls and fluorescent lights of the institution. She thinks about being cooped up like the heroine of a gothic novel, needing permission to go outside, under curfew, monitored, dosed, not trusted with her own decisions. She wonders how early Jenny got up. With a sideways look to the circles under her sister’s eyes, she wonders if Jenny slept at all.

She dots the last i and shuffles the papers. “I’ll see about that coffee,” she mutters. Jenny doesn’t say anything, just finishes her apple, crunching loudly in counterpoint to the gurgling of the pot. Abbie gets two mugs down and sets them on the counter before realising that she doesn’t actually know how Jenny likes it. She knows that she’s smuggled artifacts for paramilitary demon-hunters, but what she’s actually like to live with? Abbie’s got no clue. But now she gets to find out. “Jenny,” she says softly, and waits for Jenny to meet her eyes. “I really am glad you’re here.”

Jenny holds her eyes for a moment, looking a little uncomfortable, and then turns away and throws her apple core in the trash. “Yeah, me too,” she says briskly. Then she opens Abbie’s fridge. “You got any bagels?”

Abbie sighs and pours the coffee.

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At about 8:15, when Jenny’s in the shower, Abbie’s phone rings and she curses, because it’s Ichabod, and he’s going to be calling because she was supposed to swing by at 8 on her way to pick up Jenny, and she just... forgot. “Sorry, sorry,” she mumbles into the phone before he can get a word in edgewise, “she showed up on my doorstep a half-hour ago – apparently she didn’t want to wait. I should have called, I just—God. It was unexpected, that’s all.”

Ichabod says, in that delicate way he has, “Miss Mills, there is no need to apologise.”

It makes Abbie smile, despite herself. “Well, I feel pretty dumb for forgetting,” she says ruefully. “Guess I’m not good with getting caught off guard.”

“An admissible flaw in these uncertain times,” he says, teasing, and Abbie huffs. “Do give my sincere felicitations to Miss Jenny nevertheless.”

“I can still swing by, pick you up,” Abbie says. “I don’t want to leave you cooped up in that cabin all the time.”

There’s a pause then, and his voice is hesitant. “Miss Mills... I am aware that your relationship with Miss Jenny is a... a complex one, and I can only imagine that the process of settling in to her new home will be tumultuous and busy, for the both of you.” Abbie can feel her eyebrows creeping higher with every word. The man sounds downright anxious. “You will both, I suspect, have much to relearn about one another, and I do not wish to interrupt.”

“You don’t want to get caught in the middle of a catfight, you mean.” That manages to wring a chuckle out of him, but it’s small and awkward. There’s something Abbie can’t get a bead on here. Picking up Jenny together was the plan, and he seemed fine with it yesterday. Abbie wants to know what’s changed, aside from her forgetting about him like a jerk, but she’s trying to think of how to draw that out of him when Jenny appears leaning in the doorway, tugging on her boots. “Hang on,” she mutters into the phone, presses it against her shoulder and says, “Where are you off to?”

“Salvation Army,” Jenny says casually, lacing up her boots. Off Abbie’s look, she says, “What? I want a real bed.”

“You have a real bed,” Abbie says, frowning. Jenny’s room is a little Spartan still, but it’s got all the furniture a bedroom needs. She’d spent her last day off moving everything in, and a good part of yesterday fussing. She was this close to getting a vase of flowers for the windowsill before she came to her senses.

Jenny rolls her eyes as if she’s read Abbie’s mind. “I mean a *grown-up* bed. A big one I can stretch out on without touching the sides.” Jenny’s gaze goes distant, a little dreamy. “I’ve been dreaming of that bed. Had enough cots to last me a lifetime.” She shrugs. “Appreciate the effort, though.”

Abbie frowns. She’s got to figure out what to do with the other bed, which is a little annoying, but there’s no reason to stop Jenny from buying her own stuff. Although... “You are not getting a second-hand bed,” she says flatly. “That’s not sanitary.”

Jenny cocks an eyebrow, smile creeping onto her face. “You offering to take me shopping?”

Abbie narrows her eyes. She thinks of Crane’s weird unease, and how to lure him somewhere where she can talk to him about it with enough to distract him that he won’t get all stiff and British on her. Somewhere it’ll take a while to walk around. Somewhere Jenny can buy a bed. She puts the phone to her ear again. “Miss Mills?” Ichabod says on the other end. He’s patient and polite. Well, she knows a place that can fix that.

Looking her sister straight in the eye, she says, “Crane, have I ever told you about a place called Ikea?”

It's a half-hour drive to Paramus, with Jenny looking amused in the backseat and Crane under the impression that he's there to help them wrangle heavy furniture. He's probably a little suspicious of her motives, but he seems happy about a chance to be gallant, and he's surprisingly game to make small talk with Jenny – he meets every needling question she sends his way with the same polite cheer he uses on everyone. Abbie watches them in the rearview mirror and thinks she can work with what she sees: there's no hostility in Jenny's smart-ass attitude, nor even much wariness. She seems to think Crane's okay; it's just unfortunate that that seems to mean she thinks Crane's there to be teased. Ichabod deals with it well, though. He still doesn't understand every fifth word out of their mouths, but that's something he deals with every day. The fact that he can deal with that *and* Jenny interrogating him on the state of Corbin's cabin, how he spends his spare time, and exactly when he plans to “ditch the LARP gear and start wearing real people clothes” means it's not Jenny he has a problem with.

Which Abbie was pretty sure about already, but it's always good to have a theory confirmed.

The big blue building looms up from behind a screen of trees, and Ichabod's face settles in that apprehensive, determined way he gets when she asks him to deal with computers or unfamiliar holiday traditions. No sooner has Abbie parked than Jenny is out with a cry of, “Alright, let's get our affordable Swedish crap!”

Ichabod glances at her sideways like he wants her to translate. “Don't worry,” she says, “It'll all make sense soon. Kind of.”

He doesn't look convinced, but at least he follows her.

~

“Is this, in fact, a maze?” Ichabod hisses to her. Fifteen minutes for him to start panicking. That's pretty impressive.

“No,” she says cheerfully, watching Jenny starfish out on a succession of unpronounceably-named queen beds. “It's more like, uh, an assault course. A gauntlet,” she clarifies, off his look, maybe enjoying this a little too much. “There's one entrance and one exit and once you're inside you have to get through the whole thing to get out again.”

“I am familiar with the concept,” Ichabod says grimly. “It was diabolically clever of these carpenters to construct their business in such a way that the patron must view every one of their wares before they can make their purchase and escape.”

“It's a little claustrophobic,” Abbie concedes.

Ichabod is silent for a minute, standing beside her as they watch Jenny bounce with increasing enthusiasm on a mattress. The nearest sales assistant is starting to look nervous.

It's always hard for Abbie to be subtle about checking her partner's expression, what with his face being about a yard above her head. Still, when she sneaks a glance at him, he doesn't seem to notice; he's watching Jenny with a distant, pensive expression.

Well, now seems as good a time as ever. “So, what was this morning about? You seemed a little flustered over the phone.”

Ichabod looks startled, and a little guilty. Wait, maybe not guilty. Embarrassed? Anxious, is that what it is? “Not... flustered, Miss Mills. It simply occurred to me that,” he gestures, “Perhaps, with your sister staying in your home now, I should learn to become more self-reliant. Once, I could navigate the world as a man should, and I am learning more about this new world every day. At times, to my dismay,” he adds in a low tone as a woman walks past carrying the ugliest chandelier Abbie’s ever seen. Ichabod sighs. “And Miss Jenny is your family. It seems only right that I should occupy less of your time now that you are reunited.”

“Well, yeah, but you’re still my *partner*,” Abbie says, at a loss.

Ichabod’s eyes are bright. “Indeed. And I assure you, Miss Mills, I will always be at your disposal.”

“Crane, what—“ *the hell prompted this?* Is what Abbie means to say, but Jenny chooses that moment to walk over with a slip of paper in her hand and an expression on her face like she knows she’s just walked into the middle of something. Abbie takes a breath and fixes a reassuring smile on her face: nothing to worry about, just act natural. “Found the one you want?”

“Yeah,” Jenny says slowly, eyes flicking from Abbie’s face to Ichabod’s and back again. Her face smoothes out, cocksure and easy. “Think I’m gonna get a rug next.”

“A rug?” Abbie says.

“Yeah. A super tacky one. And maybe some paint,” she says thoughtfully, walking away.

“What? Jenny, it’s a rental, you can’t—Jenny!” Abbie calls after her. “And she’s gone.”

Ichabod is looking perturbed. “By ‘tacky’, she means...?”

Abbie shudders.

~

Another opportunity doesn’t arise for a while. Crane gets distracted by the kid’s section, which makes something twist sadly in Abbie’s stomach. His face is wistful as he watches barely-supervised children running around the colourful tents and mock playrooms. Even the stuffed toys seem to charm him, which surprises her, since a lot of them are kind of bizarre. On the other hand, she’s seen some of the hand-made dolls from his era, and most of those were creepy as hell. Eventually she finds an excuse to chivvy him out of there. It seems family’s really on his mind right now.

She just doesn’t know what’s got him acting like something’s ending. If she’s honest with herself, it’s starting to freak her out.

Several minutes later, they’re almost at the end of the display section. Ichabod has found a minimalist wooden deer and is inspecting it critically, which is when Jenny grabs her by the

elbow and hauls her into an aisle of cushions and carpets. Even as she's gritting her teeth against Jenny's pincer grip, Abbie has to admire her planning: the rugs hanging from mounted racks around them will do a lot to muffle their conversation. Jenny releases her and looks her straight in the eye. "What's with your guy?" she says. "He keeps looking at you like he's going to have to shoot his horse or something."

"He doesn't have a horse," Abbie says flatly.

"No bullshit: what's up?"

Abbie sighs, and gives up. Figuring out what's going on in Ichabod Crane's revolutionary-era head may just have to be a sisterly bonding thing. "I don't know," she confesses. "I think he's feeling awkward about being underfoot. He keeps talking about being more self-reliant now that you're living with me, and I don't know what started it."

Jenny frowns. "Hmm. Maybe I can get it out of him."

"Jenny..."

"What?" Jenny smiles, bright and sharp. "He'll never see me coming." She reaches behind Abbie's head and whips a rug off one of the racks, and true to her word, it's so tacky makes Abbie's eyes want to clamp shut forever. It's like the ultraviolet spectrum vomited on a sheepskin. Jenny slings it over her shoulder and strides, whistling, over to Ichabod, who puts down the deer when he sees her coming, and then does a beautiful double-take when he sees what she's carrying. Abbie shakes her head and follows her out, catching Ichabod's eye as they fall into step behind Jenny. It shouldn't be so easy to match strides with a guy that tall, but it always has been.

~

It's kind of a trial explaining flat-pack furniture to a guy whose idea of interior decorating involves a hatchet and a nearby forest.

"How is an item assembled out of factory-made parts supposed to withstand generations of use?"

"It isn't," Jenny says.

"That's outrageous! A waste of good pine!"

"Good thing this is particleboard, then."

"What on earth is--"

Abbie sighs. "They glue sawdust together until it's kind of solid and they use it instead of wood."

Ichabod stares. "How can such cheap and shoddy manufacturing justify these prices?"

Abbie leans against a metal shelf, and begins, "Well, the non-shoddy, solid-wood manufacturing is about five times as expensive, and harder to take apart or give away when you move house, so if you make it and buy it with the understanding that it's not going to last forever, then it drives the prices down and everyone just kind of agrees to live with essentially disposable furniture."

Ichabod's shoulders slump. "Why is everything so temporary?" he asks, with such a plaintive voice that Abbie gets the impression he's not talking about Jenny's bed.

Jenny must get the same impression, because that's when she shoves the rug into Abbie's arms and says, "I want my bed, not an economics debate. You, get my mattress. You, tall guy, help me get the box down - it's up high and it's gonna be heavy."

Taking the hint, Abbie peels away, and then, as stealthily as possible while holding a neon-purple horse blanket, ducks around several pallets of furniture and finds a spot where she can eavesdrop without being seen.

"--Realise you've got to help us put it together too, now, don't you?" Jenny's saying.

Ichabod huffs out a laugh, and his voice sounds a little strained from the effort of sliding the long, heavy box off the shelf without dropping it. "Had I known self-assembly was a requirement, I would have volunteered my services at the start. I have made many a bookcase and table in my time, albeit from rougher resources than this."

"Yeah, yeah, you got crazy pioneer skills," Jenny says, and it makes Ichabod snort. "Either way, you're coming home with us. This is probably gonna take an afternoon. Maybe grab pizza for dinner and eat it on the floor - you know, all the moving-in traditions." She actually sounds pretty happy about it. It makes that ache of guilt come back to think that Jenny's never really set up home before. Sure, they've both lived in a million places, but only Abbie's really had the privilege of making a place her own.

"Your generation's ideas of tradition continue to baffle me," Ichabod says dryly. With a grunt, he heaves the box down, and with Jenny grabbing one end they manage to get it to the ground without incident, and give twin sighs of relief.

"You know you'd be welcome anyway, right? I mean, you're her partner in the apocalypse, and that's gotta count for something. Also it's my house too, now, so I guess I get to invite people, and I'm inviting you."

There's a long pause. Abbie, chancing a peek between shelves like she's in some damn slapstick routine, can only see Crane's jaw and his hands – but that jaw is working, mouth opening and then closing again like he's searching for what to say, and those hands are twitching over the surface of the upright box. At last, he lets out a deep sigh, and says, "Miss Jenny, that is a matter I must speak to you about."

"What, me moving in with Abbie?" Abbie can see Jenny's face clearly enough, and her eyebrows are raised about as high as they get. Her sister gives a damn good eyebrow.

“What? No, of course not! How could I have any— as if I even had any *say* in— no, Miss Jenny. I am referring to my status as your sister’s fellow Witness.”

What in the hell.

“What in the hell?” Jenny says.

“It only occurred to me recently, you see. I am... my presence here is unnatural, not ordained but manufactured.” Crane’s voice sounds miserable. “And though my beloved Katrina believes me to be one of the two Witnesses to the End of Days, your presence now led me to think back, last night, upon how you came to be separated. To the ordeal when you were children – *witnesses* of a terrible event that has shaped both your lives, and now returns to bring about destruction.”

Jenny tips her head back, considering him. Abbie’s turning it over in her head, and she can’t deny it makes a certain kind of sense. “You think *I’m* the other Witness,” Jenny says. “Not you.”

Ichabod nods.

“Huh.” Jenny nods back, slowly. “Could be. You got any proof?”

“I... well, no more than that. Though, truly, my own status is no more certain.”

“Mm. Does it really matter?”

“Does it *matter*?”

“Yeah. I mean, you’re here and I’m here, and we both bring something she needs. What, this has to be a competition?”

“I... no. No, of course not.”

“Right.” Jenny hefts the box easily in her arms and turns to walk, gracefully dodging Ichabod’s startled attempt to take its weight. “And besides, it’s destiny, right? So whoever’s gotta be around to witness whatever will be there anyway.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way,” Ichabod says. From the sound of his voice, she bets his eyes are doing that sparkling thing again. And oh God, she’s supposed to be getting a mattress.

She manages to do it and catch up with them at the checkout without, she thinks, looking like anything’s amiss, especially since they’re deeply involved in a conversation about what else Jenny’s planning on doing with her room. “I’m thinking a punching bag,” Jenny says, looking back in time to catch Abbie’s eye. “What do you think? Hang it from the ceiling?”

“I’m thinking you get to pay our landlord for any damages,” Abbie says, breezing by them so she can finally dump Jenny’s gross rug on the checkout counter. Jenny shoots a big old grin at her, cocky as hell, but also pleased in a really simple way that Abbie hasn’t seen in so many years.

Jenny hightails it to the car with her purchases, a sales rep struggling behind with the mattress, leaving Abbie and Ichabod free to stroll behind at a distance. They're in step, like always, and it feels right.

Ichabod ducks his head and shoots her a sideways glance, which she pretends not to notice. She's just about ready to start whistling, she's so casual. "I owe Miss Jenny a debt of gratitude," he says in a low voice.

"For what?" Abbie teases. "Having the worst taste in carpets you've ever seen?"

"I believe I owe you the same debt," he continues blithely. He's smiling. It makes his eyes crinkle at the corners. "I almost let my fears get the better of me, but it seems cooler heads prevailed."

"I think you're the first person to ever call my sister's head cool," Abbie says dryly. "She'll get a kick out of that."

Almost at the car, but still out of earshot, he slows his pace, and she slows to match him, until he turns to look her in the eye. "I meant what I said," he says sincerely. "No matter what transpires: in this battle, I will always be at your disposal. Whatever you need me to be."

She smiles at him, the fond little smile she can't help but get when he talks like that. "I know, Crane," she says. "Same to you. That's what being a partner's about." She glances past his shoulder as something catches her eye – it's Jenny, gesturing impatiently. The Ikea guy is standing by with the shopping cart and a helpless expression. "Just like putting up with this crap is what family's about," she adds. "Come on. You've been good, and I think she promised you pizza."

She totally just admitted to eavesdropping, but he gives her no more than a sideways look for it, and she laughs at Jenny giving the rug its own half of the backseat and a proprietary pat. She's got a half-hour drive back to Sleepy Hollow in front of her, with a revolutionary-era time traveller riding shotgun, a sister on parole from the bughouse in the back, a bedframe in her trunk, and a mattress tied to the roof. She's got an evening full of furniture construction and cheese grease after that.

The day's looking up.

END

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