



LEAK FOR
ME
LAYLA SIMON

BREAK FOR ME

TIAKI ACADEMY

BOOK ONE

LAYLA SIMON

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PREFACE

Content notice: this story contains scenes with dub/non-con, gun play, drug use, physical assault, arson, abduction, somnophilia, attempted suicide, overdose, and includes references to stripping/sex work, molestation, child abuse, parental death, postpartum depression, suicide, and murder

CHAPTER ONE

EVIE

IF THERE'S ONE THING WORSE THAN MY LANDLORD SURPRISING his girlfriend with a shared lap dance at the worst (and only) strip club in town, it's when I steer them into a private room to find out she's a grabber.

Breast and bum are fair game according to the club rules and boy, does she take advantage. The lady isn't playing with those pinches, either. Bruises are already forming on my cheeks.

No, not those. The other ones.

"Never again," I tell Robyn as I leave the room, pulling a twenty out of my string and searching in vain for anything more. "I don't care if they request me. Send them another girl."

“Because you’re the booking queen now?” The duty manager arches one thinly stencilled eyebrow like she’s Cruella fucking Deville. “You don’t want the dance, fine. You’re off for the next week.”

An aggrieved sigh doesn’t budge her decision. Neither does wheedling and at quarter to midnight on a Sunday, that’s the full extent of my armoury.

“Sorry,” I manage at such a small volume it’s a surprise she hears me at all. “I was just venting.”

“Vent on your own time, which you’ll now have plenty of.” She turns back to the whiteboard calendar with our upcoming schedule, drawing a line through my name and writing Angel there instead. A girl who’s so consistently late that working with her makes the rest of us feel like we’re doing unpaid overtime.

I open my mouth to try another protest, and she points the marker at me. “Don’t push it, girl, or I’ll scrub you for the next month.”

My lips clamp together with frustration as I follow her instruction, slipping past to enter the changing room. My last stage appearance was at ten-thirty and with Robyn out to teach me a lesson, there won’t be any further income tonight.

The mirror in the changing room doesn’t have any good news for me, either. My green eyes are bloodshot from lack of sleep and my reddish curls have grown so long the weight pulls them straight. I need a cut, but it’s hardly top of my priority list. There’s only enough money on the electricity meter to last out the day.

I open my locker, tugging a short dress over my G-string and pasties, then donning a light jacket for the ride home. My cash goes into the front pocket, which zips shut. I need to find a new job—bonus points for no landlords—but I don’t know another that would pay me anywhere near as well.

Even restricted to two nights, I still outearn what I used to with forty hours on checkout at the supermarket. That’s the main reason I’m still working here after a year. Theoretically, I

shouldn't have been employed until last month when I turned eighteen, but the great thing about a cash-under-the-table gig is no one blinked at my obviously fake ID.

It's also clear no one ran my provided tax number up the flagpole. Otherwise, they'd have found out I'm eighty three... and dead.

My head is a mass of numbers as I let myself out the back door, raising a finger as a guy wolf-whistles, not bothering to turn to see who it is. As I near the bus stop, my phone rings. My brother's number shows on the tiny screen. "Yep?"

"You left work, yet?"

Ant sounds terrible, his vocal cords breaking worse than a tenth-year. Add to that the fever he was running as I left hours earlier, and a sinking feeling engulfs me. I know where this is going.

"Just about to catch the bus."

His voice drops to a gravelly rumble. "Could you drop by the old warehouse? This flu knocked me on my arse tonight."

If it is flu. We both know it's far more likely the last maintenance dose he got from the docks was so cut to shit it didn't have the desired effect.

It's been an age since I last collected anything for my brother. The only reason—and I stress the word *only* three times during our conversation—is that I'm fetching something to tide him over until we work out how to access a treatment program for him again.

Not buying him poison to inject straight into his veins for *fun*.

He waits out my lecture, then feeds me directions over the phone that I follow to the letter.

Which is how, twenty minutes later, I end up straddled between a kayak stolen from the public jetty and the metal ladder mounted by the old docks. In the transition from one to the other, my stiletto caught in the kayak apron, and these are my best heels. I'm not losing that baby without a fight.

My thigh muscles strain as I try to pull the vessel close enough to unhook my shoe, the current surprisingly strong right here by the riverbank.

The moment I think I've got it, my clammy hand slips on the metal rung. My balance shifts wildly, pitching me forwards, gravity tugging the phone from my bra as I pinwheel my arms, adrenaline pumping.

A flurry of movement that ends with my phone splashing into the river while the kayak and my shoe float serenely away.

For long seconds, the loudest sound is my pulse thumping erratically in my ears as I cling to the rusty ladder. When I recover, I scramble onto the wharf, kneeling on the wood, obscenities flying from my mouth.

The few choice curse words aren't enough to settle my exasperation as I get to my feet, lips curling in disgust at the slippery moss coating the service jetty.

I adore my brother. Ant is the only family member I have left, the most important person in my world, but right now I'd happily strangle him. My 'cheap' phone is still a fortnight's wages and I doubt the fishes will appreciate it the same way I did.

The view from here at night is spectacular, but I don't have eyes for the fancy glass and steel houses built into the lakeshore cliffs or the city lights sparkling off the water. My interest extends to the drab and long neglected industrial building in front of me.

Silvery moonlight shines off the broken bottles and discarded needles strewn between me and the concrete window that is my destination.

If I thought running in heels was bad, hopping over the uneven ground in just one shoe is a hundred times worse. After a night of dancing, my tendons already hate me.

I tug the hem of my dress down as I bounce across the yard, then give the secret knock on the window, wrapping my

jacket a little tighter, though the summer evening is still balmy, even with the breeze blowing straight off the lake.

“Smack?”

“Yeah, a bundle,” I answer, waiting for him to confirm the total before I count the cash out, scowling for show, secretly happy it leaves me with twenty bucks, enough to afford a burger on top of the bus ride home.

The money gets handed through a doggie door. A pretty name for a hole blowtorched from the base of the metal door, covered on his side with a slat of wood. I move along to the next window like it’s a drug drive thru, tapping my fingers on the metal slider until it clanks aside, and he tips the goods into the waiting receptacle.

As I reach for them, an explosion tears the quiet night apart.

I drop, ears ringing, flashes in my vision. Instinct overtakes logic as I cower, shoulder and knee pressing against the hard concrete wall.

Bursts of horrendously hot air puff through the slot above me, caressing the crown of my head. The ringing in my ears is replaced by a stuffed-to-bursting sensation, like they’ve blistered and if I jam in my fingers, they’ll pop and leak clear fluid.

Shouts gradually pierce through the dampened hum. The sounds of wood hitting plaster. Cackles of laughter and voices calling to each other, their tone high with excitement.

All inside. Nothing outside.

I cautiously straighten, risking a peek at the dispensing window.

Empty. My brother’s expensive habit has disappeared.

A loud crash echoes through the building. I hear footfalls running in multiple directions, probably dealers or junkies taking the hint and scarpering before they can incur a penalty.

One man inside whistles, the sound irritating my eardrums as they try to resume normal service. When I hold my nose

and blow, they pop, releasing most of the pressure. An overload of fresh sounds pour forth to flood the gap.

A man screams. Then yells. Then pleads.

I've dealt with the hardened gentlemen who populate this establishment before. I don't want to meet the person who could make them beg.

But I also can't leave. Not without what I came for.

Ant is already in a state. He'll be useless for days if he can't get his dose, which means he can't go out thieving or jacking or whatever-the-hell-he-does to earn his money. We are very much a don't-ask, don't-tell household.

We're already scrambling. If I lose the baggie, we might never recover.

Steeling my backbone, I peer through the slot, scanning the floor.

Bull's eye. The bag sits on the bare concrete floor. So far out of reach, it might as well be on the moon.

I glance around, but there's no handy stick resting nearby, and my arms would need to be a foot longer to reach the package. I hop a few steps sideways and kick out the wooden covering to the doggie door with my bare heel.

My body's slender. I can probably fit.

Without giving myself time for second thoughts, I kneel and push my upper body through the gap, wriggling my shoulders through one at a time, forearms pulling against the grease and dirt encrusted floor. The scent of motor oil from the explosives fills my nostrils until I gag.

The baggie rests against two large filing cabinets, a metre to my right. Beyond that, my view is obscured.

I twist and stretch, my fingertips first scraping across the plastic like the world's worst tease, then slowly, slowly gaining purchase until I drag it an inch closer, another inch.

Too late, my injured ears hear the faint shuffle of movement.

A steel-toed boot stamps down on the bag, crushing it against the floor.

CHAPTER TWO

MADDOX

“TAKE THE EAST SIDE,” ZANE YELLS WHILE MY EARS RING from the explosion. Dust and debris rain down on us as we boot in what’s left of the door and charge into the old warehouse, scarves across our lower faces to filter the smoke.

The destruction is incredible, filling me with a sense of power, invincible almost. The makeshift C4 came from a dodgy contact and until the moment it tore the night apart, I thought it was probably fake.

Now I’m amped on the noise, eyes filled with blind spots from the flash. I sprint through the lower level, whacking a softball bat against the wall, against stacked crates, against the calves of a running man, cash spilling from his pockets.

A fucking dealer.

I slam the bat into his lower leg again as he falls, shrieking at the pain. My next blow doesn't connect, hitting an inch beside his head while his eyes bug out in fright.

The pleas start, but I couldn't give a shit. The only begging I respond to comes from humans, not this cockroach growing fat on the desperation of his customers.

A parasite would earn more pity.

I stamp a boot on his face, making him curl in pain, then aim another kick at his ribs, feeling the satisfaction as they give under my reinforced heel.

The guy should thank his lucky stars I don't knock every tooth from his mouth, crush every bone in his face. Grind him to pieces against the old concrete and stone.

"Score," Wilder shouts as I move away from the battered figure. He runs straight at me from the smoky gloom, tossing a dark object with so little warning I fumble the catch.

It's a gun.

A piece of 3D printed nonsense that smells like burned plastic and looks like a toy, but when I aim the revolver at the wall above his head, it fires.

"Fucking hell," he screeches, brushing flakes of concrete from his tousled hair.

I laugh until he waves a second weapon in my direction, and I have to jump away from the barrel's aim. "Don't do that. It's dangerous."

He scoffs at the advice, whooping as he dashes into a cloud of black smoke pouring from the corridor near the entrance. The explosion must have caught, the fire spreading, but there should be precious little in this old storage warehouse to burn.

I take off in the opposite direction, slowing to duck under a connecting door already sagging on its hinges; possibly due to age and disrepair, possibly due to us.

The new room is empty, both of people and thankfully of smoke. I kick aside a couple of empty boxes, stalk across to

the outside wall, and stare through a slit cut in the thick metal door, noticing others dotted farther along.

It takes me two seconds to understand the layout and props to whoever dreamt this setup into being; it's low-key genius. Customers kept on the outside, dealers safely on the inside with a concrete wall between them to lessen the impact of any complaints.

I tuck the gun into my waistband and crouch, testing each drawer in a large filing cabinet, drag marks on the floor showing where it travelled to its new home. That's when I hear a weird noise and stop what I'm doing, head tilted, eyes narrowed to thin slits as I try to place the sound.

The angle of the cabinet hides me as I stand and peer around the edge. A girl worms her way through a rough cut hole in the door, arms hauling her into the building that everyone else is fleeing.

A second later, I see the reason. There's a baggie of narcotics lying on the floor.

Just as she gets a grip on the plastic, I stamp my foot down, pinning it until I snag it off the floor and hold it aloft, shaking it in the scant light from the windows.

"Lose something?" I tease, expecting her to see me and immediately reverse direction. But the girl must have a death wish because she stays in place, even when I click the LED light on my army knife, shooting the beam directly into her eyes.

She's stuck.

I laugh with delight, stuffing the bag into my jeans pocket. With my free hand, I grab her around the upper arm and haul her inwards. She squirms and batters at me with her soft hands, giving a cry of pain when she finally pops free from the door.

There's a long streak of darkness along the side of her dress. Hopefully dust and dirt rather than blood. I'm a vigilante, not a monster. I didn't come here to hurt strange girls.

“What the fuck are you wearing?” I say, letting go to shine my light the length of her body. Not a great distance. A little over five feet from head to toe, ninety percent of that consisting of smooth, supple legs. “You always steal drugs in your shortest dress?”

“Give me those.” She gets to her knees and snatches at my pocket for the baggie, blinking in dismay when I beam the light into her face again. As she struggles to her feet, her chin juts upwards in defiance. “I paid for them. They’re mine.”

“Finders’ keepers.” My light moves to her arms, covered in a thin jacket that covers her while still leaving nothing to the imagination. “You a hooker?”

“I was at a club,” she says through gritted teeth, folding her arms over her chest when I keep staring. “I need that medicine.”

“*Medicine?*” My face goes slack with surprise a moment before a new burst of laughter erupts from me. “That’s a good one.”

Her face is stony. Completely unamused.

“Push your sleeves up. Show me your arms.”

She shoves them in front of the light, exposing the unblemished skin on the inside of her elbows. “No track marks, *sir*.” The word is edged with insult. “Can I have my bag now?”

I stare at her, enjoying the altercation enough that I consider handing the package across. A few foils won’t tip the balance one way or the other.

But there are other ways to extend my fun.

“Against the wall,” I tell her, enjoying the flash of irritation in her eyes. “Time to frisk you.”

“I’m wearing a skintight bodysuit,” she snarls back. “Where exactly am I meant to hide something?”

She steps to the side and into the sliver of moonlight from the peephole. Enough light for me to recognise her. Not a girl

I've ever talked to or shared classes with, but I've seen her at school.

I frown, trawling my memory banks. She hasn't appeared there for a while. Years, even.

Still, she's a senior like me. Given her current attire, she left to shake her booty down at Chezzers. I bet they eat up those long legs and pert tits, and completely overlook the spirited flashes from her large eyes.

Blue? Green? It's hard to tell in the silvery light.

You're meant to be destroying everything in sight so the fucktards who profit off this place can't ever come back. Who cares about her eye colour?

I snap to attention, grabbing her upper arm again, pushing her backwards to the wall since she refused my perfectly reasonable demand. There's a gunshot from the level above ours and the girl flinches, her arm pulling from my grasp as she raises it to shield her head.

When I grin, the resulting unease on her face makes my smile grow wider. Her shoulder feels good cupped in my hand. She's so tiny, it barely takes any effort to keep her pinned in place.

The faint tang of smoke in the air grows thicker. Not bad with my makeshift mask in place, but her nose twitches, mouth pulling down in concern.

"Got the goods," my friend Zane calls from another room. "But there's nothing much here, man." He stands in the doorway behind me, and the girl's eyes flick over for a look.

She frowns, turning back to me. I can almost see the wheels turning in her mind, totting up the evidence on offer and finding a different answer than she expected to find.

"Who the hell are you?" she demands.

"I'm the one asking questions." I let the heel of my palm dig into her shoulder as a reprimand, waiting for her to wince before I ease the pressure, removing my hand and tapping her

sternum with my curled knuckle. “Give me names, sweetheart.”

“Jack. Ruby. Aroha. Wendy. Do they do it for you?”

“There’s a steel barrel off the side of the first room,” I call to Zane. “You can burn the drugs there.”

The girl lunges forward. Physically, there’s no contest, but it’s still satisfying to block her escape, to use nothing more than the intimidation of my size to drive her back into position, my palms landing either side of her head to box her in.

I feel her heat, see the increasing rise and fall of her chest, smell the evaporating traces of her perfume.

Or it could be the addicting scent of fear as I bend over her, bigger, brutish, able to manhandle her without the slightest touch. “Where do you think you’re going? We’re still having our chat, remember?”

“Not if you’re burning everything, we’re not.”

Her chin tilts upwards, perky nose high in the air. My eyes once again travel along the length of her body, just for appreciation this time, not assessment.

She’s got a sweet curve to her waist, but her arms are skeletal thin. Her nipples press against her tight dress, like they’re straining to see what the fuss is, and the sight sends a shot of arousal shuddering through me.

It’s been so long; it takes a second to remember what it is. Random sexual attraction isn’t a standard part of my repertoire. Emptiness and the struggle to form genuine connections with other people is more my line.

I snag the gun from my waistband and let the barrel rest against her dress, sliding it under the curve of her tits, showing there’s more to them than I first thought.

Her chest heaves with each breath. Even in the faint illumination, the pulse in her neck is visible, strong enough to make the skin quiver.

“Don’t worry. If you give me what I need, I’ll look after you.”

And her face falls in upon itself. “I don’t know anyone.”

“Sure.” I lift the gun away from her, twirling the barrel in a circle. “This was the only place you’ve ever bought from, right?”

Her face grows wary as she nods. In this silvery light, at this angle, she looks so much like my sister Addie, I’m heartsick. The familiar rush of anger hits a moment later.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you not to lie? That’s no way to make friends.”

“My mum’s dead.”

“Mm-hm. And is that as truthful as your assertion that this is the only drug dealer you know in town?”

“When you’re doing it right, you only need to know one.”

Zane calls out, the urgency palpable in his voice. “Come on, man. We need to run. This fire’s spreading.”

“It’ll burn itself out,” I toss back, not taking my eyes away from the girl’s face. Not for a second.

The barrel of the gun seems to have a mind of its own, gently stroking a path along the edge of her cheek, following her jawline, watching her struggle to swallow, fear sparking in those enormous eyes.

I rub it along the plump curve of her lower lip, pressing it harder in the middle until her lips part and it bumps against her teeth.

“Open wide, sweetheart,” I whisper in a voice so low only she can hear. “Suck it for me.”

I wish she stood in a spotlight so my eyes could feast on every minor change in expression. As it is, I see her shock, the whites in her eyes growing larger.

Her head jerks back, hits against the solid wall, and whips to the side, making the gun judder.

“Careful. You don’t want it going off by accident, do you?”

Given the state of the revolver, it’s a valid concern. Even with my finger along the barrel, not curling near the trigger, I wouldn’t trust it for a second.

The danger pulls my stomach muscles tight until they throb with anticipation. She makes a soft whimper, then her teeth part and I slowly edge the tip of the barrel between them, my concentration laser focused. The satisfaction I take from her obedience is pure emotional gold.

“You like that, huh?”

Those gigantic eyes fix on mine. Too scared to talk, she begs me with her gaze.

And like the bully I am, I watch them plead her case, and slide the tip another few millimetres inside, regardless.

The fire crackles behind me, smoke making the air hazy. I pretend it’s solely that causing the moisture to well in her eyes.

She moves, palm pressing against the crotch of my jeans, fingers curling, seeking me out through the layer of thick denim. And good luck with that, darling. I don’t get hard for random strangers, no matter how pretty they are. I barely get hard at all... but there’s *something* here... something in the tilt of her head and the parted lips, sucking along the barrel of death. A stirring I’m not used to...

And then it’s no longer a stirring, it’s a flood of arousal, blood pumping into my cock until it chaffs against the restrictive fabric.

The regular pulse makes me so hard my head can’t concentrate on her face, closing my eyes as the rush takes over... a thrill of sexual attraction that isn’t meant for people like me, people who tuck their weaker emotions away behind a barricade of white hot rage.

For long seconds all I feel is the surge of blood, the increasing *denseness* of my cock, the pulse that makes me strong, invincible until I’m grinding against her, wanting those fingers to do more than their tentative explorations.

I'm greedy for more, and when I open my eyes, when I thrust the barrel in and out of her delectable mouth, electric tingles ripple across the muscles of my back, my glutes, my thighs, driving against her until her fingers stop moving, trapped between my rock hard cock and the sweet press of her abdomen, the soft warmth of her calling to me until I'm deaf to any other song.

"Wider," I demand, rubbing and thrusting and shoving my dick against her, head spinning at the touch. "Open your mouth wider."

I barely recognise my voice, a gruff croak demanding she listen, demanding she obey... and she does. Those wide eyes fix on mine. A deer caught in headlights.

A fragile creature thrust against the dirty wall by a monster.

And I don't care what I am in this scenario, just so long as there's friction on the outside and that raging pulse on the inside as I shove against her again and again, my cock against her hip, my gun in her mouth.

"Take another inch for me, darling," I whisper, eyes narrowing as she tries to shove the barrel from her mouth with her tongue. "Don't you fucking dare. You take it all or I'm shoving this straight into your cunt."

Her lips tremble, the stubborn strength sending a fresh jolt of excitement roaring through me. She could be crying, but there's nothing more than a sheen in her eye.

In the glow of the outside lamp, enhanced by the silvery flood of moonlight, it could equally be the shine of lust as of fear... and that suits me better. That sends another glut of blood to engorge me as I pump my hips forward, her hand gone now, my efforts digging into her centre and there's just those few pieces of fabric and I could *bury* myself in her, like I bury the barrel into her mouth, thrusting in time with my cock.

A gasp escapes her mouth with the next push and pull of the barrel. It twists something vital on the inside of my head,

shutting half my brain off like the flick of a switch, leaving behind just the animal, growling low in my throat.

“Your skirt,” I pant, then groan as she twists like she wants to get away from me. A tear trails down her cheek, picking out pieces of the dim light and turning it into a string of gleaming gemstones adorning her face. “Lift your skirt.”

She bucks against me, trying to force me off, but all I feel is the increased pressure, the solid thrust of her hips.

The tip of the gun slips out, but I apply just enough pressure to slide it inside again. There’s an ease to it now and I’m not imagining the way her head moves away from the wall, chasing the sensation.

Her tongue curls around the barrel like she’s giving the fucking thing head and my arse clenches, driving my cock harder against her, making her repeat that gasp—half whimper—that needles deep into my frontal lobe, that turns me inside out, that drives me fucking insane.

The gun is now buried in her mouth until her lips are slobbery against my knuckles. At some point, I’ve twisted so my arm cradles her skull, protecting her from the cracked concrete wall, controlling her so there’s no possibility of escape, not for her, not until I say we’re done.

I glance down and her fingers have tugged up her hem, obeying my instruction like the good fucking girl she is.

There’s a flash of her panties, a darker colour than her dress, and I press my forehead against the crown of her head, her rich curls obscuring my sight, absorbing the increasing volume of my panting breath, soft, smelling like strawberries and the chemical tang of hairspray.

My arm tightens, dragging up her head until I can stare into her eyes, wide, shiny, and confused. It tips me over the edge as I get lost in them, barely watching the saliva slippery barrel in my periphery as I pump it, a force gathering in the base of my spine, drawing my balls into a clench of tension and muscle, propelling a burst of cum into my briefs, staining

my jeans as an orgasm rocks through me, shuddering, juddering bursts of complete incoherent pleasure.

I gasp for air, knees briefly buckling as every muscle sags at the release, my eyes closed to shut out everything except the foreign sensation. This thing I've never understood and never felt and never thought I would feel.

A second later, the exhilaration flickers into disgust.

Fluid clings to my softening cock. The dampness seeps into the fabric until it turns my stomach.

I open my eyes, pleasure resurging as I slip the filthy tip of the barrel into her succulent mouth one last time before withdrawing and tucking it away. Its proxy at an end.

Her spit coats my knuckles and I wipe them on the front of her dress, wishing I could wipe more of myself clean against her, leave her with the lingering residue of shame that adheres more firmly with each passing second.

Then a glut of guilt overtakes the crawl of self-disgust.

The first time I've ever come while near another human being and I'm wiping spit on her like she's a tissue. Erasing her humanity in some feeble attempt to reclaim mine.

An apology trembles on my lips, then I step back, and she immediately lurches away, stumbling, wearing only one shoe.

I scan the floor for its matching partner but can't see a thing. Mostly because of the dim lighting, partly because of the increasingly thick smoke.

My brain slots all the right plugs back into all the right places and a distress signal blares. The fire has clearly found a source of sustenance. Even through the scarf, my mouth tastes of smoke.

The girl wipes her face, then keeps her arm raised, using the sleeve as a filter.

We need to get out of here.

I try to remember if I checked all the rooms for stray occupants, but my head is in a tangle, still half caught in what

just passed between us, overloaded with physical sensations it's never had to sort before.

But we've been here for minutes. Anyone inside will have fled.

I can't leave her to hop to safety. I pause long enough to scoop her into my arms, wincing as she punches me in the side of the head, trying to struggle free.

The dealer whose head I stomped is gone. Like any cockroach, he's probably regenerated, stronger than before.

Zane hovers by the exit, anxiety streaming off him in waves. "We got to go. There are sirens on the way."

He barely glances at the girl in my arms, just holding the door wide enough that I can walk through with her still cradled against my chest, limbs still flailing, one blow glancing across my jaw.

"Quit it," I growl, flinching away from another close call, "or I'll dump you back inside to burn."

The words ignite a new flurry of motion, then she stills as I sprint for my vehicle. Wilder is already in his and I hear Zane's running footsteps, the slam of his car door as I open the back seat of mine, dumping the girl inside, clicking the double lock control so she can't escape from the rear doors.

Flames lick around the windows, tasting the concrete, drawing back, then surging as the heat inside propels a new explosion.

Sirens cut through the air, dulling as they curve around the lake's edge, then surging in volume.

I take one last look, then manually unlock my door and scramble inside. I floor the accelerator, halfway along the driveway before I clip my seatbelt into place, tugging the scarf from my face. The tyres spew gravel as I round the corner, heading in the opposite direction to Wilder and Zane.

And all the while the girl huddles into a ball in the back seat.

CHAPTER THREE

MADDOX

ONCE I'M OUT OF EARSHOT OF THE SIRENS, I STOP THE CAR near a public playing field, ripping away the cardboard I used to obscure my licence plates, before taking off again, heading for the central city.

When I glance in the rearview mirror, the girl has her one remaining high heel gripped tightly in her hand. I meet the reflection of her eyes and see the malevolent thoughts dancing. Probably imagining what it would look like buried in my skull.

“You hungry?”

She frowns, mouth twisting in confusion, the expressive face as cute as hell.

“I'm gonna stop for a burger,” I say, indicating for the next turnoff.

When I pull into the fast food carpark, I lean over to the glovebox, hooking the lever to the secret compartment in the back. The gun only just fits, and I feel careless for taking it with me. I should have tossed it, letting the fire burn my prints away.

Now I have to get rid of the damn thing.

Or keep it.

My eyes lock with the girl in the rearview mirror. She licks her lips, and part of my brain melts.

But I don't have time for whatever this is. I'll order food, but what I really want is the super clean bathroom in back where I can tidy myself and return to being a normal human with normal human impulses.

Not the goblin creature that took control back at the dealers' squat.

There's a pair of thick socks in the glovebox left there from last year's rugby season, and I toss them into the back seat for her. "You got a name?"

"Maddox," she says, and I jump like someone attached an electrode. Her eyes narrow as I turn towards her.

"You look exactly like your father," she adds, and my eyes drop to her jacket, reading the name of the club over the front pocket. *Cherry Red Gentlemen's Club and Bar* wouldn't fit, but the nickname 'Chezzers' slots in easier.

I face forward, lip curving into a sneer. Of course, she knows my dad.

He's at the strip club more than he's at home. The girls he enjoys watching gyrate on stage are a world apart from the age-appropriate ladies he escorts to black tie affairs.

One set for small talk. One for fucking.

A glut of bile leaps into the back of my throat and I swallow it down, opening my door, unlocking hers at the same time. "You coming?"

She does. Surprising us both, judging by the strange array of emotions that play across her face.

Inside, I shove a handful of notes at her. “Get me a double cheeseburger meal and whatever you want for yourself.”

There’s probably a hundred there, not something I’m worried about losing but the moment I walk into the bathroom, I realise she’s probably walking out the opposite door, going to hunt down replacements for the drugs I still have tucked in my back pocket.

Idiot.

And that’s the best-case scenario.

She could just as easily be calling the police. Telling the counter staff. Finding the security guard who patrols this central strip and laying a complaint that the man in the bathroom stuck a loaded gun into her mouth, the same gun he put into the glovebox right in front of her.

The one they’ll find with a cursory search of the car.

I stare at my face in the mirror, gripping the sides of the sink, concentrating until the reflection ceases to make sense. When my image reduces to disconnected blobs of light and shadow, I break my gaze, splashing water over my face, rubbing a hand through my hair.

The stalls are empty, and I choose the one nearest the door and lock myself inside, undoing my jeans with a moue of distaste, lifting my shirt clear of the mess. The smell makes my nose wrinkle and I swab at the sticky fluid with paper, then flush, then repeat until I convince myself it’s as close to clean as I’ll get in here.

Eighteen years old and the only other times I’ve dealt with this mess was following a few nocturnal emissions and one ruthlessly applied masturbation session.

Just to prove I could. To prove I’m *normal*.

The aftereffects that time had turned my skin clammy, adrenaline surging until I was a taut mass of clenched muscle,

mind awash with despair. The lingering effects left behind a bitter taste, like chewing on aspirin.

There's a taste in my mouth now, but that's not it. This is sweeter, enticing enough to be habit-forming.

It must be the gun. The weapon... and the sensation of complete control it gave me. A force to make her obey. Just thinking about those reactions, those noises, *that girl*, makes something stir.

I think how it would be to try again, this time without the bulk of fabric between us. Just me burying myself inside her tiny body, cum soaking her insides instead of my jeans.

The remnant tug of desire hits me again, then I shake my head. She'll be long gone. She didn't give me her name.

The fluorescent light flickers and ticks above me.

Game face on. You can't hide forever. Get out there in five. Four. Three. Two...

I launch through the door, halfway across the lobby when I misstep, struck by the sight of the girl standing near the order station. My pulse jumps, relief easing the bands of tension across my temples.

She stayed.

Her arms wrap tightly around her thin form, hip resting against the counter. Those big eyes drill straight into the floor.

My body turns, barely breaking stride as I change direction. "Hey."

She glances up and immediately stares down again, arms pulling tighter. Small white teeth nibble at her lower lip, catching the corner and releasing.

"It'll just be a minute," the guy behind the counter says.

I nod and the girl frowns more deeply. She shoots another troubled glance my way, then stares at the door, at the counter, back at the floor.

"I ordered enough to take some home to my brother," she whispers, loosening her arms so she can cup her throat. "Hope

that's okay."

Her hand jerks towards me, and I jump back, then realise she's returning my change. "That's fine. You keep it."

She stuffs her hands deep into her pocket as she turns aside, the sharp lighting picking out the delicate curve of her throat, the spots of colour on her cheekbones, the splash of crimson where her teeth keep worrying her lip.

"You never told me your name."

She bares her teeth, then blurts, "Evie. Do you want to pick a table?"

Only a few of the two dozen or more tables are occupied. Sunday night is apparently not as conducive to late night munchies as the rest of the weekend.

I choose one by the window, screening out the glare of lighting to check the car, then standing as Evie brings the laden tray across. The paper takeaway bag goes on the seat next to her. The rest of her meal is the same as mine.

It should feel awkward, but it's nice. There's a strange sensation in my hands and I flick my fingers, trying to get rid of the subtle vibration. When she reaches for a straw for her drink, our hands brush and I snatch mine away, the static shock sinking into my skin, adding another layer of buzz. Hurt flashes in her eyes.

It's not you, it's me.

But I'm not into apologising to strangers. I'm not into apologising to friends, for that matter.

I fish the gherkin from my burger and see her eyes fix on it. "You want it?" She nods, carefully picking it from my fingers and putting it straight into her mouth, sucking the juice off her thumb while I stare, strange sensations swirling inside me.

There are a few other people dotted about the tables, lending a low hum of conversation to the otherwise silent space. A mechanical voice calls out something from the drive-

thru window and the sole staff member on the counter hums underneath his breath.

Her colouring is so pretty, pale skin flushed with rose, contrasting the fire in her hair, the sparkling green of her wide-set eyes, crisp emerald and rich pounamu. The dusting of freckles across her nose and cheekbones match to the ginger of her long lashes and scruffy eyebrows. The makeup she wore to darken them is mostly gone, wiped away with the tears from the smoke.

From the gun you shoved in her mouth, more likely.

But I blink that memory away.

Now she's doused with light, what I see most of all is her resemblance to my sister. Not just the tones but the wariness, the fidgeting, the way she scrunches her nose as she glances around.

Enough similarities to make my chest ache.

I put the burger down again, only one bite taken, chasing it with a sip of cola. The silence adds to the weight building behind my sternum until I have to break it.

"Is that who you were buying for?" I ask, nodding to the paper bag beside her. "Your brother."

"It's not what you're thinking." She scowls at the table, shoving half a dozen fries into her mouth and chewing furiously. The burger is already gone. Her drink is near empty.

I'm only a bite into my meal and she's practically out the door.

And my gaze sweeps across her torso, paying more attention this time to her hunched shoulders, her jutting collarbones, her skeletal arms.

Not thin. Scrawny.

I push my fries towards her, something large clogging my throat so I wouldn't be able to eat even if I wanted them. "What is it like, then?"

But she shakes her head, the second batch of fries disappearing in singles and pairs rather than the larger groupings. Her free hand keeps snaking out to pat the parcel beside her, to make sure it's still there.

A sensation builds, a powerful urge to give her something, more than a few bucks' worth of cheap food. I rub the back of my neck, jiggling my leg to work off the tension twisting through me. Tension that came out of *nowhere*.

"If I tell you, can I have them?" Her eyes dart around the room, judging the potential audience for anything more descriptive, settling on, "What I paid for?"

She locks eyes with me and it's like there's a force sparking between us. Something electric and energising and alive.

I cut my eyes away to break it, my fingers tapping a drumbeat on the table. "Sure."

"It's just a maintenance dose until we can afford to get him back into treatment."

I nod, angling my head forward so she can't see what I'm thinking.

After years of listening to my sister's addiction talking, every excuse sounds the same. Treatment always starts tomorrow. Recovery is too hard an endeavour to undertake sober. The rules don't apply because... because... because...

On and on and on until one day her brother walks into her room to find she's never getting clean, she's never going to become the person she could have been because she's dead.

I clear my throat. "Most people seek treatment from their GPs."

"Not in Tiaki, they don't. Every doctor in town withdrew from the national program when the petition to revoke the dispensing clinic's licence passed."

"There's a clinic in Abbotsvale."

"Which is a ninety-minute drive, round-trip." She shifts in her seat, plucking a napkin apart with her fingers. "We made it

every day till our car fell apart. Unless we can afford a new one, we're stuck."

It sounds reasonable, but that's the thing with addicts and the people who enable them. All their excuses sound reasonable. Until you clear every obstruction away and they still don't want to stop.

"You don't want the rest of your burger?"

I shake my head, pushing it across the tray to her. My eyes go back towards the counter. "Actually, I'm more in the mood for something sweet. You fancy a soft serve?"

She reaches into her pocket as I stand, digging for the money I already told her she could keep, and I step out of range, heading for the sole staff member and ordering far more than I can eat.

While I'm waiting, I turn back to see her eyes locked on me, then she turns back to the table, like she was caught doing something she shouldn't.

You could invite her over. Watch her fall asleep. She's so like Addie you could...

I could...? What? Pretend my sister came back from the dead? How does that help?

The fledgling thought circles around, trying to expand, to complete itself.

You could say goodbye. You could tell her...

Then the new tray is pushed towards me, and I walk back to the table, sliding it over the previous one, the second burger already gone.

Evie has the change from earlier and there's a bus stop right outside. I should just leave her here. Go home. Pretend that the vigilante spree from earlier in the night satisfied my ache for revenge. "Do you live near here?"

She fills her mouth with ice cream, eyes lowered, ignoring the question. I join her, the soft serve going down a lot easier than the rest of the meal.

“You’re finished?”

She nods, jamming the last of the cone into her mouth, grabbing her bag, standing, looking ridiculous in her short dress and my oversize socks, which are inches longer than her feet. Like a girl playing dress up.

“What happened earlier...”

Her eyes rest on my chin, hands curling the top of the paper bag, patiently waiting.

I want to tell her it’s not me. None of this behaviour is me. I have so little carnal appetite that the world might as well slap an asexual label on my forehead and be done with it.

And if I can’t say *that* I want to at least reassure her it’s not *her*. She wasn’t giving off some weird signal to attract my breed of fucked-in-the-head-ness.

A plain sorry would do.

She’s a stripper. You won’t even be the first guy to come on her tonight.

The thought horrifies me. As does the realisation that one of those men might have been my dad.

My usual revulsion for sex comes flooding back, sweeping the lingering glow of satisfaction away. Whatever spell had me in its grip seems to be over and I’ve never been more grateful to let go of something in my life. “Never mind. We should get going.”

CHAPTER FOUR

EVIE

A LOT OF THE TIME, I FEEL LIKE A DOLL. A BADLY TREATED toy that goes from owner to owner, no one caring enough to make the small repairs, so the damage grows with every change of hands. Except for my brother Ant, no one ever takes the time or effort to ensure I have what I need.

As we walk out of the restaurant, the sensation of being a thing others use however they want—for pleasure, for a scapegoat, for a reservoir to pour their unrealised dreams and frustrations—should be stronger than ever. After all, the boy escorting me is only half an hour past the point he shoved a loaded revolver in my mouth and told me to suck it. Who made me look death in the eye while he ground against me for his pleasure.

It should be the most demeaning and dehumanising experience of my life, but my head has been hard at work, already picking it apart, keeping the bits that suit and tossing the rest away.

Rather than dwell on the weapon, it fixates on how Maddox's eyes were glued to my face, the crackle of the fire sending a bump of adrenaline to my bloodstream like a cocaine chaser, making everything vibrant, energetic, *alive*.

Under his gaze, it felt more like he was shoving his dick into me than a gun, my tongue licking around the barrel, confused when it felt the moulded casing rather than the hard satin of his cock.

When he demanded I lift my skirt, there'd been a pulse throbbing through my centre, my muscles clenching and releasing in time with the thrusting weapon, his pure need melting me more than any fire.

A weird rush of energy had engulfed me and that was when all I could see of him was his eyes.

The revelation as he removed the scarf sent another bolt of psychotic desire twisting through my core.

His father, Blaine Alcott, alarms and revolts me in equal measure. The friend he once lent me to, Vale—who dresses like a dapper fifties' gentleman and fucks like a serial killer—just plain scares me.

But this boy who got every advantageous piece of the genetics lottery, who sat opposite while I stuffed my face, barely taking a bite, appears far more wary of me than I am of him.

A better looking, better tempered version of his father, distress had poured from him in waves while he sat, blankly staring, forgetting to eat. Traces of it linger as he opens the passenger door for me, and I obediently climb into the seat like my ambition is to feature on a true crime podcast. “Where are we going?”

“If you tell me where you live, I'll take you home.”

A plan that sounds dangerous. “Can I have the drugs? I told you the story you wanted to hear.”

His lips twitch, brow twisting into a frown. “Do you do it a lot? Tell men things they want to hear?”

That’s a loaded question and a half. I squint at him, more puzzled by the second.

At the warehouse, I thought he was older. Fair enough, he towers over me, his body might be slim but even the darkness can’t hide the solid muscles rippling underneath the cling of his dark T-shirt.

But he’s not a man. He’s a boy.

Seventeen. Eighteen. No better or more worldly than me.

Fitting him into the slot reserved for teenagers shouldn’t make me feel superior but it does. My *Private Sessions* account is populated by a lot of fans his age; armed with an overdose of testosterone and their daddy’s credit card.

If he takes after his father, he probably maxes out the private requests every month.

He tilts his head until the moonlight illuminates his blond hair like an angelic halo. “If you don’t tell me where to drive you, I’ll have to dump you back at the dealers’ squat.”

Wow. Just... wow. “Did your parents raise you to be a dick or did you get that way by choice?”

Something hard shutters over his expression, a warning sign I blithely ignore.

“Sorry if that’s confusing.” I wrinkle my nose, smiling as the warmth from the meal spreads throughout my body, sending me on a natural high. “Parents are what us poor folk have instead of nannies.”

“And yours forgot the lesson on manners.”

“Says the boy with a wet gun hidden in his glovebox.”

His expression freezes, then he bursts into laughter and the tension dissolves like the flick of a lightswitch. The baggie is tossed in my lap, and I tuck it away before fastening my

seatbelt, reciting my address before he can ask again. Getting a lift home isn't the worst way this evening could have gone.

As he drives us through the older parts of the city, the houses turn from functionary to beautiful. We pass one with a helipad on its roof, not an irregular occurrence around here.

Blaine Alcott is one of the richest men who attends the club. Maddox grew up in this kind of luxury. He probably learned to fly a helicopter before he got his driver's licence.

But the wealthy suburbs are soon behind us, the streets grow darker, the homes packed closer together. In no time at all, he turns onto my street, my house the large one at the end of the road. It would be impressive if it weren't separated into a dozen different flats, each tinier than the last.

He pulls to the kerb in front, switching off the engine and getting out, circling the car to release me from the passenger seat. I scramble free, grabbing the bag of food and my one remaining shoe on the way.

My hand brushes against his and I expect him to jerk away, repelled by my touch like he was at the restaurant, making me feel dirty. Instead, he takes it in his, thumb caressing the soft skin on the back, staring at me with curiosity.

There's a moment when he seems frozen, then he shakes his head and turns back to my house, staring at the half dozen entrance doors along the front. Some original, some added by a builder who didn't deserve the job title.

"Which one is yours?"

"Around the back."

He takes off, tugging me forward, not releasing my hand. His palm is warm and dry, the fingers long, slender like a piano player. I'm fighting my height and his large socks, cursing when my foot comes down on a sharp stone.

"What happened to your shoe?" he asks, coming to a stop.

"A kayak stole it." As his eyebrows arch in interest, I shake my head, dancing on one foot to massage the other. "Long story."

“I’ve got you.” He lets go of my hand to sweep an arm behind my knees, lifting and cradling me against his chest before I realise what’s happening.

One of my hands curls around his neck, my cheek resting against his shoulder, the bag of food and shoe against my chest. A rush of warmth hits me, not just from his body but from the thought he cares.

My nostrils fill with smoke and body wash. His blue eyes scan my face to make sure I’m okay before he quickly covers the distance, stalling again at another four entry choices. “How many people live in this place?”

“Do I look like a census taker?” I prod his shoulder until he lets me down, then limp to the door closest to the corner, punching in a code and waiting for the clunk of release.

When he steps forward, I stop him with a palm on his chest. “And where do you think you’re going?”

“Inside. I have a proposition.”

And I picked it. A son cut from his father’s cloth.

Normally, I wouldn’t mind. He’s a lot better looking than some dudes I’ve catered for in the past. A point in his favour that’ll need to be deducted again because there’s no way in hell he’s not aware of exactly how good he looks. “Not tonight. I’m exhausted.”

But he’s twice my size and easily brushes aside my protest, pushing us both indoors. A narrow staircase leads to the second storey, then we’re along the corridor, the last door on the right.

“You can tell me here,” I say, the keypad for entry to my flat the only obstacle left to prevent him invading my personal space.

“Aren’t you going to offer me a cup of coffee? I gave you a lift home.”

“After terrorising me for half an hour. I think that cancels out your good deed.”

He frowns, reaching over to tap the correct code onto the keypad, ushering me inside when the door unlocks with a cheerful beep.

“How did you know the number?”

He laughs and my gaze immediately goes to my brother, sleeping on the sofa.

So does his. “You live with a junkie in a flat with nothing worth stealing. Obviously, you use the same code as the entrance door.”

“Obviously,” I mutter, taking off the socks he gave me and offering them back to him, still confused why he’s here at all.

“Did you really want a cup of coffee?” I check the cupboards, fishing out a stack of single use sachets I swiped from a hotel room the last time a punter decided a private lap dance would work better outside the confines of the club. “We don’t have milk.”

His gaze sweeps across me, then scans the room.

I see it through his eyes: the tatty wallpaper with beige blotches from water damage, the threadbare carpet, stained from a hundred different spilled drinks. Our sofa and the coffee table in front of it are the only proper furniture unless you count the bench and sink. A door leads to a tiny bathroom. Our belongings are in cardboard boxes, never fully unpacked in the seven months we’ve lived here.

But private helipad boy is so far above me there’s no point to being embarrassed. We live in different worlds.

“I should hope you don’t have milk,” he drawls, “since you don’t appear to have a fridge, either.”

I shrug, wrinkling my nose. “Do you still want the drink? Gotta tell you, my feet hurt, I’m about ready to drop, and all I want is for you to leave so I can get changed into something comfy. If there’s a point to this visit, please just tell me.”

“Evie?”

Ant stirs and I rush to his side, pressing my wrist to his forehead, relieved to find it’s clammy, but he’s not running a

temperature. I push the bundle into his hands, then shake my head. He's trembling so badly I'll need to fix a shot for him, and I can't do that with someone watching.

"Who's this?" My brother struggles to sit upright, his jaw clenching with the strain. "Didn't realise we were having guests."

"He's—"

"I'm Maddox." He walks over, arm extended, startling my brother into shaking his hand. "A friend of Evie's."

I bite my lips, frowning at the floor. We don't have friends. It's easier that way and we don't need them. Not when we have each other.

"Sorry, I'm..." Ant trails off, rubbing an arm across his forehead. His eyes are beady, shakes growing worse by the second.

"You need to go," I tell Maddox, trying to steer him back towards the door. I might as well be pushing against an elephant.

His eyes scan my brother, seeing the pockmarks and scarring along his inner elbow. "You're injecting? Where's your gear?"

"Look, man. Not meaning to be rude, but my sister obviously doesn't want you here, and neither do I."

Maddox steps back, turning on his heel a little. "I need to talk to you but it's private." When neither of us move, he adds, "I'll make it worth your while."

"Help me to the bathroom," Ant says, struggling to his feet.

I lend him my shoulder as a crutch for the brief journey. "Are you going to be okay?" he asks in a whisper. "I can call Kayce from downstairs if you need someone to encourage him to leave."

The polite framing makes me laugh. "Don't worry." Though that's exactly what I'm doing as I close the door on Ant, turning back to Maddox. "Okay, talk."

He's in the kitchen, opening drawers, laying out Ant's gear on the bench. I stiffen, but after a second, it's clear it's not the first time he's prepped a shot. There's an ease in his movements as he taps powder into the bent spoon, adding water then heating it, tearing a piece of cotton wool as a filter, drawing the final product into a new needle, setting it on the bench, ready.

"You've got Narcan? This stuff looks dodgy as fuck."

I pull the ampoules from another drawer, setting one on the bench beside it, trying to work out where he learned this stuff. "Your girlfriend?"

"My sister." His eyes meet mine for a fleeting second, blue pools of despair that make me want to hold Ant close while I still can, inject some sense into him instead of another hit of poison. "I want you, that's what I was going to say. Not like today... but—"

"But not dissimilar."

There's a pinch behind my sternum and I press my palm against it. It's what I expected. There's no need for my bones to ache like they've been hollowed out, my cheeks to be hot.

"I'm a stripper, not a sex worker." The lie comes so naturally, I don't even blush.

"Not sex. Maybe touching you but not like that. I want..." he trails off into a laugh, shaking his head, embarrassment darkening his face. "This will sound mental, but I want you to be asleep and then it's... like role play?"

"Role play."

He rubs the back of his neck, then leans his head back, the sharp outline of his long throat making mine clutch so tightly I can barely breathe.

And another part of his statement floats to the top. "You want me asleep?"

"For a few hours. I'll get some pills for you to take—"

"Oh, fuck no!"

He touches me, a hand on my shoulder, and it's stupid considering what he just proposed, but it feels nice. Friendly. Absent of the usual static of sexual pressure. A knot forms in the hollow of my throat and I tug at the skin there, trying to make the sensation go away.

"You could name your price. I'll get you anything you need." He shuffles his feet, briefly losing eye contact. "There's a treatment program down south. Sedated detox. Your brother's young enough to be a strong candidate. Three days and he'll be clean."

"And how much does that cost?"

"With the month-long residential treatment that follows, it'll run to about thirty grand."

Thirty grand.

It's a horrendous amount of money but he doesn't seem to care about the price. He's so calm, I check, "And you'd pay for that? For him?"

"Sure. If that's what you want."

The temptation is so strong, it feels like a physical object I could grab with both hands.

A few hours.

The most terrifying thing you've ever done.

Yes, but only for a few hours. Ant might get clean for *life*.

"Can I think about it?"

Maddox stills and I think he'll issue an ultimatum, then he gives a small nod. "Do you have your phone? We can swap numbers."

I reach into my jacket pocket before remembering. "Oh, sorry. I... uh, I lost it tonight."

His eyes sharpen, then turn dull as he taps a finger on the back of my hand, already turning towards the door.

"Don't worry. I understand a no when I hear one."

Say, yes. Tell him yes before your only chance walks out the door.

But my pulse races, my heart thumping with such force that my eyes jump with each new beat. Fear consumes me. I can't call out his name. Can't move to block him.

He opens the door and walks into the night.

CHAPTER FIVE

MADDOX

WHEN I WAKE THE FOLLOWING MORNING, MY SKIN BUZZES with excitement, providing me with flashbacks from the night before. The touch of Evie's soft skin beneath my hand. The glances of interest.

Her horror as I revealed myself as a freak.

I groan and drag myself into the bathroom, taking a quick shower because it's only been a few hours since the one last night. The outfit I tossed in the laundry hamper smells of dirt and oil and smoke, and I leave the window open to air out the room.

In the kitchen, I'm waiting on the coffee machine when my father walks in, impeccably dressed as always. "Didn't hear you come in last night."

"I went out with Zane and lost track."

“Next time, save the late nights for the weekends. I don’t like you losing that much sleep on a school night.”

After that one question, he loses interest, not a talker at the best of times. The machine beeps and when I add milk to my coffee, it drags Evie back into my head.

No fridge. Bare cupboards.

It’s crazy to think of someone my age living like that.

Grinding her arse into your father’s lap for tips.

My lips curl back from my teeth in disgust, and I edge past my dad to take a barstool at the counter, setting my phone in front of me so he won’t make conversation.

It opens on a photo of Evie, one from the school portal, then I click on my search results from last night, picking up the few threads I found online.

She barely has a presence there. Unlike every other girl I know, she isn’t filling pages with endless selfies. The content she does have is monetised. I sign up for a free plan on her *Private Sessions* account and scroll through the padlocked listings, reading the descriptions, curious about the shots she’s posting for pay.

When I glance up, my father is frowning at my screen. He clears his throat. “You know that girl?”

A dozen thoughts flicker through my head. All of them unwelcome. “Yeah. She’s a friend from school.” His eyes briefly meet mine then he glances away, and I get a shiver of satisfaction at his discomfort. “Why?”

“Do a lot of your friends have those accounts?”

I’m tempted to say he’d know more about that than me but leave it at a shrug. “Haven’t asked.”

“You’re getting to the age when you’ll need to be careful about who you let into your life. A girl like that”—he nods at the phone again like he thinks I might have lost track—“she won’t think twice about getting pregnant or taking risqué photos you’ll pay to stop being distributed. You know she’s a stripper.”

Dad-of-the-year has a faint smudge on the back of his hand. The remnants of a cherry-red stamp from the strip club. "I guess that puts her on your radar a lot more than mine."

A steely glint enters his gaze. The same stare he uses to win him concessions in boardrooms is now levelled at me.

I hold steady, but at a cost. It feels like someone is scraping my retinas with a rusty blade.

"Don't get mixed up with her. My job isn't to bail you out of every mess you get yourself tangled in. Believe me, if you get caught in some feminine trap you should have spotted a mile away, I'll disown you rather than legitimise some slut's sprog."

A threat that means nothing since the mother I barely remember left me a trust fund, making me independently wealthy. Plus, it's hard to wade past the total hypocrisy. He's the one who frequents the club Evie works at, paying money to watch girls barely older than children strip off their clothes, but she's the danger?

"Some slut's sprog is such a lovely nickname for your unborn grandchild. Just rolls off your tongue, doesn't it?"

"You better hope it's *unconceived* not just unborn or you'll quickly learn it's not a joke." After a moment, his glare softens. "Just wrap it up, okay? The last thing I need is Vale charging me ten grand an hour to convince a stripper to get an abortion."

"Because the money's better spent on lap dances?"

The taunt is useless. Shame was the first emotion my father cut from his life and there's no pleasure to be had when the implications roll straight off his back.

"We're in some of the same classes," I say, putting a full stop on the exchange. "Not hooking up."

"Okay, good."

He puts some horrendous breakfast bar into the microwave, stinking the room out with a fake eggs and bacon smell that tears away any appetite. I pour another cup of coffee

in lieu of eating, staring at the back of my father's head as he sits at the table, unfolding the first of the newspapers he insists on reading cover to cover every morning.

“You went out with Zane last night?”

The sharpness in his voice makes me swivel farther around. “Yeah.”

“Tell me you're not behind this.”

He raises the paper, and I glance across to read the headline.

Three hospitalised after suspicious fire.

Holy fuck. My heart pounds.

Three?

I only remember beating the crap out of one and he wasn't the sort to go running to the cops or media. How did the papers get hold of it so quickly?

No. Scrap that thought.

Why do they care? is the real question. They've never reported on our raids before.

“It's the front fucking page for god's sake.” He stands, walking over to slap the folded paper against my chest. Eyes glaring like the sun. “Get this shit sorted. I've given you a long leash for the past year, but I'll turn it into a bloody choke chain if you smear my name in public.”

Icy fingers creep up my back, settling into the spot between my shoulder blades, but I force a tight smile onto my face. “You think we're arsonists now?”

His voice is a low rumble that sends trepidation skittering down my spine. “Aren't you?”

I twist my seat back around, finishing the dregs of my coffee, not bothering to respond, trying to think through the implications.

My clothes stink of smoke. I need to get rid of them before our housekeeper takes them for washing. She might be loyal as

far as her employment contract goes, but I don't want the lowest earning person in our household to guess what I've been doing in my free time.

Evie's an eyewitness.

The thought hits me like a slap.

Forget the housekeeper guessing from the scent on my clothes. Evie was there. She knows damn well we're the ones started the fire.

Her brother's an addict. She might know those people. She might *care*.

Why the hell didn't they get out? They had minutes to get free.

But I know the answer to that one without thinking. Because they were stoned. Because they were unaware of their surroundings.

I should have checked.

Random users were never meant to be hurt; they're not my targets. Guilt and panic light up my brain, making it hard to think beyond the fact we're knee deep in some serious shit.

We've hit other dealers before, always without consequences. It's gone on so long without repercussions, it felt like a game. Can we wipe out every supply house within the town limits? Can we strangle the supply of drugs until the entirety of Tiaki District is bone dry?

The police haven't bothered to mount an investigation up to now. Probably just as glad as me to be rid of the scum on the streets, hooking vulnerable children—vulnerable *girls*—just to make a profit.

But this?

Innocent bystanders getting hospitalised isn't a crime they can push aside. Nobody's going to care the arson was accidental, a consequence of the method used to gain entry.

The *illegal explosives* used to gain entry.

My face turns pale as I work through the possible scenarios.

We'll probably be okay. Even if we're not, the same Vale who can convince girls to get abortions—and I do not want to know if my father has direct experience—can probably reroute a criminal investigation.

I should contact him just in case. Let him put feelers out to see what the police and media know so I'm prepared.

The message takes a few attempts to craft. The service we use is encrypted but I don't know enough about techie stuff to understand if that is enough. Because of that, what I send is so vague, my next fear is he won't understand what I'm asking.

He'll report everything to my father but it's not like I have a list of alternative fixit men in my contacts. I'll just have to be circumspect about the things I don't want him to know.

I could also inform him about Evie, dump her in his lap as a mess to clean up. But thoughts of what that might entail make me shudder.

She won't be the first girl in town to disappear for the crime of becoming a rich man's inconvenience.

No. Evie is a problem I can sort myself.

I reach my bedroom with a lightness in my step, thinking through how to approach her, how to frame the query, how to improve her life until she'd never consider naming me.

Inspire the same tight-lipped loyalty she showed last night by refusing to name names, even when held at gunpoint.

Even when other things were done to her at gunpoint.

A warm flush runs across my skin, spreading until I'm suffused with a low buzz. It's nice, better than nice. A sensation I don't want to lose, and it grows stronger with every second I spend thinking of her.

I told my father she was a friend from school, so that's what she can become. God knows, it's where she should be.

I'll get her away from her dreadful workplace, put her with people her own age, integrate her into our group so she always has friends with money and power when she needs them.

In return, I'll gain her trust, earn her silence, and get to see her every day.

When I close my eyes, I visualise every impoverished inch of her home last night, feel the horror of living hand to mouth at a level that had been solely intellectual for me up till now. The chasm between us is so extreme our paths should never have crossed.

But I'm glad they did.

I grab my clothes and toss them into the wash, setting the shortest cycle so they'll be ready to take out before I leave for school. Our housekeeper might be surprised to find wet clothes in my hamper but it's not the first time that's happened. We live lakeside, after all.

Returning to my room, I take the stairs two or three at a time, energised, the day ahead full of promise.

And I'm not gonna lie.

The thought a friendship with Evie will piss off my father is sweet icing on an already tempting cake.

CHAPTER SIX

EVIE

I DON'T WAKE UNTIL AFTER MIDDAY, BLEARILY GREETING THE new day with a dearth of enthusiasm. It doesn't help that the power meter ran out of credit sometime during the night and when I step in the shower the water runs lukewarm then cold.

At least it's summer. I screw my eyes shut, attempting to fool my brain into believing it's taking a refreshing swim. It doesn't work but I'm in and out of there in a flash and have stopped shivering by the time I towel myself dry.

The cold water also woke me up, a benefit after a night spent with little sleep. In the darkness, I had seen the wild glint in Maddox's eyes, felt the gun rest against my lips, heard the horror of his suggestion.

In the light of day, the offer doesn't seem nearly as bad as it did last night.

The worst thing is knowing that if I'd just capitulated, the experience would now be over. I could be coaxing Ant into an expensive treatment clinic instead of trying to pretend that a sachet of coffee in cold water is a satisfying breakfast.

It works about as well as my shower trick about swimming. As in, not at all.

I sneak onto the sofa, carefully avoiding my brother's splayed limbs. After a few minutes, Ant rouses a little, looking at me through dull eyes as he pushes himself upright. The moment he does, I snuggle close, lifting his arm to put around my shoulder.

My mother was killed in the same car accident that turned my father into an addict. When Dad overdosed, I was back home, but I'd been in and out of foster care for years. His death propelled me into another temporary shelter while my brother fought to get me away from people who were paid to care for me yet didn't.

He rescued me as I stood on the edge of a dark abyss, hypnotised by its depth.

Ant isn't just my flesh and blood, he's my hero. It fills my heart to have a family member who loves me by my side.

A knock at the door destroys my equilibrium. I inch towards it, tilting my head to hear better, trying to work out who on earth could be outside. Neither of us have friends close enough to visit.

"Anyone home?" a voice calls out and I don't recognise it at all. It's gruff. Impatient.

I crack the door open a sliver, staring at a large man wearing blue overalls with a store logo on the front. "Yes?"

He looks down at a clipboard. "You're Evie Mansen. That right?"

"Yeah."

"Thank goodness. This place is a fucking nightmare to navigate." He lowers the board, face colouring. "Sorry, love. Didn't mean to swear. I've got a delivery for you."

I'm as surprised by his apology as I am by his news. "We haven't ordered anything."

"Evie Mansen. Flat twelve."

I nod, still wondering if this is a trick or a game. Perhaps a neighbour having fun at our expense.

"Sign here." He shoves the clipboard into my hands, moving to the window that overlooks the street, signalling his men. "It'll be a few trips worth," he warns, taking back the sheet with my scribble. "This place is a proper rat run."

He's gone before I can ask what's being delivered so I hover in the doorway, filled to the brim with curiosity.

Two men appear first, lifting a heavy box. I retreat farther into the room as they enter, one slicing the cardboard with a box cutter and the other pulling away the packaging to reveal a fridge. Half size. The same height as our bench. It slots into the space between the counter and the side wall, a perfect fit.

"We're on metered power," I say as one of the delivery men plugs it in then frowns as it doesn't respond. "I don't have any credit left."

"Where?" the original guy asks, back with a stack of four chairs that he leaves next to the sofa.

I take him into the hallway where the meter boxes for the units on our side are positioned, tapping ours.

"Leave it with me, love. You go sit inside."

I retreat to the sofa, hugging my knees to my chest, caught between excitement and trepidation, curling closer to Ant as the men continue to bring stuff into the flat. They set up a dining table with four chairs, get the electricity running and the fridge set up, then box after box of food comes upstairs.

"What the fuck's going on?" my brother asks, finally rousing all the way into comprehension. He tucks me slightly behind him, squaring his shoulders like he's readying for an attack.

"Dunno," I reply, though I have a fair idea. Somebody is applying pressure to my 'let me think about it,' request.

But if this is Maddox pressurising me, I'm here for it. Maybe next time I should hint how susceptible I am for expensive jewellery.

More boxes come upstairs. Fruit. Vegetables. Lean cuts of meat and chicken. Sauces. Herbs and spices. Flour and sugar and box after box of cereal. Milk and cheese for the fridge. Eggs. Ready meals I can throw in the microwave—another new appliance that gets carried upstairs.

So much food, so much equipment, I can barely believe it.

Even boxes of cutlery to fill up our drawers. A stack of recipe cards with five-minute meals detailed on each.

Last, a man brings over a smartphone in a box with a prepaid SIM card resting on top. He taps it, glances at my brother, then back to me. “Keep this with you. There’s a cover with a chain attachment you can hook to your belt, so it won’t get lost.”

I’m oddly touched. Not just at the phone, which is ten times more expensive than anything I could afford, but that Maddox apparently changed his mind and now accepts that it wasn’t an excuse. That I *did* lose it. “Thank you.”

“You need help with anything? I can show you how the appliances work.”

“I’m good, thank you.” My arms fold across my midriff as I wonder if I should tip them or something.

“Right you are. We’ll be on our way, then.”

Once the men have left, Ant and I jump up, eager to examine the haul.

I should feel guilty for such generosity, but I’m consumed with glee. My stomach rumbles as I pick through the choices on offer, sorting out readymade meals for each of us, reading the instructions three times over before I trust them to the microwave.

While they’re cooking, I go out to the electricity box and stare at the numbers. Enough power to last out the month, maybe two if we’re careful.

I run back when I hear the microwave ping, serving the food while it's piping hot.

Ant's still sick enough he only manages a few mouthfuls, but I'm not too worried. I'll make him eat a few helpings of cereal later and that should see him through the day.

With my stomach full, I relax on the sofa, fiddling with the phone as it charges, playing with the different settings.

It buzzes in my hand and a notification pops onto the screen.

Thought this would make it easier to contact each other.

I chew my lip as I read the message, wondering what to say in reply, then waiting as three dots bob into life.

It's Maddox.

And I snort out another laugh, clapping my hand across my face to stifle the noise.

I guessed. Thank you for all the stuff.

I wince at my word choice but can't think of an alternative and press send before I escalate my thoughts into a worry spiral.

I have completely nefarious motives so you don't need to thank me.

For some strange reason, my smile grows wider at the admission.

I checked with the school, and they said you're still registered. Why don't you come along tomorrow?

You're in senior year, aren't you?

The request is so odd, I'm taken aback, uncertain how to respond. The only reason I enrolled at school was so Ant would qualify for a larger benefit—something that no longer applies now my eighteenth birthday has been and gone.

You let men pay you to suck their cocks, but you're drawing the line at school?

Except blow jobs are simple to understand. I don't know what this request has in store for me. But I guess it won't hurt to find out.

I'm enrolled but I haven't signed up for any classes.

Then you can come along to mine.

My uniform doesn't fit any longer.

Naked it is.

Another laugh bursts from me and I give a guilty start as Ant shifts in his seat, pulling the thin rug higher.

I should keep it foremost in my mind that Maddox wants something. Something that scares the hell out of me. A fact he obviously knows, hence the deluge of presents.

The expense won't mean anything to him, but I appreciate the thought he put into the gifts he sent today. It's not like he shoved a preloaded card in my hand and left me to it. He selected these items, knowing how much of a difference they'd make. The impact they'd have.

A warm feeling rises in my stomach and it's nothing to do with the meal I just ate.

I'm probably being stupid. A rich, handsome boy isn't hanging around with the likes of me because he fancies himself the prince to my Cinderella. He's leveraging my need to pressure me to do what he wants.

But maybe I can get what I need from him in return. That's what he's offering, isn't it?

I can probably pull together an outfit.

Fantastic. I'll pick you up tomorrow morning. Eight on the dot.

Okay. See you then.

I tug my knees even closer to my chest, staring at the screen for another few minutes in case he has anything more to add.

When nothing new appears, I uncurl myself and head for the pile of clothing boxes in the corner. It's been a while since I last walked through the halls of Tiaki Academy, but I'm sure there'll be something uniform adjacent I can wear.

CHAPTER SEVEN

MADDOX

THE INSIDE OF THE CHERRY RED GENTLEMEN'S CLUB AND Bar isn't meant to be seen in the light of day. Dust motes twirl lazily through the air before coming to rest on the sticky carpet, adhering where they fall. An odour of sweat, beer, and seafood permeate the room, overpowering the fans going full tilt trying to blow it outside.

Wilder's already waiting by the bar. "Remind me never to let you organise a party," he scoffs, shaking his head at the sorry state of affairs. "This is not an acceptable meeting place."

"Bet you wouldn't say that if some sweet thing shook her titties on the stage."

He gives me a lazy grin. "I mightn't say it, but I'd still think it." He rests his hands on the polished counter, then

withdraws them, lip curling in disgust. “Why the hell is everything so sticky?”

“Please don’t answer that,” Zane says, emerging from the rest room and joining us at the bar. “I have enough trouble sleeping at night.”

“Fine. Pick someplace else. I just need a few minutes to talk to the manager.”

“You’re not *buying* this place, are you?” Wilder says accusingly. “Because I gotta tell you, this is a business that sounds a lot more attractive than the reality.”

“Wait until you see the private rooms.” Zane makes a retching gesture. “If you used a blacklight in there, they’d be wall to wall fluorescent. I don’t know how anyone can stand to come here.”

“But they do,” Wilder jokes. “Over and over.”

I leave them to it, walking past the stage to where a corridor leads to the back rooms. One says manager and I knock, only having to wait a few seconds before a voice yells, “It’s unlocked.”

If the main stage room appeared dirty, this inner sanctum reveals a hoarder’s dream. Large stacks of recall boxes leave only a narrow pathway to a large desk, itself buried under a mound of paper, scattered stationery, and empty food containers. A frazzled woman sits behind it, scowling at a battered laptop.

“Are you the repair guy?”

“No, I’m the guy with a lot of money and a special request.”

She gives me a quick scan, then returns her attention to the screen. “We’re not a brothel, honey. Try two blocks down the road. Pink signage. You can’t miss it.” The advice is followed by a hand slamming onto the keyboard before she shoves the device away from her in disgust.

“My request is a scheduling change for your roster.”

The woman flicks her gaze back to me, a quick lick of her tongue across her lips showing a brief resemblance to a lizard. “More or less?”

“Less.”

She grunts and pulls a ledger towards her, something that apparently holds more use than the computer she pushed aside. “What name?”

“Ah... I don’t know her stage name. Evie Mansen.”

After checking a few different pages, she glances back to me. “Less as in none?” I nod. “That’ll cost you a grand a week.”

My derisive snort isn’t the best way to start a negotiation, but it slips out before I can catch it. “There’s no way she’s making you a grand.”

“I’m basing this on potential. Some of our best girls earn that in an hour.”

The first instinct is to call bollocks, but she could easily be right. With the money floating around this district, at least some of her clientele have deep pockets. I bet they’re not above making a girl light up by shoving a few k her way.

“How about a discount if I pay ahead for the month?”

The woman narrows her eyes, then shrugs. “Fine. Make it three and we’ll call it even.”

We sort out the details and I make the transfer from my phone. By the time I return to the bar, the first girl of the night is on the stage, one leg wrapped around the pole.

For all their earlier protestations, my friends require another prompt to leave.

“Can’t we go to yours?” Wilder asks, turning to Zane whose expensive gaming fitout is legend. “Then we can annihilate the crap out of each other while we listen to... whatever this is.”

Zane shudders and I jump into the gap. He can’t stand being at home, not since his mother died and his father started

taking so many meetings overseas, he's practically abandoned him. "You can come to mine."

"Dude, you don't even have the right number of headsets."

"Which won't be a problem since I literally just need a few minutes to talk with you about the weekend."

"Shh." With a finger to his lips, Wilder conspicuously glances all around him. "Nobody mention the weekend."

I stare at him in disbelief, then shake my head. "Get in my car. We'll talk there and then you can go wherever the fuck you like."

"No need to get upset," he says with a wide grin, patting me on the shoulder until I jerk away, wishing I'd ridden solo on Sunday because sometimes having friends isn't worth the bother.

We've hung around together since primary school, courtesy of fathers who travelled in the same circles. Moving as a trio became as much of a habit as a friendship, though even when I don't understand their actions or agree with their opinions, I always trust the pair will have my back.

I've always been one hundred percent clear that if trouble comes our way, I'll take the rap for it. This is my vendetta. But it would be nice to avoid consequences if we can.

"What's the problem?" Wilder asks as he slips into the back seat while Zane and I take the front. "The police never gave a shit before."

"Before they didn't have three people in hospital." I bring up the links Vale sent me. "Right now, they have nothing to go on because the injured parties aren't well enough to give interviews. Once that changes, we could be in deep shit."

"If that changes," Wilder corrects me. "And all I heard is that the police have nothing. Hardly necessary to call a crisis meeting."

My lips clamp hard together, preventing the retort that desperately wants to come flying out of my mouth. Luckily, Zane picks up my slack.

“This is a meeting to *prevent* a crisis, you twat.”

“Then get to the point. I got a date tonight.”

By which he means, he’s rigged a girl to fuck him who almost assuredly is not Dahlia, his girlfriend. For all that they’re lovey-dovey inside the school grounds, outside them he doesn’t care what he sticks his dick in so long as it’s warm, wet, and willing.

Given his looks and status, that’s a well that never runs dry.

I tick the rudimentary list off my fingers. “No talking to anyone who isn’t in this vehicle and for god’s sake, don’t run your mouth where anyone could be listening.”

Wilder rolls his eyes and waves at me to hurry.

“Get an alibi for Sunday night. Something solid. Rig shit if you have to but if the police come calling, I want you to know exactly what you’re going to say and exactly what proof you have to back the claim.”

“Right. Get some girlie to lie and say I was with her all night.” Wilder shakes his head. “So far, this could’ve been a DM.”

“Nothing online,” I say, slapping his shoulder when he tries to stare out the window at a passing trio of girls. “I don’t care if the app says all messages are triple encrypted and deleted the moment an eyeball turns in their direction. You don’t put it online. You don’t make a call. You don’t write it on a notepad and throw it in my direction.”

With his attention wandering again, I add, “You especially don’t tell your girlfriend when she’ll blab if she finds out you’re balls deep in every other pussy in town.”

His eyes cut away from mine and I experience the first wriggle of unease.

“You’ve told Dahlia.”

“I had to tell her something. She was waiting in my room when I came home stinking of smoke. You know how suspicious she gets.”

“Wonder why that is?” I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Fine. New rule. No ‘dating’”—I use air quotes—“anyone else until we’re in the clear. Got it?”

“What kind of bullshit is that?”

“The bullshit you deserve,” Zane says in a low rumble.

Of the three of us, he’s the biggest, the most aggressive, and his platinum hair is a complete deception for the darkness lurking underneath. Wilder gives a nervous lick of his lips, and I don’t blame him. The last kid Zane laid into was out of school for a week.

“This is overkill for a couple of junkies. Even under duress, the cops won’t give a shit, not even if they die. You know that better than anyone.”

I stare at him in disbelief, wondering if he just referenced what I think he did and if he really has a death wish.

Nobody talks about Addie.

Zane growls and Wilder shrinks back in his seat, eyes opening wide. “You know I didn’t mean anything by it. Just stating a fact.”

“Maybe keep your facts to yourself from now on.” Zane turns back to me. “You need any further intel? I’ve got a contact in the hospital could give us warning in case the star witnesses talk.”

“If you trust them, that’ll be good.”

“How’s that fair?” Wilder immediately grumbles. “I get punished for talking to my girl, but he’s allowed to blab to some random contact.”

“It’s fair because he knows how to work people without giving away our secrets,” I explain. “A skill you’d do well to pick up considering your fidelity issues.”

“Whatever. Are we done?”

“Run your alibi past me when you’re sorted.” The order earns me a mocking salute and I gesture for him to leave.

Once he's gone, Zane turns to me. "I'll have a private word with Dahlia. She'll get on board once I pay her enough to make it worth her while."

I nod, genuinely grateful he has my back and that we don't have to rely on Wilder sticking to the plan.

"He didn't mean Addie, you know. He's just..."

"Yeah. He's just."

Wilder comes along with us on the raids because he likes the excitement, he likes the destruction. He doesn't care that for me it's not an exercise in vandalism, it's what gives me purpose.

Retribution for the habit that cost my sister her life.

I might never know who got her hooked, who kept feeding her habit when me and my dad were killing themselves trying to keep her safe, but I don't need to. Not when I can wipe every dealer from this town, sparing countless others her fate.

In time, I'll turn it into an oasis free from drugs, except those dispensed in a licenced pharmacy.

"What about the girl?"

It's no surprise that Zane asks the question that never crossed Wilder's mind.

"Sorting it as we speak." I pause for a moment, then fill in the rest. He'll find out soon enough. "If things work out the way I want, you'll be seeing a lot more of her."

"Yeah?" His gaze is curious. Understandable since he and Wilder have never seen me pay any attention to women before. My sole focus has been targeting the dealers, avenging Addie, but he must read enough in my expression to relax. "Good."

CHAPTER EIGHT

EVIE

THE NEXT MORNING, ANT CAMPS IN THE BATHROOM, MAKING horrible noises, while I hunch near the window, trying to apply makeup. The tiny pocket mirror I'm using is cracked, silver paint peeling off the back, and even utilising the strong light from my new phone, I can barely see a thing.

A situation I haven't noticed before because it's been so long since I wore makeup outside of work, we were in a different flat the last time I tried.

With an irritated sigh, I give up, wearing lippy and straggly mascara that looks awful but will look far worse if I try to remove it.

I was right about my old uniform no longer fitting. I never had much of a growth spurt, but when I went from five foot even to five foot two, my hips decided to join in and grow at

least an inch or two in circumference, making everything old a tight squeeze.

The woollen kilt stretches enough to drag the waistband into place, but I can't fasten the zipper. A long blouse hides that fact, but it can't do anything for the way it pulls taut in all the wrong places while folding into inelegant creases in others. The top is also missing a fairly important button. I thread a safety pin through and hope for the best.

Besides, he's not asking me along because he thinks I'd rock a school uniform.

No. He's asking you along because he's a freak who wants to do unspeakable things to your unresponsive body.

My face scrunches. My stomach does a slow forward roll, threatening to bring up all the delicious cereal.

I should be on the phone to work, flattering Robyn until she gives me back some hours this week. Not twisting myself into knots, getting ready for a school I barely attended at the best of times, and not at all for the past two years.

My thumbs are poised over the keypad, about to text Maddox back, tell him I can't make it, when there's a knock on the door.

It's not eight. I check the time on my screen.

Okay. It is eight but I'm not ready. Panic pours adrenaline into my veins and my face turns clammy, heart racing the way it does before I get onstage or go into a private room for a lap dance.

Since when did attending school feel the same as work?

MADDOX

You're not standing me up, are you?

I open the door, bracing myself for his inspection, but he barely glances at me. "Good. Thought you were having second thoughts."

He turns and walks away, stopping at the end of the hallway and staring back, eyebrows raised.

“Just a minute.”

I close the door, staring around the flat for some kind of inspiration. Ant limps out of the bathroom, rubbing his hair and yawning. “Hey.” He stops short. “Why are you wearing your uniform?”

“Uh...” My brain stops working. There are too many confusing messages flooding it and I can’t work out what direction is best to choose.

“Does your new friend have a weird fetish?”

At the very least, but I don’t want to dwell on that. “Gotta run. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

When I walk back through the doorway, Maddox stands exactly where I left him, frowning through his smile. “You’ve got everything?”

This is a bad idea.

The worst.

Then he walks closer and puts his hand on my lower back, propelling me forward. The scent of his aftershave hits me, making my mouth flood with saliva. Making me dizzy enough to lean in towards him.

“You don’t need to be nervous.”

“I look awful.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah. Absolutely the worst. My reputation is going straight down the gurgler. I’ll probably top myself in a few weeks because I can’t bear the shame.”

I try to muster a smile, I really do. It’s just my face can’t remember how to work to produce the result I want. At best, it could be called a grimace.

A grimace complete with tears.

I don’t understand what’s happening. At work, I never care what people think.

He opens the car door for me, waiting until I'm seated before he shuts it and walks around to the driver's side. I don't have anything except my phone with me, haven't got a clue what else I would bring.

Everything I used to take to school is in my locker where I left it or more probably emptied to make way for another student, everything usable recycled.

"It's not a big deal. The other students are too caught up in their own drama to give a damn about you."

"I know."

"But you're still crying." He pulls on his seatbelt, then chuckles to himself. "I've got a friend who'd love you."

Panic reaches into my chest and squeezes my heart in its fist. "Are you going to share me with him?"

"What?" Maddox stares at me, astounded, and I can't meet his eyes. I don't know what made me say it. He stretches his arm over me, long fingers tugging my seatbelt from its holder as he says, "Fuck, no," face close enough that his breath flutters my collar.

The back of his hand brushes against my hip, a click echoing as he slots the mechanism into place. He eases the strap away from my torso where it twists, smoothing it flat while my senses focus on each gentle touch.

"For one," he continues, "Zane can find his own hookups and two, I was just making small talk. I haven't done it for a few years so I'm excruciatingly bad at the process, okay?"

As he straightens, hands lightly resting on the wheel, I ask, "Don't you talk to people?"

"Not unless they're friends and they already know I'm awkward and prickly and never know what the fuck to say."

I glance at him with narrowed eyes, but he appears in earnest. "You don't seem like the quiet type."

"Not compared to you," he says with a chuckle. "Next to you, I'm a bloody chat show host."

This time my smile works. He reaches across to cup my shoulder, then rubs his knuckles across my cheek.

The unexpected touch is so nice, I finally relax.

“What’s this?” He flicks the safety pin on my blouse.

“Lost a button.”

The shame hits and I hate it. It’s unfair when my inner critic insists I’m not good enough just because I don’t have the things other people do.

I have a roof over my head. My stomach’s full. I have a brother to care for, who cares about me.

Why am I close to tears over a missing button and a skirt that no longer fits?

“Tell you what. I’ll make an appointment with the department store, and they can outfit you properly.” His hand returns, brushing just under my eye, a clump of dry mascara on his thumb when he pulls away. “And give you a makeover.”

“Why are you doing this?” The question bursts out of me, and I hold my breath as I wait for him to answer. Not sure if he will. Half expecting him to kick me out of his fancy car and half thinking he’ll bring up the proposition from yesterday. “I haven’t changed my mind about... the thing you want.”

He shrugs. “I like you and I... well, I owe you an apology.” When I continue to stare, tension in every muscle, he adds, “I stuck a loaded weapon in your mouth two minutes after meeting you. It was so fucking *dangerous*, and I can’t stand to think the slightest twitch could have...”

A noise emerges from the back of his throat, barely sounding human. He glances over to me, then immediately turns away, colour splotching across his neck, reaching towards his cheeks.

“You’re my age and you work at a club my dad goes to. My *dad*. That’s so fucked up.” The steering wheel practically buckles under his hands, he’s gripping it that tightly. “You should be in school. You should spend your free time going to movies or waiting in line to buy concert tickets or going to

parties when some random kid's parents are out of town. You got stuck with a shitty life and it's not right and it barely costs me a thing to fix it, so why wouldn't I?"

Why wouldn't he?

I can't tell if he's for real. "You wouldn't because people don't do things like this."

He flashes me a smile so broad he looks like a different person. "Well, today I do. Today I'm your fairy godfather and I'm waving my magic wand to turn you into a regular teenager."

I return his grin but still see something else hiding behind his eyes. Some other truth he's obscuring.

Before I can ask, he says softly, "This isn't to pressure you into doing something you don't want to. I respect your answer. One thing has nothing to do with the other, okay?"

This time, his sincerity shines through. Maybe there's still a hidden agenda but I'm not in the mood to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"Fine, then. You may continue to wave your magic wand."

"Yeah?" He smiles while tapping a number into his mounted phone, giving instructions in a bored voice to the woman who answers with such perky cheer she must be mainlining coffee. She confirms an appointment fifteen minutes from now.

"If you take me there, won't you miss your first classes?"

And the question makes him laugh again but not in a mean way, not *at* me. "Oh, the horror." He clutches his hands together like he's pleading. "No, please don't make me miss a few hours of school."

I wrinkle my nose at him, and he shakes his head, still smiling, checking the traffic before he pulls into the street.

AN HOUR LATER, it's like I've fallen into a fairytale. Instead of birds and mice and all the tiny creatures of the forest, I have

three saleswomen waiting on me hand and foot, measuring and cutting and sewing to give me a uniform tailored to fit snugly to my every curve.

I thought Maddox would sit back, letting the assistants help me pick. Instead, he walked along the rungs of clothing, pulling hangers from the racks, holding one or two against me, the rest going straight in the yes pile.

His eye is amazing. Each item is correctly sized, needing adjustments only to better flatter my shape. There's also more clothing than I'll ever need for school.

While I'm being measured and the clothing pinned, he disappears for ten minutes, returning with boxes full of lingerie. A woman comes with him, patiently coaxing me into the selection of bras to ensure an accurate fit.

Some of the chosen pieces make me blush.

Others, I don't even know how to wear.

After the fittings, he waits with me while the makeup artist runs through colour palettes, then steps away as she gets to work. He returns as she's applying her finishing touches, looking very pleased with himself.

He rolls a chair close behind mine, opening a jewellery box to display a collar necklace. A thin band of soft black leather, decorated with silver wire, a black pearl pendant hanging from the centre.

It's beautiful.

I can't wear it. A surge of fear grips me at the thought of it closing around my neck, rubbing against the thin band of scar tissue there.

My voice emerges in a croak. "This is too much."

Maddox meets my gaze in the mirror. His eyes must see something different from mine because a warm smile spreads across his face before he strokes my hair away and rubs his thumb along the curve of my shoulder.

It's oddly intimate. More than him teasing the barrel of a gun into my mouth.

He takes the necklace from its case, but I push the chair away, jumping to my feet, a pulse ticking in my throat until I cover it with my hand, protecting it against the jewellery. “I don’t... it’s not anything against your taste but I don’t like things around my neck.”

Maddox tilts his head to the side, coaxing me back into the chair with a curl of his finger. “Then you can wear it as a bracelet.” He arches an eyebrow. “Or do you not like that, either?”

I extend my arm, letting him wrap the leather around three times before fastening it. The pendant falls on the inside of my wrist and he again strokes the sensitive area with the rough pad of his thumb, sending a spiral of heat whirling straight into my lower abdomen, making my legs tremble.

When I swallow, it becomes an impossible feat. Too many moving parts I don’t remember being aware of before.

He lifts the pendant with his forefinger, balancing it on the tip.

“When you hold it in the sun, there are deep green highlights. They remind me of your eyes.”

A frown creases his brow as he stares at the pearl, then he clears his throat and moves away, letting it drop back into place. He throws away the tissues protecting my clothes, and fluffs out my hair, staring at my reflection.

My mood plummets and the scar on the back of my neck itches.

The sensation of being a doll swamps me and I wonder if that’s what he’d prefer. An unmoving object that wouldn’t protest when he positions her how he wants.

Of course, it’s what he wants. He told you as much.

My eyes glance down, plucking the new perfectly fitted kilt away from my knees.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs in a velvet voice. “This isn’t what you think. There’s no price tag attached.”

And I nod, the repeat disclaimer making me more anxious rather than less. So much I busy myself standing, adjusting my skirt, anything to move my body and release the mounting anxiety.

Maddox signs for everything, then casts an appreciative eye over the result. “You’re so small, I feel like we should get it a size larger to give you room to grow.”

I wrinkle my nose at him. “I’m only a few inches below average. You’re the one who’s far too tall.”

He stands behind me, resting his hands on the sides of my waist, fingers nearly touching in the middle. In the mirror, his reflection raises an eyebrow, but I refuse to be drawn.

“You’ve just got very large hands,” I tell him, then blush an instant later as he moves them to crisscross my abdomen, pulling me back against him.

I arch my back, pushing out my arse until it rubs against him, every sensation heightened by the intense gaze from our reflections. My right hand finds his, encouraging it lower until his fingers splay along my hemline, the tips a ghostly caress against my bare skin, slowly drawing the fabric higher until the pads rest against the soft skin of my thigh.

Then he tugs his hand free, breaking eye contact as he steps away. “It’s nearly lunchtime,” he announces, checking his phone. “You want to grab something here or wait until we’re at school?”

A simple question but I’m so confused by his retreat, I swear someone’s emptied my brain and forgotten to replace it with anything useful.

Luckily, he’s not fazed by my lack of contribution, announcing, “School it is,” when my confused silence lasts too long.

The drive across town doesn’t take long even with the competing traffic. Ten minutes later, Maddox pulls into the student carpark, nosing the vehicle into a prime spot near the main administration building.

As I get out of the car, I see a small crown next to the R for reserved. “What does that stand for?” I joke. “Are you royalty?”

“Well, yeah, but it’s just a dumb nickname. I’m not *actually* related to any royal families from any country.”

“A nickname.”

“For the elite of the elite.” He rolls his eyes. “There are so many spoiled rich kids at this place, we had to build a hierarchy, otherwise no one would have anything to aspire to.”

“And you just happened to come out on top.”

“Of course.”

He puts an arm around my shoulder, steering me towards the main entrance.

Tiaki Academy is a massive sprawl of a school, almost large enough to count as its own township.

The east side is the high school for years nine to thirteen. The west is a vocational college, offering practical trades courses or a chance to earn standard credits equivalent to the first two years of a university degree.

Like everything else lakeside, it’s primarily financed by the millionaires and billionaires who chose this area to settle. Rather than starting a private or charter school with associated costs and restrictions, the wealthy residents funnelled their money into the existing public school, topping up the government funding to launch it into the highest decile ranking possible.

Maddox takes me to the office first, harassing the school secretary until she adds my name to all his classes. Then he walks me to the outdoors tuck shop, placing his order with the counter staff before guiding me to a table, already half occupied.

“This is Zane and Wilder,” he gestures to two boys, one with white-blond hair, the other dark brown. Far too pretty for their own good, wealth oozing from every pore.

He leans in close to whisper, “You met them the other night, but this is what they look like when their faces aren’t covered. And this is Dahlia.” He waves at a gorgeous blonde girl clutched on Wilder’s lap. “This is Evie.”

Neither of his friends say anything more than a grunt but Dahlia slides off Wilder’s lap to clutch my arm, guiding me to the bench seat opposite the boys. “It’s great to meet you, Evie. Are you new in town? I haven’t seen you around school before.”

I run my tongue around the inside of my mouth to crack the dry seal. “No but it’s been a few years since I last attended. I’ve been working.”

“Really?” Her eyes light up and she leans in close. “Whereabouts? You look like a model. Are you a model?”

Wilder snorts with amusement. “Really likely. She’s shorter than you.”

“She could be a hand or hair model,” Dahlia snaps back. “You’ll have to excuse my boyfriend. For some reason his genetics made him ninety-nine percent asshole.”

“Oh, please. I’m at least twenty percent dick and you know it.” His eyes trawl from the top of my head down to where the table cuts off his view at the waist, moving back up to linger on my tits. “Maybe twenty-five with the right encouragement.”

“Don’t be disgusting.” Dahlia tosses her hair, the strands gleaming in the light. “You can see why I’m so pleased to have another girl at the table.” She snags the salad from in front of Wilder, spearing a lettuce leaf before pointing the bamboo fork at his face. “And don’t believe a word he says about size. There’s a good reason he failed level three maths.”

“Haven’t heard any complaints.”

“Because you’re rich, darling.” She pauses as her lips curve into an angelic smile. “And slightly hard of hearing.”

Zane sniggers and Wilder throws his school jersey at him. “No commentary from the loser who can’t even snag himself a lunch date.”

“I can snag them. I just have standards.”

Dahlia narrows her eyes in warning, then turns her attention back to me. “Have you known Maddox long?”

“Nobody knows me,” he answers, returning with a tray full of food. “And that’s the way I like it.”

“We met a few nights ago,” I tell her. “Not long at all.”

“Has he asked you to the Easter Ball yet?” Before I can answer, she continues, “Because I’m in desperate need of a new outfit but somebody refuses to take me shopping.”

Wilder mutters, “You can shop from home. That’s what the internet’s for.”

“The tickets aren’t even on sale, yet,” Maddox adds. “But I’m happy to lend you a credit card once we’ve got them sorted. You can make a day of it.”

Dahlia’s eyes widen with delight, then she winks at me. “Don’t know how you wrangled this one into line, but I plan to take full advantage. Do you want to start making a list so we don’t forget anything?”

“Maybe leave it for a while,” he says, giving my waist a squeeze. “She spent the morning getting her uniform sorted, so must be sick of shopping.”

“Like that’s a thing,” Dahlia retorts. But she seems happy enough with the plan, abandoning her conversation to resume eating her salad.

Maddox hands me a polystyrene tub full of chicken, pasta, and vegetables. “Is this alright? I can get you something else if you’d prefer.”

“This is great, thanks.” The day is spiralling me into overwhelm again, so it’s nice to have a simple pleasure to focus on. This morning I ate twice as much as I usually would but after the first bite, my stomach is happy to make room for more.

The conversation lulls as everyone eats. As I finish, I turn back to Dahlia. “What’s the Easter Ball?”

“An excuse for rich folks to throw a party under the guise of raising money for charity.”

“Aren’t you a rich folk?”

She glances up in surprise, then bursts into giggles. “God, no. But I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“Play your cards right and you could be the first Mrs Parry,” Wilder says with a wink, leaning back in his seat and rubbing his hand across his sculpted abdomen.

“Better still, I’ll be the first *ex* Mrs Parry,” she jibes back. “I’m not greedy. Half your estate in the divorce settlement is enough for me.”

She grins at me, and I can’t help but grin back. Her entire manner is disarmingly funny. I relax, truly delighted by the food, the location, and the company.

Despite Maddox’s claim that today’s largesse isn’t tied to his request, I’m certain there’ll be a bill of some sort coming due. Until that point, I intend to wring every bit of joy from the moment.

CHAPTER NINE

MADDOX

NO MATTER HOW MANY TIMES I STEAL SIDEWAYS GLANCES AT Evie, her appearance continues to take me by surprise. Familiarity has already muted the resemblance I saw on Sunday. Now, she's a pretty stranger, so delicate it makes my heart hurt.

Our calculus teacher projects an equation onto the whiteboard. Evie stares at it, nibbling at her bottom lip with her neat white teeth.

“What’s that symbol?” she asks as I copy the problem into my exercise book, pointing to the elevated two next to the number.

“It means it’s a square. The same number multiplied by itself.” When were we taught that? Primary school probably. Intermediate at the latest. Her eyes stay fixed to the equation,

so I explain the rest to her. “You need to take away the integer—that’s this number—from the amount, then work out the square root of a number that when it’s added to this, also has a square root.”

“That’s the number divided by itself?”

“Yeah. So, if you—”

“Like eighteen? And added on would be twenty? And if you took it away, that would be one hundred and thirty-four?”

I turn to face the whiteboard, then shrug, repeating it aloud for the teacher. “One hundred and thirty-four?”

Ms Kaihe frowns at me, then nods. “That’s right.” She clicks forward to the next problem. A variation of the same.

“Seven hundred and forty-four?”

Two seconds. Swear to god, it took nearly as long for Evie to say as it took her to solve. I’m caught between astonishment and pride, like me bringing her to class somehow unlocked this latent talent, exhilarated at exposing yet another side.

Everyone in class turns to stare. Even the ones not paying attention to the lesson feel the vibe.

She shrinks into her chair, hand to her mouth, nibbling at her nails. Her eyes drop to her desk, staring fixedly at a scored line in the wood, cheeks flaring into a delicious shade of pink.

And Ms Kaihe’s frown deepens. I see the confusion flare in her eyes.

So does Evie. She’s so low in her chair, another inch and she’ll slip off the seat onto the floor.

I put a steadying hand on her back and feel her heart thumping at a million miles an hour. Her gaze locks with mine, pleading. “Now’s the time when you advertise your tutoring service,” I tease. “A hundred bucks a session.”

There’s a light titter from some of the class, everyone disengaging when Ms Kaihe clears her throat, drawing attention to the latest equation on display before she moves to stand beside us.

“Evelyn Mansen?”

Evie nods, not raising her eyes.

“Could you stay a few minutes after class?”

She nods again, turning to gaze out the window and just... disconnecting. Like someone unplugged her from everything and everyone in the room.

My hand still rests between her shoulder blades. The thundering heartbeat has settled, slow and steady. Her eyes trace the path of a gull gliding across the campus, playing in the updraught between buildings.

The teacher hesitates a moment, then moves back to her former position.

Evie stays silent for the rest of the lesson. She doesn't even look at the board, keeping her attention on the view through the window, watching the sparrows fighting or flirting in the nearby trees.

I grab her hand again, enjoying the flood of sensation into my palm. I don't touch people, normally. It's weird how much I enjoy it, not even doing anything, just holding onto her, feeling her tiny movements as she adjusts inside my grip.

When the bell for final lesson rings, Evie stiffens, taking back her hand to wrap her arms around her torso, hugging herself hard with those skeletal arms as we walk towards Ms Kaihe's desk. “Yes?”

“Maddox, do you need to get to your next class?”

I guess that's my cue to go but I can hardly leave when Evie is ready to implode. “No, I'd prefer to stay.”

“Okay.” She doesn't seem upset by the decision, turning her attention back to Evie. “Your dad's Ward Mansen, is that right?” When she nods, the teacher says, “I was so sorry to hear about his death. Is Antony your brother?”

“Ant, yes.”

“I had him in my class a few years back. He was quite brilliant, but I guess that runs in the family.”

Her smile is broad but given the tension radiating from the girl beside me, she might as well be a shark baring its many rows of teeth.

After a moment with no reply, Ms Kaihe pushes across a large envelope. “Right, this is the packet I usually give to students who transfer in from other districts. It’s to make sure everyone has the same base knowledge.” When Evie still doesn’t respond, the teacher switches her eye contact to me. “You should see she gets one of these for each class. It’ll help her get up to speed a lot quicker.”

I pick up the envelope, and nod. “I’ll ask.”

“Good.” She turns her smile back to Evie. “It was really nice to see you in class today. I hope you keep coming back. I think with a few more lessons, you’ll fit right in.”

“Thank you.”

“And tell Ant I said hi.”

Evie nods, already drifting towards the door. “You don’t have any more classes today?”

“Just a study period, so I’m at your disposal.”

“Don’t you need to study?”

“Desperately. My marks are atrocious. There’s also a matinee starting at the movie theatre down the road. If we hurry, we’ll be able to load up with popcorn and ice creams and only miss the ads.”

Worry pinches her expression as she shakes her head. “I don’t really like movies. They’re too loud.”

“We can stop off and buy you some ear plugs.”

But the suggestion appears to alarm her. She switches her weight from foot to foot, anxiety pulsing from her in waves until I become nervous.

“What about tv? You can have the volume control.”

“If we’re not staying at school, can I go home? I want to check on my brother.”

She's already turning, like she plans to leave on foot the moment I give her the okay. Desperation seizes me. I don't want her to go. I don't want this to be the end of our time together.

"Let me drive you."

"It's close enough to—"

This time I put an arm around her shoulders, steering her towards the student carpark. "I'll drive you."

Evie's back is rigid, then she softens and nods. "Okay. Thank you." She starts walking, shooting me tiny, concerned glances. "Sorry if I ruined your day."

"You are the only thing worth a damn about my day." I hesitate to ask, given her nervousness, but curiosity wins out. "Have you been in Ms Kaihe's class before? When you last attended?"

"No."

"How did you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Solve the problem so quickly."

She stares at me, as baffled by the question as I am by her ability. "You told me how to solve it."

"Why did you drop out of school? You belong here far more than I do."

We reach the vehicle and I beep the door open, feeling the loss as she escapes from my embrace to get into the passenger seat. I pass her the envelope from Ms Kaihe, then start the car. I'm paused in the driveway, waiting for a break in the traffic before she answers.

"My last foster family were on a farm, and we were miles from anywhere, so they switched to the distance learning curriculum." Then she wrinkles her nose. "But they mostly taught me how to do chores."

"Yeah? Did you like it there?"

She faces the window, hiding her expression. “I liked the animals. There was a grumpy goat I used to milk. She was my favourite.” There’s a short pause, followed by a sigh. “I wasn’t much good at the rest of the stuff. I wouldn’t mind owning one, one day.”

“A farm?”

Evie bursts into laughter. “No. A goat. I’ll never be able to afford a farm.” She pinches a pleat on her kilt where it falls over her knee. “Can I come to school again, tomorrow? I only work nights, so I’m free during the day.”

Her cheeks are flushed with enthusiasm and her eyes sparkle. She’s vibrant and I hate to tear my eyes away to focus on the road.

“I’d really enjoy that.” I consider telling her she doesn’t work nights, not for the next month at least, but figure I can keep that under wraps for a few days more.

Now would be the perfect time to tell her about the fire, the injuries, the police investigation. How I’d appreciate if she kept quiet about all of it.

The words are right there, just waiting to be said.

And they’re still waiting when we pull up outside her flat. I help her with the bags of shopping from this morning, carrying them up the staircase to hand back outside her apartment door. She tilts her face to me, reading my expression and my hands tingle, even though I’m not touching her, like the memory of her is embedded in my skin as much as my brain.

Curiosity swells and I cup her shoulder, an urge to get closer makes me bend to press a platonic kiss against her temple, the gentle touch even more electric, my lips buzzing. “See you tomorrow.”

She nods but appears dazed as I leave, trotting lightly down the stairs, whistling as I walk out the rear door and circle around to my car.

A kid playing near the kerb makes a monster face at me, hooking his fingers into dramatic claws. I make a face back,

towering over him and roaring until he squeals with laughter, running through the gate back to his front door when his mother hollers at him to ‘leave the nice man alone.’

Nice man.

I sit behind the wheel, the tingle on my lips fading. A memory shouts at me from the darkness. *You’re nothing.*

Icy cold fingers wrap around my skull, squeezing until my eyes water. I start the car, wiping at my mouth, welcoming the distraction of activity as I pull into the road.

AT HOME, Vale waits in the driveway, leaning with studied casualness against his metallic green Rolls Royce. I wave as I pass by, parking in the garage and escaping back through the door before it rumbles to a close.

“You have something new for me?” I call out as I walk to greet him, shaking his small dry hand.

He’s meticulously put together as always. At five eight, he’s half a foot shorter but projects the aura of a taller man. The neat three-piece suit he wears is fastidiously tailored; the crisp lines augmented with a thin row of top stitching that means it always falls exactly how it should. It’s not my style but I envy the old-fashioned aura, complete down to the pocket square folded into a neat triangle in his breast pocket.

“Come on in,” I say, nodding towards the front door. “Dad’s overnighting in Auckland, but the housekeeper’s prepared some meals if you’d like to stay for dinner.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got appointments stacked back to back until late this evening. Another time, maybe.”

“Sure.”

I lead him through to the study. One wall is covered in tall shelves with an eclectic collection of books, all of them belonging to my father. On the other side is a faux fireplace, the real things banned lakeside because the valley has the perfect conditions for smog. Much as a roaring fire is fantastic, the council voted being able to breathe was more important.

Vale sits and I take the leather chair opposite, a large oak table to my left-hand side.

“The story won’t repeat,” he says, taking his phone from his inside breast pocket. “The media organisations have agreed the public interest isn’t served by publishing these stories widely. That won’t hold if there are updates to the case, but I’ve also reached out to the individuals involved and we’ve come to an understanding.”

I sit back, feeling relief flood through my nervous system. “Thank you.”

He flicks his fingers at the praise, a man who doesn’t need gratitude for doing his job, possibly because it’s reflected in his pay grade.

“Unfortunately, the police are a different story. The few feelers I’ve put out have been met with some hostility. Without the key eyewitnesses, it shouldn’t matter, but I want you to be aware that if there are any new avenues, they’ll be pursued aggressively.”

He must catch the confusion on my face, adding, “Someone’s put a bug up their arse about the difference in clearance rates between the haves and the have nots in this town. Expect them to care until after the next council elections.”

“That’s a year away.”

“And my advice would be to curb your impulses for at least that long.”

Impulses. A nice way to say vendetta.

When I see him out soon after, it’s like his mind has already moved onto his next meeting, barely acknowledging my wave goodbye.

He’s done everything I could have hoped, but the news doesn’t set my mind at rest. We’d just built momentum. If I leave the targets alone until after the next elections, we’ll have to begin again from scratch. New dealers will creep in to replace the ones I’ve cleared, there won’t be any way to stop them.

A short sharp shock is what I aimed for. Poison the system at the roots so the next crop of young people coming through won't have targets painted on their backs.

An overwhelming sense of hopelessness drags my mood into the basement. I can't sit still, pacing the floor, counting out the steps to stop my brain churning.

Eventually, I head downstairs, pausing at the door to my sister's room, hand resting on the doorknob.

I still have the urge to knock. She's been dead and gone for eighteen months, but just walking inside her old room feels like an invasion of privacy. With a faint smile, I rap my knuckle against the wood, closing my eyes and imagining what it would be like if her sweet voice answered, "Come in."

But there's no answer. Not even an aural hallucination spit out by my brain to fill the silence.

I walk inside, leaving the door open behind me to remove some of the stuffiness from the room. Our housekeeper airs it out every few days but in the height of summer it doesn't take long for it to build again.

The view from Addie's window looks straight over the water. We're one of the first cliffside dwellings, so the lower portion is filled with the lakeside marina.

Dad's boat is probably still moored there, though I can't remember the last time he used it. Not even a day trip to entertain a client.

During the last fraught months as Addie's addiction spiralled our family into utter disarray, we'd lost touch with all the things that had once been commonplace. Once she was gone, it wasn't worth the effort to reconstruct our former lives. Not with just the two of us. Not when I would head up north to university next year and dad was seriously looking at a permanent move overseas.

I bet Evie would love it.

A smile crosses my face a moment later, because she mightn't have even the slightest inclination to sail across the beautiful clear waters. What I do know is that I would love to

take her, would love to see her expressions change as she experiences each moment.

That was the best thing about today. Watching her face. Seeing her enjoyment, her reticence, her nerves and fears and joy.

I move to the wardrobe, pulling an old shoebox down from the topmost shelf, sitting on her bed as I remove the lid, shuffling through the contents. A locked diary gets set aside—a book I can't even touch without a rush of voyeurism—the entries unread except by the girl who penned them.

The jewellery inside is worthless, sad plastic baubles. Anything of value was long ago sold or traded or bartered. Underneath are a collection of small treasures. I recognise a piece of quartz with a jagged seam through it she picked up from Parson's Beach on a family outing. A toy whistle from an old Christmas cracker, a small skeleton with moveable joints that had been a necklace pendant until the screw at the top broke away.

Old snapshots are inside. One shows me, hand in front of my face as I push the camera away. Another is Addie, taken years ago. Back when she was sixteen, just before everything went to hell.

Her chestnut hair is full of fire in the late afternoon sun, her cheeks are tinged with pink where the harsh summer rays wore down her sunscreen. Green eyes catch the light, flashing like emeralds.

My throat clutches, my *heart* clutches, until I have to leave, taking the stairs two or three at a time, my pulse thundering in my ears, the deep distress of failure clinging to me like the oily smoke from Sunday.

Upstairs, I don't stop. I get back into my car and drive into the city.

Wilder has a dorm room at the school, a concession he fought and won from his parents during the first bitter months of their still-to-be-settled acrimonious divorce.

He lets me in, even though he's got a girl in there. A girl who isn't Dahlia, despite his promise, a rule we both knew he would never keep.

But, in the moment, I don't care he takes nothing seriously; that he's a gigantic man whore who treats the girl who adores him like she's nothing.

Not when he makes space for me without question, cajoling me out of my misery with a series of terrible jokes.

Not when he forces me out to test drive a ridiculously expensive car that neither of us have the slightest interest in buying, speeding over the hilltop ridges along the west side of the range, leaving the painful memories behind me in the dust.

CHAPTER TEN

EVIE

IT'S HARD TO REMEMBER THE LAST TIME I LOOKED FORWARD to something. For years there's been lists of things to do, goals to accomplish before I can move on to the next thing... and the next.

But to actually fall asleep, excited about the coming day?

That just doesn't happen.

So, the anticipation coursing through my blood stream right now is incredible. My skin buzzes as I elbow Ant out of the bathroom, grumbling that he better not have used all the hot water again.

It's exhilarating to get my hair ready and care how it looks. To use the new mirror and the new makeup and dress in the new clothes... and to have the new worry that Maddox won't

show and this gorgeous investment in the coming day will fall apart.

I pace. Back and forth until it would wear a hole in the carpet if we had one covering our faux-wood-panelling floors.

“Sit down,” Ant grumbles. “You’re making me jumpy.”

I side-eye my brother, thinking how he’d react if I explained how much of this was his fault for sending me out to collect the drugs he should have fetched for himself.

But I won’t because I’m nice like that.

My anxiety gains momentum when I check the time on my phone and see it’s now ten minutes past the time Maddox should have collected me if he was going to. Something I shouldn’t be upset about, considering I’m perfectly capable of making my own way there. It’s just I thought he said he’d take me.

I could text him now to check but if he’s already in school...

You coming or what?

My face sports a gigantic smile as I reply:

All right, grumpy. Try ringing the doorbell next time.

Not that we have one.

“Gotta go,” I tell Ant, waving as I scoot out the door. “See you later.”

Maddox waits, leaning against his car, ankles and arms crossed, like some rich quarterback hunk from a teen movie. Despite wearing the same school uniform as every other boy at Tiaki, his hangs from his frame with the clean lines of a new season Brioni.

He steps forward when I stop short, opening the door and holding it as I slip into the passenger seat, closing it when my legs are safely inside. As he rounds the front of the vehicle, my breath catches in my throat. Yesterday, there’d been too

much of everything to pay attention but right now there's nothing else splitting my focus.

There isn't a single piece of him I would change. From the tips of his sunny blond hair to the soles of his polished black shoes, he is absolute perfection.

I want to pinch myself as he gets into the driver's seat, smiling at me, reaching over to adjust where my blouse has caught on the belt.

When his eyes meet mine, I can't look away.

If he made his awful suggestion right now, I wouldn't have the wherewithal to turn him down.

Luckily, he doesn't.

"Aren't we running late?" I ask just to say something, to make it look like he hasn't blown my mind with his casual elegance, his slap-you-in-the-face beauty.

"Teachers have a staff meeting every Wednesday." He turns to me, flashing teeth a dentist must have lovingly nurtured to maturity. "You *have* been away a long time."

I have and now he mentions it I vaguely recall that midweek is always a late start and an early finish, the latter because of the sports taking place in the playing fields out the back of the school.

When he pulls into the student carpark, he touches me lightly on the wrist. "You look beautiful."

His gaze is sincere enough to have me blushing, and I *feel* beautiful, inside and out.

As I get out of the fancy car belonging to the richest, handsomest boy I've ever seen, I think that absolutely nothing can ruin my day.

"DID YOU SEE HER?" an indignant voice squawks, three hours later. I ducked into the bathroom at the start of the lunch break and now I'm trapped here. Tied in place by embarrassment while a group of girls loudly discuss me outside the stall.

So far, they're not my biggest fans.

"Gingers shouldn't be allowed on campus, let alone be permitted to steal royals away from the rest of us."

A snort greets this declaration, quickly stifled.

"I heard she works at the strip club in town," another girl says. "Can you imagine how run-through she must be after working in a place like that?"

My face burns and my lip swells where I keep biting it. I should have emerged at the start, cutting their bitch-fest short but I mistakenly thought it would be easier to hide until they left. Now they just keep going... and going... until I'm annoyed at them and myself.

"Sila told me she's his cousin," another girl says, followed by a chorus of 'Ew.' "And she got sent here straight from being locked in juvie on the west coast."

"That's even fucking worse," the first one replies, making a retching sound. "They were holding hands when they went into English this morning. Barf."

"I heard they were practically Frenching each other in the common room."

This is ridiculous. I can't stay in here all day. Don't these bitches have better ways to spend their lunch break?

Apparently, not.

They're launching into a new round of lies and insults when I lose my patience and gain my courage, flouncing out of the cubicle, chin held high, heading straight to the sink to wash my hands.

"Morning," I say to the crowd of gossips two sinks over, priming my hair once I shake my hands dry.

There's a curl by my ear that I can never get to stay in place, and I try to hook it out of the way, encouraging it to stay with a light sprinkle of water. When I glance at the group in the mirror, they're pulling faces at each other, one girl standing slightly aside.

I take out my lipstick to touch up my colour, making a show of getting it precisely up to the line.

For theatrical flare, I smack my lips together and pout when I'm finished, lightly licking across to give them added gloss. Then I reach down my top, adjusting my boobs inside my bra, plumping them up to make the most of my cleavage.

When I undo the top two buttons, it creates quite the show.

My skirt waistband gets the treatment next, rolling over and over until it hikes the hem to expose another two inches of thigh.

I step back, turning from one side to another, making fish lips at the mirror before taking out my phone to fake-pose for a couple of selfies.

"Oh," I say, seeing a blonde girl's gorgeous, oversized earrings. "Can I just get a picture of those? They're adorable."

I snap the shot before she can protest, typing out a message, mumbling the words under my breath but loud enough to be heard, "Maddox, sweetie, could you get me a pair like this from..." Then I turn back to her. "Where did you get them?"

Her face colours a dark crimson while her friends look on with a malicious joy sparkling in their eyes.

"They're family heirlooms," she says in a tight voice that identifies her as the ringleader.

"Yikes. Don't want a pair of hand-me-downs." I type again. "Could you have a jeweller handcraft them from scratch? K thanks bye."

I pretend to press send, then tuck the phone away, patting the girl on the arm. "Don't worry, love. Once I'm finished with him, I'll drop him back in your lap, promise." Then I give her a slow head-to-toe eye crawl. "Though if he wasn't interested before, I doubt he's going to care after."

One girl has the misfortune to let a laugh escape and the others round on her, an easier target for their trouble. I haul a smile into place as I leave and walk into the common room,

spotting Maddox leaning against a wall, another boy talking intently to him while he barely seems to listen, eyes following my every move.

He has another of those envelopes in his hand, the notes to get me up to speed in English this time. A sign he thinks I'll be here long enough to do that.

Another grain of anxiety washes away.

"Hey," he says when I draw close, despite the other boy being mid-sentence. "You didn't fall in, then."

"Got trapped for a few minutes, that's all. The girls' bathroom is awash with gossip."

"All of it untrue, I hope."

"Eh." I raise my hand and seesaw it. "Bit of both."

"Thanks, Malcolm," he says to the boy who's still standing there, waiting for a space to resume. "I'll think about it and catch up with you later in the week."

Malcolm's face bursts into a dazzling display of gratitude.

"What's that about?" I ask as he moves away.

"God knows. I wasn't paying attention. I'm sure he'll catch me up to speed the next time he corners me."

Maddox takes my hand and whisks me along the corridor, outside and across the quad, then into the assembly hall. "I didn't show you this, yesterday," he says, opening a door into a stuffy corridor, then another into an airless staircase, sweltering in the summer heat. "It's a clubhouse."

"It better have air-conditioning," I mumble, and he laughs, turning side on and gesturing for me to scramble past him, something that's such an exceedingly tight fit that by the time I'm ahead, my breathlessness isn't entirely connected to the climb.

Once we're inside the room, it's a different story. A large bay window is already open, letting the air circulate without getting too breezy. There are piles of old boxes along the right-hand side of the room, and a large screen across the back.

I tilt my head, frowning, then retreat a step. “Is someone there?” I whisper to Maddox, who seems completely unconcerned.

“Yeah. There’s usually one of us up here.” He tilts his head at the clear sounds of two people fucking. He raises his voice. “Let’s go down this end so we don’t disturb them.”

“Real subtle,” Zane calls, showing no sign our arrival is about to hasten his.

Maddox just rolls his eyes and takes a seat on a circular rug, positioning a cushion to protect his arse from the hardwood floor. “We can study here.”

“What are we studying?”

He slaps down the envelopes as he says each one. “Algebra. English. History. Where do you want to start?”

A girl whimpers and I stare at the screen, then at Maddox, who can hear the sounds but doesn’t seem to care. I take a seat on the carpet next to him, opening the History packet and seeing a list of dates and names, quickly stuffing it back inside.

“Opinion duly noted.”

Wilder stomps up the staircase, tosses us one look, and declares, “Losers.”

He snickers while Dahlia pushes him to the side so she can get closer to the breeze from the window. “Don’t insult people for wanting to be smarter than you.”

“Oh, we are definitely smarter than your boyfriend,” Maddox says with a grin. “Whether or not we study.”

Wilder drops onto the carpet near us, snagging the envelope I just discarded. “You know they gave us access to this room so we could have fun without every minion in the land knowing our business.”

“I thought it was so we could fuck,” Zane says, walking around the edge of the screen, buttoning his shirt and fly. “Why else would you climb the deathtrap of those stairs?”

A girl follows him out from behind the screen, cheeks stained with tears. I'm concerned but nobody else in the room appears bothered. Zane pats her rear end as she wipes her face, then gives her another swat to prompt her out of the room and downstairs.

My lips are nearly bitten through as I try not to look, then I have a flash from yesterday. The tears in my eyes while Maddox said he had a friend who'd love me.

A band tightens around my chest, sending my gaze to Zane then bouncing away to Maddox, then seeking the easier refuge of the floor.

"We've got try-outs tomorrow," Wilder says, tossing the envelope of pages back into the main pile. "Who's coming?"

"For what?" I ask when nobody else seems interested.

"Roller derby." He tilts his head to the side. "It's the men's team so you can't earn a spot but I'm sure they'd love a new cheerleader."

"The only cheerleader," Dahlia scoffs. "Nobody plays the bloody game, and nobody attends the tournaments."

"You're out of the loop. It's gonna be the next big thing."

She rolls her eyes. "It was big last century, not now. Get with the times." Then she turns my way. "Word of warning, never fall for his bullshit."

"And how do you know it's bullshit?" he demands, faux angry.

"Because your mouth's moving."

He rises only long enough to tackle her to the ground, pinning her under him and stealing long kisses as punishment before he rolls onto his back to set her free.

Everyone soon settles down, finding their own groove while Maddox takes me through some of the finer points of the English pages. "Don't worry," he says, when my forehead is set in a permanent frown. "We can grab the movie version of everything and that'll get you up to speed far more quickly."

Zane throws a pillow his way. “Cheater.”

“Levelling the playing field isn’t cheating.”

Dahlia cackles with laughter. “Especially when you’re trying to impress your new girl. How much time are you going to spend watching the actual movie, hm?”

Maddox leans close to me as he helps sweep the pages together. Wilder has Dahlia up against the wall, showing a keen interest in acquainting his tongue with her tonsils. Zane relaxes near the window, buttons done up but not in the correct holes.

I tilt my face towards Maddox, his hand touching my shoulder and following the curve until it rests lightly against my neck. There’s a gentle pulse in my lips and my stomach pulls tight with anticipation. The light warmth of his breath blows against my cheek.

His hand squeezes a little tighter, my flesh quivering under his touch. My lips part as I ease another centimetre closer.

Then he stands, helping me to my feet. The movement provides an excuse to let my hair fall to cover my face, the embarrassment of misreading the situation lighting a fire in my cheeks.

“Better get to class,” he says, leading the way downstairs.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

MADDOX

THE NEXT WEEK FEELS LIKE I'M HOVERING IN MIDAIR, WAITING for the balance to tip until I go plunging to the ground. Each day I survive, my pessimism lowers.

This girl, though.

This girl.

My chest has never hollowed when I stare at someone pretty the way it does when I glance Evie's way. My stomach has never pulled so tight, or my throat narrowed like when she tilts her head back and laughs. I love when she becomes enthused about some stray fact like she does a dozen times a day, reaching over to grab my hand and squeeze it, like she's transmitting knowledge through a subliminal morse code of touch.

I'm never physical. Most of the time, I'm barely aware I have a body at all, except as a vehicle to get me from place to place. But when Evie's near, every cell vibrates with delight. A dozen times a day, my head is dizzy, my mouth full of cotton wool.

She wants more. I see it in her gestures, her movements, the way she sometimes sways towards me, her eyes dancing with a hundred different shades of green, her lips full and pouting and ever so slightly open to reveal the underlying flash of teeth.

A tiny gap separates her front incisors and sometimes at night, I wake from a dream where I finally run my tongue over the groove, the sensation so intense I lick my lips to dispel the lingering imprint.

Evie has flicked the switch that turns my body from robotic animation into a living breathing human and it *terrifies* me. Most of all because as much as she set me alight, nothing else has changed.

To kiss her would be to lead her astray because after the kissing would come the fondling and the undressing and the... and the *stuff* I can't think about because my brain short-circuits and my heart spasms and the hairs on the back of my neck throw a party, dancing and jiving and twisting until I rub my hand across it to get them to stop.

"Did you find the references for our history project?" I ask as we drive to school. We're doing a deep dive into the Urewera raids. I still need to buy Evie a computer and the surplus stock at the school has long been allocated, but she promised to research on her phone.

"Yeah, I have, but I need to print some of it out. I'll pop into the public library and get it done before Friday." Two days away.

"We can go this afternoon if you want. I'm free."

"Not today, sorry. I need to go to the club." She lets out an irritated sigh. "Robyn keeps insisting she doesn't have any hours for me, which is bullshit, but I've already apologised

over the phone a dozen times. If I don't work this out in person, I won't have enough for my half of the rent."

"I'll pay it," I immediately offer. "Just tell me who to pay and how much."

"Thank you, that's very kind, but I need to get this sorted. If I can't get her to put me back into the schedule, then I'll have to find another job. I can't keep living off your generosity forever. I've already accepted far too much."

There's a stern tilt to her nose, an expression of determination that makes me think she'll run rings around Robyn, probably getting herself reinstated despite my bribe.

"I don't mind—"

"No. Thank you, but no." Her voice is steel. "I need to have a job."

"Your job could be school. I'll pay you to attend every day." But the set of her jaw already tells me that won't fly. My voice softens. "I don't want you working at the club. Not when my father goes there so regularly, you recognised me from the backseat of a car on a dark night."

"Then I'll ask Robyn to schedule me for different hours. I already want to avoid my landlord, so it'll be two birds with one stone."

"But you don't need to work there at all. That's the best way to avoid both."

"Except then I won't have a job and if you wake up tomorrow and stop... whatever it is you're doing, then I'll be shit out of luck trying to get a foothold back in the door. The woman's got a vindictive streak a mile wide, and it took me ages to get two nights. If I'm set back..."

Her words tangle to a halt. Her eyes are far too bright, a sheen of tears coating them. Patches of colour mottle her cheeks.

A reaction that fills me with sympathetic distress. I ache to lift her burden, but it's my messing around that caused at least some of her turmoil.

She stares straight at the dashboard, holding her breath, then slowly releasing it. As she draws in another, her diaphragm expands to strain at the seams of her blouse, then she repeats the hold and exhalation.

My breathing falls into the same pattern with no conscious thought.

“You won’t get set back. I promise you, if the day ever comes where you don’t want to attend school or hang out with me and my friends, I’ll inform my father and he’ll pull whatever strings he needs to, to get you back on that stage.”

It’s something to say, something to cover my tracks. I’m also uncomfortably aware, he probably would.

The idea sends a wave of revulsion rippling through me. “You didn’t ever...” It’s hard to even complete the thought, let alone the question. “You didn’t sleep with him, did you?”

“It’s a strip club not a brothel.” The offence in her voice comes as a relief.

“And can you stop working there? I can’t demand you stop, obviously, but could you, as a favour to me?”

Her gaze rests on me for a moment, troubled, and I struggle to find the traces of Addie I saw so clearly on that first night. Her hair and eye colour, sure, but even there all I see are the differences.

She turns to stare out the passenger window and I resist the urge to shake her and demand to know why she’s so keen to go back to work.

I know why. Because she’s poor and everyone in her life has been transient, except for her brother, a junkie, not the most reliable faux father figure to have at home.

And it irritates me because I can’t be the only one to see there’s a glow to her that was absent the first day. Not the hair or the makeup but a light shining from within.

Attending school is good for her. This is what she needs. There’ll be a way to have her accept my money instead of

going to the club to beg for her job back. I just need to think of it.

We arrive outside the English class too early, and loiter in the hallway, leaning against the wall.

“Are you okay?” she asks, tugging at my hand enough for me to realise I’m squeezing too hard, abruptly letting go.

“Fine. I’m—”

“... she’s a stripper,” a boy farther along the corridor laughs to his mate, back to us, holding his phone with the *Private Sessions* app open on Evie’s page.

The word is an offhand comment, spoken underneath his breath, but Evie tenses beside me and without a conscious thought, I lunge towards him, infuriated that the remark hurt her, even a little. Glad to have something to pour my energy into.

The friend’s eyes widen in alarm as I grab the boy’s shoulder and twist him around, bunching the front of his shirt in both fists before slamming him against the lockers. Then immediately doing it again because the thump of his body against the metal doors makes my nerves hum with enjoyment. “What the fuck did you say?”

His expression blanks with shock, gaze darting in all directions as the few kids surrounding him step away.

“N-nothing—”

I headbutt him, skull striking the bridge of his nose with a satisfying crunch. Whatever response he was about to offer dissipates in an instant as his body sags to the side, snapping upright when I tug his shirt, jerking him forward only to slam his torso against the bank of lockers again.

Strength flows into me like the blow handed me all his power. I draw up to my full height, at least four inches above him, tilting my head, looking down, eyes drilling into his like sharp spikes.

The icy fingers gripping my temple have gone, replaced by the fire of my temper as I get closer and closer—an inch, a

centimetre, a hair's breadth—grinning like a fucking maniac. The surrounding students retreat into a loose semicircle, gazes fixed to the free entertainment.

“Answer me,” I growl between thin lips, mouth drawn into a smile as I watch him struggle for the words, every option a potential catastrophe, every phrase a key to unlock freedom or further punishment.

His hands flutter up to push against mine then think better of it, floating back down to his side. “S-sorry. I didn't mean anything by it.”

I release him, taking a half step back, then he glances at his friend with a smirk, and I lose it, fully lose it, smashing my fist into his face over and over, nutting him again, this time getting a spatter of his blood over my crisp white shirt, the dark crimson spray making my lip curl, making me step back.

Evie stares at me with wide eyes, pupils expanding until they darken into night. Her head tips back, mouth gently opening. She glances at the injured boy then back to me, tongue slowly licking across her upper lip, commanding my attention for full seconds before I wrest my gaze back to my target.

A steady pulse of blood trickles over his lips, spilling onto his chin. I swipe my forefinger through it, turning back to Evie without thinking, without registering what I have planned.

She tilts her chin to stare up at me, nipples stiffening through the thin material of her blouse, calmly meeting my gaze as I slide my clean hand around the back of her neck.

My lips seek the shell of her ear, to whisper, “Since you can't wear my collar, how about I paint you one instead?”

And I wasn't asking her permission, but my chest pulls tight, throbbing in time with my heartbeat as she nods. I wipe my laden finger across her throat, fresh paint for a gorgeous canvas. The blood smears easily across her pale skin, bringing life and colour to match the spreading flush across her cheeks.

When I finish, the pulse in her neck jumps, visibly excited. There's a vibrant sparkle in her eyes and I feel an echo of the

stirring from the first night. A trickle of arousal, muted but still stronger than anyone else has ever drawn from me.

I press my thumb on the centre of her bottom lip, remembering how they parted around the barrel and the surge grows stronger. I move my hand farther, cupping her jaw, pressing my lips to hers before the urge can dissipate, pleasure and trepidation pulsing through my bloodstream.

The touch of her luscious mouth against mine is a powerful cascade of too many sensations to keep track. They pass through me, pure energy, pure *need*.

When I pull back a little, panting for breath, she draws me back to her with a gasp, not done, not *satisfied*, the palm of her right hand pressed against my chest, her left curling into my hair, tugging it with as much force as I tug hers, giving back as good as she gets.

The welcome in her response drives me crazy.

I pin her against the locker with my bloodstained hand, trapping her like prey, setting upon her like a predator, taking what he wants with only his ragged conscience capable of stopping him.

This time when I break away, I ask, “Do you want me to punish him more?” Not even knowing why, what that could accomplish. Just following the impulse, leaning into everything that usually sends me running.

Evie whispers back, “You remember I *am* a stripper, right? We literally just talked about this.”

She scrunches her nose, cute enough to be edible. I want to take bites of her, marking every inch of her skin with my teeth, the urge so overpowering that I clench my jaw, so I don't accidentally follow through and maul her in the hallway.

As my expression twists, she gives a soft laugh. “You can't punish everyone for using a truthful description.”

“I can if the only reason they use it is to belittle you or hurt you.” I cup her chin, rubbing the rough pad of my thumb against her jawline, watching her shiver, and absorbing it like

a compliment. “If he said it with any fucking respect, I wouldn’t have to put him in his place.”

There’s a strange yearning in her eyes, then she shakes her head.

A second later, the icy band comes back but I knock it away for long enough to press gentle kisses along her jawline, thrilled when her body curves into mine, seeking something I can’t give her, not yet, but maybe one day.

And if this is how it feels to fulfil Evie’s needs, then I want more of it, whether the spill of arousal accompanies it or not.

I want her to make the tiny gasp again. Better still, I want to hear her moan.

The battered boy behind me makes his own sounds as his friend helps him along the corridor but I don’t turn. I can’t tear my gaze away for a single second.

“A lineup of eager students,” Mr Acaster says, finally arriving to open the classroom door. “That’s what I like to see.”

As we file into the room, taking a double seat together in the back row, Wilder and Zane arriving late to sit across the aisle, the person *I* most like to see has flushed cheeks, her lips red and slightly swollen, and contentment fills me, my bruised knuckles a small price to pay.

Evie stares at me with a serious expression, a slight frown suddenly smoothing away as she smiles.

“Okay,” she says and when I’m about to ask her, ‘*Okay, what?*’ adds, “I’ll stop working at the club.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

EVIE

AFTER MADDOX DROPS ME HOME THAT AFTERNOON, I LOCK myself in the bathroom, staring at my reflection, pulling the neck of my blouse down to see the flaking line of blood drawn across my throat.

Just the sight makes my chest flood with warmth. Much as I pretend the words students mutter under their breaths as I pass by don't hurt, they inflict damage, of course they do.

Damage that Maddox saw and immediately took retribution for. With that over-the-top reaction, I can't imagine anyone will be in a hurry to insult me again.

My head replays the images, the moments as he hears, lunges, strikes. Then, when the boy's behaviour didn't change fast enough, strikes again and again and again. I touch my fingertip to the browning smear, wishing it were something

more permanent to fasten the memory in my head for years to come.

I stare at the collar wrapped around my wrist, pretending to be a bracelet. The catch is fiddly to unfasten one-handed, but I get it free, unwinding the leather. I rest it against my neck, staring at my reflection, seeing the reservation in her eyes.

But it's just a strip of leather, not a metal shackle, flaking with rust.

I take a selfie to remember the new collar Maddox gave me, then wash the dried blood away, drying my skin before stretching the leather band around my throat, fumbling with the catch.

The touch against my scar sends a shiver down my spine. The longer the material touches my neck, the worse it gets. I feel the metal shackle, hear the dull clunk of the rusty chain. Straw scratches at my skin, field mice rustle in the feed hay.

My breathing picks up speed. My pulse rate increases to match.

Cotton wool stuffs my head until thinking is an impossibility, just like it was when I had sedatives coursing through my bloodstream, making my limbs too heavy to lift.

My eyes flick open, scared to glance at my reflection in case I see the creature other people see instead of the girl. The creature that invites abuse just by existing.

I need Ant. Need the one person who always sees me for who I am. Who knew I was worth rescuing when nobody else bothered.

But he's out and it might be hours until he's home.

Cold water against my wrists helps some. Mumbling song lyrics under my breath helps more.

The beautiful necklace goes back around my wrist, tongue pressing against the gap in my teeth as I concentrate on getting it fastened, forcefully shoving all the other unwelcome thoughts from my head.

I think I've recovered, sitting on the sofa, rereading the same paragraph in my English text without absorbing a single word. Then I hear the beep as Ant punches in the door code, and fly into his arms as he steps inside, clinging to him, arms wrapped so tightly his ribcage creaks.

"Steady on," he says with a laugh. "We just saw each other this morning."

"I know." My arms won't loosen, and he doesn't force me to let go, lifting me so he can walk across to the sofa, collapsing onto the cushions with me still in his arms. "My head's not right."

He holds me and strokes my hair and makes everything better just by being the brother I adore. He doesn't worry about asking questions, knowing if I need to talk, I'll do it, and if I don't, forcing the issue will just make everything worse.

Finally, I release him, resting my head against his chest for a few moments, listening to the strong beat of his heart.

It's okay. Everything is okay.

And with his comfort nearby, my head finally accepts the statement as true.

"You want something to eat?" I ask, already moving to the fridge, examining the contents, pulling out the last of the ready meals because my residual shaking makes it hard to pull something together from scratch.

"Yeah. That'll be good." He checks his watch. "You're still not working at the club?"

"No." I program the time into the microwave, leaning against the bench while the meals heat. "Robyn hung up on me the last time I called."

I bite my lip, wondering if I should tell him about Maddox's request and the Venmo he sent to cover my share of the rent. But we've never talked about stuff like that, and I don't know how to start.

Once the microwave pings, I serve up the food. While eating, I pull out my phone, bringing up the picture I took of

my bloodstained throat.

Anyone else might think me mad for finding the entire scenario romantic but it really spoke to me. There's a resonance with Maddox I've never experienced with anyone outside my family.

In the past week, attending school has made me feel my age again. Not just a hamster on a wheel, endlessly spinning, but someone who could have a future. Who might be able to find a career one day instead of just a job. Like all those years where I was tossed from home to home, accepted only for the government paycheque that accompanied me, never staying long enough to find friends, sometimes not allowed to go to school at all, is erased. A blip with no long-lasting effects. A few learning packets to catch me up to speed and it could all be behind me. Nobody ever knowing how different I am unless I go to the trouble of telling them.

Back to normal.

All of that is thanks to Maddox, not just for outfitting me and dragging me along to class but for keeping me steady when I would have bolted, for his patience as he helps me study, most of it easy to understand but sometimes hitting against large chasms in my knowledge.

Even with his friends, when they're chatting and laughing, he includes me in conversations and explains their private jokes.

A notification pings from my *Private Sessions* account. A new request. Something I could do in five minutes and, even though I only have a couple hundred followers, it might earn a few hundred on general release.

Instead of accepting, I click into settings and begin the deactivation process on my account. It's uncomfortable to turn away money, but it seems like cheating to agree not to strip, then upload photographs just as revealing.

I can't wear his collar, but I can do this. Even if Maddox never knows, I will, and the gesture instantly makes me happier.

MADDOX

Wilder sends me an invitation to a ‘River Rave,’ enthusing about all the people who’ll be there. Dahlia is presumably not one of them considering how many other girls are on his list.

I say I’ll get back to him, then go onto an adult retailer website, hunting for a toy that might work with Evie. After today’s success, I want to press ahead while the moment’s ripe with promise.

While conducting my impromptu crash-course on the extensive variety of discreet vibrators available, I get an alert on my phone. A notice I set up for any changes to Evie’s page sends me to the site, cueing a moment of panic when I think she’s blocked me, then a glow of joy as I see it’s not just me she’s blocked. It’s the entire world.

A wave of pleasure rolls across me and I close my eyes, savouring the sensation, then they startle open at a text alert.

EVIE

Thought you might like this before it’s washed away.

The attachment is a selfie with her painted collar still intact. I pinch it larger, not staring at the bloodstain, though I *will*, but at her expression.

She might have sent the image to me but I’m not the reason she took it. Evie snapped the photo to have the memory for herself.

Another pinch of satisfaction hits me at the thought my spontaneous gesture, which means so much to me, means a lot to her, too.

You're not tattooing it in place? We could get matching collars.

You must love needles a lot more than I do.

I roll onto my stomach, smiling, wondering how tightly she'd crush my hand if I were to whisk her along to the tattoo parlour in town that I use. Suddenly, the desire to see her again, despite only having dropped her at her door an hour ago, grows to overwhelming.

Do you want to come to a party tonight?

On a school night?

I think Wilder's right and you really are a swot.

I'm sorry?

Did you just try to peer-pressure me into attending a party?

Did it work?

Depends on whether I have to bring anything.

Just yourself and the skimpiest dress you own.

That's quite the challenge for an ex-stripper. Do bedazzled pasties count as a dress?

Holy fuck, no. I'll send you something.

It takes a few minutes more to arrange, then I head for the shower, whistling at the thought my long drought of an hour (two, maximum) is finally at an end.

EVIE'S EYES stretch to absorb half her face as I get out of the car to hold the door open for her. A reaction exactly matching to the one I'd envisioned when I dressed in the tux.

I've clocked her expressions as I turn up at her door every morning. I've seen the full length appreciation journey her eyes go on when I'm just wearing my uniform. About time I gave them something worth their effort.

And the dress I chose for her looks just as fabulous.

"Christ, you're a fucking weirdo," Wilder shouts the moment we turn up to the party. "Jeans and a t-shirt too much to ask, eh?"

I'm about to blurt out a response when Evie asks, "Is Dahlia here?" and my friend is immediately on the back foot.

"Sure, maybe? I'm not... You want a drink?"

He scuttles off and I doubt we'll see him again. I circle back to the car to dump my jacket—the night shows no sign of releasing the day's heat—then escort her inside the house.

"This place is enormous," she exclaims, cupping her hand around my upper arm, transmitting every jolt of alarm or excitement through her clutching fingers. "Are all the cliffside houses this big?"

"No, this one is on the small side."

"Right." Her voice is tiny for a second, then she smiles broadly. "So, this is like the servants' quarters version?"

"Definitely. You want to eat or drink something?"

"Beluga caviar and champagne, nothing fancy."

I tug her through to the kitchen, watching her face fill with excitement as she gets her first look at the view across the river. "Oh, look," she says, pointing. "I can just make out the poor people from here."

We settle for a beer each, mine non-alcoholic since I'm driving, then explore the house from top to bottom, before joining the partygoers in the garage, the door open to spill its

overflow onto the large cobbled bay at the house end of the driveway.

Some kids are playing pool, incorporating disposable cups of beer into the game, while another group throws darts at a board, giving occasional loud cheers before sculling whatever drink is in their hands. Music blares from a tree, the portable speakers hanging from its low branches.

“Is it everything you hoped and dreamed of?” I ask, securing us a place on the concrete bench near the stone steps leading down to the river. “We can go skinny dipping later if you like.”

“When have you ever gone skinny dipping?” she asks, laughing like the idea is utterly preposterous.

“A lot,” I tell her with a straight face, then she tickles me, and I dissolve into laughter. “Okay”—I pinch my fingers together—“a little bit,” then further amend to, “Once.”

“Big talker.” She leans into my side, face alight with a dozen different thoughts at once, eyes darting in all directions, eager to keep track of it all. “Did you grow up in a place like this?”

“My house is just a few streets over,” I admit. “It’s a bit fancier.”

“A bit,” Wilder snorts, appearing out of nowhere. “It’s double the size, but I’m reliably informed it’s what you do with it that counts.”

“Someone’s feeling anxious about their dorm room.”

“You live at the school?” Evie asks. “That must be so cool.”

“Yeah. It’s always been my dream to live in a shoebox and eat with dozens of other teenagers every day.”

“Don’t listen to him,” I tell her, taking careful note of her interest. “He bitched and moaned until his parents put him up there. He loves it really.”

Wilder rolls his eyes. “Sure. I especially love it when your boytoy crashes there for the night.”

“Get away from me, you fucking freak,” a girl shouts, walking by at double speed with Zane trailing behind her, changing direction when he sees us.

“Nice to see you haven’t lost your touch.”

Zane ignores Wilder’s jibe, taking the seat on Evie’s other side, nudging her with his shoulder. “You’re a long way from home.”

“Should I be worried you know where my girlfriend lives?”

“If it keeps you happy, knock yourself out.” He frowns over at the increasingly loud garage. “Is it just me or are these parties getting lamer every year?”

“They were always lame,” I agree. “If you want a drink, it’s easier to go to the pub.”

Wilder snorts with amusement. “And when’s the last time you did that?”

Evie puts a hand on my knee. “That makes his point better, not worse. What do you like about the party?”

He drains the last of his cup, staring at the base in confusion, like he thought it would magically refill itself. Then a cute brunette from our shared English class wanders over, obviously having kept tabs on him because she has a replacement cup for him in her hand. “Why, thank you, sweetie. What’s your name?”

“Dawn,” she says and giggles.

“And do you have a safe word, Dawn?”

Evie bristles so hard I expect spikes to pop from her skin. “You could use the word Dahlia. That’s a good one.”

Zane bursts into laughter and doesn’t stop even when Wilder tackles him to the ground, rolling around, leaving deep divots in the beautifully manicured lawn.

The brunette blinks but since nobody’s paying attention, she soon sashays back to the main party, immediately getting drawn into the game of pool. Potentially as one of the prizes.

I hug Evie, loving the softness of her skin, the gentleness of her smile, the fierce defence of her friend contained in those few, viciously pointed words.

Behind us, Wilder and Zane give up, falling onto their backs, puffing with exertion. “Are you from here originally, Evie?”

“Yeah,” she says, swinging sideways on the seat to see him better. “I moved out of the district for a few years while in foster care but moved back in with my brother.”

“What happened to your parents?”

I feel her stiffen and think she won’t answer, then she releases the tension with a shrug. “They were in a car accident. Mum died and Dad was badly injured. He wasn’t in a fit state to look after me most of the time, so I went in and out of care, then he died just after I turned fourteen.”

“Sorry,” he says. “That’s rough. Don’t know if Mads caught you up to speed, but my mum died of cancer a few years back, not long before...”

He trails off, eyes widening in apology as he glances at me. Even Wilder is aware enough to look mildly worried for a change and I rush to fill the pause with another painful shared truth. “My mum died, too, but I don’t remember her. She had depression for years after I was born, and nobody realised how bad it was until it was too late.”

Evie softens as she bends further towards me. “She killed herself?”

“Yeah. She took a handful of pills, then wandered into the river with rocks in her pockets in case it didn’t work.”

“Christ,” Wilder says, looking absolutely appalled. “I know I said the party sucked before but this pity-party legitimately sucks a thousand times harder.”

“Don’t worry,” Zane says with an oddly malevolent streak for him. “Wilder’s got so many stepmothers it makes up for the ones the rest of us lack.”

“They’re not stepmothers, they’re just dad’s flings, you dork.” Then to Evie, who still seems alarmed. “My parents are still married.”

“Not for long.”

He punches Zane in the shoulder for the comment. “Thanks for reminding me my mother’s about to depart overseas and I’ll probably never see her again.” He waves a hand around the three of us. “At least your parents died. Mine just hates me because I remind her of my father.”

“That sounds really hard,” Evie says, voice full of sympathy.

Wilder’s so used to our brand of tough love, he looks startled at having an empathetic human on his hands. “Thank you. It is.” Then, because he’s Wilder, he completely ruins the moment and Evie’s solidarity by saying, “And it’ll take dozens of warm bodies to make things soft again. Want to get onto the list?”

“If you ever touch a hair on Evie’s head, I will bite off whatever fingers did the touching, then spit the severed digits on the ground, make you pick them up with your mouth, chew them to a pulp, and swallow.”

“And I’ll cheer you on,” she adds, eyes sparkling with her special brand of warmth again.

“Ugh. This is tragic.” Wilder clambers to his feet, brushing grass off his back and front. “I’m off to find some casual entertainment for the evening.” He wags a warning finger at Evie. “And what Dahlia doesn’t know, doesn’t hurt her.”

She stares after him as he lopes away, drawing female attention like a magnet. “Does he really expect me to collude to keep his secrets?”

“The problem is, he doesn’t really care,” I explain, shaking my head. “And if Dahlia shows him she does, he’ll cut his losses and move on. Then she’ll be far more devastated, regardless of whether she should.”

“She’s worth a thousand of him.”

“No, she’s not.” Zane follows Wilder’s lead. “But every girl in the country is worth more than the level of treatment they’ll get from that prick.”

She scrunches her nose. “Why do you hang out with him when you don’t like him?”

Zane and I exchange a glance, then burst into laughter. “Because he’s our friend,” I explain, sure I sound like a prize arse. “And we do like him, we just don’t like all the things about him all the time.”

“And some things, never.” Zane strides towards the garage, briefly turning to cup his hands around his mouth and shout, “Now, go ahead and do all the things I wouldn’t do.”

Evie cocks an eyebrow at me, but too many memories press too close to the surface for me to explore that instruction.

“Let’s go back to the garage and try to work out the rules of this game,” I say, gaze moving aside to avoid the disappointment on her face.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

EVIE

SMOKE HANGS IN THE AIR, THICK AND CHOKING. FLAMES dance along the floor as Maddox runs for the exit, sprinting like I weigh nothing more than a feather, not even seeming to feel the punches I aim at his back and head, struggling to get free.

He clicks the car door open, spilling me into the back seat. His friends are in their vehicles, tyres already spraying gravel as they plant their feet on the accelerators and drive from the old wholesaler's carpark at the speed of a scream.

My heart beats so fast I'm dizzy. When I land on the leather interior, I immediately try to scramble out of the vehicle, danger pulsing through my veins.

But he plants a hand in the centre of my chest, forcing me against the seat and my plan has gone so far awry because now

he's climbing into the rear of the car, his body pinning mine in place. So tall, rippling with lean muscle, there's absolutely no chance of escape.

And his fingers clasp my thigh, circling around the back, sending an avalanche of pleasure through my core as he wrenches my legs apart to gain access, as his palm closes over my mouth to muffle my screams, as he frees himself from the restriction of his jeans and nudges the head of his cock inside me then pauses, making sure our eyes lock before he buries himself deep inside me with one momentous thrust.

My knees bend to my chest as the orgasm rips through me, my panting breath so loud I cover my mouth with my free hand.

Usually, I sleep on the couch; me curled at one end, Ant splayed at the other, but I also have an inflatable mattress that fits into the bathroom when I need my privacy.

Since Maddox's unexpected kiss in the hallway last week, I've needed my *privacy* on a nightly basis.

It's driving me ever-so-slightly insane.

I uncoil, my inhalations slowing to normal, the only complaint as the Maddox in my imagination fades is that the real Maddox hasn't made a move on me since the incident in the hallway. Nothing that could even get close to counting as new 'privacy' fodder.

A week since he properly kissed me, a week since I thought we were growing closer with our shared revelations at the party, and I concede I might be friend-zoned.

Not a bad thing per se but not the outcome I expected. The trajectory from our first meeting to this strange touch-but-not-properly-touch area doesn't adhere to the laws of physics at all.

My head is still so full of the fantasy, I'm crimson as he collects me for the drive to school. When we get out, I purposely brush against him... and he manoeuvres around me to slam the door shut. I'd feel rejected except it's like he

doesn't register the advance at all, leaving me confused instead.

"Jesus Christ, don't you ever stop studying?" is the question Wilder greets us with hours later as he arrives in the clubhouse, shaking his head to see us committing one of his ultimate sins. "There are people you can pay to do that for you."

Maddox doesn't even glance over. "Is that how you're planning on continuing your education? Move from buying test results to buying a degree?"

"Who needs a degree? Mummy dearest paying for my housing is the only reason I'm continuing my education."

Maddox and I are on the floor, cushions supporting his lower back as he leans against the wall, me between his legs. I'm *right there*, my arse against his crotch, thrusting backwards ever so slightly when I reach for my notepad, something I do a lot for precisely that reason.

And there's nothing. No hint of a response. He doesn't ease away with discomfort, and there's no hardness poking into my lower back.

"Ball tickets," Dahlia yells from the base of the staircase, her heels making dainty little thumps as she throws herself up the steps. "Give me your credit cards immediately."

She holds her hand out to Wilder who obliges, and she types into her phone, showing off a few dances moves when she's successful. Then she turns her eye on Maddox. "Now, you."

He gives her his card and settles back, an arm across my torso, large enough to start at one shoulder and cup the other. I never used to appreciate tall men, but my thinking has taken an abrupt U-turn. Once the fear of being overpowered transformed into a desire for exactly that to happen, I uncovered a secret love of size differences.

After all, my favourite memory is him casually lifting me into his arms and sprinting for the car. *Sprinting*. Like I weighed nothing at all.

And once more I'm hot and bothered and Maddox is just stubbornly hot, hot, hot.

Dahlia finishes the transactions, then wipes her sleeve theatrically across her forehead, slumping onto the floor beside us. "Now the true planning begins. Finding the perfect outfit with the perfect accessories."

"You know this dance is boring as hell," Wilder complains. "People just stand around talking and barely drinking a thing because they can't afford to get a reputation. So much networking goes on, it might as well be a business meeting."

"That's the point," Dahlia says with a pout. "You don't understand because everything's always been handed to you on a silver platter, but some of us have to work at making all those valuable connections you take for granted." She turns to me for support. "I know *you* understand." After a nudge with her shoulder, I nod, and she mugs at her boyfriend. "See?"

The bell goes and we walk to class. Every time I lose interest in the lesson, I study Maddox from the corner of my eye.

At break, I follow Dahlia into the girls' bathroom, taking a place at the bench beside her as she retouches her makeup. "Can I ask you something?"

Two girls walk through the door, talking until they see me. They clamp their mouths shut, rolling their eyes at each other instead.

Apart from Maddox's clique, it's the behaviour I've come to expect.

"Don't let the bitches get you down," Dahlia says before smacking her lips together and tilting her head from side to side, eyes fixed on her reflection. "While they're eaten up with jealousy, I'm getting eaten out by Wilder Parry." She winks at me. "And I know which side of that equation I'd rather be on."

The arrival of the girls stops me asking the question I wanted to, instead trying, "Do they stare at you?"

She arches an eyebrow, waiting for more information.

“Everywhere we walk, students stare at me.” I tug at my ear, then twist a curl around my fingertip, pulling until it turns white. My voice drops even lower. “Not just the girls.”

“They stare because you’re a novelty.”

Right. My stomach drops and my anxiety rockets. “Because I used to work at Chezzers.”

Her mouth drops open, eyes widening, then she collapses into giggles. “No, you dick. Because no one has ever seen Maddox with a girl before. He quite famously doesn’t touch *anybody* and now he’s roaming the corridors, unable to keep his hands off you.” She washes her hands in the sink, flicking water at her reflection. “They’re not just jelly, they’re baffled. We’ve all heard of magical pussy before, but you take that to the *extreme*.”

She takes out her phone, still chuckling, dragging me into the frame for her selfie. “Say cheese.”

I dredge up a smile, but my head is spinning. Confusion doesn’t begin to describe it.

“But he must have—”

Dahlia holds up her hand. “No. I don’t know what you’re going to say but no matter how you want to minimise it, it’s a big thing. There are gossips dissecting every single move you make because they all want a piece of whatever you’re selling.”

She stares at me with amusement while I struggle to fit this new piece of information into my puzzle. I took it for granted that he and his friends were on a similar footing. Wilder and Zane spend half their time fucking or talking about fucking or coordinating future fucks.

I thought Maddox was reticent with me. That there was something wrong.

Now there’s a deep glow of pleasure at Dahlia’s revelation. A flutter of something I haven’t felt before, at least not in a good way.

I’m special.

“Christ, girl. You converted the ice king into a simp overnight. I’m surprised more people aren’t swarming you, wanting to rub your pussy for good luck.”

The image is so coarse, I burst out laughing, every part of my mood lifting exponentially until I probably sound drunk or high.

And I decide it’s time I stopped letting my past influence my present.

“Could you help me with this?” I ask Dahlia, fumbling with the catch for the leather band on my wrist.

She cocks her eyebrow, quickly undoing the fastenings, then helping me to thread it around my neck.

It’s pretty. The silver bands are reminiscent of the spikes in a collar but not overtly so, more a subtle nod in that direction. The dark lustre of the pearl hits me right in the dip of my throat, perfectly offset by my skin tone.

Scar tissue on the back of my neck throbs, my jaw tightening as I fight against the memories trying to break free.

Dahlia stares at me with concern. “Are you okay?”

“Sorry.” I shake my head, forcing a tight smile while inside I shudder, fighting to stuff everything down until it doesn’t stand a chance of resurfacing again. “Just got a wicked dose of déjà vu.”

We walk out together, Dahlia pulling ahead when she sees Wilder chatting to a girl whose kilt hem barely covers her knickers.

Maddox is watching them, slowly turning my way. His eyes dip to my throat and his expression freezes, then he gives the widest smile I’ve ever seen.

“Did you do that for me?”

I nod and he cups my jaw, the rough pad of his thumb stroking against my skin and igniting a thousand sparks of desire. He bends to me, lips soft against mine, then becoming rougher. With his opposite hand, he touches the pendant then

spaces his fingertips along my collarbone, a wicked spell that makes every erogenous zone in my body pulse in tandem.

His body curves against mine, twisting so my back is pressed firmly against the lockers, his kiss pinning me in place.

My palms flatten against his chest, greedily memorising the feel of his muscles, the way they flex and harden under my touch. Then he slowly pulls away, eyes falling to stare at my mouth, his thumb moving to rub across my lower lip, making it pulse with need.

“Come with me.”

His voice is rough and commanding. He grips my hand firmly, tugging me until I couldn't refuse even if I wanted to.

And I definitely don't want to.

He leads me straight back into the girl's bathroom, barking loudly at the few still lingering in there, “Get out. Now.”

They scramble for the exit while he pushes me against the bench beneath the mirror, hands gripping my hips and lifting me onto the surface, hands pushing my knees apart.

“I got a present for you,” he says, and I nod, eyes dropping lower but instead of showing the excitement I expect from the hoarseness of his voice, he drops to crouch between my legs.

I grip the edge of the bench, the positioning of his face between my knees sending a jolt of desire straight through my core, melting me until I gasp for air.

Maddox slowly rolls up my kilt, inch by inch, fold by fold, steadily revealing my legs until it's hitched all the way to my underwear. He locks his gaze to mine while pressing a kiss to the tender skin on the inside of my right thigh, unleashing a wave of tingles until my flesh dances under his touch, electric and alive and *aching*, an emptiness that throbs and pleads and begs to be filled.

He leaves my skirt to explore my panties, beginning a teasing, tantalising journey that sets off a million tiny sparks as his fingers slip into the leg openings on either side, the coarse

pads skating across my hips, making my insides quiver, held by the fabric's tight fit.

Then he turns his wrists, reaching over the band as his body eases back, using his elbows to close my legs together as he tugs them down in one rough motion, past my knees, another tug to my ankles, then they're cupped in his hand as he raises them to his face, nostrils twitching, smile broadening.

He balls the pale fabric, tucking them into his pocket, out of sight.

When he cups my knees and pushes them apart again, his eyes are glued to my face, reading each change in expression. My lips part as I gulp in a breath, chest heaving while my back arches, acting on its own accord, my pussy desperately seeking his touch, throbbing, pulsing, slick with need.

He sits back on his heels as he spreads my legs wide, and I should be embarrassed as he drops his gaze, eyes feasting on my eagerness, but I lose all sense of shame as he licks his lips, as his fingers bend up and over the tops of my thighs, hauling me closer, so close his breath teases my curls.

"Look at you," he murmurs and there's a sense of wonder in his voice that I've never heard from a man before.

The tone strokes something deep inside my ears, setting off a vibration in my jaw; a rumble that makes my legs spread wider, wanting to please him, wanting to show how much he's already pleasing me.

"Spread yourself." His voice is gruff enough to give me shivers. "Let me see all of you."

I obey him, vulnerable in a way I've never been before, a position of absolute trust. I watch him watching me, knowing he must see how my clit jumps and strains at my light touch, how my wetness increases.

His face twists in concentration, like he's writing this deep into his memory, a safe place where he can savour it again later.

Then he reaches into his pocket, pulling an item free, mostly obscured from my view.

“This is your gift.” He lifts my left hand and drops a vibrator into it before standing, retreating a step. “Put that in for me, angel. Place it inside yourself while I watch.”

Blood rushes to my cheeks, burning crimson as the heat of his gaze intensifies. The toy is shaped with an egg on one side, curving around to the control buttons and receptor on the other.

As I stare, Maddox cocks an eyebrow, teasing, “You don’t need an instruction manual, do you?”

My chin rises at the challenge, and I spread my pussy lips wider, slowly rubbing the bulb of the toy against my slickness. It feels incredible and, in this school bathroom, incredibly *naughty*.

When I ease it inside, exerting just enough pressure to start it on its way, I arch my hips, and Maddox tilts his head, eyes lazily half-lidded, large hands resting either side of his belt.

“Deeper,” he commands, and I obey, sliding it halfway home.

“Deeper.”

This time his voice is a growl, his weight tilting forward like he’s about to close to the gap, to wrest the toy from my tentative fingers and do the job himself.

A development I wouldn’t mind one bit.

But his control is far greater than mine. Both of himself and of me.

With one eyebrow raise, he wordlessly repeats his command and this time I press my fingertip against the toy and don’t stop pushing until it’s completely enveloped inside me, muscles coaxing it farther still until it nestles against my g-spot.

And when I withdraw, he’s there, fingers encircling my wrist, raising the hand to his mouth where he slowly teases me with his tongue, sucking my forefinger deep inside, rhythmically pulling until my internal muscles clench and release to the same beat.

A moan sounds deep in my throat, a sound I don't have the slightest command over, like I've ceded autonomy, putty in his hands.

Next, he pulls out his phone, holding the screen so I can read the app display. His thumb hovers above the main control and my pussy jumps as though the stroke is of its sensitive flesh.

“You want me to give it a test drive?”

His eyes sparkle with mischief as I nod, unable to conceive of another response. A second later, the toy buzzes, inside me, outside me, sending my reactive flesh into a tailspin of desire, muscles clenching so hard in response to the frantic pulse of pleasure, I fear it will send the toy flying.

Maddox stands, towering above me as I struggle to hold myself together. As my hands weaken their grip and my thighs tremble. As my lungs expand until my tits strain at the fabric of my blouse, the buttons pulling tight enough I half expect one to pop free.

He strokes his palms along the outside of my thighs, giving a sigh of pure satisfaction as he eases my legs back together, then swaps the phone for my underwear, carefully pulling them into place, then snapping the elastic sitting low on my hips.

After he rolls down my kilt, he lifts me back to my feet, supporting me as I try to remember how standing works.

Then his lips are against my ear, the vibration of his voice sparking a new avalanche of tingles as he says, “I'll need those back later. When you walk to our last class today, I want you bare with your arousal dripping down the inside of your legs.”

His cups my arse, pulling me against the tense muscle of his thigh, his other hand plunging into my hair, holding me steady as he kisses me, lips soft, then demanding against mine.

I don't know what he sees when he pulls back but it must meet his approval as he nods, swaps position to take my hand in his, then strides from the room, me walking on legs made of jelly by his side.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MADDOX

HALFWAY THROUGH THE LESSON AND EVIE GRIPS THE EDGES OF the desk with both hands, surging forward when I apply the vibrations, relaxing when the intense sensation ends. My ear stays attuned, ready to nix the exercise if at any time it grows too loud.

I want to make her feel good. Not embarrass her. To use the threat of discovery to urge her to greater heights, not a pinprick of shame to burst her balloon.

The phone rests on my leg and she sneaks a quick glance at the screen as I adjust the setting, clicking it to a higher level while she shakes her head, catching her eye as I turn it one notch further.

She worries at her bottom lip, tearing the thin skin there, sucking at the reddening patch.

I wonder what it feels like, try to imagine the scene at the burning building transposed to this sedate classroom. It makes the skin of my neck tingle, the tips of my ears burn red.

“Something amusing you, Alcott?”

“Just happy to be in your class, sir.”

There’s a titter from other students, but none seem sure that I’m joking, including Mr Willoughby, the teacher. He turns back to the board where he’s crowdsourcing notes.

I face forward, arching an eyebrow as I read through the list of points, not even sure what the rest of the class are discussing. Something about political rhetoric in the lead up to war.

Then I inevitably turn my focus back to Evie. She’s adorable, hot and flustered, desperately trying not to draw attention her way.

She reaches out her hand, curving a finger over the display to lessen the intensity.

Naughty girl, but I take the setting into consideration. After all, it’s not me with a machine shoved deep inside, triggering a wave of pleasure I can barely imagine.

“Can anyone suggest a reason?” the teacher asks, and Evie wrinkles her nose, a tell that means she knows the answer.

Something I’ve quickly learned, and which Mr Willoughby must understand, too, because he ignores the raised hands to call on her specifically. “Evie? Do you have an answer?”

“All groups are echo chambers in a way, aren’t they?” Her sweet voice carefully takes the class through her reasoning. Only I know the reason for the tense side-eye she sweeps my way.

But I would never... okay, just a little buzz.

My finger brushes the control, lowering the intensity as it continues, keeping my gaze fixed on the board while monitoring Evie from my peripheral vision.

Her leg trembles, jittering like she spent the night slamming back coffee after coffee. As the dial winds down, so too does her agitation. The white knuckles ease to pink again. There's no audible sign of discomfort in her voice.

“Word choices aside, it's a valid point.” Mr Willoughby opens it to the class again. “Can anyone add examples of modern echo chambers?”

“I thought word choices were the main thrust of it, sir.”

He purses his lips, clamping back the laugh, then the discussion moves away, taking a few minutes to circle back around. As he embarks on a new question, Evie glances to me, then politely raises her hand.

I move the dial and her elbow drops a little, her enthusiasm to speak in front of the class ebbing, then I return it most of the way to its previous position, also flicking on a vibration pattern for added effect.

“Social media is like that, isn't it? You follow like-minded individuals rather than seeking views different to yours.”

A bead of sweat glows at the edge of her hairline, growing in volume as I edge the dial towards maximum, then the phone skids off the side of my leg, falling face down on the floor.

Evie's voice sounds strained to my ear as she tries to keep pace with Mr Willoughby's open questions and the other discussion points roaming the class. I reach for the phone, taking it with one hand while I cup her ankle with the other, feeling the faint hint of a vibration sink into my skin like a kiss blown through the air.

“Did you have something to add, Alcott?”

“Not me, sir,” I reply, straightening in my seat and letting my fingers brush all the way along the inside of her calf on the way. “Just wondering if Evie was close to finishing.”

She tosses me a glance, half amused, half desperate, and I keep my stare perfectly level. A faint noise hovers right at the edge of my hearing and I check the display. Shit. When it fell, I must have brushed the spin dial higher.

Her leg jiggles, knee bouncing as it releases her tension. I wind it back and the bell goes soon after. As she stands, I give another burst, shoving my chair back, legs scraping on the floor to disguise any noise.

“Sorry about that,” I say, repeating the burst at the same level. “The phone just slipped right out of my hand.”

I think she wants to answer me back, but her eyes are lidded, her mouth parted, tongue swiping across her lips. My lips find her temple, licking the fat drop of sweat a second before it falls, smoothing the hair back with my thumb afterwards, staring into her sleepy gaze.

“Better get to our next class.”

I walk slightly ahead of her, ensuring there’s a clear path, shielding most of her from curious eyes. Halfway along the corridor, her step slows as I give her another buzz. I turn, frowning as though wondering what the holdup is, then guide her until she’s cornered, back against the wall, side against the lockers, me on an angle cutting off any escape.

Not that Evie seems set on escape.

I whisper the confession into her ear, “I didn’t think it would last this long.” My knuckles run along the button placket, my body crowding even closer to hers. “Are you not enjoying my new toy? Should I crank it a little higher?”

“Please,” she begs but I don’t know if the plea is for a way out or a faster journey to the end.

“Please... more?”

Her hands bunch the front of my shirt, pulling me closer as her head bends, forehead resting against the fabric. “It’s okay,” I soothe her, stroking her hair as students behind us rush for their next classes. “I can set it higher.”

A strangled gasp comes out of her mouth, and I concentrate on the rhythmic motion of her body, the way she sways towards me and away and towards me again.

I find the beat, time the app to each new surge, making sure she’s sheltered by the lockers, the wall, my body. Making

sure that even here in public, fully exposed, she's not visible enough to draw conclusions.

And my free hand finds the delicious curve where her neck meets her shoulder, my thumb resting neatly in the dip, fingers curling around until the tips lightly dust her spine. My lips find her ear again, gently whispering, "Do you want to come for me? You'll have to be quick if we want to get to class on time."

My thumb controls the app, while every other cell in my body centres on my girl, finding the perfect tension where her head tilts back, eyes closed, fists making their small rhythmic tugs of my shirt fabric, each motion drawing me a millimetre closer.

Her body shows me when to make the vibrations surge and when to let them ebb, then surge again and this time stay there, while her shoulders draw up to her ears and her hips tip towards me and her knees sag, my thigh thrusting between them to pin her failing body against the wall.

My lips close over her mouth as she comes, catching the cry that releases from her throat as her body shudders into freefall.

I inhale her pleasure deep, deep, deep into my lungs, holding it until my brain screams for air and only the world spinning before my eyes can convince me to let it go and inhale another.

"And with a whole minute to spare," I whisper, and she giggles, tipping to the side until her shoulder leans against the bank of lockers.

"That was..." and she shakes her head, lost for words while my throat muscles clench, drawn taut with emotion, wishing I could give her a thousand more while pupils scurry behind us and the teachers take their brief respite to set up their classes for the last lesson of the day.

And she's instantly obedient, not needing a reminder that I demanded she gift me an item of clothing before we wind through the corridors to reach our last subject for the day.

With her flushed cheeks, her eyes like precious jewels flashing in the bright summer sun, she's glorious. And when I imagine fluid streaking the inside of her thighs, rubbing to a glistening sheen over that sweet inner flesh because of *me*, I feel a deeper sense of contentment than I've ever known.

EVIE

When Maddox drops me home after school, I wait until I'm out of sight behind our block of flats, then give a little shriek and dance my way to our entry door, absolutely buzzing with excitement.

He made me return the toy, forcing a clutch of girls to vacate the bathroom again while he watched me hook it out, sliding his fingers over the arousal coating the silicone body before he rinsed it in the sink.

Hopefully, he brings it to school again.

Hopefully, next time, he also sends me home with it still inside. Giving me another dose of pleasure at his command.

"Hey," I call out to Ant as I waltz through the door, heading straight for the cupboards to pull out a snack because I'm fucking *ravenous*. "You want anything?"

When he doesn't respond, I turn and my throat clutches, my heart stopping in my chest.

Ant lies curled in a ball, completely still. A needle and tourniquet lie on the table in front of him, when he always, always, *always* clears them away.

Not again. Please, God, don't let this happen again.

I can't make myself move. If I walk the five steps across to the sofa, if I extend my arm to check his pulse, my entire life

might crumble around my ears.

Just a few seconds more. A few seconds of Ant living in the Schrodinger's land of being dead and not dead at the same time.

You selfish bitch. He could be in treatment right now. All you had to do was fall asleep for a few hours with the boy you're so desperate to shag.

“Ant?”

There's so little breath behind my query, it's no surprise he doesn't stir.

That's all it is. That's the only reason.

I try to open my mouth to give a louder call and can't. Every cell in my body is locked in place, eyes bugging from my head.

Then his leg twitches and he inhales a raspy breath.

I fly across to him, dropping to my knees, pulling him off the sofa and into my arms. Crying. Babbling. “Ant, wake up. Wake up.”

His head rolls, sickeningly loose on his neck. I slap the side of his face, my palm leaving a reddened imprint behind, then do it again.

His body shifts, arms stirring, eyelids fluttering.

I should've been here when he injected. Not been gallivanting around in a school where I'll never belong.

“Wake the fuck up, Ant.” I shake him, then roll his weight off me, running to the drawer where we keep the ampoules of Naloxene, berating myself because I should have started there.

I tug the handle, drawer pulling halfway out then sticking while I scream at it in frustration. I kick at the one beneath like that'll help. My palm slams it back into place, then I yank, and this time it comes all the way out. The unexpected weight bends my wrist until I let go, the drawer spilling half its contents onto the floor.

“Fuck!!!” I scream at the top of my lungs, dropping to my knees, hands desperately scrabbling among the scattered belongings, seizing one with a triumphant cry.

But the relief is short-lived. My hands shake. The ampoule is tiny. With the blue dot facing me, I crack the tip off, then freeze, uncertain whether to use the same needle—the syringe that might still hold traces of whatever harmed Ant in the first place—or to hunt for a new one.

“No,” Ant mutters.

“Yes.” I grab the used syringe, better a bad decision than a slow one. “You have to.”

I get beneath him and shove him upright, getting him into position so he leans back against the sofa. One moment, he’s floppy and unresponsive, the next he grabs the syringe from my hand.

“Give it back,” I yell, reaching for it while his other arm blocks me.

But he slams it against the floor, snapping its tip, rendering it useless.

I slap him again, not to wake him this time but because I’m furious. Tears and snot roll down my face while my breath hitches, making me cough when I suck tears straight into my lungs. “You fucking asshole.” I bunch up the front of his T-shirt and shake him, then collapse against him, burying my face in his chest.

“Shh. S’okay.”

My crying fit eventually converts into individual hitches and sobs. At some point, I’m able to sit up, wiping my sleeve across to clean my face, still feeling like I’m perched on a precipice, staring straight down into an abyss.

It’s an hour before Ant is coherent enough to guide back into a sitting position on the couch. My hand keeps snaking out to check his pulse, counting off the seconds on my phone. Keeping check that he’s heading in the right direction.

“You’ve got a mean slap,” he whispers, laughing into my hair as I burrow beside him.

I want to laugh, too. Rid myself of the awful tension, but I can’t. I’m shaking from the aftermath. Heart frozen in the moment when I turned... and thought he was dead.

As the evening settles, he wakes more fully, enough to eat a meal that I force feed him until the container is empty. I make him drink a glass of water, then another. Finally, hours after arriving home, my panic dissipates. My mind clears.

I can’t lose him.

Ant is the only person in the world who understands. The one who knows who I am and where I came from without explanation.

Weeks after I should have sucked it up and done what he wanted, I finally pull out my phone and call Maddox.

Ready to take him up on his request.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EVIE

A DOCTOR ARRIVES TEN MINUTES AFTER THE PHONE CALL. HE performs a check-up while Ant wakes and dozes, sometimes coherent enough to answer questions, other times closing his eyes and slipping into a dream.

“His breathing and pulse are low but within normal range,” he tells me once he’s finished. “He’ll feel rough for the next day or two. The testing strip picked up fentanyl, but his signs are improving. If that changes, call an ambulance.”

I start to ask questions, but Maddox shows up, taking me into his arms before the door’s even fully open. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” I say with a shaky laugh. “Never better.”

The doctor repeats his assessment, ending with, “I’ll send a referral to the outpatient clinic at Abbotsvale. Since he’s

previously been enrolled on a program there, they'll be able to schedule an emergency appointment."

"We don't have transport."

"I've arranged a car and driver," Maddox says, arm around my waist as he stands beside me. "The service will take him there and back tomorrow, and on Friday we'll fly him down to Dunedin for assessment."

The gratitude wipes away any lingering fears.

I expect Maddox to go but he stays with me, holding me against him on the couch while Ant sleeps in fits and starts throughout the night. Every time I doze off, I wake inside his comforting embrace.

In the morning, I drink twice as much coffee as normal until I'm jumpy as a feral cat. When the car arrives to take Ant to the neighbouring town's clinic, I hover.

"You're getting treatment and you're going to do everything they recommend," I tell him, trying to convince myself as much as him. "I don't care how much it hurts or what your opinion of the facilities is. Do you hear me?"

He nods and I fuss around him to make sure he's comfortable, set him up with a bottle of water for the journey that I know he won't touch.

Anything to make sure he knows I love him.

The fear sparks as the car leaves and I run out of ways to postpone the inevitable. I didn't even think to check where we would go, but now presume Maddox will take me to his home.

Which gives me another load of stress because what if I run into his dad? What if he mentions something to contradict what I told Maddox earlier? The lie I'm nowhere near ready to confess.

"What time do you think I'll be back?" I ask as the silence of the drive makes me shiver.

I don't care but another query hides underneath.

I want to know if this is truly happening.

After our closeness yesterday, the stark change is surreal. This isn't the Maddox from school. This is the same boy who thought nothing of sticking a gun in my mouth two minutes after meeting.

“You're allowed to stay over if you prefer.”

“Can we... is it alright if we go to a hotel, instead?”

“You don't want to see my shiny new dungeon?”

A joke that might be funny at another time, but right now my sense of humour has completely deserted me.

He pulls to a stop at the next set of lights, reaching over and resting his hand on my knee. “We can but I'd prefer to be home. There's nobody else there if that's your worry. The housekeeper is finished for the day and Dad's in Auckland, wining and dining some corporate clients.”

“Okay.”

I settle back in the seat, controlling my breathing to encourage my muscles to relax. He drives through suburb after suburb, each more expensive than the last, until he reaches the narrow road for the cliffside houses.

It's another few minutes before Maddox enters a code to release the gate, then pulls into the driveway, coasting into the garage and shutting its roller door before he gets out of the car.

My curiosity mounts a war against my nerves as I get the first glimpse at the architectural marvel that is his house. My wonder grows as he leads me down a flight of stairs into a large dining room. I cross to the window, entranced by the magnificent view.

The main river system spreads below us, the house jutting out so I have to stand right by the window before I can see the ground still beneath us. It makes it feel like the house is floating right on the water, my land lubber legs wobbling like jelly, even though we're not moving.

“Do you fancy something to eat?”

I want to nod, want to do anything if it postpones what comes next, but I doubt I could eat, instead blurting, “Can we

just get on with it?”

The question is rude as hell, but there’s no change in expression. His gaze seems just as happy to rest on me as before.

“Sure. I’ll need to dissolve the pills into something. Are you happy with water or would you like juice?” When I don’t immediately answer, he adds, “What about something harder?”

A real drink sounds incredible about now. “What do you have?”

He smiles, taking my hand and tugging me after him, leading me through to a larger room with a slightly less spectacular view, though splitting hairs at this level seems pointless. There’s a full bar in the corner and he slips behind the counter, drumming his hands on the bench. “What’ll it be?”

I slide onto a barstool, chewing on my lip as I stare at the bottles. “Are those the most expensive?” I ask, pointing to the top row.

“Yep.” He selects a bottle with gold leaf covering half the glass, tipping it towards me so I can see the gigantic crystal stopper. “This is a Remy Martin Cognac, limited edition.”

“How much is it worth?”

“Fifty grand for the bottle.” He pours a generous serve into a bulbous glass, well over an inch, swirling it around so the liquid clings to the bowl, then holding it out for me to sniff. “But for you, madam? Only a thousand per serve.”

“Ooh, what a steal.” I slide the stem between my middle and forefinger, doing another swirl of the alcohol, not nearly as suave as his. “But I’ve left my purse in my other Mercedes.”

“Then I guess we’ll have to find another way to settle up.” He pours himself a glass, the level far lower than mine, then replaces the bottle. “Aren’t you going to drink it?”

I had been waiting for him to dissolve the pills, but take a sip, letting it sit on my tongue until it burns, then tipping my head back to let it slowly glide down my throat.

“What’s the verdict?”

“Feels like I could breathe fire.” He chuckles, taking a gulp from his own glass and wincing until I laugh. “Looks like you’re appreciating every drop.”

Maddox wrinkles his nose. “I don’t like spirits, much. A nice IPA is more my style.”

“Don’t let me stop you.”

He tips the last of his glass into mine, and opens a fridge under the bar, withdrawing a cold bottle and screwing off the top, clinking it against my glass. “Cheers.”

I take another sip, spinning the stool around to gawk at the rest of the room. There’s a large, ominous painting mounted along the far wall; all browns and blacks and glinting crimson edges. The furniture is cold aluminium and warmly smoked glass. A large maroon rug on the tastefully taupe carpet looks like a pool of blood.

The room is large enough to hold fifty people. I close my eyes and imagine them standing around, canapes being carried aloft by otherwise invisible servers; rich men chatting about *very important things*.

My nose goes back into the glass, taking a long sniff. Enough to make my eyes water.

It would be so nice to be invited here just to hang out. To go from room to room, finding all the treasures so familiar to Maddox and his family, they don’t see them any longer.

But I put the glass back on the counter. “Aren’t you going to dissolve the pills in this?”

He nods, pulling it closer and reaching into his pocket. Of course, he has them on him. He takes a minute to break the capsules apart, stirring in the white powder with a glass swizzle stick. A minute filled with my regrets.

Even if he lied, even if it's sex, you've swapped sex for rent before, sex for electricity.

True. On one memorable occasion I even swapped sex for the vague hope of affection, a very short-lived aspiration. Sadly, the thought of my past transgressions does nothing to fill the deepening hollow inside my chest.

“Are we staying here?”

“We can if you want to. I'm happy to carry along the hall, later.”

“Is that where your bedroom is?”

Maddox nods and I slide off the stool, taking a sip of the spiked drink. “Lead the way. I want to see the room I'll wake up in.”

He emerges from behind the bar, swapping the beer to take my hand, his palm cold from the bottle. We walk down the corridor to the farthest door, an outdoors deck running alongside the tinted glass.

The bedroom he leads me into is enormous. There's the king size bed on one side, a large entertainment area opposite, four recliner chairs next to one another in front of the largest screen I've ever seen.

Closer to the windows, there's a desk with two laptops on top, shelves stacked with books to the side.

A walk-in wardrobe is opposite, although calling it walk-in hardly denotes the size. It's more like another full room—probably larger than our entire flat—and I see crisp suits hanging in their plastic dry-clean bags. A shelf of shoes underneath.

“Where do you want me?”

I wince as the words come out of my mouth but if he notices, I can't tell.

He tugs me towards the large bed, taking my glass and setting it on the bedside cabinet, then bending to take off my shoes, lining them up neatly beside the bed. His join them a

second later before he climbs into the centre, still balancing his bottle, taking a swig.

“Would you like to listen to music?” He rolls over to the matching cabinet on the other side, picking up a remote and pushing the button, loud metal thrashing from the mounted speakers.

My body retracts into a little ball at the shock. Even after he finds the volume control, I want to put my hands over my ears.

“Maybe not,” he mutters, switching it off, the silence loud in contrast. “How about a movie?” He picks up a different remote and the large screen flashes into life, thankfully on mute. “There’s a library you can browse through.”

“Won’t I be asleep?” My throat tightens with panic at the idea, voice strained as I add, “Isn’t that the point?”

I shuffle backwards on the bed until my rear hits against the headboard. My knees curl up to my chest as I reach for the drink, taking a large gulp and swallowing it straight down, not bothering to savour the taste.

A creeping dread skitters up my body, starting at my toes, snaking up my legs, then my spine, slithering around my neck until my throat is so tight I can barely swallow. It spreads its dark fingers across my shoulders, making my hairs stand on end.

Then the alcohol hits, washing through my brain until all the rough edges of my thoughts are smoothed over. I take another large gulp, holding it in my mouth for as long as I can, hoping to aid the absorption so I stop caring sooner.

Maddox moves, making the mattress shake, edging close enough to put his arm around me again and this time the simple gesture makes me bitter. “Could you not?”

“What’s wrong? I’ve had my arm around you for weeks.”

And what’s wrong is that I thought he wouldn’t really make me go through with it, not with how close we’ve been, and that obviously mistaken belief turns me a fool.

I'm furious this will be the end of us, and I really like him. Not just the presents or the consideration or his attractiveness but the whispered asides in class, the quiet encouragement when I'm feeling stupid, drowning under the weight of all the things I haven't had the chance to learn.

I liked the strange awe on his face the first day in maths class, the way he always buys me something I'll enjoy at the tuck shop without asking, even though there are plenty of options I'd hate.

He's the perfect boy for a girl who once told Santa she didn't need to tell him what presents she wanted because if her dad loved her, he'd already know... only to discover he hadn't a clue.

A perfect boy who wouldn't make me do this unless he needed me to, and that idea circles around into guilt because if we're genuinely close, why am I *charging* him for something he *needs*.

Doesn't that make me just as wrong?

I see the strain lines on his face and feel a tremble in his arms as they rest on the covers. He hates this for me, but he won't stop... and I want to know why, and I already know he would have told me if he could because he's Maddox and he always does what he can to make my life easy.

A tremor starts in my shoulders, and I can't make it stop. I want to jump off the bed and pace the floor, but I don't know if my wobbly legs will carry me.

This is for Ant. Suck it up and do whatever you need to.

Maddox's voice is a soft whisper as he says, "I promise I won't hurt you."

But that's a promise he can't make because he has no idea what it's like to be on this side. "You're already hurting me."

His eyes drop and I push away from him because it's true. Because it feels like my mind is tearing itself apart, thinking up a dozen new questions each second with no way to get the answers, no way to escape their rhetorical dread.

As my panic increases, I glance around the room, looking for something to snag my attention, to dampen my fear and take this horrible aching sensation away.

They settle on a pot plant near the bed. Just on the other side of the cabinet. If I could get him out of the room for just a few seconds, I could tip out the last of my drink, maybe halving the effects.

Enough to stay awake but feign unconsciousness. Enough for him to get whatever he needs done and if it turns out to be something I can't endure, I can try to get the hell away.

Tears prickle at the backs of my eyes and instead of sniffing them back, I encourage them to flow. "Could I have some tissues?"

Maddox's face twists with remorse and I think he's about to say something, then he shakes his head and walks into the bathroom. I leap for the plant, dumping the contents from my glass into the bark.

It immediately soaks the chips darker. The scent of alcohol is stronger but there's not much I can do about that. When Maddox comes back into the room, I'm swirling the few last dregs of the drink in the glass, knocking it back as his keen eyes watch.

When I tilt it towards him, showing him it's empty, he takes it from my fingers. A wave of warmth crashes over me and I'm as scared of enjoying this sensation as I am of what he has planned. If I like the feeling too much, I don't need a public health warning to know where that might lead.

The thought makes me teary again and I grab tissues, soaking them before grabbing more to blow my nose. Maddox seats himself on the bed, this time taking me in his arms with such a determined grip I can't struggle free.

My heart slows, barely bothering to thump. The world is hazy, glowing with promise. I close my eyes and it's hard work to lever them open again.

Panic worms into my consciousness, then dissolves under the glorious sensations pouring from my brain. My limbs are

heavy, sinking into the bed. If it weren't for his arms, I would float to the bottom of the ocean, contentedly smiling as I drown.

“What do you have against pot plants?” Maddox whispers in my ear and instead of feeling fear at being caught out, I giggle, too lazy to even shake my head.

Saliva pools in my mouth and it takes a concerted effort to swallow, consciously making my body perform all the tiny, coordinated movements required, exhausting the last of my willpower.

I open my eyes, vision blurry even though he's so close. Close enough to touch. Close enough that when I push my chin forward just the tiniest bit, I can kiss his lips, drowning in the sensation, all my alarm bells muffled with the cotton wool of whatever drugs he gave me.

No inhibitions, no sense of self-preservation.

No control.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MADDOX

FOR THE FIRST HALF HOUR, I LIE THERE, CRADLING EVIE AS she slips in and out of consciousness, still recovering from the guilt at what I put her through. Watching her struggle to swallow the pills was torture.

All that pain for both of us and I walked out of the bathroom to find she'd vetoed my experiment, pouring out her drink.

I've probably fucked our relationship beyond repair while the dull ache of loss stays lodged right where it always is, in the marrow of my bones.

It was cruel to choose such a slow method. I roll onto my back, tugging my phone out to place an order for an injectable solution instead. A shot that won't give her time to regret her decision. Not that I hold much hope of her allowing this again.

With my arms back around her, I open my mouth, but all the words I wanted to whisper to my faux-Addie have gone, turning to dust on my tongue. I can't say them aloud because I can't bear for Evie to wake and hear them.

She probably won't rouse far enough to understand my whispered words. Even if she does, it's unlikely she'd remember them.

Probably.

Unlikely.

They're not words to stake the worst secrets in your life upon.

"I'm sorry." The words are inadequate, would be even if she were fully awake to hear them. "If I'd known how awful it would be for you, I never would've asked."

My eyes scan her face, searching for a response from this girl who should have run the moment I walked into a fast-food restaurant bathroom, yet for some unfathomable reason stayed.

I roll onto her a little, pinning her arms above her head and watching for a reaction. There's a faint tremor in her wrists that might be a bid for freedom. A twist to her mouth so quick I can't be sure I saw the expression at all.

Bits and pieces of her hover just under the surface. Close enough to animate her, too far away to lift a finger to stop me.

A surge of blood pulses into my cock, desire swirling. The arousal is nearly as strong as it was that first night.

When it comes, I realise this is what I've been waiting for these past weeks. The heady confirmation that it wasn't a one off. That something in this girl calls to me in a way no other person has before.

"Would you like me to touch you?" I whisper close to her ear and see her arch her hips. The motion sends more blood flowing, sends a rush of power skimming through my veins.

My fingertip touches just below her kneecap, following the inside slope of her leg as it rises, then her hips arch again. An unconscious response makes her strain upwards, perhaps

hoping to find me between those supple legs. To grind against me the same way I rubbed against her that first night.

Temptation seizes me. Her arms are spaghetti, staying limp on the covers as I remove my hands.

I could do anything I want with her. She's under my control.

And my brain makes the connection. It's the gun all over again. Nothing to do with the weapon itself and everything to do with the submission it coerced from her.

Similar to the spark when I saw her wearing my collar around her neck.

My cock pulses again with another surge of blood and I revel in the hardness, the power, the incredible sensation of lust. It's too good to be contained inside my clothing and I undo my fly, shove my briefs down, and stare as veins puff along its length.

A swollen mass of unfulfilled need, head shiny, darkening like a bruise, jerking with each new pulse of blood.

There's such an outpouring of affection for Evie that I want to make her feel as good as I do right in this moment. I know her physical needs are far stronger than mine and she deserves the pleasure. Her sweet nature should be rewarded.

My conscience demands nothing less than her total satisfaction.

"Can I kiss you?" I ask, such a gentleman as my skin grows a thousand new nerve endings, turning every faint touch into an invigorating caress. "Would you like that, angel?"

Her throat vibrates with a soft hum.

It sounds like a yes to me.

I hold her chin, staring at her relaxed face, the closed eyelids, her gently open mouth. I start by sucking her lower lip, running my tongue across it, grazing it ever-so-gently with my teeth.

When I pull back, she lifts her chin as though seeking my touch. I brush the hairs away from her cheek, tucking an unruly curl behind her ear, smiling as it immediately bounces forward.

My forefinger goes on an adventure, running along the edge of her jaw, then following the sweet curve of her throat, the gorgeous dip between her collarbones where the pendant I gave her sits. She still wears the collar. Yesterday, it was my biggest triumph. Then the urgent call came and overrode the moment. Now I bask in it again.

I accepted her initial refusal without question and didn't push. For weeks now, it's been enough to see it wrapped around her wrist, never left behind in her flat.

But this is so much better.

A pet seeking one careful owner. I trace the outline, drawing it down when my finger finds a rough patch of her skin, a thin line of scarring. Only a few inches long but it sends a flash of anger through me.

She's a treasure. There shouldn't be a single sign of injury anywhere on her person.

I pat the collar back into place, continuing my fingertip discovery with her blouse, the buttons flicked open one by one until I can run my palm across the smooth skin of her midriff.

My body longs to experience her weight on top of me, so I roll to the side, wriggle up the bed a little, then hook her limp arms around my neck, hauling her into position, resting back against me.

The firm press of her tiny behind against my cock makes my breath catch. She wriggles, the slow sleepiness of her movements making it impossible for me to judge whether she's trying to get away or making herself at home.

I hope it's the latter. Right now, I couldn't imagine a nicer place to house her. I spread my legs to make more room, hooking my calf over top of her leg to hold her steady.

A soft sigh escapes her lips as I curl my fingers under her chin, lifting so her face is tilted back towards me. The angle is

perfect. I find a comfortable position for my left hand to keep her there, stroking my knuckles across her cheek when a frown line briefly creases her brow.

“Shh.”

I take her earlobe into my mouth, sucking with slow rhythmic movements. One of her hands clasps my neck, a faint squeeze and release matching to my beat.

My free hand draws her blouse back from her shoulder, exposing the creamy skin, unblemished except for a tiny smattering of pale freckles. I stroke a patch with my thumb, selecting a space for my mark before I affix my mouth, sucking, then soothing the reddened skin with long strokes of my tongue.

I pull the sides of her blouse farther apart, awkwardly reaching behind her back to unclasp her bra. When I push the cups down, the feel of her breast against the palm of my hand sends a spiral of pure lust whipping across my brain.

“I’m going to make you feel so good,” I whisper, kissing along the side of her neck, above and below my collar, briefly returning to pull her earlobe into my mouth.

With each new caress, the urge to touch her grows stronger, an addiction spiralling out of control in seconds instead of days or months or years. A pleasure twisting from a want into a need.

My fingers delve lower, inside her waistband, inside the tight cling of her underwear, touching her pussy and feeling a surge of pure mindless ecstasy so encompassing I thrust my cock against her, pressing her back against me to heighten the sensation, groaning into her ear.

And I’m aggravated that she’s not here with me. That we’re not enjoying this together.

Her body responds to my touch, sure, but if she were awake, there’d be her moans and gasps, the teasing lilt of her voice and laughter.

I want the safety of this power and the presence of the girl I adore.

I don't know how to have both.

But she's given me this gift and I won't squander it. My middle finger strokes along the outside of her pussy, slipping inside to feel her wetness while my eyes roll back in my head.

Gently, I explore her, making an internal map of how her body tenses and relaxes, flinches or leans into my touch. A guide to Evie, just a single volume now but something I wouldn't mind adding to over a lifetime, turning into an encyclopaedia of knowledge, adding book after book until the shelf bows under its weight.

And when my fingers aren't enough, I lay her on the bed, spreading her legs wide, her pussy wide, until her taste coats my tongue, the scent filling my nostrils, igniting my greed, belly tightening with hunger. Until her muscles clench around my fingers, her clit pulsing against my tongue.

My cock is deliciously sensitive as I move above her, positioning myself until I can rub the head against her slippery warmth, teasing around her entrance.

This isn't what I intended to do, isn't what I promised her, but I have always been better at asking for forgiveness than permission.

Then a memory lunges forward, hands touching me even as I fight against them. The horror of what I'm doing lodges deep behind my breastbone, the power slips from my grasp, my erection disappearing as I roll onto my back beside her, feeling the same old gasp of emptiness corroding me from the inside out.

EVIE

I wake in the bath, wet bra and panties clinging while Maddox sits on the edge of the tub, lifting my limbs, washing them with a sudsy sponge, a gentle smile on his face.

He is sweet and cautious and so shy my heart aches. Especially when I ask, “Did you get what you needed?” and a dozen expressions chase each other across his features, locking eyes with me as he nods.

And I’m relieved that it was just sex after all. Despite the staging of my underwear and the water washing the evidence away, there’s the imprint of something inside me; even if not his cock, then his fingers. My clit has the slightly swollen feel it gets after an orgasm. Apparently, even asleep, I appreciated his attentions.

A betrayal but at least it’s something I understand. Not the horrible blankness of not knowing, my mind trying to fill a space with an inexhaustible supply of potential answers.

I want to concentrate on what I’ve gained not what I’ve lost, but my mind isn’t cooperating, not yet. I’m a doll again. A blank plastic form for people to play with, however they like.

His gaze rests on me with warmth, with affection, but I don’t know what he’s seeing. If there’s any of *me* in the person he looks at or just a projection of what he hopes to see.

If I exist as a real person in his mind at all.

“Why am I in the bath?”

“You were shivering,” he says, moving from the tub to sit on the floor, head just slightly below mine. “I thought you needed warming.”

“Unconscious me needs her temperature gauge adjusting, then,” I tease, watching the tension leave his face. “Because this is far too hot for summer.”

“I can pour in more cold water if you’d prefer.”

“I’d prefer you to get in here with me.”

He smiles, hand covering mine when I place it on the edge of the bath. “Maybe another time.”

There's a grogginess in my head far beyond sleepiness. My thoughts feel slow, tortoises plodding along with no chance of winning the race. When I command my body to stand, only half the muscles obey me. Maddox jumps to his feet, ready when my knees refuse to lock in place, helping me to step out of the tub, hooking the plug to let the sudsy water drain away.

He envelopes me in a large towel, somehow helping keep my balance while he also rubs me dry, making me laugh as he tickles me, cocooning me in its folds, trapping me while he lays a trail of kisses along the edge of my jaw.

“Where are my clothes?”

“I ordered you some new ones,” he says, swinging me into his arms rather than letting me walk the few steps into his room. “And an outfit for tomorrow while we're getting Ant sorted at the clinic.”

“Is that... It's still happening?”

Even through the fog, I remember cheating, remember him chastising me over his poor alcohol-sodden plant. It should have been a deal breaker.

“Of course, it is.”

He deposits me on the edge of the bed, and I fling my arms around him before he can escape, the gratitude overwhelming. “Thank you.”

There are other words I should say, something to mark the momentous occasion but my lagging brain can't think of them. “Thank you,” I repeat as he eases away from my arms, picking up a range of bags and placing them near my feet.

“When did you go shopping?”

He sits next to me, arm behind me as support. “Oh, you know. I got bored and went online. It's a vicious cycle.”

I laugh at the ridiculousness. The light in the room tells me it's only afternoon. Five or six hours since I drank the concoction he gave me, but he got whatever he wanted done and bought me a wardrobe worth of clothes, besides.

There's a pull in my lower belly—*why couldn't he touch me while I'm awake?*—then I push it away, trying to enjoy the moment.

He strips off my bath-damp underwear and helps me into a bra with far too many crisscrossing straps for me to handle alone. There's matching underwear and a garter belt. When he helps me pull up the stockings, securing them with the clips, my skin shivers under his touch.

“Any more of that and it'll be back into the bath with you,” he murmurs, kissing me behind the ear, sparks rippling across my scalp.

The dress he helps me into is silk, hand painted with large pastel flowers. A light cardigan that's more like sunscreen than a garment comes next, then he pulls out a pair of strappy sandals, with a low heel.

He kneels in front of me, taking my foot in his hand, and my midriff tenses, a pulse beating between my legs. When he glances up at me, a cozy cloud of warmth drifts across my abdomen. Without breaking eye contact, he lifts my leg until it's high enough to press a kiss on the inside of my knee. The faint scratch of his afternoon stubble through the stockings, grazing the sensitive skin, makes my muscles clench and my core ache.

And tears come out of nowhere, pouring down my face with no regard for what I want, a steady stream completely outside my control.

The shoe never makes it onto my foot. Maddox pulls me into his arms, cuddling me against his strong chest and manoeuvring us both onto the bed, resting against the headboard until they gradually dry on their own.

He leaves me alone, but only to fetch a meal that he feeds me, bite by bite, choosing the potato salad I love, tender bites of chicken, fresh cherry tomatoes. To finish, he places tiny spoonfuls of pavlova and cream and strawberries into my mouth, the crunch of the meringue and the sharp rush of sugar offset with the bright taste of the fruit and the velvety richness of whipped cream.

Most of all, he holds me, not worried when I cry or when I doze or when I laugh at a corny joke on an old sitcom he finds from the streaming options on offer. He strokes my hair as I phone Ant, listening to the rundown of his day, smiling to hear the optimism back in his voice.

The grogginess eases into the cleaner tug of sleepiness and once more he holds me against him throughout the night.

Each time I wake, he's there, soft hands and hard muscles soothing me back to whatever dreams lurk for me in the dark.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

MADDOX

THE MOMENT EVIE STEPS ONTO THE CHARTER PLANE, HER FACE fills with delight. She explores the entire cabin, crowing over each new extravagance she finds, bringing life to everything I would take for granted.

Even Ant brightens, his eyes so similar to Evie's that I can't look him fully in the face. His shuffle is devoid of her energy, but each glance catalogues the scene, like a treat he's storing for later.

"Can we make it go faster than commercial airlines?" she asks, floating briefly back within touching distance, then scampering away to examine the front cabin when the pilot offers, struggling as she asks a million questions a second.

"Time to prepare for take-off," the man finally tells her, shooing her back into the body of the plane.

I capture her wrist and spin her onto my lap, then into the seat next to me. “Anyone would think you’d never been on a plane.”

“Anyone would be right,” she says, nose pressing against the window.

“You have been on a flight,” Ant tells her as she settles into her seat, and I do up the belt before she can escape again. “Dad did a series of lectures when you were four or five. We went with him around the North Island.”

“Really?” She tears her gaze from the window long enough to frown at him. “I don’t remember that at all.”

“You’re not missing much unless you want a speech about quantum theory for laypeople, complete with jokes. But we took a flight to and from Wellington, then drove everywhere else from there.”

“Your dad was a lecturer?”

“He was a professor at Tiaki Uni before it got rolled into the joint campus.” Ant pauses, then adds, “He’d had his accident by the time they combined facilities.”

He talks like of course Evie would have told me all this stuff already and it occurs to me she hasn’t offered a lot of her life history, deflecting when asked. Perhaps I didn’t notice because I was busy doing the same. “Do you remember Ms Kaihe?”

He nods, hugging himself as a nasty tremor rolls through his body. “Yeah. She was a good sport.”

“She seems to still be a fan of yours.”

“Well, what’s not to love?”

Evie squeezes my hand into new and interesting shapes during take-off, then stares out the window for most of the flight. When we land, there’s still a forty-minute drive to get to Dunedin. By the time the driver turns into the clinic driveway, it’s close on midday.

Inside, the receptionist waves us into a row of seats, backing against the wall, and I take one.

Ant paces the room, obviously hurting. There's a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead no matter how many times he swipes it with his forearm. Evie takes the seat next to me, sitting on her hands like she can quell her brother's restlessness by restricting her movement.

"It'll be fine," I assure her as a clinician takes Ant into an exam room. "At worst, they'll give him his maintenance dose and refer him back to his GP."

But I can see how much she wants it to be over, for him and for her. I guess the most recent crisis underscored how close to the edge he is and will continue to be. His recovery involves so many interconnecting factors outside of her control, I understand the urge to just have it over, have it done, have him clean once and for all.

She won't thank me if I interject with my experience, with Addie's path and how it careened off the tracks even though as a family we did everything we were supposed to do.

Instead, I steal one of her hands out from underneath her thigh prison and press it tightly between mine. A gesture to keep her grounded.

"I passed the physical," Ant says when he emerges. "Once I'm signed in, they can begin the treatment."

Evie gulps. "You mean, today?"

He smiles, reaching out to flick her ear. "Unless you had other plans."

She bounces onto her toes, hugging herself as Ant is guided to the counter and presented with a new batch of paperwork.

A thin thread of anxiety seems to hold back Evie's happiness. Perhaps the very real fear the detox will overwhelm his system, cause more harm than good, maybe even cause his death.

The chance is small, but it must be in the back of her mind. It's in mine, and I don't care for Ant at all.

“Why don’t you take a walk around the grounds,” her brother suggests when she vibrates with a low frequency hum that sets my teeth on edge. “There’s a pond with swans if you follow that path,” he says, pointing. “Go enjoy yourself in the sunshine while we finish all the boring stuff in here.”

I think she’ll protest but instead she gives a nod, reaching for my hand.

“I’ll stay,” I say when Ant catches my eye with a meaningful expression. “They’ll need to sort out payment.”

When she doesn’t budge, I tug her outside, giving her a hug of reassurance.

“Everything will be okay. The hard part was him passing the physical. If they thought he couldn’t handle the treatment, there’s no way they’d proceed.”

I steer her to the path and when she tries to twist away to return inside, I add, “You’re nervous. I understand. But your brother’s already on edge. Maybe let him get settled for an hour or so.”

Her cheeks turn ruddy with the veiled criticism, but she nods and I’m grateful practicality is one of her strengths.

Back inside, Ant is grumbling over the wording of the forms, his hands shaking so badly he can barely complete the boxes.

“Can I do the writing?” I ask the hovering nurse, who nods. I take a seat, letting Ant continue to pace in front of me, rubbing the back of his neck as I methodically go through the full list of questions.

He scrawls something that counts as a signature, then a staffer escorts us through two sets of barrier doors to the patient quarters.

The room is nice and basic. Large windows look upon the tranquil landscaped grounds, with blackout curtains if the light proves too invasive. The furniture is simple, a bed, a desk, a chair, a lamp, a bedside table. There are no drawers or easy places to hide anything. Even the bathroom has open shelves

for the hairdryer, shampoo, and soap. The towels are hung over railings so nothing can be secreted within their folds.

A nurse comes into the room, taking his temperature, pulse, blood pressure, and goodness knows what else, all the recordings going straight into a tablet computer that goes with them when they leave the room.

“You like Evie?” Ant asks when we’re alone. His frenetic pacing has turned to stillness, his arms wrapped tightly around his midriff.

I’m not sure if he’s making idle conversation or really wants to know. “Yeah, I do.”

“Good. She needs someone to look after her.”

My eyes narrow. Is this meant to be concern?

As far as I’ve seen, Ant hasn’t even asked what his sister had to do to earn him a place here. The low rumble of anger starts, and I struggle to rein it in. Evie won’t appreciate me becoming exasperated by her brother.

I choke back any snarky retorts, muttering, “She reminds me of my sister,” even though she doesn’t. Not any longer.

“I can see that.”

It’s my turn to freeze motionless. Then I pry, certain I must be misunderstanding. “You knew her?”

“We hung together a lot,” he answers, a rough croak in his voice. I go into the bathroom, pouring water into a thin, disposable cup while resentment burns inside me.

Why couldn’t Addie be the one hugging herself to still the shakes? When did the universe decide this wastrel was more important than my sister? Or worse, nobody and nothing decided. Her death and his survival just left to chance. Blind luck.

I pass the cup to him, barely able to meet his gaze as the fury grows apace.

“Did you know she was going to...?” I can’t finish the sentence but Ant nods, picking up the slack.

“I had no idea. She seemed better towards the end. Like she turned a corner and could finally see a path forwards.” He shifts his weight. “Sorry, you probably don’t want to hear that.”

“How long were you friends?” I ask and flinch at the term, almost snarling. Friends have your back, they don’t help you shoot up in dark alleys and derelict buildings, long abandoned by anyone with any sense.

“A year or two. We used to score together, lived in a squat together for about eight months. Towards the end, we went on methadone together.” He sighs heavily before draining the last of the water, then looking in vain for a place to toss the empty cup, setting it on the bedside table. “She did it with a hell of a lot fewer complaints than me.”

I nod as my hands curl into fists and won’t release, no matter how firmly I instruct them. The pain of her death punches into me anew, the emotions swirling with no place to put them.

So, I focus outward. I clock the way Ant pulses with energy. Now he’s stopped pacing, distress rolls off him in waves.

He doesn’t want to be here.

Evie would do anything to help Ant, but I can see the reluctance on his face, the way he straightens, eyes peering with longing at the world beyond the window. His expression, his posture make it clear he’d rather be anywhere else.

His utter selfishness steals my self-control, rage bubbling just beneath the surface.

Ant feels the shift, straightening slightly. “Listen, I know Addie hurt you but someone—”

He cuts off as I launch myself at him, fury and panic squeezing me like a clenched fist as I get in his face, forcing him back against the wall. A voice screams in the back of my mind. *You’re worthless.*

“What the fuck would you know about it?” I say in a savage whisper. “You fucking useless junkie.”

Wariness consumes his expression as I stare, diaphragm heaving for each breath, struggling to inflate with the gigantic weight that's settled on my chest.

"You know, maybe this isn't the right time." His voice cracks halfway through, barely audible by the end. "I guess this place costs a lot of—"

"*Thirty grand.* That's what it costs to get you clean." My body prickles from being so close to him. So close to him and so *enraged*. "But you think *maybe this isn't the right time.*"

My voice is openly mocking, but he maintains a neutral expression.

I sense the vibration of his heartbeat. See the muscles in his face and neck clench and ripple as he fights for control. I watch how hard he's trying to avoid this confrontation and I lean a few millimetres closer.

My rage is a thousand times worse than it was in the corridor at school. I want to hurt him, but Evie won't thank me for laying into her brother. Not physically. She won't understand that I'm doing it for her, to save her from this one-sided relationship, from the family member who will always be an anchor around her neck.

"Your offer to pay is very generous, but I think Evie and I prefer not to be in your debt. I'll just—"

"You're not in my debt," I say, voice light as I retreat the tiniest fraction, seeing the relief ripple across his body. "I made your sister pay every fucking cent before we stepped foot on the plane."

His breath is foul, coffee and tooth decay. It crawls into my nostrils, sinks into the lining of my mouth and throat, invading me with its bitterness.

"Do you want to know what she had to do to get you here?"

He shakes his head but the hairs on the back of my neck are bristling, my face contorting with rage. There is no way I can stop.

“She let me drug her into unconsciousness. Do you know what that was like to watch? She *begged* me not to make her swallow, tears running down her face.”

He’s shaking again. When I poke him in the chest, he slaps my hand away. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“That was the deal to get you treatment. She let me knock her out, then use her all night however I wanted... and I wanted plenty.”

A surge of the same lust pumps into my veins, entwining with the rage until I feel bloated with power, suffused with strength. Ant huddles against the wall, dullness on his face. His hands curl into fists at his sides, then unclench, then fist again. Colour floods into his cheeks.

He wants to hit me.

Good. Maybe being a punch will knock this horrendous feeling away.

“Funny thing is, I didn’t even enjoy it much. But I loved watching how her jaw set when I handed her the spiked drink. Her throat worked so much to swallow it down, I almost took pity.”

My smile widens into a smirk as I add embellishment, spinning the truth into a lie, a tale designed to hurt him. Hurt as much as the knowledge I suspect he holds could hurt me.

“Most of all, I loved how when she woke up with my cum dripping out of every orifice, she said thank you.”

The fury hums across his skin, tensing every muscle.

“She thanked me for getting you into this fucking clinic you’re so desperate to leave. She thanked me for raping—”

His fist smashes into the side of my face, catching me near the ball of my jaw and exploding into a starburst of pain.

Joy ricochets around my body.

This is what I need, what I’ve been searching for. This mindless cruelty that tastes so much better than smashing some low-life dealers favourite squat to pieces. So much better

than blindly raging at fate. A deserved punishment for what I did yesterday.

His second punch is harder, and I stagger, the vision momentarily dimming in one eye, coming back into focus when I snap my head to the side, gurning my jaw, grinning at the rage in Ant's face.

“No wonder Addie hated your guts, you fucking psychopath.”

The blow of his words knocks me back, then his fist lands in my gut. I double over, only just getting a defensive arm up to block him as another blow comes my way.

He fights like a kid on a playground. Wild swings. Flailing punches.

If I bothered to retaliate, I could have him on his arse in a second.

But I don't bother. I welcome the pain.

Another swing with his right fist. I block it with my face.

Then the door opens and Evie walks in, eyes widening in disbelief. “Ant! What're you doing?”

She runs to me, cupping my face, mouth twisting in distress as she puts her body between us.

Choosing me.

I give him a gloating glance over her shoulder as she fusses, grabbing a tissue to sop up the worst of the blood, stroking my hair.

“It's not what it—”

“Sit down and shut it,” she snaps at him, turning, face pinched tight. “You promised you were going to behave. That you were going to do what they told you.”

Evie turns back to me, tears welling. I pull her into a long hug, then cup her face, kissing her, a kiss made all the sweeter when I open my eyes and see Ant glaring daggers at me, back against the wall for support to keep standing.

“It’s nothing,” I assure her. “Just nerves. Addie was the same when we tried to get her into treatment. Threw a massive tantrum because she was scared.”

“But your poor face.” She turns around, slapping her brother on the back of his hand. Scolding, “I don’t understand you. He’s trying to help. We both want you to get better. Why would you...?”

And the tears catch up to her until she can’t stop.

“Come on,” I whisper to her. “The staff can take it from here.”

She nods, looking completely miserable.

I jerk my chin at Ant. “See you in a month.” As I lead his sister from the room, he slides down the wall, curling his knees to his chest as he hits the floor.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EVIE

THE FLIGHT HOME SHOULD BE AS MUCH FUN AS THE ONE DOWN to Dunedin, but I sit in my chair, a nervous wreck, wanting to apologise for Ant, knowing it won't make a difference.

“I don't want you staying in your flat, alone. It's not safe there.”

A nervous flutter hits my stomach. “Yes, it is. We've been there for seven months and never had a problem.”

“How many nights have you spent there alone?”

I shake my head, not wanting to give him the answer because it's none. None at all. Ant always makes it home to me. I always make it home to him. Even if some nights we barely speak to one another, we are always there for each other.

After spending so many years separated, the best part of any day was being able to come home to someone I love. To my real family.

I hate spending time alone, but I don't understand the weird energy pulsing off Maddox. My mind is at breaking point from the last twenty-four hours. I want to curl on the sofa and listen to an anecdote about one of Ant's acquaintances. He has a neverending stock of unbelievable tales that I readily accept as one hundred percent true.

Since that's not a possibility, second best is to curl at one end of the sofa and think about how nice it will be when he's home. When I don't have the anxiety of wondering if he's sick, if he's fallen in with the wrong crowd, if this time the wrong mix of the wrong drug ended up in the wrong vein.

"I got a room for you," Maddox says, voice breaking into my thoughts like an intrusive memory. "There was a dorm room free at school. I thought it would be more convenient."

Something heavy lands on my chest, making it hard to breathe. "They have waiting lists, don't they?"

He shifts on the seat, nervous. "I put your name down for one a few weeks ago."

And I feel guilty for wanting to turn down his offer. He's nice. He's generous.

He's a liar.

He's thoughtful and kind and opened his life to me, making everyone else scrunch up so I could fit right inside.

What am I going to do? Fight him for the privilege of going back to an unkempt flat with overpriced power and insufficient facilities? The fact I'm even considering it proves there's a screw loose in my head.

"It's okay." He reaches across to give a light caress across the back of my hand. "You're allowed to stay at your flat if you prefer. I guess you have a lot of good memories there."

It's that kindness that sways me. The way he seems to know what it is I need, what gaps exist, then effortlessly fills

them.

When I glance over, I'm struck with guilt. His beautiful mouth is swelling where Ant punched him. The reward for everything he's done for me and my brother today, a fist in the face.

"What did you say to Ant?"

His glances out the window and for the longest time I think he won't answer. Then he shifts in his seat, glances at me with an expression of longing. "He wanted to leave, so I told him what you did to pay for his treatment."

Shock at his words makes me think I must have misunderstood. "No."

But his gaze is calm as he meets mine. "Yes."

My throat works but nothing comes out of it. I pluck at the skin, rubbing a knuckle against my windpipe like there's a physical obstruction there instead of a roadblock installed by my brain.

Finally, I blurt, "And what did I do?"

Meaning, *what did you do to me?*

His eyebrows pull together as he scans my face. "You know what you did."

I think he'll make me ask again and I don't know how to. It's easier to just let it go. It's almost always easier.

Maddox takes my hand, lifting it to his mouth and pressing a kiss to the back of it. Then he holds it against his cheek, closing his eyes. Two nights and I've barely seen him sleep. He must be exhausted.

"When we were in the restaurant, the first night, I kept thinking how much you looked like my sister."

I frown, trying to place the information, then it clicks. The first night as he prepped a shot for Ant, he'd mentioned her. There'd been so much pain on his face. "She's an addict."

"She's dead." He keeps hold of my hand but his gaze travels outside the window again, scanning the clouds. "We

thought she was finally clean. She was staying at home after years spent living rough because my dad refused to let her near when she was using. I came home one day and she..." He trails off, shaking his head.

My arms are around him, hugging him tightly as my fears from a few nights ago come flooding back at full force. "I'm so sorry." The words are totally inadequate. "What a fucking mess." Closer. "That must have torn your heart to pieces."

I feel the press of his arms in return, his face buried in the crook of my neck, hiding from the world as he makes a strangled sound in the back of his throat.

My tears are hot as they stream down my face, in sympathy and for my own agony. For everything in my life that changed from the moment of my father's accident. For losing my brother to the same curse, my father carelessly ignoring the effects as he turned his son into a dealer, then worse, into an addict.

I cry for the fear. For the cascade of people in my life who didn't give a shit about me even when the government paid them to. For the horrors inflicted at my last home, when I truly thought I would die... and Ant saved me.

As I harness my emotions, I ask, "What was she like?"

"Moody. Irritable. But when she wanted to have fun, she was the most exciting person in the world. When we were little, she always dragged me into the weirdest adventures."

"Like?"

"A prank scavenger hunt where you had to take a photo of what you were doing at each stop. Pretending the woods out by the old industrial site were haunted and going on expeditions to rid the place of ghosts."

There's a smile on his face, subtle but there. Nostalgia for a time when things were better.

"She had a knack with people, too. A complete extravert. She started a reading club for the retirement home and claimed it was because they had decades of the most extraordinary gossip." I smile at the memory. "At one point she was going to

combine all the best stories to create a book she thought would sell for millions.”

“Yeah?” I settle into his lap, resting my head beneath his chin, hearing the steady thump of his heart. “Did she get far?”

“No. That was around the time dad sent her away to attend Auckland Girls’ Grammar.” His voice turns wistful. “Even when she came home on school breaks, it was different. She was far too mature and far too cool to hang around with the likes of me.”

“Why did he send her to Auckland when Tiaki’s a better school?”

“Is it?” He shakes his head. “I don’t know. Probably to impress one of his friends. That’s why most things get done.”

After a few moments in companionable silence, Maddox nudges me. “That didn’t answer your question. Do you really want to know?”

I nod even though every muscle in my body tenses.

“When you were under, I was going to say goodbye to her. Pretend like I’d just found her and say everything I didn’t think to say the first time.” His eyes close, face contorting like he’s reacting to the images in his mind. “But it’s too late.”

This time, when he opens his eyes to look at me, they’re soft. Like his hand is soft when he raises it to brush my cheek, curling into my hair.

“I couldn’t think of you as anyone but Evie, so it didn’t work.”

“But why did I need to be unconscious?”

“Because I didn’t want you to laugh at me. I didn’t want the secrets I shared with my sister to go anywhere further. Because I’m ashamed and embarrassed.”

Laughter bubbles out of me then, despite the horrible timing. “Sorry. It’s just hard to imagine you worrying what I think about you. Surely, you know I’m the one worried what you think about me.”

Maddox's eyes light up. "Oh, yeah? This is a totally one-sided relationship, is it?"

"Are we in a relationship?"

He adjusts me so I sit astride him, arms linked behind my lower back, eyes resting peacefully on my face. "We are, aren't we?" His eyes drop to my collar. "If you want to be."

The answer is on my lips. Ready and waiting to be said.

As the pause elongates, Maddox frowns. He leans until his forehead rests on my collarbone. "I told you it wasn't about sex and at the time I made the offer, it wasn't. But I..." He swallows, throat clicking with dryness. "Do you want to hear this?"

"You had sex with me."

He inclines his head. "Not intercourse but I touched you. Except it didn't feel right because you weren't... you weren't *awake* to agree to..." His torso shakes, his hands shake.

The answer still leaves me hollow, and I desperately want to understand. "Why don't you want me when I'm awake?"

His eyes snap to mine. "I do."

I press my hand against his crotch where nothing is excited to meet me. Apart from the first night, there's been no outward sign of interest. "You don't feel like you do. How can you be turned on when I'm asleep but... not..." My voice disappears beneath a rush of fear. "You only like my body when I'm not in it."

"That's not true."

But it seems to be true. There's no sign of anything happening in response to my touch.

I try to remind myself it's fine if we're just friends. *Just friends* has a lot going for it. The wriggle of excitement pulsing between my legs can safely be ignored.

Maddox makes a weird hum. "I've never explained this to anyone before, so I apologise in advance if my wording choice sucks."

“Duly noted.”

His dry palm cups my cheek, thumb caressing in small, rhythmic circles until I have to swallow, my throat's so dry.

“I don't feel sexual attraction like most people do, that's the first thing you need to know. It's not a reflection on you if I can't get hard.”

With his head still resting on mine, I feel him swallow. Feel him fight to create the words then boot each one from his mouth in order.

“Oh.” I pluck at a crease on his shirt, playing with the explanation inside my head, trying to make it fit some place it belongs. “Like you're asexual?”

“I think it's more me finding someone I like and trust and just... *know*, inside and out.”

“Selective sexuality?”

His chuckle is strong enough to ruffle my hair.

“And have you ever found someone like that?”

“I hope so.” His eyes scan mine. “I hope I've found her, but I don't know how long it might take or whether it'll be worth it for you when we get there.”

It costs him such effort to tell me I want to reassure him, but I force myself to pause, to think. The weeks we've spent together have careened from confusing to joyous to terrifying.

What he's talking about will require dedication and patience. Our needs will always be out of step.

He's found the person he wants in me, but have I found the one I want in him?

I close my eyes and let my hand find the edge of his jaw, feeling its way until I can wrap around his neck, plunging my fingers into his hair, tugging at the strands until he makes a growling noise deep in the back of his throat. I try to imagine moving to another, less complicated relationship and the devastation is immediate.

The people I care most about have never made my life easy, but they're the ones who make it worthwhile. "I don't have any other plans."

He tickles me and I squeal with laughter, feeling closer to him than I can ever remember with another boy.

"Why don't you have plans?" he asks, and I take a few seconds to understand he's not joking.

"It's hard to look ahead when you're always struggling to get through today."

I think he's tuned out, my brief reality check jolting him out of our shared peace, but when he speaks again, it sounds more like he's readying himself for another confession.

"Can I ask you something serious? Since I'm in a full disclosure mood?"

"Go ahead."

"Ant said you need someone to take care of you."

I wriggle my butt, shifting position on his lap, suddenly awkward. "I knew you were talking about me behind my back," I mutter.

"Just the usual older brother warnings. You hurt my little sister and I'll kill you and roast your corpse in the fiery pits of hell."

"That's standard, is it?"

He doesn't answer my rhetorical question. "Is it true?"

"I'm an adult. I can take care of myself."

"This isn't about your capabilities. It's about what would improve your life." He picks my hand from his shoulder, linking his fingers through mine. "Because I would very much like to take care of you. From the moment you wake in the morning to when you fall asleep at night."

The flood of warmth through my core is its own answer. A rush of desire that's not sexual, or not entirely sexual. Just wanting and longing and a gross outpouring of need for what he describes.

But I know that easy attachment makes me vulnerable. I don't need an older brother looking out for my welfare to teach me that. "And what does that entail *exactly*?"

"It means I'd make your decisions for you. I'd wake you, clean you, dress you."

Between each short statement, Maddox strokes my hair back from my forehead, the movement soft and soothing, lulling me into an agreeable state, like physical hypnosis.

"I would select your food, tell you when to eat, plan out your day. Every moment I'm awake would be dedicated to making sure you had what you needed."

"And what if I didn't like what you picked out for me to wear?"

"But you would. Because I wouldn't be selecting something to match my tastes or for the hell of it." His fingers clench, catching mine harder between them. "I would only ever pick out something you'd adore. A comfortable outfit when you need to relax, something fancy when you need to shine."

Maddox tilts his head forward. The angle means I can't read his expression. Can't see what's flickering behind the intensity of his sharp blue eyes.

But I can feel his arms tighten around me, the slowing of his breath as he waits for an answer.

"You'd take every decision away from me?"

"I wouldn't take a thing. It's a gift. The gift of my complete devotion."

A voice in my head calls out a different story. A tale of suffocation, smothered beneath his attention.

I pull my hand from his, twisting until I'm back in the seat beside him, staring out the window at the vastness of the sky. Reading the clouds like they're tea leaves, trying to decipher a clue in their different shapes.

And armed with this new request, I circle back to the previous point. "What if I can't wait?"

“You don’t have to.”

The crush of disappointment hits me. “And how would that work? I just go off and have...” I wave my hand, lower lip trembling with rejection.

But Maddox catches my hand, holding it to his mouth, pressing a kiss into the palm, his tongue snaking out to wet the skin, making it tingle, making my question a hundred times more urgent.

“I can take care of you there as well. Maybe not the way you’re used to, but with my hands, my mouth...”

A mouth I suddenly can’t look away from.

“But you wouldn’t want to keep doing that. Not without reciprocation.”

He grabs my hair, pressing his mouth to mine, the impulsive kiss hungry, devouring.

“Fucking hell, Evie. I would do so much more if you let me,” he says when he finally pulls away. “I want to give you orgasms until your legs won’t carry you.”

His mouth sweeps along the curve of my neck, tingles spreading in widening ripples from his epicentre.

“I want to bury my face in your sweet cunt until you’re screaming. Want to memorise every inch of your body with my lips”—he kisses my shoulder—“and my fingers”—kisses my collarbone—“and my tongue.” He laps at the divot between my collarbones until my knees tremble and my nipples harden into peaks. “I would do that forever just to bring a smile to your face. Whatever and wherever and however you need for as long as you need it.”

And he pulls me back onto his lap, moving me like it’s effortless. His kiss absorbs me, his hand between my legs, pressing the heel of his palm against me, bucking against me until the sweet friction grows into a crescendo of pleasure, knocking the breath from my lungs as he steals the moans and gasps straight from my lips.

“Say you’ll be my girl and I’ll spend every day trying to please you.”

My face burns with colour, thighs clamping onto his hand as the last convulsions from my climax fade.

“Of course, I’ll be your girl.”

MADDOX

The plane ride ends too soon. While we ready for landing, Evie stares at me with a new sparkle in her expressive eyes.

When we first took our seats, she was trying to get away from me. As we disembark, we’re walking hand in hand, and I can’t wait to show her the dorm room I secured for her, to introduce her to the new life I have planned. The world where she’s mine, and she’s precious and she’ll never want for anything, ever again.

And the moment we’re inside, the door locked against the world, I’m insatiable. The thought of possessing her fires dopamine deep inside my brain.

The physical manifestation of my lust might have dissipated but inside my head is a different story.

Inside my head, things slot together, making the most satisfying connections. Every door on an advent calendar full of desire flies open, giving me carte blanche to indulge my impulses as I pull Evie close and set about making her mine.

I thought it was heaven to sink my fingers into her unresisting body but her *willing submission*, oh, that’s the stuff to make the receptors in my brain purr. Not in the physical sense but my mind shudders with satisfaction.

She agreed to let me own her, let me control her. I will have a stranglehold over her decision making and I could weep with joy.

For the first time since I walked into Addie's room to see her lifeless body splayed across the covers, anger flows out in a wave and doesn't get dragged back in by the greedy tide.

In its place is a kind of wonderment. This girl, a real live human girl, is mine to play with.

If I pull this, it makes her moan, and I can suck this to make her hum with satisfaction. My hands roam her, clasping, caressing, twisting, pulling, stroking and each response gets filed away deep in my brain, adding to my knowledge.

A step-by-step guide for how to fulfil her base desires while stoking what I have instead of my own.

Each inch of her skin gets my touch upon it, the caress of my hands, the flicker of my tongue, the long slow drag of skin against skin.

If this was sex, I'd be left cold, even revolted, but it's nothing like that, not for me. This is programming the base code of how to make a human girl happy. A program I never need to repeat with another if I can only get the routine right.

And I have the time and space to do that.

Ant is locked up tight for the next month. No one else has a claim on Evie's attention or her time. This strange and enticing girl is completely mine, the ownership just as pleasing as the phantom bursts of arousal she's inspired in me.

She belongs to me from the hairs on her head to the soles of her feet. Each tiny piece of her I take builds onto the next and the next... Deeper than sexual attraction. A thrill that pumps around my body like adrenaline.

The suck, suck, suck and the whirling tongue and the long licking strokes that make her bend her body backwards, arching off the bed in physical ecstasy set a possessive fire in my mind, burning through my constant companion of anger to leave me satisfied.

Even though I won't fill her tender pink cavity with anything larger than my fingers, I still appreciate the glistening wetness of her folds as my hands and tongue and my dirty, dirty mouth make her open to me, squirming under my touch, twisting and arching as she seeks more.

And when her sweet taste explodes upon my tongue, when her thighs squeeze my ears, her fingers twisting in my hair to guide me where she needs, in the throes of her ecstasy, I take her pleasure as my reward.

I wrap my arms around her, curling my knees so my thighs touch against the back of her legs, snuggling into her like I would cuddle a pillow in those first long, lonely nights after Addie died.

Mine.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

EVIE

I WAKE IN THE MORNING WITH MADDOX'S ARM SLUNG ACROSS my waist. The rhythmic puff of his breath hits my neck, one leg traps mine beneath it. A sense of overwhelming contentment fills me. My brother's getting the treatment he needs, and for the moment, it seems like I might be as well.

The dorm room is tidy and clean and built for purpose. There's no kitchenette, not with the university cafeteria open around the clock, but otherwise, it's better outfitted than the flat.

My phone is under the pillow, and I retrieve it, trying my best not to shake Maddox awake. There's a text from the clinic; my brother has passed the roughest stage of detox with flying colours.

I close my eyes, biting into my lip to stave off a noisy sob of relief.

Tomorrow, they're scheduled to ease off the sedatives. When he's fully conscious, they'll be able to perform a more thorough examination and have promised to send the results of that as soon as they're able.

The idea the worst might be behind him fills me with gratitude. To think that a few short weeks ago, it seemed the grind would be never-ending; that he'd always be within reaching distance of the claws of addiction, that bouncing from one crisis to another was the most we could hope for from life.

And now...?

Now Ant's on the mend. I shouldn't count our chickens before they're hatched but the chances are so good, I throw caution to the wind.

He'll wake from the sedation with his system clear of opioids. When he completes the thirty day rehab program, it will be the first time he's gone that long without drugs since he swallowed the first pill aged thirteen.

Nine years.

It's a miracle. Paid for with far more cash than anything should cost, but that doesn't make the effect any less spectacular.

I carefully replace my phone and roll onto my back, freezing as Maddox gives a soft snort, rearranging his long limbs, then falling into the same rhythmic breathing as before.

My eyes trace his features, their strange mix of brutish and delicate, highlighted by the bruising and swelling from Ant's punches. The tips of my fingers itch to touch his face, trace the shape of his lips, feel the strength of those wide cheekbones.

Then I feel something stir against my hip. I nudge towards him a little and yes, there's definitely something there. Mr I-don't-get-hard is well on his way to an erection.

Usually, I wouldn't. But my curiosity gets the better of me and my arm steals down to my side, gently easing my fingers between us until I'm cupping him in my hand. At my touch, he grows bigger, stiffer. Maddox's eyes move beneath their lids, and I wonder what he's seeing in there. If his view is as gorgeous as mine.

Any thoughts about touching him while he sleeps is excused away by his admission that he did the same while I was under the influence of his pills. Not in a mean or vengeful way, but it's fair play, isn't it?

I press my palm more firmly against him and his hips move, leaning in towards my touch.

He's so beautiful, even with the bruising and swelling. His long lashes flutter as the movement behind his lids grows more insistent, his fat lips parting to inhale a gasp.

I wriggle farther down the bed, wanting to take him into my mouth, to feel him inside me. Most of all, I want his hips to twitch towards me, feel the rhythmic clench of his sculpted arse as he uses me, gags me, chokes me with his cock until his hot release shoots into the back of my throat.

My fingers circle his girth, lightly at first, then taking a firmer hold, beginning to pump his silken shaft, lips twitching with mischief.

Then he makes a strangled sound deep in his throat. Instead of moving with me, he twists, like he's trying to get away.

His nose wrinkles, his arm jumps, and I release him, guilt pouring in to drown out my moments of pleasure. He makes a noise, somewhere between a howl and a whimper.

He sounds *young*. He sounds *terrified*.

I'm sick to my stomach as my mind leaps to fill in the blanks, every answer I think of more upsetting than the last. I've heard distress like that before; similar sounding nightmares abounded at my first group home. I let him shuffle away while my lips tremble, heart beating at twice its usual speed.

Slowly, my body calms to normal. Maddox falls back into a deeper sleep, his erection softening. As I relax, I drop into a doze, then wake as he rolls over, his arm finding me again and dragging me back against him, nuzzling his nose into the side of my neck.

“You’re thinking far too loudly for this early in the morning,” he whispers, shaking his head and slowly blinking. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s perfect.”

His jaw-cracking yawn relaxes into a smile. “Good. That’s exactly how things should be.”

He rolls onto his back, swapping arms so he now has one cradling my shoulders.

“What’s the plan for today?”

“First, we’ll take a shower, then we’ll have breakfast.” He leans over to suck at my jutting collarbone, a place he seems to favour much to my delight. “Then we could float the idea of studying.”

“You should probably sneak out before meeting me in the cafeteria,” I tell him. “Then the school won’t raise an alarm about cohabitation.”

Maddox snorts. “Given the revolving door policy Wilder operates, I can’t imagine anyone minds. If they do, I’ll just waitlist myself for the room next door.”

He tickles me until I try to wriggle away from him, then he traps me in his arms, pulling me back against his body. “You know, for someone who doesn’t like sex, you sure like putting your hand all over naked ladies.”

“Only the one lady, and since when has touching someone been about sex?”

“Since I got my first period.”

“I hope you’re either exaggerating or you’re a late bloomer.” He runs his fingers through his hair, tugging it to the side of his face. “Don’t you like it? I can stop.”

“Don’t you dare.” I grab his hand so he can’t withdraw from the embrace. “I was just curious, that’s all.”

Maddox chuckles, eventually releasing me as he stands, grabbing my ankle to drag me off the side of the bed. “Now, on your feet.”

“Yes, sir.”

His eyes gleam as I get off the bed, immediately snagging me around the waist and burying his face into the side of my neck. “You want to be careful about how you tease me. I could get to the point I won’t answer to anything else.”

It’s lighthearted but there’s a strange melting sensation in my lower belly, a feeling that intensifies when he follows his statement with a low growl. “Now, into the bathroom.”

If I thought he was kidding about ‘us’ taking a shower, I’m soon disabused of that notion. He turns on the water, regularly testing it with his hand until it reaches a temperature he agrees with, then he hauls me into the cubicle, crowding in behind me though there’s scarcely enough room.

With the water falling over both of us, Maddox presses himself flat against the wall. Those long, long fingers lather the shampoo into my hair, gently caressing my scalp until it buzzes from the attention. My eyes close, luxuriating in the depth of the sensations. After cleaning, he sluices off the foam, shaking any stray bubbles from my wet curls, then takes the moveable showerhead on a wild journey before replacing it in the holder.

Next, he fills his palm with body wash, running his hands over every inch of skin before he grabs the washcloth and repeats the performance again, starting a thousand different fires with his touch, flames that the steady stream of water does nothing to extinguish.

“Do you know what I’m looking forward to most when I next take you home?”

I shake my head, incapable of talking.

“I’m going to draw you a bath and having you rest back against my chest while I lather the body wash against your

skin.”

He demonstrates the theory quite ably, curling his fingers around the back of my neck, soapy fingers sliding over the skin behind my ears, tugging at the lobes while the bubbles pop, the touch incredibly sensual, invasively intimate.

“Then while you’re resting back against me, I’m going to slide my fingers between your thighs...” He holds me upright while his hands wander according to his spoken directions. The slippery feel as the rough pads of his fingers graze against the soft skin sends coils of desire snaking through my core. “I’m going to create so much lather, you’ll look like you’ve got a platinum pussy, then I’ll slide them further, curling them inside you, soaping you inside and out.”

His knee catches against the underside of my buttocks, gently lifting until my toes are an inch off the ground, making me feel weightless.

I grip his supporting arm so tightly, my fingertips make divots along his forearm. Then I reach up, curling my hand around the back of his neck, wishing I could tug his face down to kiss me, wishing I could reach behind me and wrap my fingers around a hardening cock.

Just the thought sends a pulse straight to my clit, making it swell as the pads of his fingers rub near the stretch of sensitive skin, setting the muscles in my thighs fluttering and twitching.

His knee presses more insistently against my backside, raising and lowering me in a rhythm, forcing me back and forth against his fingers until I give a strangled sound somewhere between a whimper and a moan.

“That’s the noise I want,” he whispers, voice almost savage as he continues to lift, to fondle, to stroke.

My nipples harden into peaks as signals bounce from one sensitive spot to another, inviting every erogenous zone along to the party.

“I’m going to wring that noise from you every morning of every day, I swear to god.” His fingers burrow farther between my legs, one bending to slide inside me, the path so slick that

even the soapy water can't offset its slippery welcome. "Make it for me again now, angel, and I promise to make you feel so good."

The sound slips from my lips again, unable to stop it even if I wanted to.

And Maddox lives up to his promise, satisfying every need before I can even fully form it as a thought, leaving me helpless as the pleasure steals away my physical control, utterly content.

CHAPTER TWENTY

EVIE

“No, no, no,” DAHLIA SQUEALS, GRABBING THE PHONE FROM my hand and posing beside me. “You’ve got to get the angle with the mirror and the lighting, and twist your face so your good side hits the... There! That’s the shot.”

It’s Sunday, a fortnight since I moved into the school dorm, and we’re at the largest shopping centre in town, trying to find outfits for the Easter Ball.

The event is still a month away, but Dahlia insists we can’t leave it any later to buy our gowns or the seamstresses won’t be guaranteed to make any needed adjustments in time.

She hands my phone back with a new photo a hundred times more glamorous than the one I attempted. A sigh escapes my lips. “You make these look so good. Are you trained in photography?”

The laugh tells me before the shake of her head. “No. But I was born taking selfies. If aggressive social media strategies count as training, then maybe.”

We’ve already spent four hours shopping but Dahlia still has stamina to spare. I’m too nervous to commit to a purchase, a trait she doesn’t share. At all.

“Look at these,” she cries, tugging my arm when I’m about to walk past the counter. “Aren’t these earrings gorgeous?”

They are. The delicate gold hoops are three inches in diameter, the metal surface scuffed and misshapen to make them look handcrafted.

“Can I try these on?” she asks the nearest sales lady who rushes forward to comply. I take a step to the side and the woman’s eyes narrow as she quickly scans me from head to toe and places me in the not-worth-my-time pile.

Even with my new hair style, fancy makeup, and expensive clothing, I still broadcast the wrong signals. I’m used to not fitting in, but it stings. Another burden Maddox lifts from my shoulders, day to day.

The metal fastenings are sprayed, then Dahlia slips off her current studs, swapping them out for the new pair.

“Aren’t they divine?”

“They’re beautiful and suit you perfectly,” I say, leaning over to inspect the price tag and immediately wishing I hadn’t. “Did Maddox say what the limit on his card was?”

“I don’t think there is one,” Dahlia trills, nodding to the saleswoman who places her discarded pair into the box, wrapping it for purchase. She frowns at my discomfort. “If we strike one, we can just send him a text to raise it. I doubt he cares. Now concentrate. Pick something to buy soon, or I’ll feel bad about myself.”

“We can’t have that.”

I search again with good intentions, but they soon fade. Maddox has shown such skill at selecting clothes for me, I’m a little afraid any clothes I pick won’t reach the same standard.

How he knows what suits me better than I do, I don't know. All I know is that he does... and it's playing havoc with my confidence.

Dahlia hunts along the racks and pulls out something that doesn't have enough fabric to qualify as underwear, let alone a dress. "Ooh. This. Now. Let's get Maddox all hot and bothered."

I twist my body into the tangles of string, then emerge, my cheeks bright crimson at the thought a shop assistant will see this much of me. This isn't like working at the club where everyone expects me to flash them an eyeful.

But Dahlia's dressed in her own version, though her choice is blue rather than my rusty orange. "Quick. Give me your phone."

The device is in her hand in a second while I fail at covering all my exposed bits with my hands.

"Don't you dare," Dahlia grumbles. "Hands like this"—she gives a quick pose—"all tits and lips, that's what we want."

While posing next to me, she takes a range of shots with her phone, then with mine. When I reach for it, she twists out of range, typing a note and pressing send before I even get the chance to read it. "Don't worry. It's nothing I wouldn't post publicly."

The words don't inspire confidence but there's just a cheeky smirk, and a note for Maddox. *What about this one?*

There are so many bits of me falling out of the dress, I'm more concerned about getting dressed in actual fabric again rather than seeing what he has to say about my virtually naked body.

Dahlia looks pretty while I just look mildly embarrassed.

Still, I'd be lying if I claimed his answer didn't interest me. Unfortunately, when I check the entry, he's just hearted it. Hardly a ringing endorsement, though Dahlia takes it as one, adding it to her pile.

And I still don't know what to buy.

“The colouring of the fishtail dress really suits you,” Dahlia says, trying to be helpful. “Although so does that shocking pink number. I love it when redheads wear pink. It makes your hair colour pop. Oh!” She pulls a dress of the nearest hanger. “Try this one, *immediately*. Kristoire is such a raging hot name right now. Could you imagine if he featured you in a public post? You'd probably hit the gossip mags. They love a rags-to-riches story.”

Her enthusiasm overpowers any private thoughts I had on the garment, but when I step out of the changing rooms, it's obvious the cut and colour does nothing for me.

“You try it on,” I order, understanding she's still shopping for herself under the guise of helping.

When she emerges, I assist her with the straps, positioning them across her shoulders so the starburst pattern across her back shows off her flawless skin to perfection. She grabs handfuls of the voluminous skirts, raising them to show off her ankles.

“Get this shot,” she orders me, and I obediently take the image with her phone. And the next. And the next.

Once I've taken a dozen different poses, including of the exquisitely detailed back, I show her the evidence. “This is the one.”

She laughs. “The one on top of the two I've already purchased. Now stop taking flattering pictures”—she poses for another shot—“and get yourself sorted.”

“Are these follower numbers real?” I ask, pointing to the excessively populous display counter on her main page.

“Of course.” She flutters her eyelashes. “I'm becoming an influencer, darling. Half a dozen companies have already paid me four figures to feature their products. Another year or two, it'll be a proper income.”

“That's so impressive.”

But everything about Dahlia is impressive. Her manner. Her riotous opinions. Her excessive confidence that I wish she could bottle because I wouldn't hesitate to charge *that* purchase to Maddox's card.

"What's holding you back?" she asks when she emerges from the changing cubicle, dressed in her ordinary clothes rather than another new outfit.

"I'm scared to buy something in case Maddox doesn't like it," I admit. It's not the sole reason, maybe not even the main one, but it's the simplest to articulate.

"Easily solved." Dahlia grabs my phone, and my thumb to unlock it, then coaxes me to pose in half a dozen gowns, one after the other, taking a picture of each. "There we go." She returns my phone. "Now he can decide for you."

The situation should be ridiculous but there's no hint of derision. Dahlia's social status might be way higher than mine, but her rung is still a million times lower than Maddox and his friends.

She gets me. She accepts me.

It's a nice change from the last time I was at school when the student body acted like I had a plague circle drawn around my feet.

"Now, while he's deciding, we need to get you some serious jewellery. Something green or gold would look fabulous against your eyes."

She drags me back to the same counter, then we venture farther afield, hitting four different jewellery stores in the twenty minutes it takes Maddox to come back to me.

"Told you it suited you," Dahlia declares, reading the message about the fishtail dress over my shoulder. "Which means you'll need something in pounamu and there's nothing here suitable. Time to hit the main street."

And we do. For another hour.

After buying a large pendant necklace, Dahlia insists the dress needs more bling and piles a selection of bracelets onto

the purchase. “Please stop,” I beg her, laughing as she adds another expensive trinket to the pile. “This is far too much.”

“Yeah, but those boys are buying our silence, aren’t they?” She nudges me with her elbow. “And you don’t want them to think they’ll get off lightly the next time they do something heinous. If you don’t take advantage when they’re facing potential arson and reckless endangerment charges, what lesson is that going to teach them?”

I fix a smile in place, my mind working to decipher what she means.

Maddox never told me to keep anything secret. It must be connected to what happened on the night we met, but he’s made no mention.

Dahlia levels a cautious glance at me. “Have I said something wrong?”

“No,” I assure her. “Just finding the whole day overwhelming. I thought it was amazing when Maddox paid for my uniform and my street clothes. This is...” I wave my hand in the air.

“Yeah, it is. Don’t you love it?”

Even if I didn’t, it would be hard to counter her enthusiasm. “Do you mind if we stop for a coffee? My feet need a rest.”

She ducks to the loo while we’re waiting for the order, and I pull out my phone, searching for something connected to the arson. It takes a while to find—the headline is buried on page three of the search results—but my ears buzz as I read the article.

It hurts to discover Maddox doesn’t trust me. I thought we were closer, and it’s even more annoying that I don’t feel fully entitled to my anger because I’ve held things back, too.

Like the small detail that I once sucked his father’s cock for money. A fact that could only harm him and something I’d like to keep private until the end of time.

If we were rating on a scale, someone might even consider my fib worse because he asked me a direct question and I lied, whereas he just omitted the information.

The thought makes me angrier. I caught him in a lie but I'm the one who feels guilty? That's not fair.

But at least the anger makes me more comfortable about spending his money. "Shoes," I declare the moment Dahlia returns to the table. "That's what we're missing. Expensive, uncomfortable, inappropriately high-heeled shoes." I smack my lips together with satisfaction. "Did I mention expensive?"

She sags back in her chair, clapping her hands. "Now, you're getting it." She clinks her mug against mine. "Cheers to our five-figure shopping spree and trying to max out a credit card."

We hit designer shoe stores next, not part of the centre but along a narrow street of shops that branch off it, growing more exclusive the farther we go.

At the last boutique before the corner, I find a cute pair of cream shoes, tinted in the palest shade of my dress and twinkling with adornments. The salesperson frowns as I sit and try on the shoe from the display, spending an age fixing the thin straps so they're positioned perfectly.

"Oh, they're gorge!" Dahlia enthuses, before turning to the sales rep, opening her eyes wide when he doesn't immediately jump to attention. "Could you bring the other half of the pair when you get a moment, sweetie?"

Her saccharine smile doesn't encourage him to move any faster, and she rolls her eyes once he disappears into the storeroom.

"You haven't really made it until a shop assistant looks down on you," she whispers, the attitude rolling straight off her back. "Don't worry. Once he sees the name on the card, he'll change his tune. It's like nobody down this end of town's seen *Pretty Woman*."

The retort makes me smile, even though I count myself among that number. Dahlia's eyes light up as she spies

something, then her phone rings and she frowns, hunching her shoulder as she turns away from me, asking the caller, “Are you okay?”

I guess not because a moment later, she takes the conversation outside, speaking with urgency and looking distressed. When she returns, the happiness has drained from her expression.

“Sorry but I have to go. A friend’s in trouble.” She digs into her wallet, pulling out Maddox’s card for me. “Buy those and get some flats you can fit into your handbag. The boys always want to go to an afterparty and half the time they insist it’s so close they can walk.”

She rolls her eyes but her heart’s not in the day any longer.

“Is there something I can help with? I don’t need to keep shopping.”

“No, it’s...” Dahlia trails into a frown, flicking a thumbnail against her teeth. “A friend has an abusive partner,” she confesses, spots of colour burning high in her cheeks. “I just need to...”

A rush of sympathy sweeps through me. Her hand flies to her throat as the words tangle into a sob. “Go!” I say, alarmed, giving her a hug before stepping back, making a shooing gesture. “Go see to your friend.”

“You’ll be okay?”

“Don’t worry about me for a second,” I insist, standing in my mismatched shoes and escorting her towards the door.

I watch her leave, turning back to the assistant when he clears his throat, holding the matching shoe in his hand. They’re lovely but my enjoyment has evaporated.

“Thank you,” I tell him, barely bothering to try it on my foot before swapping back to my tatty sneakers. “I’ll take them.”

“You’ve seen the price?”

Dahlia was right. The snooty tone insists I can’t afford to pay for what I want. “Yes. I’ve seen the price.” Then I

remember her parting advice. “And I’ll take a pair of ballet flats in the same size. Plain black if you have them.”

His visit to the back room is shorter this time, and he opens the box, pushing aside the tissue paper.

“Yes, that’s fine,” I say, barely looking. My stomach is reacting to the coffee, and I really want to teleport home right this instance.

The assistant rings up the charges while I stand with the credit card in my sweaty hand. When I pass it across, he frowns. “This isn’t yours.”

It’s not even a question. A dipping sensation in my belly could be the double espresso or it could be a reaction to the disbelief flashing in his eyes. I just my chin into the air. “No, it belongs to my boyfriend.”

“And you have his permission?”

Nobody challenged Dahlia.

We’ve made purchases at four stores. Five if you count the café.

The more he glances at me with open suspicion, the more guilty I feel, and the more defensive. “Of course, I have his permission. You can check with him,” I snap, half hoping he does just to see him flounder. I pull out my phone, flicking through to my contact list to bring up Maddox’s details.

“I’ll check with the bank. Come through to the back office,” he tells me, gesturing to another assistant to say he’s leaving the main store. “Just to get out of the way of the other customers.”

My hands clench into fists, the rush of embarrassment at not being believed so intense that if he weren’t still holding the card, I’d leave. I nearly do anyway, but I don’t want to tell Maddox I abandoned his card in the clammy hands of a random shoe store clerk. Even worse, I’d hate the shop assistant to think he successfully intimidated me.

Instead, I follow him into a windowless cubbyhole and take a seat, imagining how his attitude will change when

someone tells him I'm allowed to use it.

If someone tells him that.

My gloom takes centre stage, then the man finishes his call. "They're checking," he tells me. "It shouldn't take too long." The moment he says that the phone rings. This time the call's even shorter. "The cardholder is on his way."

Thank goodness.

I hope I'm not dragging Maddox away from anything important. After learning about his lie, I wouldn't mind going somewhere, just the two of us. To talk, to reconnect and build back our trust.

"Justin?" a voice eventually calls from the hallway. "Customer for you."

I sit upright, expecting Maddox to walk through the door, waiting for the touch of relief.

Instead, Blaine Alcott strides into the room.

His father.

CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE

EVIE

“I DIDN’T STEAL IT,” I REPEAT FOR THE UMPTEENTH TIME SINCE getting into Blaine’s vehicle. The smooth leather interior is gorgeous to touch, my hands can’t stop stroking it. A point of contrast to the tight tangle of hatred directed at me from the man driving. “Maddox wanted me to buy some clothes.”

“You’re a stripper. The last thing any man wants is to buy you *clothes*.”

I turn my face away from his, staring out the side window at the vehicles travelling in the next lane over, going about their days without being whisked towards certain doom.

The fear shouldn’t be this powerful, not when I’ve done nothing wrong. But tell that to the brain raised on being tossed from household to household. A childhood where every lesson

ended up the same, that I'm a burden, a nuisance, a debt that nobody wants to take on.

"Come upstairs and don't talk to anybody," Blaine barks at me as he noses the vehicle into the underground parking garage for his company offices. Once out of the car, he pushes me into a lift and hits the button for the top floor.

It ejects us into a foyer with soft carpet and tasteful artwork hung at regular intervals along the walls. He leads me between rows of desks with workers busy at their computers. They barely glance up as I walk past and my eyes are mostly fixed to the floor in front of me, trying to fight off the sense of impending doom.

"Take a seat," he says inside the office, waving me towards a chair. My hands grip the arms with such force, my knuckles turn white.

"Let me text him," I offer. "He'll clear this whole thing up in a matter of seconds."

"I don't give a shit about his credit card. What Maddox spends his money on is his own business."

I wave feebly at the office interior. "Seems a lot of trouble for someone who doesn't care."

He ignores me, opening and closing drawers, riffling through the contents. It's strange to watch him now I've grown so used to Maddox. The father and son have the same build, the same features, the same depths in their identical blue eyes.

But Maddox stares at me with curiosity, with interest, with enjoyment. The man seated in front of me could burn my retinas with a single stare.

"Here." He tosses a box onto the desk. A pregnancy test. He jerks his chin towards a door on the left-hand side of the wall behind him. "The bathroom's through there. Go take the test, show me the result, and we'll talk."

A simple way of telling me he doesn't know the first thing about his son. "I'm not pregnant."

The eyes rake across my face again and I stare at the edge of the table, waiting for him to stop. “Then it won’t upset you to take the test.”

I pick up the packet, opening it to snag out the instructions. Another protest forms behind my lips but I keep it trapped there.

He’s right. It doesn’t bother me.

My feet drag as I head for the bathroom, but when I’m inside, it’s a relief to be free of Blaine’s glare. There’s a lock on the door and I click it, a temporary measure of safety.

With my underwear around my knees, sitting on the toilet, I read the list of instructions, then read through them again, only peeing once I’m holding the stick ready. A few drips hit my hand and I curl my nose in disgust, flushing before I scrub my hands with the fancy soap in the sink. A fresh bar. I bet at this level in the building, it gets replaced new each day.

I pull some tissues to protect my fingers as I hold the test, counting off the time in my head. Tears well in my eyes and I sniff them back. Ridiculous girl. Blaine obviously wants me contained or gone, miles from his son, but this isn’t a crisis unless I make it into one. The good thing about owning virtually nothing is it makes it easy to start again from scratch.

A pity those pragmatic thoughts do nothing to budge the knot forming in my chest. The connection that feels so much deeper than the short length of time Maddox and I have known each other.

Despite knowing I can’t be pregnant, I still experience a flush of relief when the symbols on the pee stick agree with me. I march into his office and place the test in front of him, slumping back in my chair.

His eyes barely touch upon it, the exercise more a demonstration of control than a necessity. “I told my son to stay away from you.”

The idea makes me snort. “And you thought that’d work? He’s a teenager, not your employee. You might as well have given him a green light.”

Blaine splays his hands, palms down, like he's gathering strength from the solidity of his desk. "Tell me, is your 'friendship' with my son the reason you're no longer at the club?"

"That and the last night I worked there, my landlord demanded a lap dance."

His lips twitch and I turn to stare out the window. From here, there's a clear line of sight across the lake, a few pleasure craft dotted about as the day's fishing tours get into full swing. I want to get lost in the view, disconnect from everything in this power play of an office, but Blaine's hard-edged voice demands my attention.

"How much is Maddox paying you not to work?"

"Nothing." I steel myself to meet Blaine's eyes, almost shaking as I force a show of nonchalance onto my features. If I'm being forced out, there's no need to leave Maddox contaminated by the residuals of our fledgling relationship. A lie is easier. "He's paying me to hide the fact he almost killed three people. Nothing to do with the club."

"You're not in a relationship?"

"We're not fucking if that's what you're asking. Can I go now?"

"How much is he paying you to keep your mouth shut?"

The chair grows harder by the second and I shift so my left buttock is the one getting crushed instead of my right. "It's not like that. He pays for clothes and food, treatment for my brother."

His eyes narrow. "And how is Ant?"

A flutter hits my stomach, unpleasant, nauseating. It's not a secret but there's no reason for this man to know my brother's name. "Ant's doing well."

"Do you think Maddox will continue to pay for his medical treatment when he finds out he's not just a user, he's a dealer?"

The flutter in my abdomen turns sharp, pain radiating out until I rub my hand to get it to settle. “As I said, we only met recently. You’d have a far better idea of how your son would react.”

“Take a guess.”

In a second, I’m back in the industrial building, flames crackling in another room, the greasy taste of the gun barrel in my mouth. “I’m sure once I explained the circumstances—”

“What about when he discovers Ant’s the one who supplied my daughter?” The pain is back again, sharper. “Do you think he’ll still pay your bills knowing Ant sold her the drugs she overdosed on?”

My mouth goes slack, the pain intensifying.

I know Ant started dealing when my father needed a supply of drugs to kill his pain, after the doctors stopped prescribing. He dealt and somewhere along the line he got hooked. His judgement went sideways.

A bright kid, adapting to the change in circumstances. Far too young to make decisions on any other basis. Only finding how steep the walls were when he wanted out.

But I doubt Maddox will see it that way and I understand. If Ant had died, I wouldn’t want excuses from his dealer.

I’d want revenge.

“You didn’t know.” He leans back in his chair, one arm behind his head, the other tapping restlessly on the arm. “Take your time to process it. I suppose it’s not every day you find out your brother’s a murderer.”

“He’s not—” But I break the sentence off so quickly I nearly bite through my tongue.

Blaine reaches into a drawer and pulls out a bundle of cash, crisp notes in a thick stack secured with a band of paper. “That’s twenty thousand. Get out of town and take your brother with you. Fuck off for good.”

Twenty thousand.

I can't stop staring at it.

This is money he just *happened* to have in his desk drawer. My brain struggles with the unreality of the situation. Even at three nights a week, the most the club would allow, it would take me six months to clear that much. Probably longer.

If it was thirty, you could repay Maddox for Ant's treatment. It might be the only apology this man allows.

And the word's out of my mouth before I can think. "Thirty."

"Excuse me?"

My throat muscles are clenched so tightly, I need to rub my knuckles over my windpipe before they release enough for me to continue talking. "Thirty and I can get..." But he doesn't need to know what I'll spend it on. "Thirty and it's a deal."

"And here I was, thinking it was true love." His lips curl into a wide smirk.

"Thirty-five."

"Fuck off." He sweeps the money back into the drawer.

"Fine." I stand and move behind my chair to push it back into place.

"Sit the fuck down."

"I only sit for forty." My arms tremble until I fold them to still the movement.

"You're insane." Blaine stands and comes around the desk, sitting on my side, one knee raised, his hands laying lightly atop it. "For that price, I can make a call and have you killed. You're such an easy target, I'd probably get change."

I clench my crossed arms even tighter. "Bullshit." My eyes don't want to lift but I make them, raising inch by inch until they lock with his cool, calm gaze. "Five minutes ago, you told me my brother killed your daughter. If you could wipe out your problems that easily, he'd be long dead."

His jaw clenches, nostrils flaring. “You’re not as smart as you think you are, little girl.”

The phrase causes me to snort with amusement. “I barely survive day to day. No one’s claiming I’m smart.”

“Pity.” He tilts his head to the side, eyes wandering before they snap back to my face. “I went to school with your father, you know. He was a goddamn genius. Must’ve hurt to give birth to two loser kids.”

The blow lands and I can tell from his widening smirk he sees it. But when he speaks again, his voice is softer, the query out of left field. “How is Maddox?”

My eyes narrow, wondering if it’s a new trick, but his expression is sincere. “He’s even angrier than you are and far less skilled at hiding it.”

“Did he really burn that place with the people still in it?”

“Forty and no one will ever hear the truthful answer, not even you.”

He straightens, moving behind his desk again and bending to reach into the drawer. “Fifty, you and your brother go, and if my son ever tracks you down, you’ll keep our shared history private.”

Ah, yes. I wondered when that would pop into the conversation. “Shared history is such a fancy way to say you paid me to suck you off.”

I expect the phrase to jump him to another level of anger, but he takes it with no outward sign. “Do we have a deal?”

We would have had a deal back at twenty. I’m alarmed at how easily I got him to a larger figure, then the realisation socks home again. This is a lot of money to *me*. It’s a lot of money to anyone who lives where I live. Who was raised the way I was raised.

This is nothing to Blaine. Literally, nothing.

“I think I’m good for your son.” My voice is so small, he leans forward to hear it.

Memories crowd my head. Maddox holding my hand that first night, frowning at the contact like he'd never touched a girl before. From my vantage point now, I know he probably hadn't.

Then it changes to this morning, as he made me come three times with a toy buried inside me and his attentive eyes fixed on me throughout, visually soaking up every drop of my arousal, my stimulation, my completion, the drowsy weight of my limbs afterwards as I came close to dozing before he spun the settings on his phone to begin the adventure all over again.

“A shop assistant called the bank rather than let you use his card, even though it lost him hundreds in commission. Even the lowliest shoe store clerk doesn't think you're right for my son. In a month's time, neither will he.”

A month. It's only been that long since we first met. A blip on the radar, a loving, heavenly blip that's challenged and scared me and ultimately turned into something far more rewarding than I could dream.

I don't want to go, my heart is miserable at the thought of never seeing Maddox again, but the choice is out of my hands. If I told him about this meeting, it might make him hate his dad but nothing more.

I've lived near rich men for long enough to learn if someone of Blaine's means wants me gone, that's what will happen. My preferences don't matter.

In a softer voice, Blaine adds, “I'm doing you a favour. Once I explain about Ant, you won't have a friendship. Not unless you're willing to sacrifice your brother to be with Maddox. At least this way, you get paid for your time. Stay and you won't have my son or the money, I'll see to that.”

And I don't have to look him in the eye to know he means it.

In this stifling room, I finally admit I've been falling in love with Maddox from the very first moment, but the man opposite me smothers any hope we can have a future.

When my fingers close around the stack of money, Blaine's smirk changes into a wide shit-eating grin. He pats his thighs, flicking his fingers towards his zipper. "Why not give me a parting gift, for old times?"

I don't bother to hide my shudder of revulsion. "Because you're three times my age and your junk tastes rank?"

He's around the desk, lifting and body slamming me face first against the wall before I register the change in position, gripping my hair like a leash. My cheek squashes against the frosted glass, pinned in place as he presses against me from behind.

I panic, feeling light-headed. My body shakes with loathing. I know better than to goad him but can't help myself, it's the only power I have left.

"There's no need to be rude," he whispers while grinding his hard cock against me. I close my eyes, wishing I could sew my stupid mouth shut. I could have declined politely and already been out the door.

"You know, your son told me I remind him of Addie." My eyes open a sliver as I twist around to face him, gauging his reaction. "Is that why you want to fuck me?"

His fingers close around my throat, the thumb digging into my windpipe, making me wince. I fight against the urge to struggle, knowing movement might set him off, could make it worse.

Blaine's exhalation is hot, condensing on the side of my cheek. He pushes away from the wall, turning slightly aside so I have a path to freedom. His hand pats my cheek, the gesture mocking, before he returns to his seat.

I collect the money, shoving half into my bag, the rest deep into my pocket.

When I reach the door, he calls after me, "Stay gone or I really will find out the cost to tidy you away, once and for all."

CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO

MADDOX

“WE SHOULD TAKE THE BOAT OUT,” WILDER SUGGESTS, AND I can’t work out whether he’s joking.

We’re at my house, having decamped from Zane’s the moment his father showed, choosing my place instead. “There’s a raver on Parson’s Beach tonight. We could anchor in the bay and talk a variety of girls into coming on board for a sleepover.”

As though she overheard, Dahlia texts me from the gate, demanding entry. I buzz her car through, feeling the uptick in my mood that always comes from seeing Evie.

Except, when Dahlia walks inside, Evie is nowhere to be seen.

“She didn’t make it back yet?” Her eyes sparkle with amusement. “Guess she got a taste for it after you chose that

dress. She was like a wee mouse until then, scared to buy a thing.”

The scenario amuses her but I’m less concerned with Evie’s shopping patterns and more concerned with where she is. “You left her on her own?”

“I did not. I left her in the exalted company of your credit card.” When Dahlia reads my expression, she fidgets. “I got an urgent call away. She said she didn’t mind.” There’s a pause during which her expression grows guiltier and guiltier. Her voice comes out in a tiny whisper. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

She hooks her finger, beckoning me into the hallway. “Had you explained to her about the fire and how she wasn’t meant to talk about it?”

My nerves seize on the question, delighted to have some reason to feel as jumpy as they do. “I had not.”

Dahlia’s normally impeccable façade crumbles further. “I might have let something slip,” she admits, voice growing tinier by the word. “But I thought she knew.”

“And when did you let this something slip?”

“Not long before my friend called, and I had to leave.” I check my phone but already know there aren’t any messages. Not since I last checked a few minutes ago. “I’m really sorry, Mads.”

Her face is twisted, on the verge of tears.

“Don’t worry. I should’ve done it long before now.” She nods but her expression doesn’t change. “Get your dress sorted?”

A hint of colour comes back into her face. “Yeah. I grabbed a few options, just in case.”

“You should get in there,” I say, jerking my chin towards the entertainment room. “Wilder’s about to take a boat and go trawling.”

She rolls her eyes and I frown as she hurries inside to join him.

I head to my room, opening my laptop and initiating the tracking program installed on Evie's phone. Although it's been on there from the beginning, I haven't started it until now. It takes a few minutes to run through the sign-in screens, saying no to every offer until it reaches the location map.

After a few moments, the pin circles her neighbourhood. A few clicks later, it's zoomed in on her old flat.

She's probably collecting something she left there. Considering I moved her with no prior consultation, a lot of her belongings were left behind. No reason to be worried.

But I want to talk to her sooner rather than later after hearing Dahlia's news. Evie obviously played it down when it was mentioned, otherwise her friend's query just now would have held more concern.

It still should have come from me.

I should have spelled it out for her weeks ago. Even better, I should have done it on the first day.

I'm still mulling over the wording for my message when the entry gate buzzes. Optimism flares as I walk upstairs to press the release but it's Vale; by the time I get to the panel, he's already punched in the code and driven through the gate.

A shiver races down my spine.

Please don't let these events be connected.

"Dad's not in," I tell him the moment I open the door, standing to one side so he can enter. "Was he expecting you?"

The man takes a step inside, then stops. He pulls a wallet from his inside pocket, withdraws a card and hands it to me.

It's my credit card.

My skin feels encased in ice.

"You should keep a closer eye on that."

"Where did you—"

“The next time your father tells you to stay away from a girl who’s trouble, you listen. Understand?”

I stare at the man. At the meticulous way he presents himself. Nothing about him looks like it could be ruffled by the messiness of normal human emotion.

“Where’s Evie?”

“Heading out of town if she knows what’s good for her.” He waves a finger in a small circle. “I’m sure this little gift of hers has been fun, but it’s over.”

“She wouldn’t leave.”

Vale stares at me, then slowly, slowly, his lips curve into a smile.

Fear explodes in me at the thought of what this man could have done to gain her compliance. Pain splinters through my hand, the knuckles indenting the wall where Vale’s head was a second before.

“Perhaps you should—”

The next blow hits him in the stomach and when he bends forward, I grab the sharp creases of his lapels and shove him against the wall. “What the fuck did you do to her?”

Before he can answer, my knuckles collide with his face, crunching bone, mashing his lips against his teeth. When I flex my fingers, specks of blood fly to land on the carpet.

“Hey, man,” Zane calls out from the stairs. “Is there a problem?”

“No problem,” Vale calls out, his upper lip swelling, blood coating his teeth. The skin next to his eye swells, already speckled with shadows. “You’re upset, so I’ll just add this altercation to my tab, but the next time your temper frays, remember I know enough to send both you and your father away for a very, very long time.”

He steps away from the wall, and I fall back, turning to the side to let him go. My hands shake as I try to call Evie. She doesn’t pick up, the phone diverting to voicemail.

“You okay?” Zane asks, walking up the rest of the stairs, frowning as I stand, staring at my phone with troubled eyes.

“I need to go. Don’t let Wilder anywhere near the boat.”

“As if. I’ll take them to mine,” he says but I’ve already turned, grabbing my car keys off the hook, and jogging into the garage.

My fingers tap an impatient rhythm on the steering wheel as I wait for the garage door to open, the gate to unlock, the traffic to clear long enough to let me pull into the road.

The back of my neck prickles like someone’s staring at me. I rub it raw by the time I pull up outside Evie’s old flat, cursing that I didn’t bring the laptop with me. Cursing harder that I never ported the tracing software to my phone.

After a second of thought, I lean over to open the glovebox, reaching inside for the revolver I keep meaning to dispose of but haven’t, tucking it into the back of my jeans.

Then I’m out of the car, punching in her door code, thundering up the stairs, two or three at a time, not caring about the noise. Her door is partly open, a stack of belongings on the landing.

“Evie!” She jumps at my voice, spinning around from the bench, her face deathly pale. She’s writing a note. “What’s happening?”

“I need to leave.” There’s a reusable supermarket bag next to her, folded over, and she picks it up, fingers clenching around it as though she doesn’t want to let it go. Then she shoves it at me. “Here. This is for you.”

I ignore it, stepping closer, trying to read her expression while she tries equally hard to keep it hidden.

“Vale returned my credit card.”

Her pupils expand until there’s no visible colour left in her irises. “You shouldn’t be here,” she says in a gentle voice.

“Why not?” When she doesn’t immediately answer, I grab her arm, tugging her closer to me. “What happened?”

“Your dad happened.” She unhooks herself from my grasping fingers, turning back to her note. “He paid me to clear out of your life and that’s exactly what I’m doing.”

“He can’t make you leave.”

Her eyes rest on me, the black depths swallowing my confusion and giving nothing back. “He’s not making me leave. I’m the one who chose this when I took his money.”

Raw panic tries to spiral into anger. When my father told me not to get involved, I didn’t know he was this serious.

My rage is useless but the money...? I can work with money. “Whatever he’s paying you to go, I’ll pay you double to stay.”

She shakes her head, folding the notepaper in half and propping it on the bench. It’s addressed to Larry, her landlord. Underneath are crisp clean notes.

“Didn’t you hear me?” I demand when she tries to walk past.

“Sure. You’re going to pay me with what? Your father’s money? I doubt he’ll be keen on that.” She moves to the bathroom, gathering a towel and putting it on the floor, immediately loading goods into the centre.

“I have my own inheritance. Nothing to do with him.” She doesn’t bat an eye. “For fucks’ sake, would you stop?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Evie squats, the vanity cabinet open in front of her, knees not touching the floor and I don’t blame her. The peeled and chipped linoleum must have a generation worth of filth caught in its cracks.

But it’s her eyes that catch my attention. Her voice might disguise the fact, but her expression shows me how deeply she’s hurt.

“I thought you...” but she shakes her head as she trails off, attention turning back to the task. “You could have said about the people who were injured in the fire. I was never going to narc on you.”

“That wasn’t why.” She narrows her eyes at me, and I concede, “It was part of it but not the main reason. I like you. I told you that from the start.”

“Yeah, you did. A second before you asked to drug me unconscious.” Even her laugh is gentle, gracious considering the circumstances. “I really like you, too, but I like your dad’s money more.” This time her smile has sharper edges. “And it comes with far fewer strings attached.”

She’s not the girl I sent off this morning on a fun day’s shopping. My Evie hides in there, just visible through the cracks in this worldly façade.

I guess I’m staring at the same armour she donned to get onto a stage half naked, then remove more clothes. The same mask she must wear while fishing tips out of her G-string; a good disguise until you glimpse the haunted eyes peering out from behind.

“Please don’t do this.”

Toilet paper and knock off brand shampoo go into the towel. A moon cup in its satin bag. A giant tub of Vaseline and a box of plasters.

“Where will you go?”

She sits farther back on her heels, scanning the small room, then bundles the towel into her hands. I think she won’t answer, and a nibble of panic turns into a large bite. “Back down to Dunedin. Once Ant’s completed treatment, we’ll figure out someplace more permanent.”

“The treatment I paid for.”

A flash of anger sparks in her darkened eyes. “No, the treatment *I* paid for.”

I think she’s referencing what I made her do, then she pushes the supermarket bag at me again. I take it, opening it to see cash sorted into neat bundles. Thirty thousand. It doesn’t make any sense. “He paid you thirty grand to leave?”

“No, he paid me fifty.”

I’m genuinely stunned.

“For what it’s worth, I would have preferred to stay, but I can’t afford to fight him. You know he could crush me if he wanted.”

I blurt, “A hundred to stay.”

Her eyes rest on me, halfway to pity. “Why? What do you gain by turning me into a tug of war between you and your dad?”

“You said you’d be my girl.”

“And you said all the shit you bought was an apology for the gun. Guess we’re both liars.”

There’s something hiding in her face, a wariness I haven’t seen before.

“Please. You’re wearing my necklace. You’re my girl, aren’t you?” I slide my hand around the curve of her neck, pulling her closer, rubbing my thumb along the edge of her jaw because I know she enjoys it and there’s nothing in the world, I wouldn’t do to fill her with pleasure.

“Your necklace.” Her voice twists with bitterness as she raises shaking hands and undoes the leather, pushing it into my hand. “Here you go. Find another piece of livestock to chain.”

“That isn’t...” Anger snaps across my brain, then grief, fear, giving me whiplash. “You agreed. I’m taking care of you.”

“It’s not care, it’s control. You’re buying me everything I need until our lives are so entwined I can’t get away from you. I’ve been here before, Maddox.”

“With who?” Jealousy pours into me. “Who the fuck—”

“My foster parents. The people who loved and cared for me as long as I did every chore they set, obeyed every instruction, became the perfect obedient little girl they’d always wanted.”

Her lower lip wobbles, eyes brimming with tears. It’s like a crack has opened, spilling out bitterness in a flood.

“What happens when I’m not your perfect partner, Maddox? What happens when I wake up one morning and I don’t want to wear the lingerie you’ve picked out for me or eat the food you prepared?”

The words spill out so fast, I can barely follow what she’s saying.

“Because the last time I disappointed people, they took me out of school, they isolated me, they tried to separate me from the only family member I had left. Every day worse and worse and worse until I ended up drugged and shackled in a cage in the stables.” Her hand creeps up to rub her neck, nails grazing over the scar, the thin line that I now see could fit to a metal collar.

My blood runs cold. I want to tear her foster parents into raw chunks and feed them to a rabid dog. I bite hard into my cheek just to taste the blood. “That would *never*—”

“Sure. That’s how it began last time, too.”

She turns away, arranging her belongings again.

“I didn’t know.”

“Because I didn’t tell you, but it didn’t matter, did it? You still treated me exactly the same and how the fuck does that happen?” Her voice nearly disappears as she cries, “What is wrong with me?”

“I don’t...” There’s no answer I can give her. Coincidence? Fate? The universe hurling an ironic curveball straight at my face?

For a moment, her hand is across her face. Then she sucks in a deep breath, slotting her mask back in place. “This has been so much fun, really, and I’m so, so grateful, but I have to take the money. I need something that’s *mine*.”

“But you’re the one for me. You’re my girl.”

But her eyes fill with sadness rather than joy. She pulls away. “You want a toy to play with, Maddox. Not a girl.” She gives another of those gentle laughs. “Especially not a girl

your father threatened to kill if she didn't accept his kind offer."

"Why?" She tries to turn away and I grab her by the shoulder, twisting her to keep facing me while my thoughts race, trying to solve a problem without enough information.

My father doesn't care, he's not into hands-on parenting. He's never given a shit who I hang around with or whether I *like* anyone, let alone a girl.

How did he go from nothing to threatening to kill her? What am I missing?

"What reason did he give you?" I demand. "Why would he be so anxious, he'd murder you if you don't go voluntarily?"

She clicks her tongue, giving an impatient toss of her head. "I don't think he *would*. He just enjoys the theatrics of it all."

But I can tell from her face she's worried. So would I be... if I knew enough to figure out what the hell's going on. "Did you sleep with him?"

Her face shutters and those icy tendrils are back, squeezing my head until it hurts to think, until the last fragile bands on my control snap. I should have pushed harder, back when this was starting. As the temperature of my blood rises and the fuse on my temper burns, I reserve some of the blame for myself.

She's not going anywhere. That's the one thing I'm certain of.

I didn't force her to accept any of this. She did that on her own and it's too late to steal it away from me again.

She accepted and someone threatening her into taking a bribe won't change those facts, even if it's from my father. Even if he corrupted my sweet angel into doing something he never should have wanted, let alone coerced her to do.

Evie's mine. She stays.

The rest of it, dealing with my father, figuring out her past, we'll sort out together.

I reach into my jacket pocket, for the shot I organised when I saw her struggle to swallow last time. By the time she works out there's something in my hand, the plunger has sent the sedative deep into her muscle.

And I hold her in place, a hand over her mouth to stop the scream until her legs sag underneath her.

CHAPTER TWENTY- THREE

EVIE

ONE MOMENT, I'M FLOATING ON A WARM BLUE WAVE OF BLISS, the next a spike of fear thrusts straight through me, jolting me upright, startling me fully awake.

I'm on a bed. In a strange room. My mind tries but can't get a handle on how or why or when I got here. I don't remember falling asleep at all.

After a few seconds, I swing my legs over the edge of the bed.

There's a grogginess that makes it hard to think, hard to remember, hard to process the influx of information slamming into me through my eyes, my ears, my skin. A pulse throbs in my upper arm and by the time I rub it, I understand what caused it.

He injected me. He drugged me.

The horrible knowledge descends like a black cloak over my consciousness, making my knees buckle until they nearly spill me back onto the bed.

The view alone tells me I'm in Maddox's house and my blood pressure spikes, worried who else might be here.

Another glance and I think this must be Addie's room. I stare at the clothes I'm wearing, none of them mine.

I have the horrible sense they're Addie's clothes. When I touch my throat, the leather choker is back in place.

"Maddox?"

My voice is weak enough to cause a new flurry of alarm. Why do I sound so scared?

I steady myself with one hand against the headboard while I take a longer perusal at myself. There aren't bloodstains. No pieces of me are hanging off at strange angles. There's been nothing inside me while I was out. I can't taste anything weird or wonderful in my mouth.

Nothing to be frightened about.

I take a few tentative steps, finding my balance and then trying a few more. The door to hallway is ajar but I turn towards the other one. This room is set out like a backwards replica of Maddox's, so I know this will lead to a bathroom.

When I try to turn the knob, it sticks. Someone's locked it from the inside.

"Maddox?"

There's no answer and I tap it with my knuckles, being insanely gentle considering I want the person inside to know I'm out here. I'm alive. "Maddox, are you in there?"

A whimper is just within the level of my hearing. My pulse thumps so loudly it's hard to hear past the beat in my ears.

"Can you open the door?"

There's no answer. I press my palm flat against the wood, trying to imagine what's happening on the other side.

When I scan the room again, searching for anything that might help, I see a shattered vase on the opposite side of the bed. There are large chunks of broken blue glass, the ombre artwork going from pastel to the dark navy of the night sky.

Some of the shards are stained with crimson. My fear skyrockets.

I rap my knuckles on the door again, loud as I can this time, rattling the handle, making no secret that I want to get inside.

“Open the door!”

When there’s still no response, I thump the heel of my palm into it, then stand back. In a movie, I’d run at it and if the directorial gods were kind, it would fly open, letting me inside.

Worth a shot.

I throw myself at the door and luckily don’t hit it hard because the damned thing doesn’t give in the slightest; I’ll be wearing the bruises on my shoulder for days.

A kick below the doorhandle doesn’t get me anywhere, either. I sag onto the floor, tipping my head until it rests against the hard wood.

“Please tell me you’re okay.”

There’s silence for minutes, just the groggy pounding in my temples, the excited rush of blood through my eardrums.

Then I hear a small click and leap to my feet, turning the handle and pushing until I can slip through the gap.

Maddox sits with his back against the wall of the shower, vanity cabinet beside him, a large shower mat rucked up beneath his arse. Legs splayed. Hands dangling between his knees.

Those long, delicate fingers that I adore are wrapped around the handle of the revolver.

He lets his head fall back, bumping against the wall, staring at me like a drowning man’s eyes would stare through the waves closing above his head. It triggers such sympathy

that I can scarcely breathe, my shock and confusion swept away.

How could I ever think of leaving him?

Fuck Blaine and his money. All I want is to bundle Maddox into my arms and take care of him. To look after him the same as he does for me.

Blood covers his other arm, streaks and spots of it creating a counterpoint to the white of his t-shirt, the pale skin of his face, his sunny blond hair clumping into unkempt tangles.

I sink to my knees beside him, seeing a large chunk of blue glass from the vase in the room, sticky with blood.

“Guess that’s a ‘no’ to the okay.”

A tiny smile hooks up one side of his mouth. His eyes meet mine, but they look nothing like him. They’re the eyes of someone too exhausted to continue, too tired to ask for help.

I reach for the glass, pinching it between my fingers and sitting upright to toss it in the sink. There’s another piece on his side closest to the cabinet and I take that, too.

His legs curl to his chest, pulling the revolver out of my easy reach. His body shakes so violently it makes the floor underneath me shudder.

“Can I take the gun?”

I hold my hand out to him, not wanting to get into a tug of war that I’ll lose but he draws it closer to himself, leaning it against the side of his head, finger flat along the barrel.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes, and I feel a rush of pity and twisted anger.

“Don’t say that if you’re not going to hand it over. If you were truly sorry, you wouldn’t be scaring me like this.”

He tries to cover his face and I grab his empty hand, squeezing it until the bones creak and his mouth twists with pain.

“You shouted at me, you injected me, you dressed me in your *sister’s clothes*.” And I know he told me about wanting to

say goodbye but I'm not Addie and never have been and I'm so angry he treated me as an afterthought in my own life. "You did god-only-knows-what while I was unconscious and now you want—"

"Nothing happened."

I stare at him, wide-eyed. "*Something* fucking happened, Maddox. You're covered in blood."

The hand in mine tries to withdraw and I turn it over, close to weeping as I see the jagged line scored in the flesh of his wrist. Not deep enough to sever anything important, but enough to show the intent, blood still leaking from the wound.

"If you won't give me the gun at least *talk* to me. Tell me what's going on. *Please* just talk to me."

He shakes his head, Adam's apple bobbing as he fights to swallow. "Just leave. The money's upstairs. Take the car if you want, the keys are on the kitchen counter."

"I don't want your fucking car." I grab hold of his shoulders, trying to get closer to him, to curl him against my body but he's still, resisting every effort and I can't force him, not while he's holding a loaded gun in his hand. "Why do you still have this?"

He untangles his limbs in an instant, grabbing my face, hauling me close enough to kiss, the gun hard against the side of my head because he won't release it from his grip.

A soft caress turns more forceful. His tongue licks against the seam of my closed lips, forcing them apart, demanding entry and I give it to him, making room for the welcome intruder. His hands hold me in a vicelike grip, making me take more and more and more as his kiss becomes more punishing, lips pressing so hard against mine they swell.

My fingers lace through his hair, then tighten into a fist, tugging at him when I need to come up for air. His teeth scrape across my bottom lip, sucking and grazing as I tilt his head back and gulp in a breath, then push my free hand against his chest, forcing him to straighten his back, giving back as much as I'm getting.

The kiss is like a tug of war for power, and I can't tell who's winning.

He breaks away as quickly as he started, eyes shell-shocked and haunted, the lighting from the window so weak it throws half his face into deep shadow.

“Lie down.”

The gun points towards me and much as I don't want to think he'd pull the trigger, his hands shake so badly they might not have enough control. I keep my eyes fixed to his as I comply, lying on my back, the tiled floor hard against my shoulder blades, my arse, my feet.

He covers me with his body, the hand with the gun pressing it flat against the floor, just visible from the corner of my eye.

There's a hardness against my hip. Something I've longed to feel but not like this. Not at the expense of cracking open his mind to spill out his worse fears.

“Why did he have to get to you first? To ruin you.” The words are barely legible, leaking out from around his kiss as he fixes his mouth to my shoulder, my neck, sucking on the dip between my collarbones, licking me with long strokes of his tongue, setting every piece of me alight.

He lifts, supporting himself on the hand holding the gun, sliding the other up my thigh, teasing at the hem of my skirt, fingertips rasping against my skin, the callused pads igniting small fires at every touch.

But his words hurt. Worse than the threat beside my head, worse than the blank hours I've lost to whatever he injected me with.

“I'm not ruined.”

He chokes out the words like they're tearing small chunks from his throat. “You wore my collar. You were meant to be just mine.”

His mouth fixes to my throat, to just below the pendant and I'm so enraged by his words, by his way of thinking, that I

punch at him, trying to get free. “What’s the matter? Don’t you think you can compete?”

I twist to the side, worming out from under him, but it’s not a contest I can win. He quickly smothers my progress with his weight.

Teeth dig into the meat of my shoulder as he marks me, roughly sucking until my flesh must be bruising crimson.

“Stay fucking still,” he growls in my ear, making my thighs tingle, making my toes curl like the sickening beacon for atrocities that I am.

My hand slides down his back, grabbing a huge handful of his arse and squeezing, then shoving the heel of my palm hard into his backside as I thrust my hips upwards, grinding against him while a groan catches deep in his throat.

My lips find his ear, panting until his hips pump, helplessly seeking what he needs. “You want some inexperienced fuck who won’t know better, go find one. Whatever your frail ego needs.”

I throw my leg over his, curving my hip to the side, panting from the effort. My need explodes, and I clench my muscles harder, rubbing against him, riding his thigh upside-down, generating as much friction as my pinned body allows.

“Fucking whore.”

“Keep throwing insults,” I say between clenched teeth, threading my fingers into his hair again, tugging his head back to expose his throat. “I’m sure that’s easier than proving you’re a better man than your father.”

His free hand clamps around my throat as he roars, anger pouring from him in waves, such a powerful display of raw emotion that I tremble.

And my mouth won’t quit. “Little virgin boy. Do you need a guidebook? Should I give you step-by-step directions, so you don’t lose your way.”

The pressure on my throat increases, driving the sharp pieces of his collar deep into the skin, marking me as much as

his teeth.

I reach for him, fumbling with the button on his jeans, the zipper catching as I draw it down just enough to reach inside, to curl my fingers around his throbbing cock, feel it twitch against my palm.

His hand moves, releasing my throat to tug at the neck of my dress, hauling it off my shoulder until the fabric draws tight against my chest, digging into my skin as it strains, scoring a line in my flesh.

The pressure increases until I try to fight, the fabric finally tearing.

“Stop fighting me, you freak.”

“Says the guy who needs a gun to get hard.”

His eyes drill into mine, fires raging behind their glacial blue. The gun skids across the floor, far out of reach, and he straddles me, sitting back on his heels as he grabs my dress to rip it farther, the fabric rending until he lets go and the halves fall on either side, my chest exposed.

In a second, the urgency leaves him. He cradles a hand under my neck, raising me as he peels the material away from my body, leaving the tattered pieces to pool around my waist, holding me upright as his fingers snap open my bra.

I try to help but he flips the front above my head, twisting and binding my arms in the straps as he fastens his lips to one breast, taking it inside his mouth, the steady pull of suction tugging at an invisible cord that attaches between my tits and my cunt, flooding me with desire until my mouth seeks any part of him I can reach, desperate to have any piece of him inside me.

But the moment he raises his head, he twists the elastic straps, binding my arms even tighter. He flips me onto my stomach, skin retracting in shock from the cold tiles, groaning as he settles his weight back upon me.

“What use is your experience now?” he whispers into my ear, breath hot against my neck. Then he puts his mouth to use, kissing and sucking at my shoulder, my back, my neck,

crushing my arms against my back as he tips his weight forward, fumbling to release himself one-handed, nails scraping thin lines in my skin as he searches for my hem, tugging it upwards.

Then his fingers slide under me, lifting my hip as they delve into my panties, curling against my pussy, fumbling, rough as they slip inside my silken-wet folds, a groan escaping his lips as he strokes me. He eases the pressure when I yelp against the force, slipping and sliding, rubbing and stroking, his middle finger breaching my entrance.

I arch my hips as much as I can under his weight, matching my rhythm to the thrust of his finger inside me while his hips grind his hard cock against my arse.

“Fucking tease.”

His hand disappears, hauling my underwear halfway down to my knees with one furious motion. “Spread your legs for me, baby,” he croons, and it’s like he’s possessed by two different people.

The beautiful caring boy who holds my hand as we walk along the school hallways, building trust, wheedling compliance. And the rough man who couldn’t care less what I think or feel. The brute who injected a sedative into my muscle tissue; all so he could take whatever he desired, heedless of my screams.

I want both. Twisted and tangled together, gentle and forceful, one driving forward, relentless, while the other holds back.

Goosebumps chase across my flesh, heightening my sensitivity, sending a cascade of hot and cold tingles to ripple across my skin until the entirety becomes an erogenous zone, desperate for his touch.

“Please,” I croak in a cracked voice, spreading my thighs as far apart as the tangle of underwear will allow.

He seizes them again, this time tugging until they’re all the way off, tossing them above my head to land on the gun,

hiding its cold anger beneath the silky fabric, still warm with a glistening streak from the gathering wetness between my legs.

“That’s it,” he rumbles in my ear, punctuating his words with a twisted groan. “You beg for me and maybe I’ll deliver.”

My hips have a mind of their own, bucking against him, seeking his hardness, seeking the pleasure that only his fat cock can provide.

“I want you.” My voice cracks to a halt as his thick fingers fasten around my throat again, tighter than any collar. “Nobody else, ever again. Just you.”

The head of his cock pushes against me, blindly seeking its warm resting place. I twist my hips, arching my back to make it easier. While one hand continues to act as my collar, the other burrows between my legs, trying to find its home.

He pushes forward, surging into me, a gasp loud in my ear as he stops, withdraws a little, then thrusts all the way home.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR

MADDOX

MY BLOOD IS SMEARED ACROSS HER BACK, THE PALE SKIN marked with my frantic and disastrous attempt to leave this painful world behind. The throb in my wrist matches to the pounding in my temples and the pulse in my cock, every beat making it harder, stronger, more desperate.

The urge to pull back and thrust is close to overwhelming, but I choose stillness instead, letting my senses calm enough to feed me the information I crave, the flood of input that feels so good easing inside my memory, lodging deep inside my brain.

“Are you okay?” I whisper, mimicking Evie’s earlier query, still unanswered except by the evidence available to her eyes.

If she said no, I couldn’t bear it. A pool of calm spreads across my fiery emotions, a gap allowing me time to breathe,

space to think.

And what I think is that Evie is glorious. Her snapped retorts and dangling taunts, the speed with which she takes my jibes and turns them back on me.

This Evie isn't the shy creature who walks beside me at school, her muscles tight with the worry that she'll do or say something wrong and everything good will be gone in an instant. Jerked away the same way all the good moments in her life have been stolen, leaving her with scraps when she deserved a feast.

This Evie has the confidence I'm missing.

Even now, when I'm frozen, trying to understand each new sensation, she tilts her hips, moving me when I'm trying not to move, squeezing her internal muscles until I think I'm about to come, about to climax just from resting inside her, overwhelmed with how good, how natural it feels.

Nothing like my hand and the sense of despair that there's something wrong with me. In this instance, I've never felt more *right*. More like the person I want to be.

"No," she finally gasps in answer to my almost-forgotten question. "I'm being pinned down to a bathroom floor by a maniac who apparently doesn't realise he's supposed to thrust."

"Like this?" I ease back a tiny fraction and surge into her again, the pleasure rippling into the deepest corners of my brain.

"Call that a thrust, virgin?"

"Bit late for that insult, whore." But I don't want to use that word, not any longer, not even in teasing. "Angel." Better. "Where are all these lessons you promised? Where's my step-by-step instruction booklet of how Evie likes to be fucked?"

I curl my hand under her body, cupping my hand around her breast and lightly squeezing, the feel of it somehow making my cock feel ready to explode.

Our nipples harden in tandem, and I rub mine against her back while gently circling my palm against hers. She's pressed too tightly against the floor to allow more movement.

I must be crushing the air out of her lungs.

The fear catches me until I roll onto my side, bringing her with me. My cock slips out of her from the movement, and she chuckles, digging her elbow back into my stomach until I untangle her arms, bringing one to my mouth for a kiss before letting go.

She reaches between her legs, taking me in her hand and guiding me back inside her. A slow exhalation ends with a whimper of pleasure and my pulse thumps even more strongly, taking her enjoyment as a reward.

My first movements are tentative, scared I'll slip free again, scared I'll hurt her. Then she reaches behind her head, curling her fingers into the base of my hair, tightening it into a fist and tugging, sending a flurry of delighted messages twisting and rolling, bumping into each other and turning, zooming in new directions.

Every cell in my body suddenly has an urgent signal to impart, too many, they tumble and tangle and entwine until all other thoughts are driven from my head.

I reposition myself, my right hand uppermost, curling over her hip so my fingers can stroke along her pussy, judging from her noises when to exercise more restraint, when to push harder.

My mouth finds the sweet curve where her neck meets her shoulder. Already, my teeth have marked it, but now my tongue stakes a claim too, licking and sucking and lapping at her skin, tasting the faint sheen of sweat, underneath it tasting the sweet subtle scent that's purely her.

She tilts back her head until her mouth finds mine, using my hair to guide me where she needs to be, teeth grazing as she sucks my lower lip into her mouth, the rhythmic pull of her tongue encouraging it to swell, amplifying every signal of pleasure.

And finally, I move inside her. My thrusts are awkward at first, unsteady, jabbing forward with no skill, clumsy and tentative.

“That feels so good,” Evie murmurs and the half of me that thinks it’s a lie is overtaken by the half of me encouraged to move with firmer strokes, my fingers circling her clit, rapturous at the strangled gasp of pleasure that vibrates from her throat.

The sensation of her warm cunt wrapped around me is indescribable. Nothing has ever been this good, this rewarding, this terrifying all at the same time.

My chest is split open, my heart pulsing in full view, vulnerable and raw.

She could fell me with one wrong word, one cruel slap of her hand, but she doesn’t. Instead, she makes noises that fill me with encouragement, that make me want to give her more pleasure and more until she bursts with it, until she’s as joyous and frightened as I am.

I keep thinking I’ve found my rhythm, settled into my stroke, but every time the urgency grows until I move faster, until my claim is made deeper, harder, planting my cock so far inside her she won’t be able to remember anyone before me.

The urge to make her *mine* is so strong that I can’t help but give into the sensation, thrusting harder and faster until I’m pounding into her, skin slapping together until it stings like sunburn. I’m sure at any moment she’ll squeal, she’ll struggle, she’ll scream, and instead I listen to her gasp and moan, feel her pick up my rhythm and move so every sensation is heightened, every stroke lengthened.

I revel in the motion until the position I chose doesn’t work for either of us. Until I get to my knees, wrestling her in front of me, grabbing her hips and pulling her back onto me as I thrust forward, feeling her muscles grip and pulse and squeeze along every inch of my cock.

The wound in my wrist opens again, oozing blood that smears and streaks and smudges across her skin until she’s

coloured crimson by the essence of me, by the miracle that gives me life; stained in its glory.

Her hand reaches behind her, blindly flailing and I relinquish the sweet curve of her hip to grab hold, twining my fingers through hers, feeling her clutch harder and harder until my bones grind together, her nails digging into the skin as I close my eyes to feel everything in all its graphic detail.

An image explodes from the darkness. Hands holding me down, laughter, someone touching me while I writhe and sob with disgust.

My eyes flick open, filling with the sight of Evie beneath me. *She's* the one on the floor. *She's* the one being ridden.

The visual stimulation forces light into the darkest corners of my mind.

I'm back. I'm with her. One hundred percent hers the way she feels one hundred percent mine as our bodies connect, and the revulsion recedes under a wave of belonging, a sensation that everything we're doing is exactly how it should be.

The force of her cries increases until her muscles quiver then convulse, pumping along my length, flooding me with so much pleasure that my mind whites out with the joy, with the power and the intensity. Everything builds until my balls draw up, my body becomes mindless with rutting, and finally I feel the thrilling forceful burst of orgasm, exploding inside while her muscles milk me for every drop, collapsing on top of her in the compulsive animalistic bliss of release.

Everywhere we touch extends my joy. My chest against her back, my cock in her cunt, my hand still being crushed into a new shape by her tiny fingers.

I laugh against her back, needing to let some of the emotion escape before it overfills and drowns me. When I roll to my side, I take her with me, folding her inside my embrace, drawing my legs up until hers are pressed close against her chest.

"Not bad for a newbie," she mutters, giggling as I squeeze my arms tighter around her. She squirms out of my hold until

she can twist to face me, her hand reaching out at an awkward angle to cup my face.

Our eyes meet and I can't look away, absolutely mesmerised. I never want to let her go.

“Your wrist...” Her face creases in concern as she examines the injury, nostrils pinching tight with worry.

“It's fine. Just a flesh wound.” I pause for a second, then have to ask, even if it hurts both of us. “Did my dad pay you to have sex?”

She nods, then chews on her lip. “It wasn't full sex, just a blow job. I'm sorry I lied to you.”

“When was it?”

A tear drops into her hairline, and she sniffs back another. “Not long after I started working there. A year ago, I guess. He propositions all the girls.”

And it doesn't take a maths genius to work out the calculation that she must only have been seventeen and barely that.

Her fingertips investigate my face, touching my cheek, my lips, thumb stroking the tender patch of skin at the top of my jaw. “What happened? Didn't it work out like you thought?”

I shake my head, not as an answer but because I can't answer, closing my eyes to get away from the scrutiny.

The rage that consumed me earlier has gone, burned off in a wildfire of lust. The self-hatred is still there, hard to look at, hard to deal with, its spikes burrowing under my skin, taking swipes at my ego until I feel it flake apart.

“Talk to me,” she begs and a minute ago I thought there wasn't a single thing on this earth I wouldn't do for her, but now my chest snaps shut, the barriers thumping into place.

Evie splays her fingers across my chest, and I drop my forehead to hers, resting there while our breathing settles from the physical exertion. In synch.

“Do you think it was easy, doing everything you’ve asked me to do?”

My eyes startle open, locking straight onto hers. And the answer is obvious. I’ve seen the stain as she tries to fit in, struggling with the things I do every day without thinking.

“Were you just going to leave while I was sleeping there? Utterly defenceless.”

“No, I—” But it’s a lie because if I had the guts, I’d be long gone.

If I had courage, I would have died before I met her.

“Do you think you’re the first person to come home to find someone you love dead? If you think Ant’s fucked up now, you should’ve seen him back then.”

And my mind spins because it hadn’t even occurred to me. “Your dad?”

“He overdosed so quickly the tourniquet was still wrapped around his arm. Ant collected me from school, and we walked in and he...” She shakes her head, throat working as she fights against the tears. “I’ve never seen someone who looked so grey.”

“I didn’t notice.” The words catch and I close my eyes, opening them again when she bumps me. “She was curled on her side how she always used to lie on the bed. I bounced the mattress to wake her up, thinking it’d be funny.”

The images slowly fill my head, the ones I usually fight against, forcing back into the shadows for some magical future date when I’m well enough to handle looking at them. Some magical date I know will never happen.

“She hated me. In those last few weeks, that’s all I remember her saying.” I give a rueful laugh. “Well, not saying so much as screaming it in my face.”

The pain of the admission tears at me, claws ripping away my feeble attempts at self-preservation, but Evie smiles. She kisses me softly, gently, her palm still resting against my chest.

“Ant used to yell that at me, too. And tell me how I was a useless burden, and he’d be better off if he just left me at the farm to rot.”

I wince. The words genuinely shock me.

In the eighteen months since my sister’s death, I’ve grown accustomed to rationalising her mood swings, her anger, the kindness that would flip in a second into a fully-fledged razor-sharp attack.

But to hear it from Evie, to see her smile though the words obviously still cause her pain, it’s a comfort and a burden.

“You want me to kick his arse?”

“Sure. I’ll suggest it the next time I want to see you beaten to a pulp.”

I laugh, burrowing into the side of her neck to plant a kiss there, my mood still buoyant. “How dare you insult my manhood like that?”

“Oh, if you need your manhood insulted, I’ve got far more inventive ways.” She snuggles closer to me, closing her eyes. “Promise you won’t leave me. Not like that.”

“At the hands of your brother?” I tease, then can’t stand the shadows that form in her eyes. “I don’t want to leave you at all. It’s just sometimes, I need it to stop hurting.”

“But it’s meant to hurt.” Her eyes open wide, searching mine. “If your heart isn’t torn in two when someone you love dies, you’re not doing it right.”

Another laugh bubbles to the surface until she grabs my chin, forcing me to meet her gaze. “Promise me or let me go.”

And I can read the seriousness of her demand. Her expression isn’t hard, not unforgiving, but her eyes don’t waver.

This request is non-negotiable. It should be easy to say yes, easy to *lie*, but that isn’t fair to either of us.

I can’t let her go but I should.

My eyes drop, a coward until the end. “Even if I promise you, it doesn’t change all the things that are wrong. You’re tolerating me now, but you know I don’t work right. There’s something missing inside me or a connection that doesn’t slot into the correct place in my brain. Most of the time, I can’t give you what you need.”

“Tolerating.” She frowns at me, then glances down where our shared fluids are leaking out of her body. “Yeah. You talk a good game, but I have evidence to the contrary.”

“That wasn’t... I don’t even know why it worked this time.”

“Because I’m awesome.”

I chuckle, cupping her face and kissing her softly. “I agree but you were awesome yesterday, too. And the day before... and the day before... you get where I’m going.”

“Is it the gun?”

My mind fills with the first night, sees her lips parting, feeling the power and the triumphant surge inside me as everything aligned for one moment in a dirty building, in the worst part of town.

And today.

But it wasn’t the same and I don’t know how to frame the difference or explain how I know it’s not right.

“There was something the first night, but I don’t think it’s the weapon, it’s more...” I frown, chasing the thought, chasing the words that scatter, dancing on the tip of my tongue one second, then gone.

“If you don’t know what it is, how are you so confident you know what it’s not?”

“And what if it was?” I snap, the familiar rage slotting back into place. “What if the only time I can get hard for you is when I’m...” But I can’t even finish. The idea is too appalling.

“Then I think we need to invest in a weapon with a safety catch.”

Evie stares at me so earnestly, I can't help but burst into laughter. "Sure, and that would be some kind of marriage proposal, wouldn't it? Do you take me in sickness and in health, loaded or unloaded..."

"Single or double action..."

"Always double."

"Really?"

She pushes at my chest, and I let her roll me onto my back. I let her straddle me, my jeans still halfway up my hips, shirt mostly unbuttoned while Evie's naked. Her dress lies in pieces beside me. Her bra is tangled into the ball where I tossed it to the side, her knickers lying on top of the gun.

"If this is a once in a blue moon event, then I better take advantage of this *double* action," she teases, lightly rubbing her pussy against me.

I'd scoff at the effort but to my surprise, it immediately yields results.

"See?" She rolls her eyes. "Mr I-can't-satisfy-you getting his second boner of the day."

"*Boner?*"

"What would you prefer me to call it, then? Your stiffening member? Your steely meat puppet?"

"And the blood mysteriously drains from my *dick*."

"Typical upper classes with your fancy terminology. I don't know how a girl's meant to keep up."

She takes my hands and plants them above my head, her tit bouncing so close to my mouth that when I extend my tongue, I can just flick across her nipple, laughing as it immediately stiffens.

"It doesn't matter," she says, the serious expression back on her face. "If you can or can't, or I can or can't."

"But it's not right. It's not normal, is it?"

“Normal,” she scoffs. “What does that even mean? It doesn’t matter if the inside of our relationship would freak out other people. They’re not in here with us. They don’t get to have a say.”

The expression of defiance on her face would make me hard if I wasn’t already—miraculously—on my way there.

“All that matters is what works for *us* and what doesn’t. If you need to drug me or hold a weapon to get in the mood, we’re the only ones who get to decide if that’s okay.”

“And what if it’s months before I can do it again?”

“You’ve been keeping me perfectly happy with your tongue and fingers, mister. And it’s always a good time when you crack out the toy.” She bends to press a kiss just above my belly button, sending shivers spiralling out in a wave. “Maybe in class again, that was fun. We’ll survive and adapt like any couple would. Who knows? One day I might tie you up and force you to watch me surviving, over and over, with a vibrator.”

“Not unless I get the control for it.”

“Oh.” Her face drops. “Oh, no. Now that really is a dealbreaker.”

She swings her leg to the side, and I grab her by the hips, settling her back exactly where she was. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“Nowhere, apparently.” She leans forward and bunches up my shirt, lifting the whole thing over my head and tossing it to land near her bra. “You know there are toys that work both ways. I could get a remote. You could get a remote.”

“Everybody has a remote.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

And she rubs herself along my cock, slippery and satisfying, until the idea that I won’t be able to perform this way on demand is the idea that seems like a dream.

CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE

EVIE

AFTER WE DOZE TOGETHER FOR A WHILE, MADDOX GOES TO retrieve the outfit I wore earlier while I return to the bathroom, staring at the gun but ultimately too scared to touch it.

Knowing my luck, it would explode in my hand, killing me even without pulling the trigger.

Someone will need to clean the blood, wrap the chunks of glass from the broken vase into newspaper before safely disposing of it in a bin. If it were me, I'd scrub the floors myself, clean the damage away and out of sight, embarrassed by the display.

With Maddox, I have no idea what he'll do. Probably leave it to traumatise his cleaner.

My phone is in the pocket of the torn dress, and I check the display, no missed calls. I retrieve my bra and panties, slipping

them on, then stuffing my phone into my bra, rolling the ruined dress into a ball, and wiping at the worst of the bloodstains.

“You don’t need to do that,” he remarks from just outside the door and I nearly hit the ceiling.

“I’m going to buy you a bell if you don’t start making a normal amount of noise when you enter a room,” I tease, taking my clothes and tugging them on while he stands there, smiling.

His injured wrist was steamed clean in a shared shower, the jagged edges of his wound now held together with layers of gauze and far too much tape. Just looking at the bandage makes me woozy.

“Hey,” he says, moving to my side, alarm in his voice. “You look like you’re about to collapse.”

I nod, closing my eyes as I rest my head against his chest. It’s my favourite place in the world right now, listening to the steady pump of his heart, my cheek moving with the gentle rise and fall of his breathing.

There are still problems to solve but I have a sense of connection with this beautiful boy I’ve never felt with anyone outside family. I’ve kept secrets from him, withheld information, but now I can’t remember why.

He walks me back to his room, propping me on the bed, back against the headboard, positioning himself by my side.

“I’m sorry for scaring you. And for wedging myself into every corner of your life.” With my head on his chest, I close my eyes, listening to the steady beat of his heart. “Evie, please believe me, if I’d known...”

Maddox takes a tighter hold on me and when his voice fails, he lets the warmth of his arms tell me his sorrow.

“Sometimes, I get this sense like I’m a doll. People play with me and sometimes they’re careful and most times all they want is to have their fun and they don’t care if that means rolling me in the mud.”

“You’re not a doll. I don’t... I’m sorry. It was never meant to be like that.”

“I didn’t mean you.” A laugh bursts out of me, mostly relief. Not just that I’ve told him the worst, and he’s accepted it but because now it’s said, I never have to tell the story again. “Maybe a little the day at the department store, but never apart from that. I know you’re not anything like them. I twisted my fears around to throw at you because I needed a reason to leave and that’s all I had. It was cruel.”

“But I made you wear the collar.”

When I turn to him, his face is mottled with angry patches of crimson. “No, you didn’t. It was a struggle, but I wanted to. I needed to feel closer to you.”

“And the sedatives.”

“Yeah. You really are a shitty boyfriend. I’ll have to send Dahlia out with your credit card again to teach you a lesson.”

“It’s not a joke.”

Alarm spikes in my system. “I didn’t tell you to make you feel worse about yourself. You gave me choices.”

“I coerced you.”

“Because you were bought up with far too much money. I bet that shit’s as natural as breathing.” When he still doesn’t find the joke, I give him a light elbow in the ribs. “Every employer alive coerces people to work for them. Don’t go thinking you’re all special.”

His forehead presses against the back of my neck, and I feel his tension. Then he lifts his head away. “Does that make me your boss?”

“Well, you do like to order me around.”

Finally, he laughs against the side of my neck.

“I didn’t mean it, you know,” I whisper.

His nose wrinkles in confusion. “Which bit didn’t you mean?”

“You’re not a shitty boyfriend. You’re my favourite boyfriend ever.”

“Mm-hm. And is this the bit where you follow up by saying I’m the only one you’ve ever had?”

I heave out a long sigh. “Guess I’m becoming predictable.”

But if anything, his arms close tighter around me. “I like that. I’d hate to think the firsts were all one-sided.”

“In which case, this is the bit where I should probably admit that no one ever bothered to...”

“To what?”

“You know.”

He chuckles against my shoulder, the vibration tingling across my skin. “You will definitely have to be more specific than that.”

“No one’s ever bothered to *pleasure* me with their tongue before.”

“Fools. Out of every delicacy in the world, your pussy is the number one dish I’d like to eat.”

A shiver of pleasure rolls along my body. If we weren’t already on the bed, I’d have to sit because my legs tremble too much to stand.

“But speaking of eating...” he drawls. “Would anyone else in the room fancy a snack?”

My stomach immediately grumbles.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He slides off the bed, then touches my shoulder. “Do you want anything specific or am I okay to pick for you?”

The offer ignites a ferocious wave of emotion inside me. That once again he listened and adjusted. Like all these things I’ve never experienced with any other person is just like breathing to him, he course-corrects and falls into the right patterns so naturally.

But I've seen him struggle with his friendships. I understand this behaviour only occurs when he's with me.

Because I'm special to him.

I've fought the idea because there are so many things telling me this is wrong, this won't ever work, but for the first time I just let myself believe it can. That he's different with me because we're something better together, more than the sum of our parts. Our strange, broken parts.

Even with his father's disapproval looming like a loaded weapon, we'll still find a way.

And I grab his hand, tugging him close enough to kiss, holding him in place with my hand, every sense stuffed to the brim with enjoyment. "I love you."

His arms grip me tighter, squeezing until I can't breathe, until my ribs creak and groan, straining to adjust to his force.

Then his hand cups my face, he stares into my eyes, and he kisses me. Not like before, not with a hunger that needs to be filled, but with a gentle wonder. The muscles of his face clench, I think he's about to speak, then he grips my hand and clears his throat.

"I'll get that snack."

He didn't say it back but I'm happy that his appreciation is genuine. We don't need to reach the same milestones at the same time. "Thank you."

I watch him walk from the room, eyes enjoying every inch of his stride from the broad shoulders to the sculpted arse to the way his eyes dance with mischief when he turns back to see me watching. The easy smile that graces his face is worth a thousand wordy poems.

My phone buzzes and I pull it from my bra, frowning when I see Ant's number. "I thought you weren't allowed phone calls until the end of your stay?"

"Hey, sis. Nice greeting."

Distress chokes my voice for a second, the hand holding the phone turns clammy. He's calling and he shouldn't be. I try

to force away the disappointment until I know for sure, but I fear the worst. “What’s going on?”

“You’re asking *me* that? I got home and the door’s open, there’s shit all over the bathroom floor, and half our stuff’s missing. Where the fuck are you?”

“At Maddox’s place.” I shake my head, trying to piece together the information. “What are you doing home?” I scold. “You’re meant to be down in Dunedin for another fortnight.”

“Yeah, well. Change of plans.”

The disappointment swells larger. I bite my cheek to hold back a flood of tears. “Are you using again?”

“What? No! I’m fucking worried is all. Maddox told me —” The phone is muffled and there’s a long silence before he comes back on the call. “Your friend said some shit that really concerned me. I’ve been trying to get back to you from the moment they woke me after sedation, but the damned place is more of a prison than a treatment facility.” I can practically hear him biting his lip, a bad habit we both share. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Better than fine. I’m...” *In love* is what I was going to say, but it’s not the right time. He’s not in the right mood.

“What the hell happened in our flat, then? There’s a note to the landlord on the counter. Were you going to tell me we’d moved?”

“For god’s sake. I haven’t been able to call you, either.” I blow out a frustrated breath, but I can’t blame him for the panic. A lot of strange things have happened in a short space of time. It’s natural he’d be worried. “I’ve been staying at a dorm room at school.”

“The note says you’ve gone down south and won’t be back.”

“Yes, it was—” I break off because it was something I can’t disclose without worrying him further and it sounds like he’s already frantic. “Just stay there. I’ll come and get you.”

“Not if you’re thinking of taking me back to your psycho’s house. You shouldn’t be there either.”

“He’s not a psycho.”

“He fucking is. I know his sister did some messed up shit to him, but it doesn’t explain half of what I saw when you left me alone with him at the clinic.”

“Trust me. It’s okay. I know what he told you but it’s not how it sounds. He’s good to me.”

“And you once told me you enjoyed living on a farm because you were bonding with the animals.”

I inhale a shocked breath, heart racing.

His voice comes back on the line, much softer. “I don’t want to hurt or upset you, but I need to make sure you’re okay. I don’t think he’s a good person to have in your life.”

“People would say the same thing about you.”

“And those people would be right. But at least I’m family. I understand where we both come from and how different we used to be. You deserve better than to spend your life making excuses for the people who hurt you, me included.”

I glance towards the door, feeling guilty for talking about Maddox behind his back. “You don’t understand and that’s fine. We can talk about it later.”

“Come home then. We’ll discuss it tonight.” He exhales in a long sigh. “I really missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

“Come home, Evie.”

My free hand curls into a fist. Doubts assail me, making it hard to think as I slowly plod backwards through our conversation. My stomach shrinks with dread, and I take three tries to ask, “What did his sister do to him?”

“Come home.”

I walk to the doorway, listening to the sounds of Maddox humming underneath his breath, completely out of tune.

“Did you sell drugs to Addie? Are you the one who got her hooked?”

He makes a strangled noise, and I can imagine him pacing back and forth, the way he always does when he’s stressed or upset.

“I love him, Ant. I trust him. Things are hard right now but we’re finding our own path and way of working. I don’t want to come home if all I’m going to hear is a string of accusations or negative opinions. He matters to me.”

There’s another audible sigh before my brother’s voice comes through the line. “Okay. I respect that. Please just... I miss you.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon.”

He sounds happier as he says goodbye and I’m better for having told him how I feel. Not wanting to hide a thing, not any longer.

I walk upstairs, slowing when I hear the garage door, then the heavy tread of footsteps.

Blaine walks along the corridor, coming to a stop as he sees me. His face is blank as stone.

CHAPTER TWENTY- SIX

MADDOX

MY HEAD WHIRLS AS I STARE INTO THE FRIDGE, UNABLE TO process enough to decide anything, not even what to eat.

Evie's declaration sent me into a tailspin. I should have said something back, but my tongue tied in knots. The opportunity passed me by. I need to prepare in case it comes again; surely an inevitability. Better yet, next time the admission should come from me.

Warmth blossoms in my chest. It feels good.

Then again, everything about Evie feels good. New and clean and shiny.

But it's also overwhelming. Sending me on an inward spiral, out of control.

The pulse in my wrist is a good point of focus and I let my mind explore the sensation, the ache of the jagged edges, the throb of the surrounding flesh, appalled by the attack.

Other thoughts try to intrude, awakened from their dark caves, sharpening their claws before slouching towards the light.

I push them back, the phantom hands pinning my shoulders, the touch on my hip; a voice whispering in my ear.

Keep quiet or I'll really hurt you.

The cold kiss of a knife against the tender skin on the inside of my thighs.

“Sandwich,” I mumble under my breath. “Bread. Butter. Cheese. Ham.” My eyes scour the shelves, finding a jar of gherkins and grabbing it though I hate them. Remembering Evie taking a sliver from my fingers, the spark of electricity between us frightening me then.

The fading tingles from touching her, being inside her, scare me now.

Pressure weighs upon my shoulders. Shame and pleasure contort in my chest.

“Bread. Butter.” I grab a knife from the cutlery drawer, a plate from the cupboard. “Cheese. Ham. Gherkin.”

A hand grasps my throat, lips curling into a snarl.

“Bread.”

The tip of a knife, stippling my skin, raising dots of blood.

“Butter.”

A pulse twists through my abdomen, tightening my balls, blood pumping, head throbbing, chased by a bucket of ice water, dousing any arousal, leaving me shaking, nerves oversensitive to pain.

The butter knife slips in my hand, and I grip it harder, staring at the dull blade, wondering how much effort it would take to do damage.

You tell anyone and I'll kill you.

A film coats my eyes, remaining after I blink, after I wipe my arm across my forehead to mop up the clammy drops of sweat.

No one will ever believe a snivelling dog like you.

I peel back the plastic cover on the Swiss cheese slices, placing one on the bread, then adding another at a different angle to cover the holes in the first.

You're worth nothing. Less than nothing.

“Fuck!”

The plate, the food is on the floor, hand stinging where it swiped everything off the bench. My breathing is hard and heavy, head spinning.

Get a fucking grip. You're out of control.

I hear the creak of floorboards from the storey below, Evie's light tread as she moves around. She'll be here in a minute and the only thing I've made is a mess. There's a pan and brush in the cupboard and I pull them out, quickly sweeping up the broken crockery, my eyes drawn to the sharp edges.

Then the garage door mechanism rattles into life. A new dump of adrenaline hits my bloodstream, narrowing my vision, everything brighter and sharper than it should be.

Evie starts up the stairs.

I walk out of the kitchen to meet her, and she's paler than pale, eyes wide and full of fear.

My gaze locks to her with such focus, it takes the subtle shift of movement before I realise my father stands in the corridor, waiting for her to finish coming upstairs.

He locks eyes with her, ignoring me. “I thought I made myself perfectly clear.”

“You did,” I agree in the calmest voice I can manage. “Fifty thousand dollars' worth. It's almost like you think there's something to hide.”

Evie manages the last few steps on shaking legs and I reach for her, clasping her hand and moving her behind me as I face off with my dad. She gives my fingers a squeeze and I return the gesture, taking strength from her support.

Meanwhile, my father arches an eyebrow, the only hint of expression. “Does this mean you’ve come clean about your cache of secrets?”

I hate the dismissive way he cuts his gaze back to mine. Hate that he’s been intimate with my girl, a thin sweat of green to her gleaming bronze. “If you mean the secret that you had sex with an underage girl, yes. She did.”

Blaine flicks a hand in dismissal. “She was well past sixteen.”

Like that makes it alright for a fifty year old man to fuck a teenager just because he threw money at her.

Isn't that what you're doing? Paying for her company? Like father, like son.

I wrestle my head back on track. “The bar is eighteen if you’re paying, or do you think you can convince a jury she was doing it out of the kindness of her heart?”

“A jury.” Blaine snorts and the door from the garage opens again, Vale emerging. Evie gasps and moves farther into my shadow. Her fear adds to my discomfort.

“It’s just a phrase,” she assures him, her voice high and tight. “Nobody’s going to report you.”

She squeezes my hand as though hoping I’ll agree with her, but my mind is caught, watching Vale’s knowing smirk, feeling the fear pulse from her body in waves.

“I have the photographs you wanted,” Vale says to Blaine in an obvious piece of staged theatre. “Are we doing it here?”

“Doing what?” I ask and immediately know I should have kept my mouth shut. This is part two of whatever plan they’re hatching, ready when part one failed.

“It’s about Ant,” Evie says, her soft voice pleading. “He was friends with Addie.”

I turn to her with a frown. “I know that, already.”

When I face forward again, my dad tilts his head to the side, his eyes fixing to her with the stern expression I know so well. The cave creature who lives within me lurches forward, twisting and growling, its sharp claws digging into my bones, using them as a ladder to clamber up from the depths, teeth glinting in the light.

“Did you tell him the rest, Evie? Did you tell him where your brother was the night my angel killed herself? Did you tell her who she turned to for help?”

You like it. I know you like it.

“Stop.”

The word barely makes a sound, escaping my throat like the expelled breath of a dying man when the mortician rolls him over on the slab.

“She was an addict,” Evie says, tugging at my arm. “They were trying to help each other.”

And my father’s mocking voice, “Is that his story?” His eyes move to me, keeping tabs on how his revelations are landing.

“It’s not a story,” she says, bristling. “It’s the truth.”

“Truth is such a strange concept, isn’t it? Means completely different things to different people.”

Vale opens the leather satchel he’s carrying, pulling out a photograph and letting it float to the floor.

Addie is in Ant’s arms. Shockingly thin. Greasy hair falling in straggly waves around her face, so long the curls are almost pulled straight. I can’t think how I ever saw her in Evie; now all I see are the differences. The harsh lines around my sister’s mouth, the early ageing of addiction; the dark circles under her eyes reeking of ill health. Her mouth is pressed in a thin line, pulled down at the corners when, even while she’s frowning, Evie’s lips curl upwards. Like there’s always a part of her—even buried deep—having fun.

Another picture follows. Then another.

Ant scoring. Ant injecting her, the view caught through a shattered window.

“I had her followed. Every time she left the house in those last months, someone was trailing her. I kept cutting off her source of funding, but it didn’t matter.”

Another photo lands on the pile. Ant wears a thin jacket, arms hugging himself to keep out the cold. Addie gets into a car a few metres in front of him.

“This is your brother *helping*,” he says to Evie, eyes still fixed to me. “Pimping her out to any punter who could afford it. Making her fund his habit on her back.”

The repulsion hits me; stronger than ever. My body recoils from the thought of touch, of skin, of tongues and teeth and hair. Of fluids and panting and writhing and the twist of limbs.

Metallic spit coats my tongue. The wound in my wrist burns like acid.

I crush Evie’s hand, tighter and tighter. The bones and tendons groan and grind and strain until she tugs, and I release her... wiping my palm against my jeans leg, lip curling as I try to rid myself of her touch.

“Six times he sent her out that night. You’d know what that feels like, wouldn’t you?” My father finally breaks his gaze to sneer at Evie. No emotion for Addie beyond using her degradation as a taunt. “Even the nastiest whore would have trouble living with herself after that many punters in a row.”

The photos keep floating to land on the pile. My breathing is audibly strained. I recoil from the sound but make another and another, my chest pulling in a desperate bid for air.

Evie’s brother whoring out my sister.

Evie’s brother twisting her mind, feeding her drugs, fuelling her addiction.

Reshaping her from the fun older sister who never used to mind me tagging along on her adventures into someone bent and corrupted, swallowing love and vomiting hate.

“I’ve been generous with your family,” Blaine says, moving towards Evie. He takes a step forward at the same time I take a step away. “Wouldn’t you agree? Fifty thousand for an uneducated stripper with no real prospects.” His voice softens, dropping so low it’s barely audible. “You took the money. Why couldn’t you just leave?”

“I gave it back.”

“Isn’t that nice? You gave it back. Was that before or after you decided my son was a better prospect?”

My head jerks up at that, echoes of a lecture I’ve heard a thousand times before but never really internalised. But now I hear it. Worse, I see it standing beside me.

What was it she said as she packed up her things, preparatory to leaving? Completely indifferent to the fact that I needed her to stay. *‘I need something that’s mine.’*

You offered her double to stay.

You offered her money and suddenly she’s ‘in love.’

“Maddox,” Evie pleads, her vocals distressed, eyes shimmering with tears. “You don’t have to listen to this. You can come home with me. Ant will explain. It won’t be how it looks.”

She reaches out her hand, but I recoil, inching farther away. My face overheats, cheeks burning with shame at how easily I was fooled as the horrendous weight bears down upon me.

“Vale will take you home,” my dad says, nodding to the man. “Stay. Leave. I really don’t care. But never go anywhere near my son again.”

“Maddox, please.”

Her voice is car keys on a new paint job. The burst stitches on an infected wound.

Ant ruined my sister while she stands there, making excuses.

While you pay for him to get well, she rots in her grave.

And that's the thought which has me turning, staring blankly at the girl I thought was my future. She can't even meet my eyes as I say, "You knew? You knew all of this and never thought to tell me?"

I want her to deny it. I wait for her to claim innocence, for her to be as outraged at her brother's behaviour as I am.

"He loved her, too."

"Love?" I wave my hand at a photo array of my sister's disintegration. "You think this is love?"

I close my eyes, finding my old anger, my old armour, shutting every other disturbing emotion away. The rage greets me like an old friend and what good times we had, tearing apart the dealers in this city as I searched in vain for the person who started it all, who got my precious sister hooked on their corrosive drug.

The man who's been under my nose all this time.

"Get out of my house," I say, chest straining to form the words. "I never want to see you again."

CHAPTER TWENTY- SEVEN

MADDOX

I CAN'T FACE GOING TO SCHOOL ON MONDAY. INSTEAD, I skulk in my room until I can't stand to remain there a second longer. Until the memories of Evie, the smell of her, the image of her smiling face, erode any hope of finding equanimity.

The bed is a no-go area, the imprint of her body still indenting the covers. The floor and the walls aren't much better. After a night spent tossing and turning, I shift what I need into a guest bedroom. It's sterile, and the view is crap but at least I manage a few hours' sleep.

Thoughts of Addie fill my head. The way she was in the last few days and weeks of her life. The wretched screaming. The howls of abuse. The desperation that pulsed from her as I pushed her away.

The past eighteen months has been spent blaming myself. For not helping her in the right way, not being strong enough to get her clean. For not finding the right way to be supportive without enabling her.

For being wrong at every turn.

Even through the months when I doled out punishment to the dealers with indiscriminate abandon, the wound inside me festered. Knowing it was more my fault than theirs. The crusade nothing but a way to misdirect the blame; always knowing it wasn't the answer. Always knowing I was the one who should be eradicated.

It was me who failed.

And now I find out the truth. That there was never any hope for Addie because the person who she thought of as a friend was the worst person in the world for her.

When I close my eyes, I see Ant's face. See his earnest expression as he lies to me, point blank *lies* to me about how he wished he could have done more to help my sister. About how wonderful she was, how much he cared for her.

Lies, lies, and more lies.

Bad enough that he didn't help her. Worse to find out he was the person who initiated her drug abuse.

The anger has never burned as fiercely inside me. I toss and turn, giving up after so many hours spent awake that I decide it's just as easy to glare at the ceiling as to stare at the inside of my eyelids.

I have English first period and a free study period after, so stay home until after morning break, drinking coffee and glaring at the river. Of all the vapid thoughts in my head, one wish rises above the others. The wish to turn back time and stop myself going on the vigilante spree that sent my life careening off course.

"What d'you want me to do with the money?" my father asks when he drags himself upstairs, settling down with his morning papers. "I can have Vale drop it in to her."

“Fuck, no. She gave it back. Keep it.”

He stares at me for a long moment, but I don't return his eye contact. We said all we needed to when he explained exactly how much of a fool I've been, chasing a girl who knew—who *knew*—her brother caused Addie's death.

Another lie on top of all the other lies she told me. The embarrassment is the worst part. That my father understood all along she was no good, he warned me to stay away, but I thought I knew better.

All I ended up doing was letting the enemy camp too close to my heart.

At ten-thirty in the morning, my phone buzzes and I check the screen. I've blocked Evie and I know it won't be her, but there's still a faint tang of hope when I see a random number on the screen. “Yeah?”

“Hey, big spender. It's Robyn from Chezzers, remember me?”

My mind is so scrambled it takes me a moment to place her. Then it clicks. The woman I paid to ensure Evie stopped working at the club. “Sure. What d'you want?”

“Well, you only paid up to this week. I was wondering if you still want me to exclude your girl or should I bang her back on the roster?”

An unfortunate choice of words. *Bang*. Sounds about right.

I must pause too long, because Robyn explains, “Only she called, asking for hours.”

“Do what you like. I'm not paying any longer.”

“Okay. Well, it was nice doing business with you. Any other special requests you or your dad have, I'm your girl.”

My dad. Thanks for the graphic reminder, Robyn. I fondly remember when the only treachery I had to worry about was my girlfriend fucking my dad.

Before I found out her brother had killed my sister.

In a burst of frenetic energy, I take care of everything else I've left dangling in the wind. Her accommodation goes first, the student housing office indifferent to the news that Evie is freeing up her room for a new tenant.

And I'm happy to pay over and above for them to be the ones to inform her of the expiring lease. My heart craves the contact, which only makes me more determined. The last thing I need is to see her again.

Next, I call through to a moving company and task them with emptying her dorm room and delivering everything to her old flat. I guess that's where she's gone already.

Back to her brother, clean and in recovery on my tab. Alive and well while my sister rots in her grave.

For a second, the rage is so all-consuming, I shake too much to spin through the contact list on my phone. Then it passes like it always does. Slinking into the back to wait for another turn on centre stage.

Next, I place a call with my bank, cancelling my credit card and ordering a replacement in case she memorised the number. After they confirm a new one's on the way, I pause, trying to think if there's anything else.

For weeks now, I've been consumed with the drive to meet her every need, to ensure she has everything she wants.

But there's really nothing. She only stayed at the school dorm to please me. To make it easier to reach her when I needed to. To give me a place to stay when staying at home became unbearable.

Everything else was just... normal stuff. Nothing fancy. Her school uniform and a few spare clothes. Food and a place to store it.

I have spent money, a lot of money, but most of it went to Ant. Some to her work but that was a 'me' thing, not a 'her' thing. Even the credit card bills are ninety percent Dahlia.

Dad gave her fifty grand, and even when she thought she was leaving, she turned more than half over to me without a second thought.

She didn't need my money any more than she needed me.

The pain digs into my sternum, so sharp I bend over, hugging my arms around my torso to ease the discomfort. So sharp that when my brain tries to point out the flaws in my train of thought, the contradictions that won't fit neatly together, I brush it aside, too exhausted to think.

I had been planning on going to school. Instead, I head back downstairs and hide in the spare bedroom. In the evening, fed up with my racing thoughts and the sharp daggers of my memory, I collect a shot from my bedroom, twin to the one I used on Evie, and inject it straight into my thigh, letting the warm ocean of unconsciousness claim me.

A brief flicker in my brain wonders if this was why Addie started, to gain control of intrusive thoughts so they could stop hurting her, then every channel unplugs in my brain, and I float away.

THE NEXT MORNING, I decide to stop wallowing. I text Zane to let him know about my fake illness and even faker recovery. He'll learn the truth soon enough; he's more than capable of putting two and two together, but hopefully a lie will hold him until I have the strength to answer properly.

"Where's Evie?" he asks, raising his eyebrows in surprise when I roll into my carpark without her. "Have you moved back home?"

"I never moved out," I snap, temper fraying already. With my eyes closed, I count to five, slowly exhaling, then open them again. "But, yeah. I'm staying at home this week."

"Cool," he mutters, not bothering to repeat his first query. Probably sensing I wouldn't answer it the second time, either.

We tread upstairs to the clubhouse, the heat already stifling and the air so still that even when we throw the windows wide open, it barely makes a difference.

"Broken any sinks, lately?" Wilder asks Zane as he stumbles into the room, yawning and immediately collapsing

on the cushions, on the verge of falling asleep.

“What’s this?” I ask Zane, happy for any distraction. “You doing a bit of remodelling?”

“Yeah. He’s been plumbing Susie,” Wilder quips, snorting at his own joke.

“I got a bit enthusiastic in the girls’ bathroom off the science block,” Zane expands. “We were having a lovely time, when physics decided we were taking too many liberties, and broke the sink clean off the wall.”

He pauses for a second, head tilted, eyes half-lidded, a beatific smile on his face. “She’s no longer returning my calls. Apparently, in the confusion, I may have suggested she was the only one placing any weight on the equipment in question.”

“That’s what you get for fucking a heifer.” Wilder narrows his eyes as he glances my way. “Where’s your mini-me this morning?”

“Otherwise occupied.”

“Looked like someone was cleaning out her room when I walked by.”

I move to the window, glancing at the quad below. “Oh, look. Dahlia’s chatting with Mariel. Weren’t you two—”

“She’s what?” Wilder pushes me aside as I chuckle, elbowing me in the ribs as he turns.

“Yeah, funny guy. You know, if either of you two losers need any tips, I’m here for you.”

“Thanks. I’ll put that on the bottom of a very, very, very long list.”

The bell for first period goes and I pad downstairs, heading for English. Wilder has a free period, which translates to him probably texting another girl to join him for the next hour. Zane follows me, splitting off to go to chemistry where he has a secret project to reproduce the explosives, we used on the night...

But that's the night I'm not thinking about. Along with all the nights since.

Today is a new day. Ground zero. A return to the status quo of being a single man.

A status that lasts until I push open the door, scanning the class for an empty desk.

Instead, my gaze catches on Evie.

She sits in the same seat as usual, an empty space beside her left open for me. Her hair is up, caught in a messy ponytail, a style I've never seen her wear before.

Exposing the collar I bought her, once again wrapped tightly around her tiny neck.

CHAPTER TWENTY- EIGHT

EVIE

I PLAYED OUT THIS SCENE A THOUSAND TIMES IN MY HEAD THE past few nights instead of sleeping. But the reality of Maddox's cold rage still eclipses anything I conjured alone. When he levels a glare at me, every hair on my body stands on end and my chest gives a sickening pull like an abscess is where my heart should be.

But while my body flinches, my eyes feast on the sight of him, cataloguing the new shadows on his face, the hard clench of his jaw, the slight dishevelment of his third button not entirely through the hole; an oversight my fingertips itch to correct.

I miss him.

Even with Ant cajoling me into good humour, I feel like a limb's disappeared. A dozen times a day I'll hear a phantom

noise and turn, disappointed when Maddox isn't there.

He held my hand so often while walking these hallways, my palm throbs as I stride through them alone.

It would be so easy to reflect the anger straight back at him, but I can't blame him for giving up on us, not when I'd just done the same out of fear.

I took his dad's money and Maddox took his bait.

But during that terrible and glorious last day, he showed me who he was, and I let go of my darkest secrets. He's my family, whether or not he's with me. I can't force him to open his heart and share his burdens, but I can show that I'm here, waiting and hoping he'll play catch up at some stage.

My hands shake as I face forward, trying my hardest not to glance in his direction.

Maddox stands at the door, staring for so long that I think he'll turn around and leave. Then, as the teacher stirs, looking ready to ask questions, he stalks across the room and slumps into the neighbouring chair.

"Hey," I say, but he ignores my greeting. No surprises there.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"English."

He shakes his head, curling his lip then turning his attention to the teacher and keeping it focused on him for the rest of the lesson.

"You know, your father's summary was very one-sided," I say as we pack up, readying for our next class. "If you have time to sit during morning break, I can—"

"Don't follow me. Don't sit near me." Maddox shoves his face an inch from mine, glowering until I can feel the heat burning me. "You don't belong here. Leave or I'll make sure nobody in school ever talks to you again."

And that makes me laugh. "You mean, keep the status quo? Why don't you leave?"

“Because this is *my* school and I’m actually going on to bigger and better things, unlike some people.”

His anger burns so hot I take a step back, reminding myself this is rage and fear and grief talking. I stare at the bandage on his wrist, wondering what he’s told his friends about the injury. If he’s bothered to explain himself at all.

“If you wanted to know why Addie hurled abuse at you, this is why. I know you care for me, the same as I care for you, but you’d do anything to hurt me right now, wouldn’t you?”

And I swear he grows an inch as he looms over me, encroaching into my personal space. “Don’t you dare say her fucking name.”

“Ant did it too, you know. The sex work. He wasn’t sitting back and pimping her out like they—”

But he’s gone. His long strides moving him away from me so fast he might as well be running. I sigh, hugging my textbook close to my chest and ambling to second period calculus.

Ms Kaihe frowns as Maddox requests a different seat. “Or you could just exclude Evie from class. A stripper doesn’t really belong here. I’m not sure the board of trustees would find it acceptable.”

Her startled glance quickly relaxes into her usual calm. “Anyone who’s enrolled belongs here, Maddox. A point you were insistent upon a month ago when you disrupted everyone’s schedule to enrol Evelyn in each of your classes.”

“Changed my mind.”

“Good for you. I haven’t.”

He turns, giving me a long stare from blank eyes. “You know she fucked my father for cash. If the school wants to continue receiving his generous donations, you might want to reconsider.”

When her sympathetic gaze lands on me, I’m sure she’s about to fall into line. Tiaki didn’t become one of the best

schools in the country without pandering to the parents who foot most of its bills.

But she smiles. “I’m sure that information will come in handy if he tries to withdraw his support. Asking to exclude a student on such a basis could have disastrous reputational consequences for all concerned.”

For the rest of the day, he doesn’t challenge me, but it’s awkward as hell. So many students were listening to his tirade in class, I’m sure my name is besmirched all over school.

At lunch, I sit at a bench and the other occupants immediately stand to leave. I look over at Dahlia, who gives me a sympathetic glance, but shrugs and I understand.

“Maybe you should apply to skip straight to uni,” Ant advises when I complain bitterly at home. “Considering you got up to speed in a month, I doubt it’ll prove much harder. Especially with the maths classes, you could fast track through a lot of the curriculum.”

His optimism far outweighs mine but also misses the point. I’m not going to school just to go to school.

But perhaps he does understand because he says, “I’ll forever be grateful for the treatment, but I’m glad you’ve stopped dating him.”

The words flow in and out of my head, not really sticking, but when I glance over, Ant leans forward. “I’m serious, Evie. The money is good but you’re too vulnerable to date someone unstable. When you’re older and have your shit together, maybe, but not now.”

“I like him.”

“I know. Believe me, I get it, but you can’t shoulder another person’s problems on top of your own.” He grins at me. “Only I’m allowed to do that.”

My face must show the disappointment because he leans over to squeeze my shoulder. “What? Don’t you appreciate my newly sober lecture? I was thinking of turning it into a career.”

I stare at him with a glum expression, wanting to issue a quip, a comeback, but afraid if I open my mouth, I'll cry.

"Fine," he throws his hands in the air, sighing for theatrical effect. "Chase him if you want him back. See if I care." Then his expression turns serious. "But you should steer clear of his dad. Addie had... other issues long before she got addicted. Probably the reason she was chasing a high in the first place."

I haven't told Ant much of what happened on that final day. The warning isn't in response to what happened with me. "Other issues? What does that mean?"

He rubs the arm of his chair, picking at the fabric. Dad used to do the same thing, picking and poking until it looked like an animal had chewed up the fabric.

An arrow of pure grief shoots straight through my heart.

"She didn't tell me who, but someone molested her when she was a girl. Addie said when she told her father, he sent her up to a school in Auckland."

"That's awful." My heart beats quicker, putting me in her place, imagining how it would feel to be treated like the guilty party when I was already in pain.

"It gets worse," Ant says, looking miserable. "He sent her away because it was inconvenient for him to sever his business relationship with the man who hurt her. Can you imagine how low your morals are to put a corporation ahead of your daughter?"

My mind fills with Maddox, his bottomless well of grief and anger. How deeply he blames himself for not saving his sister. The haunted expression that came into his eyes whenever he spoke her name. The pain in his voice when he confessed how she'd screamed at him.

Nothing but a meaningless burst of vitriol, fuelled by her addiction. Something they could have repaired and healed the same as Ant and me... if only she'd lived.

"You want to watch a comedy or something?" He flashes a lopsided grin at me, wagging his phone. "For some strange reason, I've developed a really low mood."

“Did anything like that ever happen to you?”

“Like wh—” he recoils. “No! I was just bog-standard scared and lonely with no idea of where my life was headed and chewing my tongue every time I tried to talk to a girl.”

“Right,” I laugh. “Bog-standard. And did it help you talk to girls?”

“Obviously.” He pats out a drum beat on his chest. “Mr Smooth. That’s me.”

I frown, thinking back to our phone call. “When you said Addie did some messed up shit with Maddox, what did you mean?”

He shifts in the seat, putting a hand to his face, looking disturbed. “She wasn’t well, Evie. Nothing she did was intentional. There were just so many things twisted in her head.”

A terrible thought occurs, and I ask it, just so I can push it away. “Did she abuse him? The way someone abused her.”

Ant’s face is miserable as he nods. “I don’t know many details but along those lines.”

My heart shrinks in my chest, not wanting to believe anything my brother says. But of the two of us, I’m the one who struggles with expressing the truth. I lie and hide and pretend everything’s absolutely fine because it’s so much simpler than making waves.

Ant is the one who deals with things head on.

I try to think how Maddox, a boy who already spends half his time sex-repulsed, could fit such a massive chunk of trauma into his psyche. But of course, he hasn’t. That’s why it spills out from around his edges, twisting his smallest sexual impulses into a massive tug of war.

Later that night, I cry hot tears of misery, wishing I could be there for him, talk things through, listen. Our estrangement hurts even worse with this new knowledge.

A dozen times during the night I think of him using a shattered piece of vase to cut into his wrist and want to call

him, text him, tell him I'm thinking of him. That even if he hates my guts for eternity, if he wants me, I'll stand by his side.

At school, the next day goes the same way. I'm ostracised in the classroom and in the quad. Even some of the teachers seem wary about interacting with me.

Obviously, I'm not in the loop to hear, but I'm sure the royal gossip columnists are working at full speed, detailing my every fault.

By the end of the week, I settle into the routine. Even without company, being back at school is its own sweet pleasure. Such great tracts of my life were spent without it that just sitting in a lesson, seeing the hardworking teachers whose main purpose is to *help me learn* is enough to keep me on track.

The second week takes a nastier turn. A few bumps happen in the corridors, one hard enough to knock my books to the ground. I have to time going to the bathroom to avoid the cruel taunts that seem set to become commonplace.

On Thursday, I'm sitting at a bench by myself, eating the sandwich I bought from home. The other half sits on the table in front of me and a boy swipes it onto the ground as he walks past.

I bend to pick it up, biting my cheek to hold back any retaliation. When I straighten, Zane sits opposite me. I cut my eyes across to Maddox and see he looks as puzzled by the development as I am.

“What's your class schedule after lunch?”

“History then a study period.”

“You like history?”

I wrinkle my nose. “I fucking hate it.”

He breaks into a wide smile. “Good. Skip it and come to the clubhouse.” He slides a twenty to me. “This is for your lunch.”

“Oh, I'm good.”

Zane doesn't seem to care, taking the dropped half of my sandwich and stalking after the boy who knocked it to the ground. They're out of sight behind the science block when I hear a startled cry, then a few moments later, Zane reappears, crossing back to his table, flexing his right hand.

Maddox glares as he takes his seat and Zane looks like he doesn't give a single fuck.

I'm confused but with a pinch of optimism that's been missing so far.

A sense that dissipates completely as I head up the narrow stairs to the clubhouse. There's no one within earshot of this place. He could do anything he likes, and nobody would care.

But when I reach the room, he's not even there yet. I walk to the window and stare down at the quad, the last few students hustling to get to class. It's weird to be in this space alone, disconcerting because I no longer feel entitled.

Then Zane thumps up the stairs and I turn my back to the window, cupping my elbows.

"Relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

I nod but remain tense as he walks towards me, stopping a metre away with his hands on his hips. "What the fuck did you do to upset Maddox? He's never been a talker but now he can't even communicate in grunts."

"I didn't—"

"Spare me. That's my best friend you've sent into a tailspin."

"My brother used to supply his sister."

He drops back a step. "Well, that's... fuck."

"Ant used to deal until he got too lost in his own habit. Once he stopped, he turned to sex work. So did Addie but Maddox thinks it's something my brother *did* to her." My voice spirals upwards as the words pour from me faster and faster. "Like she didn't make her own choices. Like his dad cutting her off wasn't the reason she resorted to doing that in the first place."

“Hey.” He walks over and gives me a hug, the gesture as welcome as it is unexpected. In the middle of the longest week ever, it’s lovely to have the show of support. “He’ll come around.”

“I don’t think he will. Not with how he—” And I have to bite my tongue because that’s not my secret to say. “How is he doing?”

“He’s a fucking mess.”

“Did he...?” I shake my head a little, clearing my throat. “Did he tell you how he got his injury?”

Zane stares at me so long anxiety bites, then his eyes flick to the window. “I told you I lost my mother from cancer not long before Addie died. Mads is the only one who could ever talk to me about it, who understood.” He stares down at his hands. “In those first weeks after, I spent most of my time around at his place. It was when Addie seemed to be getting better. Clean for the first time in years.”

“I’m sorry.” The misery just keeps piling up. “Ant didn’t want to hurt her, I swear.”

Zane’s face scrunches as he shakes his head. “Yeah, I know.” He gives a funny little cough, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I have this quirk. It’s... I don’t know if Maddox told you, but I have a thing for crying girls.”

I duck my head to hide a smile. “He might have mentioned something.”

“Addie was in tears a lot.”

My stomach hurts and I press my hand against it, not wanting to hear where this is going. Sad for everything and everyone, my empathy pulling me in a dozen directions. “You paid her?”

“I paid her,” he confirms, a long sigh escaping as he stares at the floor. “She’d been clean, then I paid her. She used the money to buy drugs, and she died. It’s all such a mess.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

He stares at me, and I can see the trepidation in his eyes. The sorrow and regret warring with each other. “Because I have to tell somebody. Because I’ve always been scared Maddox would find out and hate me and if I can’t get him to see past your brother’s involvement and accept you back, even when he loves you, then what hope do I have?”

“The hope of someone who’s been friends for years instead of knowing him a month?”

He gives a sorrowful laugh. “Somehow I don’t think longevity is going to cut it.”

“You really think he loves me?”

His eyes relax, and he gives a small nod. “I think he lit up on the night he met you, and just kept growing brighter. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

The small kernel of hope I’ve been holding on to grows a little larger. “Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me.”

And his eyes meet mine, the tension dissolving. “Thank you for being here. You don’t know what a relief it is to share.”

CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE

MADDOX

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OVER A WEEK, I GET TO SLEEP AT A normal hour. Then I turn over in bed and trap my healing wrist at the wrong angle, the pain instantly jolting me awake.

I get out of bed and stumble into the bathroom. Under the harsh lighting, my face is haggard. Insomnia has plagued me for years but now it's on steroids. I think about taking some of the pills I had for Evie, wish I had more of the prepped shot I jabbed into her arm... then have to grip the sides of the basin as I sway on my feet, overcome with a pull of grief at losing her.

You didn't lose her. You threw her away.

The initial fury has dissipated, leaving behind charred remnants of our whirlwind friendship.

In a year's time, you'll struggle to recall her name. In ten, you won't even remember having a girlfriend in high school.

But the lie doesn't even convince me.

I pull out some paracetamol and chew the tablets, taking enjoyment from the bitterness. The truth is I could live to a hundred and twenty, never seeing Evie again, and she'd still be the girl filling my thoughts on my death bed. Forever the one I pushed away because I'm too scared and too broken to know how to mend what we have.

The anger is easier so the anger wins. Even if it's eating me alive.

As I get back into bed, there's a new fear. Everybody saw Zane defend her in the quad at lunchtime. Most probably, it's just his protective instincts kicking in, not wanting to see her being attacked when just a fortnight ago, he was adjusting to our friendship.

Another thought lurks deeper, the idea he likes her. That his defence might be prelude to a courtship.

It won't take a lot. He's always on the lookout for his next fuck, lining up his targets in advance to maximise the chance they'll suit his kink.

I know that's not it. Neither one of them has ever given me a reason to expect them to hurt me like that, and it would be the ultimate betrayal. Yet the idea remains lodged in my frontal cortex, playing on a slideshow as I wait for the pain to retreat enough for me to get back to sleep.

THE FOLLOWING DAY IS FRIDAY. The weekend is nearly here. Two days where I won't have the torture of seeing Evie in all my classes, sometimes in the seat next to mine because the teachers insist no one change places.

Since that's also the highlight of every school day, I'm torn.

"You want to hang out at mine tomorrow?" I ask in the clubhouse when we're trying to gather the energy to go down

to the quad and sort some lunch.

Wilder sits with Dahlia on his lap, both looking bored out of their minds. Zane is on his own, setting off another spark of concern he might be interested in pursuing forbidden fruit, an idea I quickly extinguish. It's been over a week since his last hook up but that hardly counts as a dry spell. If it was Wilder, sure—that'd be reason to worry—but Zane's attention goes in fits and starts.

“Nah,” Zane says, shifting uncomfortably. “I'm going along to Chezzers tomorrow night. Unless you want to hang out there?”

Both Wilder and I turn to stare at him, and I recover first. “You're what?”

“Things can't be that dire, man,” Wilder says with a confused laugh. “Or have you got a crush on one of the hotties?”

“Evie's scheduled for tomorrow. I'll be there lending support.”

Dahlia looks properly uncomfortable while Wilder just sticks with generalised confusion.

“Right,” I drawl, quickly clocking everyone's expressions. “And is this to get a rise out of me? Because I got to tell you, if you're that desperate, go ahead.”

“Not everything's about sex,” he growls at me like the story of him fucking a sink off the wall isn't still circulating around the school.

“Then what is it about?” Dahlia asks, quickly flicking a glance in my direction and adjusting her facial expression on the fly. “You've never shown an interest in the strip club before.”

“She's a friend who's going through a tough time and she needs someone in her corner. Her landlord creeps on her, and she pretends it's okay but it's obvious she's frightened. I just want to be there to ensure nothing worse happens than her shaking some titties in his face.”

There's a burst of concern that I quickly sublimate, lost in the confusion of trying to discern if he's serious or not. Thanks to Robyn's call, I already knew Evie had returned to work, but the landlord stuff is new. I can't remember her talking about him to me at all.

A flare of jealousy bursts inside me. She's telling *Zane* her secrets now?

"I am not on board with this plan," I state through gritted teeth.

"Well, tough shit. You're the one who bought her in here, showing everyone how much you adored her until we all fell in love with her, too. Just because you're going through something right now doesn't mean the rest of us have stopped caring."

"Zane's right," Dahlia says, clambering off Wilder's lap to stand beside him.

"Zane is not fucking right."

But he shakes his head. "I don't want to lose our friendship over this, but I won't let that girl get hurt because you're nursing a bruised ego."

"It's not a—" I move closer, jabbing my finger towards his chest. "Do you know what her brother did? When she was sharing her life story with you behind my back, did she drop that little titbit into the conversation?"

Zane just shrugs. "Ant sold her drugs she begged to buy, he opened his squat to her when her family kicked her out of her home, and they tried to get clean together, Mads." Zane's glance is full of pity, an expression that feeds my fury. "He was Addie's friend when nobody else in her life knew how to be there for her any longer. That's what happened."

"He sold her the drugs she overdosed on."

"And I gave her the money to buy them."

It's the shame on his face that knocks me back a step, far worse than the shock. This isn't a wind-up or a ploy to snap me out of my blackest mood ever.

He can barely force himself to meet my gaze head-on, a stance that lets me know it's the truth.

“She came to me, crying, begging, and I had sex with her and paid her and a week later she was dead.”

Dahlia turns to Wilder with a pleading expression, clearly distraught, and he gets to his feet, standing where he can easily force a path between us.

“She was home, but she was still a mess, and I took advantage. *I did that. Not Ant. Not Evie. Me.*”

I can't answer him. I can't look at him. My face is numb, my body feeling so weak it might spill me to the ground at any moment.

“So tonight, I'm going to the club and I'm going to watch out for Evie because their security is for shit, and I don't think a girl I go to school with should have to worry about getting assaulted at work. Especially when the only reason she's back working there is because her boyfriend has his head so far up his arse that he'd rather let her go than sort through the pile of shit he's been carrying for far too long.”

He glances at Wilder and Dahlia, then shakes his head.

“She had nothing to do with what happened to Addie.”

“Right. And her fucking my dad for money is outside her control, too, is it?”

I want to take another step closer, get in his face and force a physical confrontation. I want to feel the smash of his fist against my face, just like I had with Ant. The external pain so much easier to deal with than its internal cousin.

But it's all I can do to stand, trying to stop my body shaking.

“Are you really going to blame a teenage girl when a fifty-year-old billionaire pressures her for sex.” There's so much scorn on Zane's face, I can't see any hint of my oldest friend. “You've never sided with your father before, but this is the situation you pick to back him?” He shakes his head in disgust. “I don't even know who you are anymore.”

He walks past, thumping down the stairs while I stay exactly where I am, trying to hold myself together.

The admission he made is a far greater betrayal than anything Evie did, but I don't feel any animosity. Weirder out, sure, but a sixteen-year-old torn up by grief and taking solace where he finds it isn't the same as...

... as what? You'll excuse him but blame a girl who never even met her?

"Just gonna grab something to eat," Wilder says with an awkward grin, clapping me on the shoulder as he and Dahlia escape down the stairs.

When the bell for class goes, I turn and walk slowly downstairs, too. Except instead of heading towards my next lesson, I head for my car, getting behind the wheel and steering towards home.

The midday traffic is sparse and soon I'm pulling through the security gates and into my driveway. My heart thunders in my chest, my eyes pulse like a migraine is on its way.

I have my hand on the doorknob to the guest bedroom when I change my mind, heading for Addie's room instead. The inside has been tidied since the night I brought Evie here. The night I couldn't bring myself to end everything... even with the perfect method held in my hand.

A cry for help and the only person listening got shoved away.

Inside the room, I open the windows, trying to air out the dreadful stuffiness, the heat and flat taste of the air combining to make me feel dizzy. I step inside her wardrobe, seeing the clothes and shoes still on their hangers and folded neatly into drawers. Neither me nor my dad have ever sorted it, deciding what to donate or throw away.

It's a shrine, except the girl who lived here couldn't stand this place.

I take the shoebox from the top shelf, walking through to sit on the bed, placing the lid beside me. Then I remove the

locked diary, dire warnings scrawled over the cover, every inch filled with doodles from felt-tip pens.

I tip the box onto the bedspread, shuffling through the contents until I find the key. A stab of guilt strikes as I unlock the pages and I resist the urge to peer over my shoulder and check no one's watching.

Of course, no one's watching. There's no one left in the house who cares.

The diary starts on her twelfth birthday. The first few entries are short, far more doodles than words, but the longer she kept to the habit, the more detailed the daily or weekly logs became.

Friends and their petty arguments. Boys she liked. The name and signature she'd use if only so-and-so would marry her.

On and on and on with so many jottings that make me smile. The wonderful memories before everything turned bad.

I finally told on him one page begins and I stop, flipping back to the previous page while my heart picks up speed, my pulse thrums in my neck and wrist, my throat tightens until I can barely swallow.

My hands shake but not from shock or surprise, from the dread of knowing this would be in here, maybe not the details but the awareness that of all the things that went wrong when Addie started using, something had been very wrong for a long time before.

The words are so painful to read, my eyes keep flicking to the side, to the bedspread, even to the window to stare at the view I no longer register, as invisible as the patterns on the wallpaper, blinded by familiarity.

Each time my gaze tries to evade the writing, I force it back. I force myself to read each word while my nervous system twangs with warning signs. Page after page after page. Year after year after year.

I finally told on him. I never have to hear him squeal like a pig again.

And the next entry isn't written in the lavish bedroom of her childhood home. The next entry is written from a shared dorm in a female boarding school half the country away.

A banishment.

A punishment.

And every entry that follows is full of self-hate.

Fifteen, she's in shock, struggling with loneliness, filled with anger and fear. Sixteen, she's using. Seventeen, and she's trading sex for drugs. Eighteen and the entries are few and far between, probably because by then my father had started his tough-love campaign, an attempt that was always doomed to failure because the second half of that hyphenated phrase was missing.

Nineteen and I have to close the diary, the entries sparse, the handwriting barely recognisable.

I can't read what she wrote because I can't bear to relive any of it.

Nineteen and I was fourteen, going on fifteen, and I can't stand to read and find out what she thought as she took the poison she'd been given, turned around, and spoon fed it to me.

Everything goes back into the shoebox, goes back onto the highest shelf, gets shut behind the wardrobe door, then the bedroom door, then the garage door, then I'm in my car again and driving anywhere as long as it's far away, as far away as I can get from my physical house.

And while I drive, I think of my father and how calm he was as his henchman threw the photographs of my sister on the ground. Not displaying a scrap of emotion at the sight of his daughter's downfall.

With his money, he could have kept her safe even in her addiction. He could have paid for therapists and treatment; even in failure, he could have bribed a doctor to ensure an uncontaminated supply.

Instead, he locked her trust fund and threw her on the street to fend for herself, paying a man to tail her, to take photographs but never step in to help. His sick daughter. His broken daughter. Just another sacrifice on the altar of his ambition, shoved aside for being problematic, for the audacity of being abused when it was inconvenient for him. I doubt he would care that as he let her sickness fester, it infected me.

All the people I've blamed and punished, yet the chief perpetrator of my sister's misery slipped past my attention, unscathed.

I think of Evie, asking why my sister was sent away to board when there was a better school at home. She'd seen something wrong, and I hadn't been curious even with her prompting. Even after the revelation he'd used her—a disadvantaged young kid—for sex.

The traffic is low, but I still pull to the side of the road, gripping the wheel as hard as I can, letting the waves of grief and loss and utter frustration at my own actions wash over me.

I pushed Evie away because I don't have the skills to deal with what's inside me. While she fought her demons, I let mine gain the upper hand.

It's probably too late for us. We are both hard work, too damaged to let anything be easy. But even if I can't win her back, I need to make up for the things I've done, the things I've said.

Like I told her that first night, I want her. Even in the depths of my anger and self-hatred it's always been the absolute truth.

More than that, I want her safe. I want her loved and cared for even if I'm no longer the person to do it.

When my breathing is stable and my hands steady, I restart the car and pull into the flow of traffic. I drive to my friend and knock on his door and wait, hating to know what he'd think if he knew the full truth about me.

Zane answers the door with cautious movements and cautious eyes. He opens the door wider to let me in, giving me

the acceptance I've never been able to give myself.

And I step inside, pressing a palm flat against the turmoil in my chest, sick of hiding away from everything and everyone who tries so hard to stand by me when they must know I'm completely worthless.

One deep breath and I force myself to look past the comforts of my grief and instead embrace the future, whatever it holds.

“What's happening with Evie?”

CHAPTER THIRTY

EVIE

ANT COMES HOME WHILE I'M GETTING READY FOR WORK, looking a thousand times better than a month ago; vibrant and present in a way he never was before. He puts a bag of groceries on the bench, telling me outrageous stories about everyone using self-checkout at the supermarket while he unpacks the contents into the fridge and cupboards.

“What?” he finally says as he folds the reusable bag and tucks it in his back pocket. “Keep staring at me like that, I’ll think you’re up to no good.”

“Always.” He grabs me in a headlock, rubbing his knuckles on my head until I stamp on his foot in a bid for freedom. “You dick.”

“That’s no way to speak about the man of the house.”

I cup my elbows, shivering with nerves. “I don’t want to work at the club any longer.” The words come out of my mouth without preplanning, but god knows, I’ve thought about leaving often enough the past fortnight.

Each time I walk from the club to the bus stop, footsteps follow me. Nobody I can get eyes on, but the sensation of being stalked won’t quit.

Robyn thinks I’m making up shit. Jeremy, the chief bouncer, escorts me if I ask nicely, but he has tasks to perform after the show that means I risk missing the last bus each time.

My landlord creeps on me inside and some unknown stranger creeps on me outside and I’m done. Each day I stay in school the contrast between that, and the club grows starker.

Both environments are hostile right now, but I’m not scared of going to school. I shouldn’t be scared to go to work, either.

“Then don’t,” he says like I have no considerations beyond how I feel.

“It’ll take me a while to earn enough, but I can sell—”

“No.” He grabs my hand and squeezes. “Go to school, do your homework. Figure out what the hell you want to be. I’ve got this.”

“But there’s—”

He sticks his hand over my mouth to cut me off, shaking his head. “I’ve *got* this. You’ve been taking care of me for years. You put me into a treatment program better than anything I could’ve dreamed of. Go to school. Get your grades. It’s my turn to take care of you.”

“I owe you.”

Ant rubs a hand through his hair, the bright ginger catching the light and setting it on fire. “You don’t owe me.”

“Yes, I do.” The gratitude clogs my throat until it’s an effort to get each word out, but I persevere because I need him to know how much he means to me. “If you hadn’t come to visit me when you did, I don’t think I would’ve made it out.”

And it sounds dramatic out loud, but it also feels completely true.

Ant shakes his head. “It should never have got to that stage, Evie. I’m the eldest. I should’ve been taking care of you, not them. It kills me that my weakness meant you got hurt.” He pinches the bridge of his nose, scrunching his eyes closed, then laughs. “I’m trying to let this shit flow through me like the drug counsellor said, but it is *rough*.”

“It wasn’t your job.”

Finally, he drops his hand, meeting my gaze again. “What wasn’t?”

“To look after me. You’re not that much older, you know.”

“Sure,” he says, his voice swinging hard into teasing mode. “Girl hits eighteen and think she runs the world. Typical.”

“I can work at a part-time job, just not the one I have right now.”

“*Fine*. You’re allowed a job if it doesn’t interfere with your schoolwork.” He turns in a semi-circle, hands on hips. “Bring in enough and we might think about moving out of this dump. It looks even worse when I’m sober. Now go quit.”

“NO, NOT TONIGHT,” Robyn snaps when I hand in my notice. It’s already five and I’m due on stage in an hour for my first set.

“Yes, tonight.” I raise myself up to my full five foot two inches and look her square in the eye. “You’ll need to call someone in last minute because I’m not going on that stage.”

Any regrets I might have harboured about leaving her in the lurch disappear as her glare heats another ten degrees. There’s also a sense of relief underpinning it. She’s now so angry about needing to hustle to replace me, there’s no chance of me ever changing my mind.

Robyn holds a grudge like nobody’s business, and it’ll be a cold day in hell before she forgets I cost her time and effort.

As an insurance policy against future spinelessness, it's iron clad.

"I took a chance on you, and this is how you repay me?"

There are a multitude of things I could say but I'm so grateful this is the last time I have to step foot in this place, all my irritation burns away in a giddy rush. "Yes. This is how I'm repaying you. I'll clean out my locker."

"Fifty bucks for access to clean out your locker. You're not an employee here any longer, remember?"

She clicks her fingers, holding out her hand and I just laugh and shake my head. If someone wants my spare five-for-ten-dollars pack of knickers, and an ocean of detritus I've been too poor to feel comfortable throwing away, they're welcome to it. I can't think of a single thing in there I'll actually miss or need.

"Fair enough."

Robyn's face relaxes, then tightens again as I turn on my heel and head for the door. It's like a weight cascades off my shoulders while I make the walk. By the time I reach the exit door and slam my hands on the release bar, I practically float from the place.

As I leave, I check the side alley out of habit, seeing nothing more than a stray cat who instantly tenses when it sees me looking, stares with increasing aggression for two seconds, then bolts up the wall and down the other side.

"Me, too," I say, laughing as I hitch my bag farther up my shoulder. According to my phone, the next bus is just a couple of minutes away, so I hustle to the stop, nodding to the elderly man already waiting there.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle and I turn, eyes narrowed as I try to find the source, not having any more luck than every other time I've tried.

I remember when I began working there, earning real money for the first time. It gave me breathing room when I needed it, even a sense of belonging as I chatted with the girls in the changing room.

Then the dark underbelly showed itself, growing larger with every passing month. The special requests that weren't requests but demands, the bouncers taking bribes to turn the other way. I hadn't realised that while I was assessing the regulars and learning their patterns, they were doing the same thing to me. Spotting my weaknesses so they could use it to their advantage. Graduating me from the stage to the private rooms to the outside functions with the pressure steadily increasing at every turn.

Not that I've done a private function in a long time. I might be poor but at least on that front I quickly grew a backbone.

The bus arrives and I wave the elderly gentleman on first, then swipe my card, finding a double seat to myself near the rear door. As we depart from the stop, that awful sensation of being watched disappears and I wriggle in the seat, finally comfortable.

Hopefully, it's the last time I ever feel those chilly fingers creeping up my spine.

When I dismount, sunlight still floods from overhead; evening just doesn't mean the same in early autumn as it does in midwinter. There's a boy dressed as a monster-hunter out the front of the flat, bare feet stomping through the tangled knee-high grass, as he brandishes a long stick as a sword.

"You're still here?" Larry asks, coming out of the flat one along from ours as I punch in the code for our back door. "Thought you moved."

"Just stayed somewhere else for a few weeks while Ant was down south." When Larry continues to stare as though he's owed something, I check, "We're good on rent, yeah?"

"Until next week." He broadens his greasy smile. "Unless you want to pay me early. The missus wouldn't mind a private lap dance if you're in the mood."

Revulsion makes it hard to keep my polite smile in place. "No, thanks. We'll just stick with cash."

"Your call, love."

Larry's been top of mind as a potential answer for what keeps tripping my sensors when I leave the club at night. As he wanders away, I stand watch just inside the door to check he really leaves. He rounds the corner and I release a slow sigh, turning to climb the stairs.

The sooner Ant and I can swing a new place, the better.

Upstairs, I tap in the code and twist the handle, frowning when it doesn't release. I try again, then a third time for good luck, then dissolve into a long string of foul curses before yanking at the handle again.

I clear the keypad, count off two minutes using my phone screen, then try the four-digit code again.

Still nothing.

"Ant?" I hammer on the door, hoping against hope he's in the bathroom and about to emerge to hear me knocking. "It's me. Can you let me in?"

There are footsteps and I inhale a deep breath of relief, stepping aside to give him room as I hear the lock disengage. The door swings inwards, then a hand bunches in my shirt, dragging me inside and slamming the door shut behind me.

Vale shoves me against the closed door, putting his face close to mine. "Hey, Evie. Remember when Blaine and you had that little chat and you agreed to leave town?"

He licks the pad of his thumb and uses it to smooth my eyebrow. The touch makes me flinch, temples thumping, pulse jumping like a horse bolting from the starting gate.

"I'd say you should have followed through on your word but then I wouldn't be having this lovely chat, would I?" The heel of his palm digs into my shoulder, holding me steady while his gaze wanders around the room. "You really live in complete squalor. I would've thought you'd be glad of the money. Especially when there was only one string attached." His eyes jerk back to my face, drilling into mine until I can't tear my gaze away, doom settling over me like a weighted blanket.

“If Blaine sent you here, you can report back that Maddox wouldn’t touch me with a barge pole. He doesn’t need to worry about his son any longer.”

“We’re past that stage, Evie. Nobody is worried about Maddox, but you still defied us. You still warrant punishment and I’m in the mood for a little fun.”

His words drill into my ears, unleashing a wave of cold dread. I can’t run from the flat, not without overpowering him and I’ve fought him before. It didn’t work. It just made him more excited.

“Your phone.”

Vale holds out his hand and I reluctantly hand over the device, scared I’ve just made the move that will seal my fate. He backs up a few steps, perhaps to lull me into a false sense of complacency, perhaps just to gain distance. His fastidiousness always was at odds with his twisted desires.

I ease away from the door, and he positions himself so I have to go through him to reach the handle, playing right into his extremely fucked-up hands.

Instead, I fold my arms over my chest, hugging myself for comfort.

And the moment I see his shoulders relax, I lunge for the bathroom, slamming the door and flicking the lock.

A temporary measure at best. The door shakes as Vale launches a volley of kicks at it, twisting the handle so roughly I’m surprised it doesn’t come off in his hand.

I grab my angled toothbrush and wedge it in the gap under the door. Two dollars’ worth of hard plastic the only reinforcement as the full weight of Vale’s body thumps against the cheap wood, his fists battering, feet stamping, shoulder crashing under the lock until it splinters.

He bellows, and the door shakes more with every blow.

CHAPTER THIRTY- ONE

MADDOX

THE CLUB'S ONLY JUST HEATING UP WHEN I STORM THROUGH the entrance, dragging a reluctant goat along behind me. I would happily have left yet-to-be-named in the back seat of my vehicle, but she's already tried to nibble my leather seats.

With each second, my apology present seems dafter. I could have had it written out on a fancy card with gold lettering: good for one goat, rather than dragging the actual animal straight from its country home into the middle of a strip club.

The plaintive bleating draws a few glances but, for the most part, the earlybird punters have their eyes locked to the stage.

My glance goes there too but I'm relieved to see it's not Evie shaking her arse under the desultory lights.

“Excuse me, sir,” the cashier belatedly yells, stalking after me. “You can’t bring that animal in here.”

“It’ll just be for a few minutes,” I say, thrusting a few notes her way when my assurance does nothing to sway her. “I’m collecting someone, then we’ll get out of your hair. Zane!” I cry in relief, spotting my friend near the bar. “Can you lend a hand?”

He stares at me like I’ve grown two heads and fair enough. When I said I had the perfect idea of an apology present for Evie, he probably thought I meant flowers or jewellery.

Instead of helping, he contorts with laughter, shaking his head.

“That’s not food,” I assure the goat, tugging it out of range of a tablecloth. “Nor is that,” I add when it nibbles on a napkin dropped near the bar.

There’s a jug of celery on the counter, ready for a pitcher of bloody marys, and I grab one of those, wagging it before the animal to its apparent disgust.

“Where is she?”

“She was due to start half an hour ago, but I haven’t seen her,” Zane says, reaching out a tentative hand to pet my gift’s head. “You are so weird.”

“Thanks for your support. Can you hold her lead for a minute? I’ll just duck out the back.”

But he holds his hands up, still far too amused for my liking. I tug the leash and the goat obediently follows along behind me as I round the stage, ducking into Robyn’s office only to find it empty.

“Excuse me,” I call to a passing waitress, who ignores me in favour of taking the order from a table of men in their forties. When I call out again, she rolls her eyes and I lose my patience, storming straight through the door to the hallway of private rooms.

“Evie?” I call out, slamming the first one open. Four men and two girls turn my way, startled, and I make my apologies

before moving to the next. And the next. And the next.

“Changing rooms?” I ask the girl in the last room, and she points along the corridor. I duck under the velvet ropes at the end.

“Staff only, mate,” an enormous man says, encroaching into my personal space. “Patrons must remain behind the rope at all times.”

“I’m looking for Evie. Is she on tonight?”

“Why? That her kid?” he asks, smirking at his own joke.

“Yeah, good one.” I use his momentary inattention to skip past, shoving through the door and trying not to see anything I shouldn’t. “Hey, ladies. Anyone seen Evie?”

“Get the fuck out,” Robyn says, speeding towards me and shoving until I’m back in the corridor, heading towards her office. “If you want to pay me to keep her offstage, that little stunt just doubled the cost.”

“I’m not giving you another cent. I just want to know where she is.”

“If only there was someone you could bribe for that information.”

“My friend told me her shift started thirty minutes ago.”

The woman gives me nothing, her face a blank slate. Her hand is more forthcoming, palm up, jerking her fingers in a come-on gesture.

“Fine.” I pull out my wallet, checking for cash and only finding a twenty.

“Come into my office.” She opens the door and practically pushes me inside before I can protest. “You’ve got a credit card, don’t you?”

“Or how about you tell me what you know, and I won’t place a call to the employment tribunal telling them how you employ underage dancers?”

She freezes in place, lip curling. “I bet your dad would just love that.”

“What my father does or does not love means nothing to me.” I pull out my phone, trying to operate it one-handed while the goat makes a renewed bid for freedom, nearly pulling my arm from my socket. “What’s it gonna be?”

“Fine.” Robyn throws up her arms in exasperation. “She doesn’t work here any longer, okay? She’s probably at home or sucking off a new sugar daddy.”

My hand balls into a fist, then I decide it isn’t worth it. I retrace my steps to the entrance, giving Zane a shoulder bump on the way past. “She’s not working here any longer. You’re officially relieved of duty.”

“Seriously?” When I nod, he abandons his beer and trails me outside. “Thank goodness. I’m going home to have the world’s longest shower. Call me later and tell me how everything went.”

“Will do.”

I load the goat into my vehicle again, staring at its strange rectangular pupils for far too long before I put the car into gear, apologising when my abrupt turn makes her stagger. “Next time, I’ll come better prepared, I promise.”

She doesn’t look the slightest bit impressed as I pull up outside Evie’s flat, sending a text, but getting nothing back. I get out and walk around to the passenger side.

“Another adventure,” I say, opening the door and coaxing the animal outside, lead gripped securely in my hand. “You’ve had quite the day.”

As I round the corner of the flats, I bump into a man coming the other way. “Careful.”

“You can’t take that inside,” he calls out, turning to follow me. “Pets are against the house rules.”

“It’ll just be for a few minutes.”

“Take the goat inside and that’s how much longer Evie’s tenancy will last. I presume it’s her flat you’re visiting.”

I’m tempted to call him on it, but an apology starting with I-got-you-evicted-from-your-home sounds a bit more

challenging than what I'm aiming for. Abruptly reversing direction, I settle the goat into the back seat, screening the windshield and leaving a window cracked, so she doesn't get uncomfortable.

This time, I make it up to Evie's flat unimpeded. I knock but she doesn't answer, so I punch the code into her door.

The red light tells me it's the wrong number before I try the handle and find it still locked. I would assume she'd gone except the landlord just confirmed she still lives here or, if she doesn't, nobody's told him.

"Evie?" I yell, knocking loudly. "I just want to talk."

Nobody answers but when I press my ear flat against the door, I can hear someone moving around.

"It's Maddox," I add, just in case. When there's still no response, I punch in the code again, grinding my teeth as the light stays red. I know I teased her about having the same number for the entrance and her flat, but couldn't she have left it alone for another week?

I send another text and hear her phone buzz inside the flat. Nerves at the top of my jaw twang while I stay as still as I can, listening.

"Evie? If you want me to go, that's okay. Please just tell me."

I tilt my head, ears straining to hear any sound but sensing nothing beyond the faint rush of my pulse.

A terrible aura of foreboding settles over me. My body shivers even though I'm standing in a patch of direct sunlight.

Common sense tells me to go, she doesn't want to talk. She might even be napping on the sofa, unaware that I'm texting her from the hallway. Or having a shower. Or another perfectly reasonable explanation that I can't think of right this minute because every nerve is spiralling into panic, telling me there's something terribly, horribly wrong.

I slam my fist against the door, loud enough to wake anyone on this level. "Evie! Open the door."

There's a faint cry from inside and I take a step back, kicking so my heel slams just below the handle, the impact sending a jagged spike of pain into my groin.

The door shakes, the wood splintering around the lock but holding. I kick again, this time steeling myself for the impact, gritting my teeth against the pain and leaning my weight so when the door gives, I tumble inside.

Evie's eyes are wide as she stares at me, Vale's hand clapped across her mouth, her blouse torn at the neck. He takes a firmer hold of her arm while she actively flinches from his touch.

A red film of rage falls over my vision and I throw myself at him, circling at the last moment to catch him around the back of his neck, punching at his kidneys until he gives a cry.

“Get your fucking hands off her!”

Evie springs free and I shove Vale aside to draw her into my arms, pulling her to safety. The man stares at me for one long second, then bolts out the door.

“Fucker!”

I give chase, Evie hot on my heels, thundering down the stairs, nearly falling because I'm skipping so many at one time.

Then I'm along the corridor, out through the back door, launching myself at the fleeing figure, tackling him to the ground and feeling the satisfaction of landing a hard punch on his right eye.

Another punch follows, then another. Then I struggle to my feet, stomping on the side of his chest, hearing his ribs strain, maybe even break.

“You think it's funny to attack girls?” I scream in his face, the rage back at full volume and this time I'm grateful because this time I'm finally directing it at the right target. The man caught attacking the girl I love.

Evie ducks forward, shoving her hand into his pocket and pulling out her phone. That earns Vale another kick, doubling

down on his injured ribcage until his face drains of colour.

“I’m calling the police,” she says, swiping the screen.

Vale laughs, even though it causes a fine mist of blood to colour his lips. “Go ahead. It’s your boyfriend they’ll lead away in cuffs. After all, he’s the arsonist. He’s the one who landed three innocents in the hospital.”

“And you just spent five minutes detailing all the ways you were going to rape me, you sick fuck,” she screams. My blood runs cold at the thought of what could have happened if I’d taken a day longer to sort out my shit. “You can squeal like a stuck pig while your cellmate holds you down. See how you like it for a change.”

“What?”

The world slows down, sounds muffled like I’m underwater.

My senses overload, fuses blowing one by one as the entry from my sister’s diary flashes in my head.

I finally told on him. I never have to hear him squeal like a pig again.

My voice is sharp as I grind out, “What did you say?”

Evie’s expression turns wary, and I hate to see it, hate that her first thought is that my anger will be for her.

Vale knows better.

The man reads my face and knows it’s all for him.

“You hurt Addie?” The strained question turns into a bray of fury as I repeat it as a statement. “You hurt Addie.”

He rolls over, hands clawing at the ground as I launch myself, roaring, grabbing his hair and smashing his face into the hard earth, again and again and again. I kneel on his shoulders to gain leverage, my hard joints digging into him, pinning him like a bug.

Each time I smash him, more blood spills, making crimson mud with the clay.

“Did you think my sister was your personal plaything? Someone to take advantage of?” Another volley of blows smash into the back of his neck, his head, battering his ears. “Did you really think no one would ever make you pay?”

Evie steps back, her eyes wide as she makes the same connection I did. That this man took my beautiful, trusting sister and peeled her innocence away to leave her exposed and raw.

A cry tears from his throat. His body bucks, trying to dislodge me. But I’ve spent the last year perfecting the art of taking revenge. I’m not about to let this filthy cretin gain control.

In my back pocket is a knife and I pull it out, planting my opposite palm on Vale’s head to keep it pinned flat against the ground.

“Wait,” Evie says, her voice filled with panic. “You can’t kill him.”

“Listen to her,” Vale grunts.

And she continues, “Not here. We need to take him somewhere private. With no one watching.”

Vale’s desperation explodes, and he struggles a hundred times harder to get away. I can’t tell if Evie’s serious or just threatening him to cause a reaction. When I glance over my shoulder, I see movement at a few windows; people jerking out of sight so they won’t be seen.

“You bitch. I should’ve known better than to fuck Blaine’s leftovers.”

Evie stamps her foot on his outstretched hand, grinding her heel until he screams for mercy, and the bones snap. Her jaw clenches as she stares at me, eyes wary.

And I rush to give her the reassurance that’s long overdue. “I hate my father thought it was okay to use you. That he fed you to this man.” Vale bucks and I slam the heel of my hand into the back of his head. “It’s not your shame to carry and I’m sorry I ever made you feel that way.”

She nods, brow smoothing as her worry lines relax.

“Here,” I say, passing her the blade. “Hold this while I turn him over.”

The folks who live around here aren't the type to volunteer information to the police, but I still need to be careful. I don't want to be locked up on the same day I finally got my head straight.

I stand for just long enough to flip Vale onto his back. When I fall back on his body, my knees make something in his shoulder pop and he screams, writhing underneath me.

“This is a warning for anyone you meet in the future.” I hold out my hand and Evie slaps the knife into place, eyes glittering with vengeance. “A signal for anyone young and vulnerable so they know to stay away.”

Evie kneels, gathering Vale's arms and yanking them above his head, making him scream again as his shoulder twists.

A cry that grows louder as I slice the blade through his flesh, carving out the letters to mark him. Making them as tall as I can, more than an inch high. Branding him as a clear and present danger.

RAPIST.

And the blood from his label slowly leaks into his hairline, into his ears. Into his eyes when I wipe my fingers across the raw edges and flick them to create crimson spatter.

Vale snarls as Evie lets go, stepping away. “You'll regret that when I pass my information to the police.”

“Better check a mirror first,” I say, laughing in his face as I stand. “See how you go telling the police about my supposed crimes without having to explain your own.”

My arm goes around Evie's waist, making sure she's well away from Vale as he struggles to his feet. His face is an array of lumps and bruises pressing into each other. The cuts spill bright trickles of blood.

It's not enough. It could never be enough to make up the damage this man inflicted on my family. That my father chose him rather than Addie fills me with despair.

“Will he tell?” Evie asks as he staggers away to his car. “Should we invent a plausible alibi?”

“I doubt it.” I spin on my heel to face her, brushing the hair away from her face and examining it closely to see where he inflicted damage. “If he spills his guts about one client, the others will all get nervous. In his line of business, that's a larger threat to him than it will ever be to us.”

Her hands creep around to link behind my back as the sun sinks near the horizon. “My apology got kind of derailed.”

She leans forward, bumping her forehead against my chest before tilting her neck back, revealing her wide smile. “Well, you bust down a door to save me, so I'm happy to accept that in lieu.”

“I'm so sorry.” I close my eyes to better feel the softness of her body. The way her curves fit so neatly against me, my hands finding natural resting places anywhere they touch. “You deserve so much better than how I treated you.”

“Thank you.”

I wait for the ‘but’... for the pull back... for the sympathetic smile as she disengages and waits for me to get the message and leave. But she stays inside my embrace, warming me so the icy tendrils never stand a chance.

“We should probably do something about the door,” she finally says, not moving. “Before Ant gets home and starts yelling.”

“He'll have to come through me if he wants to shout at you.”

She gives a shrug, then wrinkles her nose. “Between you and me, he'd welcome that. He hasn't forgiven you for whatever you told him down at the clinic and me moping around for the past few weeks hasn't helped.”

“You were moping?”

“Oh, that’s what you heard, was it? Not the bit where my brother will tear you limb from limb before you even know you’re in a fight?”

She laughs, then tilts her head to the side, frowning. “Do you hear that? It’s like a bleat or something.”

“Oh, shit.” I turn, sweeping her up into my arms while she shrieks and grabs fistfuls of shirt in her hands. “There was a present, but the landlord wouldn’t let me bring her inside.”

“You ordered me a threesome? And people say you’re not thoughtful.”

“You’re so far away, it’s not even funny.” I round the corner, then stand there, appalled. “Ah... so you know how you once mentioned you’d like to own a goat?”

“Yeah?” She twists around to look at the car, then gives a cry of excitement, slapping me until I set her down. “How are you, little cutey? Oh, my god, Maddox. What’ve you been feeding her?”

“We’ve only known each other for a few hours. I haven’t had time to take her for a meal.”

“Open the door.” She slaps her palm against the window, half collapsing with laughter, then growing more worried. “Hurry! She’s eating your seats.”

I rush over, unlocking the doors to survey the damage. “That’s practically cannibalism. Goats aren’t allowed to eat leather, are they?”

“Look up the nearest vet,” Evie orders, gathering the animal in her arms and awkwardly climbing into the passenger seat with her. “That’s definitely not meant to be on her diet.”

I follow her guidelines, finding the closest vet surgery and obeying the GPS directions until we reach the parking lot. “There are a lot of other things I still need to say to you.”

“Which can wait until we make sure this poor girl isn’t in pain or poisoned by whatever keeps your seats looking so shiny and smelling so good.”

Five minutes later, as we turn into the vet's carpark, she turns to me with a confused smile. "Where were you thinking of keeping her?" She pauses for a long second, biting her lip. "I hope you're not taking her home to your dad."

"Never. I found a house with a large back yard for her... well the paperwork's not quite sorted and the title will be in your name, so I guess I bought you a house, and..." My speech falters as she stares at me so intently, I can barely stand to meet her gaze.

"Did you hear that?" Evie whispers to the goat, scrunching her face as I help them out of the car, then rush to open the vet door. "I think Mr Moneybags just said he bought you a *house*."

Not exactly the reaction I was going for, but I'm buzzing with happiness as I stride ahead to the counter to announce our arrival.

I hope the goat is okay but most of all I hope the vet takes ages to get around to us, because I could sit in the tiny waiting area with my arm around my girl until the end of time.

CHAPTER THIRTY- TWO

MADDOX

IT TAKES A LONG TIME TO SHOW EVIE AROUND THE NEW HOME. Or ‘the goat’s house’ as she insists on calling it. The creature in question—recently cleared by a veterinary professional—happily trotting along at her heels as we explore.

There’s a granny flat out the back that Ant can use unless or until he needs his own place. Inside the main house, there are three bedrooms, one with an en suite, a living and dining room, a lounge, and an enormous bathroom with a claw-footed tub in the middle.

Mostly bare of furniture, the place seems far too large but I’m sure if Evie lets me stay, we’ll fill it.

Only when she’s content everything is in shape does she release the goat into the fenced yard where it can roam free, eating the remnants of the last tenant’s vegetable garden. The

moment she's not clutching its lead, I finally get to scoop her into my arms and take her across the threshold.

"I can walk, you know."

"But you don't have to." I set her on her feet, nuzzling into the crook of her neck, which I think is a prime contender for my favourite place in the world. "If you had let me continue with my apology, I would have mentioned how sorry I am for rejecting you based on some half-arsed reasoning."

Her face goes still, staring deeply into my eyes. "Is that what happened?"

And the thing I set loose by reading Addie's diary skulks into the shadows. I've spent so long running it feels natural for my muscles to tense, ready to sprint, but I accept now it won't ever stop. All I'll do is exhaust myself and lose the chance to connect with the people who matter.

Of them, the one who counts most of all is in my arms, deserving of the truth after baring so much of her injured soul to me.

"No. What happened is falling in love with you brought a lot of memories to the surface and it was easier to push you away than to confront the truth. Even though I never really believed their lies."

She nods, standing on tiptoe to reach me just as I bend to reach her, our foreheads resting together, breathing the air she exhales deep into my lungs. "Ant told me Addie had been molested. He thought she might've passed that same trauma on to you."

And *fuck* it hurts to hear her careful voice as much as it frees me. Like cutting my foot off to escape the shackles.

Necessary but oh god why does it have to cause so much pain?

"I don't know how to talk about it," I admit, my voice as small as I feel.

"That might not be what you need to do right now. Maybe for now, it's enough to sit with it, own it, and see where it fits

before you do more work.”

A jagged laugh escapes my mouth. “Isn’t that a cop out?”

“It’s an acknowledgement you can only win the battles you’re prepared for. There’s nothing wrong with making sure you’ve got the right equipment before you launch yourself into the fray.”

I stand with my eyes closed, holding her, finding solace in her touch in a way I have never been able to with another person. Finally, I open my eyes and give a cautious sniff. “Is that a new perfume?”

“Sure. I believe it’s called eau de goat.”

“Mm-hm. No offence, but your new pet requires a little olfactory acclimation.”

“If only there were a place we could fill with sudsy water to wash it all away.”

With a laugh, I pick her up again and walk through to the large bathroom, turning on the taps one-handed, finding a bottle of body wash in the cabinet that will have to double as bubble bath liquid until I get around to ordering some.

I rest on the side of the tub, alternating between checking the water and removing articles of Evie’s clothing until I’m able to deposit her in the bath, barely giving her a minute alone to adjust before I discard my jeans and t-shirt to slip into the tub behind her.

“This is lovely. I’ve never stayed in a flat with a bath before.”

It’s not a flat, it’s her home, but the correction can wait because my mouth is better occupied by kissing and stroking and caressing her flesh wherever I can reach. By sucking her fingers into my eager mouth, one by one, feeling the rough pads against my tongue. By nibbling gently at her earlobe and tilting her head for easier access so I can explore the bumpy terrain to my satisfaction and hers.

The bank account also needs a mention at some point; how I transferred money from the trust fund my mother left for me

over to her, to do with whatever she likes.

Partly it's from gratitude that while I spiralled into the darkness, she was the glow that led me back towards the light. The rest is because I can't bear to think of her beholden to anyone ever again, even me.

But I don't need to tell her these things because I know she won't care about them. Not the same way she'll care that she and Ant can always find a haven within these walls; building their family out however they wish. I hope she'll include me inside that select number.

My hands lather the body wash into a palmful of bubbles that I caress into her shoulders, slathering along her arms and slowly sliding along her fingers, carefully cleaning each one.

Once done to my satisfaction, I dip them under the water's surface, lifting to my nose to give them a sniff.

"Much better. Now they smell of lady rather than lady goat."

Her laugh is a symphony to my ears, the vibrations travelling through her back into my chest until I wrap my arms around her to better feel the joy.

I repeat the same cleansing routine on every part of her, twisting and tipping and turning her, bodies slippery with the soapy water.

As her shoulder twists into my chest, I grab her wrists, pinning them behind her back while she scrunches her face, my other hand forming a necklace far better suited for purpose than the leather choker she still wears.

And she relinquishes her control over to me without a single grumble, no hint of complaint or trepidation in her body language, nothing but trust and patience in her eyes as she waits to see what I'll do with this gift.

A knot unwinds in my stomach, blood warmed from the bath throbs ever so delicately, pumping, stiffening.

In my mind's eye, it's not my hand clasped loosely around her throat, but a weapon pressed against her cheek, trailing its

moulded barrel along the line of her jaw as the first timid waves of lust flirt with me. They ease closer, growing bolder, softly lapping at my shore then surging as I haul her mouth to mine, tasting her lips, teeth grazing against the tender skin, my tongue gently sliding along the narrow gap between her frontal incisors.

The gap I stared at so often in the first week, imagining how it would feel; the actuality so much better it could make me weep.

And when I'm sure it's not a mirage, not a tease or taunt but a lion roaring through my libido, awakening every cell with a rallying cry, I release her wrists, take her hand in mine and guide it to me, eyes flickering closed at the glut of sensation, the overwhelming joy of her touch.

My fingers leave my cock in her experienced hand and move to cup her pussy, easing inside her folds, slick with her arousal, a thousand times smoother than the soapy water as my finger play around her entrance, retreat to circle her clit, then can't resist the smooth glide inside the warm clenching muscles of her cunt, her gasp of satisfaction a sweet caress inside my ear.

"Is this another present you have for me?" Evie whispers, her fingers wrapping around my girth and gently tugging until I groan at the sensation. "You know I remember a boy telling me once he didn't know if he'd be worth the wait."

"He sounds like a smart guy."

"This boy was a complete dick."

I'm a little offended, and curl my fingers deeper inside her as punishment, a rather twisted notion since the deeper penetration makes us both moan with more pleasure, not less.

Her hand curls back around my neck for support as she pumps me at a steady pace. "A huge dick," she mutters as my fingers continue to explore her, my knee forcing itself along the curve of her arse, penetrating between her thighs from behind, spreading her legs to allow better access. "A massive hard cock of a boy."

I tighten my fingers around her throat, feeling the jump of her pulse underneath my skin. Then her hand falls away from my neck, twisting to tug the chain, pulling the plug out to let the water gurgle into the drain.

The suction around my body adds another layer of physical ecstasy as she peels my fingers away from her neck until she can turn in my embrace, spinning on my fingers while I adjust with each movement, eager to keep them plunging deep inside her.

But she doesn't let them stay.

Evie draws my hand away, locking eyes with me as she slides my middle finger into her mouth, tongue lapping and curling and sucking around it until my cock gives a massive twitch against her inner thigh, keen to remind her there are other things eager to thrust between those plump lips, to explore the warm cave of her mouth.

“And what would you tell this boy if you could speak to him now?”

She straddles me, hands pressing against my chest, her animated features telling me a developing story of exactly how she enjoys my every touch. “I would tell him that there's an art in knowing what to cling to...” Those talented fingers grip me again as she lowers her body, guiding my cock inside her warmth, the muscles squeezing me in welcome. I lift my upper body, arms wrapped around her as the last of the bathwater gurgles down the plughole, large palms pressing against her supple back. “And what to release.”

Her hips tilt, lower back arching as she slides along my length, guiding me, muscles gripping me as her eyes half lid with pleasure. My mouth finds her, my tongue and cock finding a few moments of symmetry as they plunge inside her, their dual penetration overlapping and heightening the raw power of each until I have to come up for air, panting.

“And I would tell him I heard him sneak in a little snippet about falling in love with me earlier.” Her tongue finds my earlobe, sucking it until I'm sure someone stuck a new erogenous zone there while I wasn't paying attention. Evie

plunges her fingers into my hair, tugging my head so she can stare deep into my eyes, slowly rocking back and forth, the movement growing an inch longer with each ride. “I heard him, and I wanted to remind him I love him, too.”

Her palm slides over my torso, making patterns in my chest hair.

“Will you marry me?” Evie’s eyes open wide, and I experience a flicker of panic. “It’s not my raging hard-on talking, I’m serious. Marry me. Let’s ditch our old families and set up a new one. Bigger”—I thrust inside her—“better”—I thrust again—“and more rewarding than anything that came before.”

“I’m not ditching my brother.”

“Fuck, no, you don’t have to, I don’t know what I’m saying.” My cock plunges into her again and I feel the drag of her nails across the skin of my back, melting away every inhibition I’ve ever felt. “Wait, yes, I do. I want you. Let’s go ring shopping and I’ll buy a diamond the size of a kiwifruit to put on your finger. Let me haul you up the aisle and I’ll spend the rest of my life worshipping at your feet.”

Then my tongue ties as I find a new angle inside her, one that makes her eyes roll back in her head and her mouth loll open, defenceless against my kiss.

I lay a trail of tiny pecks along her jaw, tugging her hair back to do the same to her throat. My mouth fastens onto the gorgeous knobby outcropping of her collarbone, sucking at the tender skin until I make her moan.

Then I move again, bending my spine like it’s rubber, exploring her left breast, then swapping for her right, my tongue rolling across her hard nipples, feeling how the movements make her arse clench and her inner muscles squeeze around my needy cock, her little panting breaths making me shudder with ecstasy.

A sound comes out of her mouth, and I tilt my head, ear straining to pick out the word I’m desperate to hear.

“Yes,” she whispers as I feel her muscles flutter, then pull hard along my length, milking me until I thrust up into her as far as I can, my cock straining then exploding inside her, pumping cum into her waiting body while her fingers cup my jaw, her happily exhausted face staring down at me, eyes bursting with love and acceptance.

I revel in each sensation, memorising every moment, a treasure to store deep inside as armour against the difficult times I know are waiting in the future.

And as much as it feels like she’s mine in this moment, there’s a deeper truth at work; that from the very first moment I pinned her against the wall in a burning building, every single part of me has belonged to her.

CHAPTER THIRTY- THREE

EVIE

“YOU WOULDN’T UNDERSTAND,” I TELL MADDOX, HOLDING onto his arm for balance as I totter on the world’s highest heels. “But for one night, I’d like to be able to kiss you without needing a footstool.”

“They are footstools,” he laughs, trying to push me off balance, a feat that doesn’t take much effort. “It’s just for some strange reason you’ve strapped them to your soles.”

“How about the tall people in the room stop making fun of those who weren’t blessed with their natural gifts? Hm?”

“If you only understood the burden. With great height, comes great responsibility.”

And he sweeps me off my feet like we both knew he would, lifting me like I weigh nothing at all, nuzzling into my hair until my skin is zinging at the contact.

We've been living together for three weeks and neither one of us has grown used to the novelty yet. The dorm room at school was nice, but the house has a completely different feel. It's like we're embarking on our real lives instead of just playing, helped by the three carat diamond engagement ring on my finger.

The important bit is our commitment to become one another's family, but I won't lie, the bling is *nice*.

"This hairstyle cost three hundred bucks and four hours in a salon chair," I remind him. "If you mess it up, I'll sic Dahlia on your credit card."

"Threats again?"

"More like promises."

But I let him continue to his heart's content because I'd rather feel good than look pretty. And when he draws back far enough to see my face, all I see is admiration in his eyes.

"Are you going to take me to the car or just stand here, holding me in midair?"

A plaintive bleat comes from the backyard, and he freezes. "Shh. Aroha can detect movement."

"I should probably see what she needs."

"Don't you dare," Maddox says, striding out the door with me, hooking it with his foot so it slams shut behind him. "I don't mind tearing apart a few hundred bucks' worth of hairstyling, but if you walk in tonight smelling of goat, folks really will draw the line."

"Mm-hm."

He sets me on my feet next to the car, then opens the passenger side, making sure my dress is safely tucked inside before he slams the door and walks around to his own. "You're sure you want to go?"

"We're going," I say, ignoring the question entirely. "Dahlia would never let me forget it if we waste these tickets, and since she's still the only girl at Tiaki who talks to me, I'm not about to throw her friendship in the trash."

Being attached to a so-called royal is just as isolating an activity as it was at the start. It's lonely at the top, especially when every girl who looks my way is utterly convinced they're more deserving of royal attention than me.

Dahlia's company is a treasure, and I won't test us by refusing to turn up to the dance she's been looking forward to for months.

"We can leave at any time."

There's the sound of a clearing throat and a tap on my window. With a guilty start, I wind it down, smiling sweetly at my brother.

"Were you two going without me?"

Ant is dressed in a tux and somehow looking a lot more comfortable in the attire than I'm managing in my expensive dress.

"I was just about to beep the horn," Maddox answers, briefly widening his eyes at me until I have to bite down on a laugh. "But you spared me the bother."

My brother gets into the back seat, fiddling with his bow tie. I'd been astonished when he expressed an interest in attending the Easter Ball, it hardly seems the kind of event he'd be used to, but I concede he looks the part.

There's still a palpable tension between him and Maddox but I try my best to pretend I can't feel it; like the air crackling between them is perfectly normal and not making the hairs on my arms stand on end.

"Now, remember," Ant says with a mischievous light in his eye. "Once we're through the door, please pretend you don't know me."

"Sure," Maddox scoffs. "That'll fool them. No one's going to suspect the redheads who look suspiciously alike could be related."

I twist in my seat. "Why aren't I allowed to know you? What're you up to?"

“Nothing bad. I’m just pressing the flesh and getting to know the movers and shakers in this town. Considering the large hole in my resume, I thought a personal introduction would help ease me into the job market.” He leans forward and ruffles my hair while I give a squeal and fend him off. “Can’t have little sis cramping my style.”

“Just so long as you’re not hooking up in front of me.”

He bursts into laughter. “I’m not promising anything.”

“You’re meant to take care of yourself for the first year of recovery. Not get entangled with anyone else.”

The eye roll I catch in the rear-view mirror tells me exactly what he thinks of my reminder.

From our house, the drive to the event only takes fifteen minutes. At the entrance, we leave the vehicle and hand a valet the keys.

“You’re ready?”

“After the work it took to get me looking like this?” I fake a pose that would be worthy of a pinned post on Dahlia’s home page, then take his arm. “You bet.”

Inside, I take one look around, and relax. It’s just a party, albeit one with more planning and a higher price tag than most. Nothing to fear.

Wilder arrives, paying more attention to his phone than to the event. Dahlia hooks her arm through mine, insisting Maddox do the honours and introduce her to everyone she doesn’t already know.

One turn around the floor and I’m dizzy, but she’s in her element. Enormous smiles and shoulder hugs are the order of the night as she documents everyone and everything on her phone.

Ant has the same idea, getting into groups, no matter how tightly knit, and pressing the flesh like he’s channelling a politician in their prime. Dahlia is soon besotted, spending most of the first hour in his close vicinity, openly admiring him while Wilder’s frown grows ever deeper.

For those of us not intent on impressing or networking with everyone in sight, the evening passes a lot more slowly. We gravitate towards the bar, landing on the edge of a group where Maddox knows a few people enough to chat, without getting dragged into deep conversation. His arm is supportive around my waist as he invites me into the small talk, explaining all the shared history I'm missing so I can keep pace.

The hall grows warmer, and I glance towards the balcony, thinking the cool autumn breeze would be welcome.

"You have to be kidding me," a rough voice says from behind us, and I suppress a groan, painting a smile on my lips as I turn to see Blaine staring at me with his glare already on high-beam. "How could you even think about coming here tonight?"

"It's all for a good cause," I say, face straining within the first few seconds. "But I'm sure the room is large enough for us to stay out of each other's way all night."

"Or you could leave. Perhaps there's a waiter out the back who needs servicing."

He glances towards Maddox, the conversation a charade to get his son to engage. The man's hard to read at the best of times but it's the only explanation that makes sense.

And Maddox immediately bristles. "Funny how I've seen you grin and bear it through a dozen difficult negotiations, but you can't hold it together enough to be polite to your future daughter-in-law for two minutes at a public event."

From Blaine's twisted expression, I guess Maddox hadn't previously told him of our engagement and I'm glad. The farther away from his brand of parental poison, the better. I jut my chin, readying myself for another verbal blow.

"Negotiations have the chance to be beneficial." He gives me a lewd wink and I notice he's off balance, eyes shot with red. Drunk and not just today. From the looks of him, he's on the wrong side of a week-long bender.

I hate this man. Not just for what he did to Addie or to me, but for the misery he's inflicted on the boy I love. The one who represents so much of my future.

Along with their destructive habits, my father and brother also gave me so much joy, so much love even in the darkest times. Always my favourite people, always so warm; a family I delighted in coming home to.

But Maddox gets nothing from his dad. Addie might have loved him, but she twisted that affection into something monstrous, exactly the way she'd been taught, adding to his burden.

His grief is shot through with the same complexity. His connection to his father a bond doused with hate.

I give Maddox's arm a squeeze. "Maybe we should move onto the balcony, get some fresh air."

Blaine sniggers, voice growing louder. "Here's another idea. Why don't you fuck off to whatever hovel you crawled out of, instead?"

"That's enough," Maddox growls, encroaching on his father's space and forcing him back a step. "If you can't be civil, get out."

"Be civil," his father mocks. "You know it's me who's funding this little soiree every year. You're the ones who aren't welcome."

My temper shreds, sick of his bullying. Sick to think what his children went through, growing up inside the horrors of his overpriced home. "Pity you sold us tickets then, isn't it?"

But he's turning, giving up the game and moving to greet a couple of men around the same age, both looking far more welcome of his presence than we are.

Maddox shakes with rage beside me, and I glance at the lobby, wondering if we should just give up and go. He still struggles daily with a gamut of emotions. To stand here in the presence of the man who curdled his childhood, who should have protected him and Addie but didn't is unbearable.

Especially when, instead of an apology, he's doubling down on his nastiness.

"Aren't you going to introduce us?" Maddox asks in a tight voice, his hand trembling as he steps into position beside his father. He boldly meets the curious gazes of the men before him, then his face relaxes into a smile. "Sometimes, I think you forget you have a son."

Blaine bristles as the men shake Maddox's hand, then his brow creases in fury as they shake mine.

"What's the matter?" Maddox asks, laughing as his father's face descends further into anger. "These are the people you prioritised above your daughter, aren't they? These men who you'll use until they can't earn you another cent. Whose friendship you'll then throw away."

He spins on his heel, grinning broadly as the objects of conversation shift nervously, gaze moving from Blaine to his son and back again. One speaks, "Perhaps we'll catch up later," but Maddox steps in front of them, blocking their attempted retreat.

His voice climbs in volume, staring at his father as he says, "Maybe they deserve to hear what happened when Addie—your teenage daughter—told you how your middle-aged friend abused her."

There are curious glances coming our way from around the room. Ant comes to stand slightly behind us, lending support, and Wilder, Dahlia, and Zane soon follow suit. Blaine's friends and business associates gravitate towards him. Soon we're facing off against each other like rival gangs about to go to war.

I squeeze Maddox's fingers and he returns the pressure, the shaking leaving his limbs as he relaxes, giving voice to the words that must have danced for so long inside his head.

"Why don't you explain to everyone why, instead of calling the police or getting Addie into treatment, you exiled her to a boarding school in another city. How you chose a morally bankrupt man over your flesh and blood."

Blaine's voice rises, too, drawing more attention from those gathered. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about. Everything you have is down to me."

"It's down to my mother, another woman in our family you drove to suicide. The person who funded your first business, remember? Or are you still pretending you're a self-made man?"

Blaine lunges for him, immediately stumbling as his alcohol-soaked brain feeds him the wrong directions. The people closest to him step back rather than moving forward to help, leaving him to recover his faulty balance alone.

"You don't know anything about it. Be careful how you speak to the only family member you've got left."

"You're not my *family*." Maddox waves a hand across me, my brother, his friends standing valiantly in support behind him. "This is my family. You're a sperm donor at best."

Again, Blaine lunges, this time tipping so far forward his balance goes, spilling him onto the floor.

Maddox stares at him, lip curling in disgust. "I'm ashamed I ever listened to a word you said. I don't want a single thing to do with you. You absolutely revolt me."

He towers above his father, crawling like a worm on the floor. I can feel his urge to physically hurt him, but he drops back a step, shaking his head. "You're not even worth the bruises I'd get from hitting you."

In tandem, we turn and walk away, Zane falling into step on his other side as we make our way through to the balcony. Once the door is closed between us and the other partygoers, I pull Maddox into a tight embrace. "You did so well."

"I didn't even tell him off for what he did to you. I'm so sorry I ever let him come between us." He turns to face Ant. "And I apologise for what I said to you at the clinic. It was unforgiveable."

Ant stares at him for a long time, brow twisting into a hundred different expressions. "Did you do what you told me?"

Maddox shakes his head. “Your sister wouldn’t be standing beside me if I had.”

I frown, wondering what really passed between the two of them because I appear to only have part of the story.

“Then I suppose I can forgive you.”

“Thank you.”

“But if you ever hurt Evie, I will kill you. Slowly. Taking great delight in every drop of blood I spill and every scream.”

“Ant!”

“What?” he says, schooling his face into a look of pure innocence. “I’m allowed to daydream about torture. There’s nothing at all about that in the twelve steps.”

I still glare at him, and he gives an elaborate sigh. “I’m going back inside to work the crowd. Apparently, there’s a gap in the market for someone who can get unsavoury things done without asking awkward questions.”

“You don’t mind me tagging along, do you?” Dahlia asks, earning a fiery hot glare from Wilder, who immediately pushes into place beside her.

“Come with me and I’ll introduce you to everyone you want to know.”

My brother winks at me, whispering, “Guess I stepped on someone’s toes.”

“No romantic entanglements for a year, remember?”

He flaps his hand at me before following the couple inside, immediately being snagged by a small group of businessmen near the door.

Maddox pulls a face. “So, he’s the new Vale?”

“No, he fucking isn’t. My brother has a moral compass, you know. He just likes to help people.”

Zane snorts, earning a frown that doesn’t appear to worry him at all. We find a table and sit, enjoying the festivities from

afar. When the cool breeze off the river makes me shiver, Maddox puts his arm around me, feeding me his warmth.

“Uh-oh,” Zane says, pointing to where a couple of police officers have arrived on scene. “Guess someone complained about the noise.”

“It’s only ten o’clock.” I laugh in protest. “And surely everyone who’d care is already inside.”

I track their progress with interest, then shiver as the officers turn our way, walking straight for the balcony. They slide the door open, surveying us and the dozen other guests out here.

“Maddox Alcott?” the female officer asks, stepping forward when he nods while my skin crackles with ice. “We have a few questions about the vehicle you drove here tonight.”

“Do you?” His voice is strained and when I turn to look through the glass doors, Blaine tips me a one-finger salute. The betrayal pinches my throat closed. Each time I think we’ve reached the depths of his depravity, the man reveals another basement.

“There are reports of the same vehicle at the site of an arson, month before last. We’d like you to accompany us to the station to answer some questions.”

“No.” I clench Maddox’s arm in a tighter grip, panic bubbling in my chest. “Can’t this wait?”

“Three people were seriously hurt. It’s not something we want to postpone.” The male officer grips his belt, squaring his shoulders. “You can come to the station voluntarily or we can make this formal. Your choice.”

“It’ll be okay,” Maddox whispers into my ear. “This is my mess.”

Zane stares at me, then his friend. He stands, moving between us and the cops. “I know what you’re here for, but you’ve got the wrong man. I drove his car that night. I’m the one you want.”

Maddox grabs his arm. “What are you doing?”

Zane leans into him, talking so softly I can barely hear. “I owe you one. Now, shut up and let me repay you.” He claps him on the shoulder before swivelling to face the officers. “I’m happy to come with you and answer any questions but Maddox has nothing to do with any of it. He wasn’t anywhere near the industrial area that night.”

I bite my lip, tears welling as I stare at Zane with gratitude, giving him a small nod when he meets my eye. I understand the impulse to protect his friend. When he confessed his guilt over what happened with Addie, it was easy to see how deeply he blamed himself.

If this is penance for his sins, I hope he finds the comfort he deserves.

Maddox opens his mouth to protest but I tug his hand, stopping him before the sacrifice is derailed. The police escort Zane from the party, using the stairs leading off the balcony rather than dragging him back through the main room.

“Let him do this for you,” I whisper to Maddox when his expression fills with concern. “A good lawyer will either get him off the charges or knock the punishment down to size.”

“You think?”

“Yes, I do.”

“We should probably go hire one for him, then.” He wrinkles his nose, waving at the party. “I think every halfway decent lawyer in town is inside.”

Before we can, Ant comes through to the balcony, giving a concerned glance over his shoulder. “Do you know this man?” he asks, showing me his phone screen.

I gasp, shuddering at the sight of Vale, a headband wrapped around to disguise his forehead scars. “Is he here?”

“He’s gone now, but he sat outside in his car, watching while the police put someone in the back of their patrol car.” He frowns at Maddox. “It looked like they were arresting your friend.”

“They were,” I confirm. “We need to get to the station. If Vale’s spilling his guts—”

“Wait.” Ant’s voice is sharp. “This is the man who hurt Addie?”

“He also hurt Evie,” Maddox growls. “But he’s insane to hand evidence to the police just to settle a score. He holds secrets for powerful men all over town.”

Ant looks thoughtful. “What I’m hearing is that a roomful of rich men would be grateful if someone took him out before that could happen. Have I got that right?”

Maddox gives him an assessing stare. “If you’ve got the energy, I’ve got the resources.”

And it’s probably not something I should encourage but as we head inside to find help for Zane’s legal troubles, I’m happy to support their plans.

CHAPTER THIRTY- FOUR

MADDOX

“GET IT INTO THE CORNERS,” EVIE ORDERS ME. “WHAT’S THE use of putting the tall guy on the ladder if you won’t do the job properly?”

I raise the roller, blue paint dripping, but it’s hardly a threat considering how much of the colour decorates her overalls already. She grins, pokes out her tongue, and points to the offending patch of white still showing on the wall.

It takes a carefully angled stroke to disappear.

“That wasn’t too hard, now, was it?”

My eyes narrow as I wonder about the likelihood that’s a double entendre, then shrug. Who cares if it is? Part of my anger management work has been closely focused on the skill of letting things go.

My father has also let things go to head overseas, though ending his most lucrative contracts wasn't his choice. After the ball, word spread about Addie, about him colluding with Vale to release information to the police.

It didn't take long for the starting gossip to become enriched with bigger and more fanciful details. In a matter of a few weeks, he became a pariah, relocating to London to start afresh, selling the family home.

I might never see him again and the only emotion to accompany that thought is relief.

“What's my reward for this again?”

“The knowledge you've done a good deed.”

It's winter term break and the walls we're decorating are those of the drop-in centre in town. A come-as-you-are community hub for addicts in the district. We haven't quite got the permissions set to reinstate the methadone treatment program, but one more meeting with the local health authority and it's pretty much assured.

The 'concerned residents' who dismantled the original program are still fuming but I've discovered that it really doesn't matter as long as you're the one with the most zeroes in your bank account.

At the rate I've been spending, that won't stay true forever, but I feel good about using it to make possible the changes I want to happen.

And when I worried aloud to Evie that transferring funds wasn't giving me the warm glow of philanthropy I expected, she immediately went out and filled our school holidays with a half-dozen boots-on-the-ground projects. They range from our current stint at decorating through to serving meals at the City Mission.

Even if I occasionally grumble, the physical act of giving back to the community is far better for my mental health than any donation could be. Once again, I'm grateful her spark and practicality are part of my life.

Every morning I wake in her arms is better than the last.

“We need to go,” she says now, showing me the time on her phone. “Did he call you like he promised?”

Zane is in court again today, this time for sentencing.

Despite hiring the best lawyer I could find, the man couldn't undo the damage of Zane's highly detailed confession. Being seventeen, the police weren't required to contact a guardian unless requested and he hadn't asked for support.

The barrister explained that to plead not guilty would not only result in a more intensive investigation coming my friend's way but could expose me and Wilder to potential charges as well.

I hate leaving him alone to suffer the consequences but also understand the guilt that motivated him to take the blame. Thank goodness, Evie already knew, so we've been able to talk about it openly from the very first night. She always brings a new perspective to things... another item on the long list of reasons to be grateful she's such a big part of my life.

“Do not give in to your base instincts,” she warns me as I tip paint from the roller tray back into the can. “Nobody wants to see a ginger Smurf.”

I pull her into my arms, enjoying the way she curves into my body, finding a perfect fit, snug against my chest.

“We've got a little spare time, don't we?” I say, my thumb caressing the edge of her jaw until it winds up dimpling into the sensitive spot behind her ear. The way her body sways to press against me more firmly tells me she's on board with a little diversion, then she breaks free, shaking her head.

“Nope. Not a minute to spare, buddy. The moment we get in the door I want you changing into your best suit.”

But my powers of persuasion must be on fire today because we wind up running a few minutes late, both flushed and happier than anyone entering the public gallery of a district courtroom has any right to be. Luckily, the judge also runs late—presumably for very different reasons—and we end up waiting on the bench outside.

To my surprise, Evie's brother walks through the courthouse door, nodding to his sister but locking eyes with me, giving a jerk of his chin to pull me to one side.

"I got you this." Ant hands me a neatly folded pocket square. In the corner, is a small dot of blood.

When I stare at him, so deeply moved I can't talk, his lips curl in the trace of a smile. "I loved Addie, too. So much. Once upon a time, we told each other all the things we were going to do the moment we got clean." He pauses for a moment while my heart swells. Not just with gratitude for what he's done to avenge her, but for staying beside her when the rest of us fell away. His voice thickens with emotion as he adds, "I made him pay. For every version of the future he stole from her, I made him pay."

The silk material is heavy, rough but smooth at the same time.

"You know," Ant continues. "I never had much of an idea of what to do with my life. Evie has a clearer head than me. I'm sure she'll embrace uni, her mind works so much like Dad's, she can easily follow in his footsteps." He frowns as the bailiff moves to stand beside the judge's chamber door, then snorts out a laugh. "I mean the academic stuff, not the addiction."

His casual attitude invites me to laugh along with him, a first. Since our altercation at the clinic, we haven't exactly seen eye to eye, and I can't blame him for that. I hate myself for what I said, what I *did*, too.

But relaxed Ant is a different creature from the frazzled junkie I wanted to hurt because he knew too many of my secrets. Now that fear has rescinded—most of the time, anyway—I hope we can gradually work our way towards being friendlier even if we never become friends.

"Don't you have any aspirations?"

"I might do." He gives me a quick sideways glance. "But I'm happy to be the new fixit man. Someone to clear away impediments or inconveniences." While I tilt my head,

working it through in my mind, he shrugs. “Not that I share the same morals as the last one, but if you or someone you can vouch for ever need my help, I’m happy to see what I can do.”

Astonishment steals my voice, then the case is called. By the time I recover, the judge has walked into the room and the opportunity to respond is lost as everyone stands. I tuck the keepsake in my jeans pocket, where it forms a comforting weight, and take Evie’s hand.

A formality. That’s what his lawyer has kept stressing since he entered the plea. With just under a month to go before Zane turns eighteen, he’s being sentenced under youth court rules.

No permanent record will follow him into adulthood, and name suppression automatically applies. The sentencing guidelines also have more freedom of movement; especially since he has no previous convictions.

“I’ve read through the agreed summary of facts,” the judge says as I stare at the back of my friend’s head, wishing I could see his face to understand how he’s feeling. “And have also studied the character references and victim impact statements for the case. My starting position is five years.”

Zane’s lawyer leaps to his feet. “Your honour, my client has never been in trouble with the law beforehand. A starting position of three years is more in line with previous sentences imposed by the courts.”

“In single victim cases,” the judge replies, no scrap of emotion on his face. “Here, we have multiple victims.”

He proceeds to lay out his reasoning, giving discounts for the guilty plea, for Zane’s youth, for his previous unblemished record.

The constant barrage of information is exhausting. The unfamiliar situation makes things even more difficult to understand.

“That leads me to a total of fourteen months, which is automatically a custodial sentence.”

“No.” I’m halfway out of my seat before Evie drags me back. The judge frowns in my direction, then returns to his summarising notes. I lower my voice, heart pounding as I say, “He can’t go to prison.”

And luckily Zane’s lawyer is on his feet, arguing the same. Evie has to pry her hand from mine, I’m holding it that tightly. She hooks her hand around my upper arm instead, giving me a gentle squeeze.

The legal arguments get tossed back and forth. Zane sits with his head bowed, showing no outward response to the fight waged on his behalf.

“Are there any further oral arguments from the prosecution?” the judge finally asks and the crown representative shakes his head. “In that case, could the defendant please rise?”

I hold my breath as he summarises the case again, this time speaking directly to Zane for the most part. “The final sentence I’m imposing today is eleven months.”

“Your honour, my client would like to be considered for home detention.”

“The prosecution has no objection to the request.”

Eleven months. The judge finalises the sentencing judgement and Zane stands as he leaves the room, only then turning, scanning the assembled crowd, and offering a watery smile when he finds me.

“It’ll be over in no time,” Evie assures me. “There’ll probably be media reports complaining at how lax the punishment is.”

We wait patiently as the lawyer continues to talk to him, then waves us over, giving us five minutes to say goodbye before he’s taken off for processing. As we approach, I see apprehension in his eyes, but mostly what I see is relief.

Evie pulls him into a long hug, giving him the reassurance he needs, while Ant claps him on the shoulder.

“It’ll be okay,” Zane says as Evie releases him. “And at least this way, it draws a line under it, so we won’t need to look over our shoulders for years.”

I shake my head with the unreality of the situation. That the boy taking punishment on my behalf is offering me solace. “And thanks to my age, my sentence is far lighter than it would be for you or Wilder.” He winks. “Just as long as I stay out of further trouble.”

“Jesus, you’d better,” I say, reaching deep to find a humorous response to lighten his tension. “Because you are far too pretty to last a week inside.”

His lawyer soon takes him away to further explain the conditions and organise the monitor, reassuring us he’ll call once he’s processed and released to his home address.

Evie and I wander outside, hand in hand, the day still, sunny, and with the gorgeous crispness to the air that only a frosty midwinter day can bring. We walk to the nearby park, sitting on a bench while we absorb the random beauty of the day.

“It’ll be all right,” Evie says, tugging my hand up to her lips, kissing each knuckle in turn before I steal her hands for being too cold and tuck them inside my jacket. “It might seem like an eternity to him right now, but once he’s through it, this year will just be a tiny blip on his radar.”

She’s right and I know the pain of guilt. Know how it can eat away everything good in your life until you’re left with nothing but crumbs. If Zane can find his solace in the punishment handed down by the court, then the best support might be to get out of his way.

“Did you know, I’ve been taking stock of all the things I have to be thankful for, and I think the best moment in my life was when I peeked around the edge of a filing cabinet to see a girl wriggling like a worm across the floor.”

“Oh, please. I was wriggling like a crown princess. And that is nowhere near my favourite moment,” she adds with a scowl. “But I’ll let you away with it.”

“Doesn’t sound like you.”

“I’ll let you away with it because *my* favourite part of the night was when you picked me up and sprinted towards the car.”

“Funny, I seem to remember you punching my head at the time.”

“Only because you deserved it.”

“Oh, yeah. And what do I deserve right now?”

Her calm eyes travel over my face, seeing me more clearly than anyone has before. “Well, if you throw me over my shoulder and run to the car, I can probably show you.”

And before I have time to second guess the situation, that’s exactly what I do.

THANKS FOR READING!!!

If you enjoyed Maddox and Evie’s story, please stay tuned for the next book in the Tiaki Academy series, featuring Zane and Avon: CRY FOR ME



**The richest boy at my school made a mistake and he's
punishing me for it.**

I never meant to tangle with Zane Beaumont.

We're not the same type of people. We don't hold the same values. We'll never move in the same cliques.

But when we collide at a party, he makes a mistake, crosses a line—*hurts* me—and instead of apologising, he morphs into my worst nightmare.

He destroys my reputation to protect himself.

He weaponises my one true friendship.

He turns the refuge of my new school into a battle ground and the fact **he's** in the wrong just pushes him harder.

I never meant to tangle with Zane Beaumont, but it happened.

Now the boy would set my world on fire just to watch me cry.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Layla Simon is a fictional entity writing dark romance stories because she keeps running out of books to read.

(and please don't tell her TBR I said that)

She enjoys writing about large dangerous men and tiny feisty woman, possibly because she is neither of those things.

You can check out her available and upcoming titles on my website:

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