

The Keeper And I



KELSEY PAINTER

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Kelsey Painter

The Keeper and I by Kelsey Painter

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Cover design by Yummy Book Covers

Edited by E&A Editing

To my Memama (1936-2023)

*Thank you for my love of books. I write in a room
surrounded by pieces of you, and am forever proud to be your
granddaughter, the author.*

In that order.

Author's Note

As is the case with most fiction, this is not a completely accurate depiction of the operations of a Premier League football club. However, I have done my best to pour my love of football into this work, and I hope that comes through. While real clubs are referenced, I do not intend to depict any actual athletes, managers, staff members, etc. working in the Premier League.

Content warnings: This book is not intended for readers under the age of 18 as it includes scenes of explicit sex. It also includes discussions of body image, abuse, divorce, and cheating. It contains scenes featuring stalking, mild violence between characters, and implied gun violence.

Stanmore Team Lineup

If you haven't read the first book in the Stanmore FC Soulmate's series, no worries! I've got their starting eleven listed here for you:

Jordan Frawley (Scottish national) — Goalkeeper, Captain, #1

Kâmil Murat (Turkish national) — Defender, #2

Fernando Barros Vidal (Brazilian national) — Defender, #4

Israel Etefu Amare (Ethiopian national) — Defender, #5

Luka Božanić (Croatian national) — Defender, #3

Hector Rizo (Colombian national) — Midfielder, #8

Artem Antonenko (Ukrainian national) — Midfielder, #6

Osahar Shadid (Egyptian national) — Midfielder, #10

Callum Sharp (English national) — Midfielder, #21

Peter O'Riley (English national) — Forward, #11

Devon Scully (English national) — Forward, #7

Stanmore FC plays in a 4-4-2 formation and are managed by Donny Warren, a former Sunderland and Everton midfielder. Their mascot is the Wasps and their home stadium is called The Hive, located in north London.

Prologue

Autumn, 1815

My best work yet, Samuel thought to himself as he gazed at the portrait.

His subject, with her soft blonde curls, bright blue eyes, and a smile that put him on his knees, appeared to glow in the frosty moonlight pooling through his window. He cursed that his brush couldn't capture the true depth of her beauty, but he knew she would adore it. And hopefully, she would begin to see herself the way he saw her. From his seat on the mattress, it was almost like seeing her in person, especially in the night, the only time he really had her to himself.

He picked at a bit of paint stuck to the back of his hand, a special blend of red and white he made to get the perfect shade for her lips, and for a moment, he blissfully recalled the softness of them.

The sound of the doorknob turning made him stiffen. His hand poised over the knife he kept under his pillow. He curled his fingers around the handle slowly, prepared to brandish it at the intruder.

It was probably the footman Howes since the maids had reported him to the butler for nicking trinkets from their rooms. But surely, that lad knew better than to take on Samuel.

At the click of the lock turning, he gripped his knife tighter. His brow furrowed. Howes didn't have a key to the other servants' rooms.

Whoever it was pushed the door open but not enough for Samuel to see them. Not until they slid through the opening and quietly snapped the door shut. Samuel blinked, trying to make out the figure in the darkness. His heart pounded as he debated waking the rest of the house by calling for help, then the mystery person stepped into the light.

“Lord Colfield!”

Samuel scrambled out of bed, leaving the knife behind, and stood. Lord Colfield remained where he was though without the usual warmth behind his eyes. Samuel's stomach lurched.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, m'lord?” he asked.

Lord Colfield took a step closer, and Samuel could see an angry twitch of the older man's lip beneath his mustache. Lord Colfield reached into his coat pocket, and Samuel braced

himself to be shown a pistol. But it wasn't a weapon at all, it was...his wallet?

“How much?” Lord Colfield asked quietly.

Samuel blinked. “My lord?”

“Don't insult me by pretending you don't know,” Lord Colfield spat. “How much will it take for you to leave here and never see my daughter again?”

Samuel took a step back. They had been so careful, always looking over their shoulders before they kissed, never so much as stretching their hands toward each other in the presence of her family. They kept a watchful eye on whoever might be watching them. Where had they slipped? Who had discovered them? How long had Lord Colfield known?

Samuel squared his shoulders. “There is no amount—”

“Spare me the heroics. Everyone has a price.” Lord Colfield snatched bills out of the leather case. “Name it, and I will see you get every penny. I'll even pay your travel expenses. Wherever you want—back to Scotland, Paris, or even to bloody America for all I care as long as it's far from here.”

“Lord Colfield,” Samuel said levelly. “You could offer me the world, and it still wouldn't be enough. I won't leave her.”

The earl frowned. “You cannot think you'll be allowed to remain here. Not when you have betrayed my family.”

“Betrayed? My lord, you're mistaken. My loyalty to this family has never been stronger.”

A humorless laugh burst from his chest. “A loyal servant does not compromise the virtue of a lady who is above him.”

“That’s not how we see it—”

“How dare you!” Lord Colfield cried, but quickly composed himself after a glance at the door. He turned furious eyes on Samuel. “We? *We*? The nerve of you to declare yourself attached to my daughter—*you*, a pauper, a servant, and a *Scot* no less! You have nothing to offer her!”

“If love holds any weight with you, she’ll certainly be rich in that.”

“Poetic, MacPhairse,” Lord Colfield scoffed. “But it is not enough. Love matches are a thing of fantasy and novels. This is her life. I will not let you rob her of what she deserves.”

“She deserves someone who loves her,” Samuel insisted, drawing himself up to his full height. “Someone who appreciates her for the intelligent, generous, sweet soul she is. She—”

“I’ve had enough of your impertinence; I will not be lectured about my own daughter.” He paused to take a deep breath. “You are dismissed, MacPhairse. You will leave at once and shall never be welcome on this estate again.”

“You really want me to go?” Samuel asked with warning in his voice. “Knowing she will come to me the moment I call?”

Lord Colfield drew closer, within inches of Samuel’s face. “I’ll lock her in her room.”

“We both know you’re too kind for that.”

“You think I’m not capable of discipline?”

“You’re capable of a great deal, my lord.” Samuel paused and held the earl’s gaze with resolve. “Except keeping us apart.”

Lord Colfield took a step back, though kept his head high. “She will never be yours, MacPhairse. She is promised to someone else.”

Samuel blanched, and his chest tightened. “You mean you’ve already...you’d give her to that animal?”

“Lord Seymour comes from a long line of worthy gentlemen —”

“He is a monster!” Samuel cried, ignoring the affronted look on Lord Colfield’s face at being interrupted. This was too important to worry about propriety, not when Samuel had seen Lord Seymour grab Caroline’s wrist so hard she winced and overheard him disparage her name when her back was turned. And, of course, the fear in Caroline’s eyes at the prospect of a lifetime with him. “He cares nothing for Caroline!”

“*Lady* Caroline to you,” Lord Colfield shot back.

“My lord, that man is cruel. He’ll hurt her. She’ll live her days in fear and—”

“At least she will not be ruined! I will not have a scandal in my house, and I will not allow my daughter to be banished from the society that is her birthright. She will marry him. And, by that time, you will be long gone.”

Samuel dropped his gaze to the floor. His mind raced. He still wasn't sure how much Lord Colfield knew about how far things had gone with Caroline. If he played the truth card, he would be taking quite a gamble, not only with his fate, but Caroline's as well. On the other hand, it could be their only chance. Perhaps, if her father knew, the engagement would have to be called off.

Caroline told him before she had no desire to remain in society. They had never been good to her, but she was hesitant to sever ties with her family completely. She hoped to discuss things diplomatically and that her father would allow her to leave on good terms even without her titles. After all, her brothers would be carrying on the family name. What did it truly matter who Caroline married? If he was going to speak, he needed to do it quickly. Lord Colfield was halfway to the door with his arm outstretched toward the handle.

“What if there's to be a child?” Samuel blurted.

Lord Colfield froze. He turned slowly, his mouth slack and his eyes wide as they found Samuel's face again. “I beg your pardon?”

“You heard me, my lord.”

The earl shook his head. “It's gone that far, has it?”

Samuel glared at him with a lift of his chin, refusing to be ashamed. “We've been lovers for some time.”

Lord Colfield dropped his hand and shook his head. “You leave me no choice.” His gaze hardened. “I will see you at

dawn.”

“Dawn, my lord,” Samuel confirmed with a curt nod.

“I’m sorry it has to end this way, Samuel.”

Samuel blinked, unaccustomed to hearing his given name, especially from the family. Well, from anyone but Caroline. They had dropped the formalities the day he first kissed her. He wondered if he had felt her kiss for the last time.

“I’m sorry too,” he said.

Lord Colfield’s eyes searched Samuel’s. Samuel willed him to see reason, to drop the charade, and to let them elope and live in peace. But the sharpness in the earl’s look was firm. He said nothing more and swept out of the room as quietly as he’d come in. Samuel heaved a sigh, and his shoulders sagged. Before he went for his pistol, he reached into his desk for some parchment. He wanted to leave his last words to Caroline, for this was not a duel he intended to win.

Chapter 1

Jordan frowned at the crowded pub. He didn't mind meeting up with his sister when she was in town, but why did she always have to pick places with so many fucking *people*?

Heaving a sigh, he opened the door and braced himself for the noise, which hit him like a wall. His height allowed him to see over the ocean of people and scan the room for Ava's familiar face. The place was rammed from the bar to the booths and even to the street-facing window. People shimmied between bodies, somehow managing not to spill their carefully balanced beverages.

He spotted his sister at the bar with her legs draped across the seat her ass wasn't in, and true to form, she glared up at a man standing beside her through her shaggy brown bangs and heavy black eyeliner. He watched her shout at the stranger who loomed a little closer. Jordan's stomach gave a lurch. He pushed through the crowd.

"I told you, this seat's taken!" Ava cried over the chatter, her Scottish accent in stark contrast to those around her.

“And *I told you*, you can’t save seats in a pub this crowded!” the man shot back.

“Fuck off, you entitled English bawbag!”

The man took another step toward her. Jordan inserted himself between them and shoved the man back several steps. The man blinked, bewildered by the intrusion and looked up at Jordan with outrage. But as suddenly as the rage arrived, it left, and recognition came over him.

“Jordan Frawley?”

“There a fucking problem here?” Jordan challenged.

“Well...I...look...” The man took a breath. “I am a massive Stanmore fan. That last save in the FA Cup Final...you were brilliant, mate.”

Jordan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Four months had passed since the Cup Final, and suddenly, he was meeting more “massive” Stanmore Football Club fans than he had in the ten years since he had signed.

Ava poked her head around Jordan. “So you’ll be polite to the famous footballer but not to me?”

The man’s glower returned. “Mind your business, you—”

“Watch your mouth,” Jordan warned, stepping in front of Ava again. “That’s my sister you’re speaking to.”

The color drained from the man’s face. “S-she’s your sister?”

“What? Don’t you see the resemblance?” Jordan replied with thinly veiled sarcasm.

The man glanced between Jordan’s hulking frame and petite, wispy Ava behind him. Where Jordan towered over people, Ava barely met their shoulders. His features were sharp enough to cut glass while she had to deflect from the softness in her face with a ragged haircut and heavy makeup. His hair was almost black while hers was chocolate brown with a layer of deep purple. However, they did have one thing in common, the tattoos that stretched from their shoulders to their wrists.

“I’ll ask you again,” Jordan said. “Is there a fucking problem here?”

“No.” The man shook his head. “No problem.”

“Good, now do as she said and fuck off.”

“Could I actually get a selfie first—”

Jordan growled. The man recoiled and scampered off before anything else could be said. Ava removed her boots from the barstool next to her, and Jordan took a seat. A whiskey was waiting on the counter for him. He glanced at his sister.

“You know me too well,” he said.

“Reckon you needed it with the way the season’s started.”

“Fuck you,” he grumbled. “It’s bad enough I’ve got to hear posh-little-shit pundits talk about it. I don’t need you piling on.”

The headlines and talking points followed him like his shadow:

“Stanmore Football Club Draws for the Sixth Time” — *Sky Sports*

“Each Goalkeeper With a Clean Sheet Today” — *ESPN*

“Is There a Win On the Horizon for the FA Cup Holders?”
— *The Independent*

She chuckled. “It’s not all bad. Technically, you’re undefeated. And you started the season with two clean sheets.”

“It’s not nearly as impressive when the other keeper gets a clean sheet too.”

He took a deep swig, letting the liquor warm him from his chest to the tips of his fingers. He relaxed under its influence, and he settled further into his seat. When he looked up again, he noticed the night’s match was on the television—Chelsea versus Sheffield United. He barely held back a groan as he watched his former teammate, Ethan Knight, make a brilliant strike that sent the ball sailing past the goalkeeper and into the back of the net. Down the bar, a couple of people in deep blue shirts cheered.

Ethan had led Stanmore to their FA Cup victory, but with talent like his, it was no surprise another club, with more money and more opportunities for the most prestigious trophies in Europe, had scooped him up as soon as they could.

As much as Jordan missed the goals (and the striker, though he'd never admit it), Ethan looked great as a Chelsea blue. If only it hadn't left Stanmore in the lurch.

"I don't want to talk about football," he said to Ava as he turned his eyes away from the screen, desperate for a change of subject. "Tell me about you. How's the tour?"

She took a long drink, swallowed hard, and set the glass down gently. "It's good. Turnout is great, and we're in talks to play in Australia next year."

He stopped mid-sip. "Australia?"

"Yeah. Fucking class, right?"

"What? No."

"No?" She raised an eyebrow.

"It's a bit..." he drummed his fingers on the counter. "Far. Don't you think?"

Her gaze softened. "J—"

"Don't," he cut her off. "I know what you're gonna say."

"That your compulsive need to protect me is rooted in patriarchal values and you'd best unlearn it before I knock it out of you with my own two fists?"

"Something like that," he replied with a smirk, then took another sip of his whiskey.

"I am a grown woman, you know," she went on. "I can take care of myself." She put her hand on his shoulder. "You'll always be my big brother though."

“Don’t get mushy on me.”

“You’re the one getting weepy about me going to Australia!”

“Okay, weepy is a *strong* word—”

“J.”

“It is!”

“J,” she said as a rebuke that time.

“Yeah?”

“Are you really alright with it?”

He took a long moment to respond. What could he say? *Don’t go, what if something happens and I can’t reach you?* He knew it was irrational, the way he fretted over her after all these years, but he couldn’t help himself. When her first boyfriend turned out to be a real piece of shit, he was there for her, but since then, she’d kept herself pretty safe, even while touring the UK with her all-girl punk band, Nifty Bitches.

“I suppose I must be,” he said with a halfhearted shrug. “You’re going, and I cannot very well stop you, can I?”

“No, you can’t,” she said with a nod.

“Good luck to you, then.”

She smiled. “Thank you.”

He grunted in reply, finding the moment far more emotional than he was comfortable with, so it was best not to carry on. She took a sip of whiskey, but she was still examining him with curious eyes. She only turned her head at the sudden cry

of “Referee!” from the group at the end of the bar, but she quickly looked back at him.

“You really don’t want to talk about the season?”

“I really don’t,” he said firmly.

If he could, he’d have liked to forget about football entirely. There was a moment during their last match, against Newcastle, where he’d fleetingly considered turning in his gloves like some jaded cop handing over his gun and badge on one of those American procedural shows. Even here in the bar, he could still feel the brush of the equalizer he’d conceded on his fingers.

“Stupid,” he muttered.

“What’s that?” Ava asked.

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “It’s...nothing.”

She cleared her throat. “So...anything else? Any new artwork?”

He shot her a warning glare before glancing around to be sure there was no one he knew within earshot. Ava was the only person in the world privy to his hobby outside of football, and he was in no rush to share that with anyone else.

“Yes,” he said in a hushed voice. “I’ve finished a new piece.”

Her eyes lit up. “Have you got a picture?”

Doing one more sweep of the area with his eyes, he retrieved his phone from his pocket and slid it over to her. She knew his

passcode, as it was her birthday, so she went right for the camera roll. It was his most recent in a line of photos of his work. He rarely bothered to capture anything else. She tapped on it to see it full screen.

It was one he was proud of, a portrait with all the colors of the rainbow emerging from the heart of the subject—a young woman with her eyes closed and a hand over her chest. She had a soft, gentle smile on her face that rounded out her cheeks. Her hair floated around her, following the pattern of the colors. He watched Ava to gauge her reaction. She blinked in surprise.

“The same girl?” she questioned.

Jordan answered with a stiff nod.

“Still don’t know who she is?”

He nodded again. Truthfully, he had some idea, but he knew he couldn’t share without sounding like a creep. He knew the woman’s face long before he placed her. From the time he picked up his first pencil and sketched, he had been drawing her. And when he had progressed to painting, it was the same. No matter what he tried, he could not get her likeness out of his mind.

“It’s beautiful, J,” Ava said. “I’ve never seen you use color this way.”

Usually, he stuck to more subdued color palettes, but something in his gut told him to change it up. Take a chance. It must have been effective because Ava couldn’t stop staring.

“You really like it?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s stunning.”

“Thanks.”

“You should start posting it on Instagram or—”

“No,” he cut her off.

“Oh, come on.”

“No.”

“It would just—”

“*No, Ava.*”

She frowned and handed his phone back to him. “Have it your way, then. I’m only trying to tell you that your talent should be appreciated by more than me.”

“You’re all the appreciation I need,” he said.

“I’m not an expert.”

“So fucking what? Art experts are snobs anyway.”

She rolled her eyes, and they returned to comfortable silence. The chatter around them carried on. It was a few minutes before Ava shifted in her seat and nudged him playfully with her elbow, a wry smile on her lips.

“So...” she said, drawing out the O sound with a kind of mischief that made Jordan’s shoulders go rigid. “Anything *else* going on?”

His brow knit together over his eyes. “Such as?”

“Have you met anyone...special?”

He scowled at her. “Fuck off.”

“It’s an innocent question!”

“It’s a loaded question, and you know it.”

“Look.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “You’re my brother, and I want you to be happy. All you do is go to training and matches, then sit alone in your flat and paint. Isn’t that lonely?”

“I go out,” he insisted.

“With?”

“The lads, my teammates.”

“And how long do you stay?”

He cut his gaze from hers and shrugged. “Half an hour, I suppose.”

“And you think that’s enough socialization?”

“Am I a toddler? I don’t need some arbitrary number of hours with others so I don’t turn out to be a hermit.”

“You’re just toeing the line of recluse,” she said. “I hate the thought of you all by yourself.”

He raised a challenging eyebrow at her. “You’re as bad as I am.”

“I am not!” She folded her arms across her chest. “You’ve been single for ages. I want to make sure you’re not depressed or something.”

“Have *you* met anyone special?” he returned sarcastically.

“Well, no, but—”

“Then fuck off, Ava.”

She huffed and returned her gaze to the television where the match was going into halftime. The camera panned back to Ethan, who had stopped by the stands to speak to his fiancée, Billie. She beamed at him, her eyes shining as he tucked her brown curls behind her ear. As if they weren't infuriatingly precious when they began dating at Stanmore, now they were engaged and absolutely revolting. Yet Jordan's heart gave a twinge.

“Don't you want someone to look at you the way she looks at him?” Ava asked.

“Don't be ridiculous,” he scoffed.

“Alright, do you at least want a date for their wedding?”

He paused, recalling the moment he opened the invitation. It was addressed to Jordan Frawley and guest, and on the RSVP card, it let him know, once again, that there were two seats available for him. He hadn't filled it out yet.

“You could come with me,” he said.

“When is it?”

“June, I think. After the season's over.”

She shook her head. “I'll be on tour.”

“I'll go stag, then.”

“You're unbelievable.”

“I like being on my own, Ava,” he said with an exasperated sigh. “I like having all my free time to myself and not answering to anyone. I’ve got no desire to be in a relationship right now. It’s not because I’m depressed or whatever. I just...I like being alone.”

Her eyes searched his for a long moment. “If you say so.” She paused for a beat, then her brows furrowed. “Are you sure it’s not about what Mum—”

He smacked his hand on the bar, and she started. He shot her a brief, apologetic look. “I, uh...gotta take a piss. I’ll be right back.”

With that, he got to his feet and headed to the back of the pub.

Chapter 2

“Excellent, Laci. That’s gorgeous!”

Laci’s smile widened at her photographer’s praise. She let the shutter click two more times before she changed the angle of her head to create more space between her jaw and shoulder. She filled the space with her arm, bringing her hand to her hair and creating a triangle, then she pushed her chin out an inch.

“Adorable, I love it,” her photographer crooned.

Her name was Myla Berry, and her project—a high-fashion style photoshoot celebrating diversity in the modeling industry—had Laci sold the moment she heard about it. She was one of several plus-size models included, but there were also many models of color and models with disabilities as well. Myla herself was a Black woman who hadn’t started pursuing photography in earnest until her fifties. She now had a London studio, and her work was featured in magazines all over the world. She was a testament to what defying the norms could do, and she was eager to help others as well.

“Last frame,” Myla said, and Laci held her final pose, schooling her face to look more sultry. “Stunning.”

Laci sat up and beamed. “You know, I think you said something along those lines for every shot.”

“Well, it’s true,” Myla said. “You look beautiful in all of them. Which I believe I can take a bit of credit for.”

Laci chuckled. “You absolutely should, you styled me.”

“And I have excellent taste,” Myla replied with a grin as she handed her camera to an assistant. “Thanks for doing this, Laci.”

“Are you kidding? I was honored to be asked!”

“I don’t mean to sound like I’m sucking up, but I couldn’t imagine pulling this off without one of the top models in the UK.”

Laci’s cheeks heated. She still wasn’t used to hearing that. Ever since *British Vogue* had named her in their “Top Ten Up-and-Coming Models” article, her life had changed significantly. She’d done her first podcast interview, was appearing on her first morning show within a couple weeks, and had a job lined up in the States for several shows by a designer who only designed for plus-sized bodies. On top of all that, she was getting calls from people like Myla freaking Berry. All she had wanted when she’d started her Instagram page was to give other women her size some confidence, to show them they could be stylish and chic and whatever else they wanted to be. Now, she was here.

Myla tilted her head. “Have I said something wrong?”

“Goodness, no.” Laci shook her head. “I just...I’ve always felt like I’m beautiful, but for the first time, more people are agreeing with me than aren’t.”

“I know what you mean,” Myla replied. “Believing in yourself is enough, but a little support from others can take the load off.”

“You’re brilliant, you know that?”

“I do,” Myla said with a wink.

After a hug and some more compliments back and forth, Laci returned to the changing room. Myla’s studio provided large, private changing rooms complete with makeup remover, hairbrushes, and scrunchies or claw clips for ultimate comfort when heading back out into the city.

Laci brushed some of the hairspray out of her curls and gave her hair a bit of a fluff before changing back into her jeans and jumper, which was in her favorite shade of blush pink. She was zipping up her boots when her phone rang from inside her purse. A glance at the screen told her it was her brother.

“Hey, Jax!”

“Lace, have you got plans for the weekend?” he asked, rushing through his words.

“I’m doing quite well, actually, thanks for asking,” she answered sarcastically. “Just wrapped up an *amazing* photoshoot with a *legendary* photographer, and—”

“I get it, I’m sorry,” he cut across her. “But, seriously, I’ve got tickets to the Stanmore-Chelsea match, and I haven’t got anyone to go with me.”

Laci rolled her eyes. Of course, this was about football. Jax hardly took anything else in his life that seriously. “Can’t you bring Tate with you? Or Dad?”

Their younger brother usually matched Jax’s enthusiasm for sports, and their father enjoyed that it gave him time with his sons, which gave Laci time with their mother to bond over wine and comment on the attractiveness of the athletes free of judgment.

“Tate’s going with some girl—” he stopped short, no doubt to acknowledge whatever protest Tate had made to “some girl” though Laci had no idea her little brother was dating.

“Tate’s got a girl?” she asked.

“Yeah, one second, I’ll call you back on FaceTime so he can tell you about her.”

The call ended, and seconds later, Jax’s picture reappeared but this time as a video call. Laci answered, and her two brothers came up on the screen, the older looking exasperated with a hint of a smile, and the younger with a big grin. She leaned her phone against the wall so she could sign with Tate.

“Are you seeing someone?” she asked, moving her hands carefully so he would understand. Sometimes if the signal was bad, the signs were misconstrued.

He nodded and signed back to her, “I am. Her name is Britt, and she’s deaf too. She loves football as much as I do.”

“That’s fantastic!” Laci replied. “I’m so happy for you, Tate!”

“Thank you,” he signed. “I hope you can meet her soon.”

“Me too,” she said, then looked at Jax, but continued to sign so Tate wouldn’t feel left out. “Why can’t Dad go with you to the match?”

“He and Mum are going to a wedding,” he said while also signing for Tate’s benefit.

“Glad to know I was your first choice.”

“My first and only...after two of my coworkers also said no,” Jax joked. “Hey, maybe the four of us can go for drinks beforehand? We can meet Britt and see if we approve?”

Tate elbowed his brother playfully while Jax snickered.

“Well, if meeting the new girlfriend is on the table, I’m definitely in,” Laci said. “I’ll see you both on Sunday, alright?”

“Sounds good,” Jax said as Tate nodded. “So...how’d the photoshoot go?”

A slow smile spread across her face. “I smashed it.”

Jax barked out a cheer while Tate did his usual jazz hands. She beamed. While what Myla said was true, Laci had never had only herself to believe in her. She had her two wonderful brothers and her parents, who never let her doubt herself for a

moment. They let her gush about Myla for a few more moments before confirming their plans for Sunday and hanging up. Laci left the studio after a quick goodbye to Myla and headed home.

It was walkable, so she decided to save herself the cost of a cab and make her way on foot. She opened Instagram and posted a few stories she'd filmed while at Myla's. One with Myla and a few with the other models. Once they were up, she went to her notes app to drum up some questions for Britt. Where had she and Tate met? How long had they been seeing each other? Was her family hearing or deaf? Did she have any siblings or—

“Laci?”

She turned her head, the voice unfamiliar to her.

“Laci Miller?”

A man approached, about two heads taller than her, with blond hair shaved almost to the scalp and startling blue eyes. A plain white T-shirt, joggers, and a black puffer jacket hung over his slim frame. His cheekbones protruded through his skin, and his lips curled up to reveal his teeth and gums in an alarming smile. She had no idea who he was.

“Um, hello,” she said. “Have we met?”

“Oh, no, we haven't.” He shook his head bashfully. “I'm just a big fan. I'm Dane.”

He stuck out his hand, and she hesitantly shook it.

“Nice to meet you, Dane.”

“It’s even nicer to meet you,” he replied. “Seriously, I think you’re like the hottest woman in the world.”

She dropped his hand, her skin crawling. Unsure of what to say, she settled on the usual, “Thank you.”

“Some guys have no appreciation for big girls, but I think they’re really sexy. Something to hold onto, y’know?”

She blinked, now *extremely* unsure of what to say. What did he want from her? A pat on the back for finding her attractive? “Oh, um, to each their own, I suppose.”

“Those guys are fucking pricks, right?” he said with a forced laugh that made Laci take a step back. He ran his hand over his head before stuffing both hands in his pockets. “What were you shooting with Myla Berry?”

She took another step away. She had posted that story only seconds ago. Had he already seen it? And he just happened to be near the studio? The hairs on the back of her neck rose the longer she looked at him and saw a frantic shine in his eyes.

“I...it’s a project she’s not completely ready to share,” she said.

“Oh, say no more. I totally understand,” he replied. “Uh... where are you headed?”

She glanced away to be sure there were other people around. Thankfully, there was plenty of foot traffic along this street. She was stumped. She certainly didn’t want to tell him she was heading home because there was no telling what he would do with that information. But then what?

“I’m...going to meet a friend at the pub,” she lied. Better to let him believe she had someone waiting for her. “And unfortunately, I’m running quite late.”

He shifted uncomfortably on his feet and dropped his gaze to the ground before looking at her again. “Could I escort you?”

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Please,” he said. “How often do you get to meet your celebrity crush?”

She heaved a sigh. She didn’t know of any pubs nearby, and she couldn’t Google one right in front of him. The way he was blinking hopefully at her sent a chill up her spine. He was too eager, too forward. But maybe if she went along with it, she could find some other excuse to break away from him. She wished she hadn’t hung up with her brothers. But that thought was of no help to her now.

“Very well, then,” she said. “For a little while.”

“Wonderful.” He grinned and gestured in front of him. “Shall we go?”

She wondered if there was a polite way to ask him not to walk outside of her, blocking her access to the street, but there wasn’t without setting off alarm bells, so she resigned herself to the sidewalk. Maybe she could make a break for it if she needed to, though she wasn’t the most athletic, and she was in heels. Sturdy, chunky heels, but not built for sprinting.

She told herself she was being paranoid. This guy was... awkward and a bit of an oversharer, but that didn’t necessarily

make him dangerous. He was probably nervous. Like he said, she was his “celebrity crush.” Of course he was bound to make a blunder or two. She decided to give him the benefit of the doubt.

“So, Dane, what do you do?” Laci asked as they walked.

“I work in IT,” he told her. “Not as exciting as your job, but it pays the bills.”

“My job can be extremely dull at times,” she said. “It must be nice to be able to count on something every day.”

“I suppose,” he said with a shrug. “Though I work with all men, and that’s no fun.”

“Ah, I can’t say the same about working with mostly women. It’s lovely most of the time. Although, the men can be quite a lot of fun as well.”

He frowned. “You work with lots of men?”

“Sometimes. Photographers are often men. Fashion show coordinators are usually men. Journalists are—”

“I get it,” he cut her off, a sudden bitterness to his voice. “I didn’t realize.”

“Is that a problem?”

“That lingerie ad you did last month...were there men there?”

“Yes, the photographer was a man,” she said, cocking her head to the side in confusion. He must really be dedicated if he

knew that off the top of his head. But this line of questioning had her on edge like when they started.

“Was he at least gay?”

She stopped walking. “What does that matter?”

His eyes went wide as an owl’s. “Shit. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend. I was just curious.”

“And I’m curious why it matters,” she replied and started to walk again, but she put more distance between them.

“I just wouldn’t want my girl half naked in front of a bunch of men,” he said. “Have you got a boyfriend, by the way? Does he mind?”

At that, she stopped again and cleared her throat. “Okay. Well. That’s done. I think...” She glanced through the window to her right, and thankfully, they were at a pub. She spotted a crowd of people in football shirts and a match on several televisions throughout the room. “I think my friend is waiting for me inside.” With another quick look, she spotted a woman with shaggy brown hair sitting alone at the bar. “Yes. There she is.”

Before he could respond, Laci ducked inside and made a beeline for the empty seat beside the woman, who was scrolling on her phone. When the door didn’t close behind her, Laci knew Dane had followed her in.

“Hey!” she cried with enthusiasm that she knew was overkill. The woman gave a start, but Laci didn’t care. “It’s so good to see you!” She threw her arms around the stranger, who

stiffened at the contact, but Laci whispered in her ear. “Please pretend you know me; this guy’s weird.”

The woman relaxed, then whispered to Laci in a thick, Scottish accent. “Understood. I’m Ava.” She drew back and beamed. “You too! How’ve you been?”

“Lovely, and you?”

“Grand,” Ava said, then patted the bar stool next to her. “Have a seat.”

Laci did so as Dane approached. Ava narrowed her eyes at him.

“Who the fuck’s this?”

“This is Dane,” Laci said. “We met on my way here.”

He glanced uncertainly between them, assessing Ava who, with all the makeup and tattoos, was intimidating, exactly the type of person that might be capable of scaring him off.

“Well, thanks for delivering my friend here, Dane, but you can go now,” she said firmly.

“But I was wondering...Laci, if I could take your number or ___”

“Nope, it’s time for girls’ night. You’re shit out of luck.”

“She can speak for herse—”

“Have a good night, Dane.”

“But—”

“Fuck off, Dane,” Ava said, her tone final.

He glared at her and shot one last look at Laci before he folded his arms over his chest and rooted himself to the spot.

Chapter 3

Cursing the lack of paper towels, Jordan emerged from the bathroom wiping his hands on his jeans. He spotted his sister in their seats, but found that she was, once again, involved in a confrontation. It wasn't the same bloke as before. This guy was much slimmer with a buzz cut and wild blue eyes. Something about him made Jordan's skin crawl. He hurried over, pushing through the crowd with no regard for courtesy.

When he reached her, he stopped short. A third person sat to her side—Laci Miller, the gorgeous model Jordan had been painting for most of his life, even before he knew who she was. He only painted the likeness of the most beautiful person he could think of in his imagination. Later, when she'd popped up on his Instagram explore page, he spent a solid hour scrolling through her posts in awe. The person he'd dreamed of really existed! He'd never reached out, of course, he didn't want to frighten her, but he'd been a quiet follower for some time. What wasn't quiet was his massive crush on her.

He froze. What did you say to a woman who, in your dreams, you had already married, had babies with, and made passionate love to every night? He watched her bright blue eyes flick between Ava and the stranger, and she took her bottom lip between her teeth. Holy fuck, she was cuter in person. He felt his knees buckle.

When she flinched nervously at a sharp word from the man, a violent urge to protect her awakened inside Jordan's chest, and he was able to move again. He stepped up to the group, and the man went silent as Jordan's shadow fell over him. He shrank back as he realized Jordan's size.

"Is...is this him?" the man asked.

"Yes, we weren't lying," Ava replied, exasperated. "She's got a boyfriend."

Jordan blinked, taken aback, and finally tore his gaze away from Laci to lock eyes with his sister. She quirked her brow with a meaningful look, which he understood to mean *play along*. With a subtle nod, he let her know he got the message.

"We've already told you to clear off once, Dane," Ava warned.

The man—Dane, apparently—only glanced at her before facing Jordan again. "You're really her boyfriend?"

Jordan met Laci's gaze, her pleading, hopeful gaze that made his stomach do backflips because holy shit she was stunning, and reluctantly looked back at Dane. "Yes. Are you bothering her?"

“Wasn’t trying to,” Dane said, taking a hesitant step back.

“Best be on your way then,” Jordan said.

Dane frowned at the dismissal and turned eyes on Laci. “If he really is your boyfriend, why haven’t you posted him?”

“Haven’t you heard of a soft launch?” Laci put an indignant hand on her hip. “We’re just starting out. I’m not going to plaster him all over the place.”

“He’s a footballer; he’s used to it!”

“That’s exactly why they’re so private!” Ava interjected. “Don’t want the press all over them, do they?”

“Right,” Laci said with a firm nod. She rose to stand next to Jordan, tucking herself beneath his arm and sliding her own around his waist. It sent a jolt up his spine to feel her touch, but he maintained his steely expression, which became more difficult when she nudged him to get his attention. The sight of her peering up at him through her long lashes made him want to engulf her in his arms. “We prefer our privacy, don’t we, babe?”

His brain short-circuited at the sound of the endearment coming from her lips, and he took a moment to recover. Clearing his throat, he simply added, “Yep.”

Dane’s raised eyebrows betrayed his skepticism, but his uncertainty was evident in the way his gaze bounced from each person as if sizing them all up. “I didn’t mean to...I just...I’m a fan of hers, and I was hoping...well...I dunno, it doesn’t matter now.”

“That’s exactly right. It doesn’t matter,” Ava said. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“Fine,” Dane huffed. “Sorry. I’ll leave you alone.”

Hanging his head, he stormed out of the pub, shoving the door so hard it nearly swung into the outside wall. He stalked down the pavement. Jordan followed him with his eyes until he was out of sight. Laci’s shoulders relaxed, and she let out a long breath. Jordan looked down at her.

“You alright?”

“Yeah,” she said. “Thanks for that.”

“Anytime,” he replied and immediately wanted to kick himself. *Anytime?* Why in the world would that happen again? He’d never been that lucky. “I mean, not that you’d need it or anything, but—”

“I knew what you meant.” She stopped him with a gentle smile, and he could have sworn the whole room got brighter. “I really appreciate it, but I should probably head home.”

“Don’t leave yet. He might be waiting for you,” Ava said. She patted the barstool again. “Sit back down. We’ll get you a drink.”

“But where will you sit?” Laci wondered, eyeing Jordan.

“I’ve got fucking strong legs,” he said with a shrug.

She smiled again and took the chair. Jordan moved to stand on the free side of her, blocking her from the window. She offered her hand.

“We haven’t been properly introduced,” she said. “I’m Laci Miller.”

“Jordan Frawley,” he replied, shaking her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Jordan.”

“You as well.”

He wondered if it was obvious that his heart was galloping inside his ribcage at just being beside her. If it was, she was gracious enough to let him off the hook.

“I’ll be honest, I didn’t know you were a footballer,” she said. “Which club?”

“I’m the goalkeeper for Stanmore,” he told her.

“Jordan...” she trailed off. “Hold on, I thought you played for Everton.”

He wrinkled his nose. “That’s Jordan Pickford.”

“You sure?”

“What? Of course I’m sure,” he replied, affronted. “We don’t even look alike.”

“You sort of do.”

“He’s fucking *blond* for Christ’s sake. And he’s *English*.”

“Well, you’ve got that whole anger thing going on like he does.”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s certainly similar.”

“No, it isn’t—” he stopped himself once he noticed the mischievous smile slowly parting her lips. She was teasing him. And against his better judgment, he liked it. Coming from her, he really liked it. “You’re taking the piss.”

“Caught on, have you?”

Ava snorted into her drink, and Jordan shot her a glare over Laci’s head.

“Sorry,” Laci said, drawing his attention back to her. She fiddled with the fringe around the edge of her handbag. “Guess I’m still trying to recover from how uncomfortable that whole thing made me.”

Ava looked on with sympathy. “Let’s get you that drink. What’ll you have?”

“A cosmopolitan, please,” Laci said, and Ava called over the barkeep.

“Did you know him?” Jordan asked. “Dane, that is.”

Laci shook her head. “No, he approached me when I was leaving a photoshoot. I told him I was meeting a friend so he wouldn’t follow me home, but he insisted on walking with me and then asked me a bunch of questions about working with men.” Her drink arrived, and she took a sizable sip. “Maybe I was being too paranoid.”

“There’s no such thing as being too paranoid,” Ava said. “Especially for women.”

Jordan couldn’t help but agree. From the time Ava was twelve, he was protecting her from lingering stares and

wandering hands. He couldn't imagine what it must be like for Laci, who was in the public eye. Her direct messages on any social media platform had to be a nightmare.

“Yeah, especially in your position, you can't be too careful,” he said.

“What position is that?” Ava asked.

Jordan blinked at her. “You don't know who she is?”

She glanced between Jordan and Laci, a knowing look in her eye as her gaze landed on her brother. He realized she must have recognized Laci from his paintings but wasn't giving him away. “Am I supposed to?”

“Laci Miller?” Jordan repeated. “Never heard that name before?”

“Should I have?”

“She's one of the most famous models in the fucking country!”

“When have I ever kept up with who's who in the fucking modeling scene?”

“You don't have to keep up to have seen her name or at least her face—”

“You know who I am?” Laci's voice interrupted, soft but sweet and not something Jordan was capable of ignoring.

His face grew warm though her expression lacked judgment, just genuine surprise. He'd revealed more than he intended to. He looked away and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Yeah, sort of,” he said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a footballer recognize me before,” she said. “I’m quite flattered.”

He opened his mouth to reply, but Ava spoke first. “Sounds to me like he’s a proper fanboy.”

Jordan scowled at her. “I know who she is because I’ve got fucking eyes, Ava.”

She flipped him off, and Laci giggled.

“Are you two actually siblings?” she asked.

“We are if you can believe it,” Ava answered.

“I don’t think I’ve ever spoken to my brothers like that,” Laci said with a bemused smile.

“Brothers?” Ava questioned. “As in you’ve got multiple?”

“Two.” Laci chuckled.

“Fucking Christ. As if having one isn’t difficult enough.”

They continued chatting, and Jordan stole a glance out the window. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Dane was hanging around, considering the way the guy was looking at Laci. Normally he only saw that level of eagerness from the stands at matches. Something in his gut told him to keep a lookout.

Laci finished her drink, and the tension left her body. Her shoulders dropped. She smiled easier, and she let her arm brush against Jordan’s, which he didn’t mind. It made his skin tingle more and more with each contact. He supposed it was a

testament to his nature that she was comfortable. He felt comfortable too.

He always thought if he ever met Laci, he'd be starstruck, but given the circumstances, he didn't have much of an opportunity for that. He'd even forgotten his pants were still damp from the bathroom, which now he was going to think about until well after he got home even if there was nothing to be done about it.

"Well, I appreciate you both, but I really should be heading home," she said with a sigh. "It's late, and I've got some work I need to get done in the morning."

"How're you getting home?" Ava asked.

"It's nearby. I can walk."

Jordan tensed. Should he offer to walk her home, or would that be too much? He didn't want to make her uncomfortable. But what if his instincts were right and Dane was still hanging around? If anything happened to her, Jordan would never forgive himself. But where were the lines in this situation? They'd only just met. He had no right to feel as protective as he did.

"You can't do that," Ava said, resolving his inner crisis. "If you don't want to call a cab, at least let Jordan walk with you."

Laci looked at him. "Would you mind?"

He might have laughed if he wasn't so relieved that she was open to the idea. "Not at all."

“It’s not far,” she said. “The weather’s nice, so you won’t be miserable.”

“You don’t have to convince me, it’s really no trouble,” he assured her.

Her cheeks turned a rosier shade of pink. “Alright then.”

He helped her off the barstool and then looked at Ava. “You coming?”

“Actually, I’ve sort of got my eye on the bartender,” she said with a wink. “I think I’ll stay.”

“Be safe,” Jordan said sternly. “Call me if you need anything.”

She replied with a mock salute. Jordan led Laci outside but came to a stop before letting her all the way out the door. There were a few people walking around, but nobody was loitering, so he figured it was safe to go on. He gestured for Laci to lead the way, and with a smile, she did. Jordan slowed his long strides to walk beside her.

“I’ve got a question,” she said.

“Fire it off.”

“D’you not hug your sister when you say goodbye?”

“If I tried to hug Ava, she’d thump me,” he said, and it was true. He could picture it, him approaching with his arms wide open only to be met with Ava’s palm against his forehead and a stern warning to never do that again. “We’re not really the hugging or...affection sort.”

“I see,” she said. “So, I suppose saying the words ‘I love you’ is...”

“Absolutely out of the question.”

She giggled.

“You’re close with your brothers then?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I speak to them every day, and while we aren’t lovey-dovey or anything, we are affectionate.”

“Do they live nearby?”

“Yep. All three of us are in London,” she said. “They live together, but I wanted my own place. Mostly so I could decorate it how I like. Believe it or not, they weren’t keen on having fluffy pink pillows on the couch.”

“Ah, they haven’t got any taste, do they?” he joked.

“Seriously!” she said. “Their idea of acceptable wall decor is a framed photo of Chelsea after they won the Champions League.”

“They’re Chelsea supporters? Now, I’m *really* questioning their taste.”

“I’m afraid I come from a long line of Chelsea supporters,” she admitted with a laugh. “We’re going to the match on Sunday. My brothers and I, not the entire lineage.”

“Of course,” he said, doing his best to ignore the way his stomach dropped at hearing she was going to be at the match.

Not only was he going up against his old teammate, a remarkably threatening striker, but Laci would be watching.

What if it ended in another draw? Or worse, what if they lost? It was never ideal, but the humiliation would be tenfold knowing Laci was in the stands to witness it all. He shook his head. He didn't need to concern himself with impressing her.

“Which club did you watch growing up?” she asked.

“Rangers, of course,” he said as if it were obvious.

“What made you come to England and play for Stanmore?”

“Money, mostly.” He paused for a beat. “I know it sounds fucking shallow.”

“No, I get it,” she said. “Gotta make a living somehow, right?”

“Right.”

He met her gaze and was relieved to find that her understanding was genuine. Usually when he gave that answer, people looked at him sideways like he lacked sentiment. But Jordan had seen firsthand what poverty did to a family. He refused to let it happen again if he ever had a family of his own. And given his unwillingness to entertain the idea of a relationship, the prospect was doubtful.

All too soon, they reached her house. A large, elegant row house with a gate and small garden in front. Jordan wondered if there was something he could do to stretch the time he had with her, but his mind drew blanks. Asking her out or for her number wouldn't be appropriate after she'd just been harassed, so planning a way to see her again wasn't in the cards either.

Not that he thought someone like Laci would be interested in him. That was wishful thinking.

“Thanks again for your help tonight,” she said.

“Sure,” he replied.

She glanced down at her shoes and then back at him. “Can I ask you something that has the potential to embarrass us both?”

“You can ask me anything,” he said and then wondered if that sounded too desperate.

“Have we met before?”

He blinked, taken aback. He found her familiar, but he reasoned it was because he’d been following her on social media for so long.

“No.” He shook his head. “We haven’t.”

“Are you sure? It’s just...I feel like I’ve heard your voice somewhere.”

“Maybe watching something in the press?”

“No, I don’t watch that stuff.”

“Social media?”

“No, I don’t follow anything football related.”

He shrugged. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“You’re certain we haven’t met?” she questioned.

“Positive.”

She raised a challenging eyebrow. “How?”

“Because there is no fucking way I’d forget meeting you.”

Her mouth fell into a small O shape, and her eyes widened. His heart pounded, alarmed by his sudden honesty, but he figured it couldn’t hurt. It wasn’t like he would ever see her again. Sure, she’d be at the match in a couple days, but he would be on the pitch, and she in the stands, one of the many faces in the crowd—though he was certain he’d be able to spot her if he really looked. So why not?

Pink rose to her cheeks again. “Oh.”

He cleared his throat. “Shall we say goodnight?”

“Yeah, um, thank you,” she said. “I’ve probably said that too much. But I really am grateful to you.”

“Happy to help,” he said. “Goodnight, Laci.”

“Goodnight, Jordan,” she returned as her eyes searched his. “And...good luck on Sunday. I’ll be rooting for you secretly.”

He cracked a small smile. “Well, I think that’s enough to call us even.”

A little laugh tumbled out of her, and she took a step through the gate. He watched her walk up the path to the door. She hesitated on the steps, turned, and opened her mouth like she was going to say something else but decided against it, then she turned to put the key in the lock and open it. As she crossed over the threshold, she stole one last look at him.

“Goodnight again!” she called.

God, she was so fucking cute. “G’night.”

She beamed at him and then closed the door at last. He gazed at it for a moment, going over everything in his head. What did she think of him? Had he been kind enough? Was he too honest? He shook his head. It didn't matter. Surely, that was the last time he'd see Laci Miller.

Chapter 4

Stamford Bridge buzzed as a sea of blue filed into the stands. The sun kept trying to peer out from behind the clouds, but they were thick and moving fast across the sky. Jax led his siblings and Britt to their seats. Laci dutifully took up the rear. She gazed out at the players warming up, and her eyes found Jordan in the far goal, blocking practice shots. He was taller in real life than he looked on the pitch. It almost made her face warm to know that. He was ridiculously handsome. Pretending to be his girlfriend had been fun despite the frightening circumstances that had forced the ruse. She wished he'd asked her out or something before he left. She felt like she'd given him plenty of opportunity, but he must not have been interested. She resolved to not let that get her down and enjoy her day with her brothers and Tate's new girlfriend.

Britt was a sweetheart from what Laci gleaned so far and with a fascinating background. Her parents had moved to London from Lagos, Nigeria, started a business and then started their family. Her father and sister were hearing, but her

mother was deaf. Tate joked that he envied her evenly matched family.

“How are the chips?” Laci signed to Britt.

“Great!” Britt signed back. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Laci replied. “Halftime rounds on you then?”

Britt grinned. “Let’s be real, it’s on Tate.”

“Fair enough,” Laci giggled.

Tate distracted Britt by taking her hand, and she beamed at him. Laci glanced over at Jordan again and a hint—a tiny nudge—of jealousy went through her. There Tate was, younger than Laci, and finding love while Laci had never so much as tasted it. The closest she’d come was a fleeting moment of make believe in order to get a creep to leave her alone. She sighed and popped a hot chip into her mouth.

“Oi,” she said to her family after swallowing. “I need a picture for my Instagram story.”

Britt and Tate made no protest, but Jax rolled his eyes. Even so, when Laci lifted her phone, he leaned in with a smile. She snapped a great shot of them with herself in the front, Tate with his arm around Britt, and Jax beaming at the top of the screen. She brought up her story and added the photo along with the Chelsea song “Blue is the Colour” and a couple of blue hearts, then posted it.

“Thank you!” she told them with a smile.

Before long, the match was underway. Ethan Knight scored the opening goal for Chelsea twenty minutes in, and Laci cheered with the rest of the crowd. Her smile faded when she saw Jordan. Even from a distance, she noticed the way his muscles tensed. He shouted at his defenders, who nodded in acknowledgment before they jogged back toward the midfield to reset. She had the strangest urge to comfort him, like it would have been the most natural thing in the world, but she shook it off. Her imagination was getting carried away again.

She had actually dreamed of Jordan that night they met. Only, they weren't like the people who met in that pub. They were at a ball. All the women had been in empire waist gowns that swished and jewels that glittered as they waltzed around the ballroom floor. Laci, in her own elegant dress, found Jordan standing away from the crowd. She offered him a gloved hand, and they snuck outside to the garden, where they danced alone, with no music but for the beating of their hearts.

She'd chalked it up to the eventful night and watching *Bridgerton* before bed.

By halftime, the score was still one-nil with Chelsea looking threatening as they put pressure on Stanmore's defense and held them on their side of the pitch. They had taken several more shots on goal, including one from a set piece, but Jordan stopped them before they crossed into the net. Laci found herself holding her breath and releasing it each time Jordan made a save.

While Tate went to retrieve some snacks, Laci checked her phone. She had a couple likes on her Instagram story but also a new DM. The username read dane_2307, and to her dismay, it was exactly who she thought it was. The guy who'd followed her from the photo shoot. He'd sent several messages:

You're at your boyfriend's match wearing the other team's shirt?

There's being private and there's lying, Laci.

To think I almost believed it when I saw him walk you home. But you didn't even kiss at the door.

Her stomach turned to stone as she read the last message. He had followed them? When? How? She never saw any sign of him. Then again, she'd been so wrapped up in Jordan that she doubted she would have noticed anything else.

Several thoughts occurred to her. First, Dane knew where she lived. She was going to have to look into getting the police involved to feel safe. Second, he knew she was lying about dating Jordan, and she had no plan for this. It hadn't occurred to her to carry on with the lie, but she forgot Dane followed her socials. She never thought he'd be looking out for evidence of her pretend relationship. Third, she was going to have to act fast to recover from this slip up.

Another message popped up: Just give me a chance, Laci.

She locked her phone and stuffed it into her pocket as she took a deep breath. She needed a few minutes to think, but the

second half was starting. Jordan was in her direct line of vision in the goal on her side of the pitch. God, he was distracting.

A nudge to her side made her turn her head and face Britt who shot her a questioning look. “Are you alright?”

Laci nodded hastily. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She looked out at the pitch, taking notice of Jordan’s profile. “Just fine.”

The second half provided a much-needed distraction from her worries. The pace of the game picked up with Stanmore going on the attack, though still unable to equalize. Laci got a good look at Jordan. The way he prowled the penalty box was like a panther. His eyes always focused on the ball, tracking it around the pitch, ready to pounce. Her heart skipped a beat at the thought of what that gaze might look like up close.

Finally, Chelsea capitalized off a mistake by one of Stanmore’s midfielders and they made a break for the other end of the pitch. A wall of blue shirts closed in around Jordan’s all black kit though the top of his head still poked out above them. Ethan Knight took another shot. Jordan sprang to his left and batted the ball back toward Ethan. Knight poked it away from the Stanmore defender and shot again, but Jordan scrambled to his feet and jumped, stretching his limbs as long as they would go to get his fingertips on the ball. It was just enough to put it up and over the back of the net. Laci barely held back a cheer.

Chelsea got set up for a corner kick, and Laci kept her eyes fixed on Jordan as he braced himself—until Jax called over to her.

“Lace, d’you know anyone named Dane?”

A shiver ran down her spine, and she faced her brother.
“What?”

“He sent me a message on Instagram asking if you’re really dating Jordan Frawley,” Jax said, brow furrowed. “What’s going on?”

Before she could answer, the Chelsea forward kicked the ball with a resounding *poomf*, and it sailed toward the goal. A crowd-wide groan went through the stadium when Jordan caught the header from a Chelsea defender at the far post. The only eyes not on the action were Laci’s, her brothers’, and Britt’s. Their focus was solely on her while she scrambled for an explanation.

“I, uh...”

The crowd started a wild protest as Stanmore’s attack improved. They cut through the Chelsea defense with surprising accuracy and finally slipped one past the goalkeeper. Stamford Bridge erupted into boos while the Stanmore section cheered. Frustrated by the noise, Laci put aside her voice and began signing to explain everything to her brothers and Britt, from running into Dane after her photoshoot to Jordan walking her home. She left out her attraction to him though. Even without the risk of being overheard, she was a little embarrassed to admit he wasn’t actually interested in her.

“Oh my...” Britt replied.

“Do you need to stay with us for a couple days?” Tate offered.

Laci shrugged. “I have no idea. But I have to do something if he’s seeking out my family now.”

“Have you told anyone else about it?” Jax asked.

“No, I thought it was over until today,” Laci answered. “I can’t believe I didn’t think about the match. I should have been more careful.”

“This isn’t your fault,” Britt insisted. “We’ll figure something out. There has to be a way to cover it up.”

Laci cast a desperate look at Jax whose eyes were trained on the pitch. She followed his gaze to where Jordan stood, inside the penalty area, prepping to take a goal kick. Jax tapped his finger against his lips, and Laci dreaded to think what he might be coming up with.

“I’ve got an idea,” he signed.



The match ended in a one-one draw.

As soon as the final whistle blew, Jax herded the group out of the stands to where he knew the visiting team’s bus would be parked and waited for the Stanmore athletes to emerge.

Already, a few of them were trickling out. No one tall enough to be Jordan, of course, but that meant they were in luck.

Laci came to a stop as her stomach dropped. “I don’t know about this, Jax. Aren’t I being the creepy one now?”

“No, he’s helped you before,” he replied as if it were obvious. “And he said *anytime*. That means he’s willing to help you again.”

“I think that’s just an expression,” Laci said.

“There’s other people waiting as well,” he pointed out, and there were a handful of fans loitering around the exit, mostly with their kids eagerly awaiting autographs. “Loads of people ask for pictures and stuff.”

“I just think—”

“Lace, don’t think. We only need one shot to put this Dane guy off until we figure out another solution.”

“Like a restraining order,” Tate suggested as Britt nodded her agreement.

Laci took a deep breath. Asking for a photo seemed simple enough. The plan was to see if Jordan would pose with her while Jax took a photo and sent it to Dane. They agreed it was best for Laci not to acknowledge his messages to her. But now that she was there, it felt like too much. He had already helped her once. Was it right to keep imposing?

She didn’t have long to war with herself about it. Jordan came out, looking fresh, though much the same dressed in a

black T-shirt, leather jacket, and dark jeans. Jax took Laci's hand and dragged her closer.

“Jax, wait, I think we should—”

“Oi, Frawley!” Jax shouted.

Jordan turned his head and spotted Laci and Jax immediately. The color drained from her face as she looked at him, but Jordan seemed unfazed. He came to a stop and waited for Laci and her brother to approach.

“What's up?” Jordan asked, glancing between them.

“Go on, Laci, tell him,” Jax said and nudged her in front of him. She shot him a scowl, which he ignored.

“Hi,” she said, her voice a couple octaves higher than usual as she looked at Jordan again. “Um...I don't know if you remember me from the other night, but—”

“I told you,” he cut in. “No way I could forget you.”

Her cheeks warmed. She remembered him saying it, but she wasn't sure what to make of it since he hadn't made a move. Despite that, it was flattering to hear. Albeit a bit embarrassing in front of her big brother who would, no doubt, take the piss out of her later.

“Of course,” she said. “I, um...look, this is rather uncomfortable, but the guy from that night saw a photo of me at the match, and he's called our bluff. Would you mind taking a quick photo with me to put him off a bit longer?”

Jordan narrowed his eyes. “That wee shite’s still bothering you?”

“Unfortunately. We’re trying to figure something else out, but for the moment, could you—”

“Sure,” he agreed. “No problem.”

“I reckon it’s best if we make it look candid,” Jax interjected. “Like I’m catching you finding each other.”

Jordan looked at him. “This one of your brothers?”

“I...” She blinked. He remembered? “Yes, he is. This is my older brother, Jax.”

Jax extended his hand. “Nice to meet you. Big fan.”

Jordan only grunted back as they shook hands, his narrowed eyes on Jax’s Chelsea shirt.

“Alright,” Jax said. “Laci, you’re the professional, how do we make this convincing?”

“Uh...” She considered it for a moment. “Okay, Jax, stand a ways back, and we’ll just hug.” She looked at Jordan. “Is that alright?”

“Fine by me,” he said and set his bag down.

Jax took several large steps backward and raised his phone. Laci shifted on her feet. She’d taken a million photos and posed with plenty of models, but she’d never been this nervous. Maybe it was because she was attracted to Jordan in a way she’d never felt with another model. Maybe it was the pressure to make it appear real. Maybe it was that being near

him brought forth that nagging feeling she knew him from somewhere else. Whatever the case, his voice brought her out of her thoughts.

“Come here,” he said as he opened his arms.

She gulped, nodded, and slid into place. She wasn't tall enough for his chin to rest on her head, but he moved so that his face was toward her instead of the camera. She wrapped her arms around his middle and felt warmth spread from the tips of her fingers to the pit of her stomach. His arms came to rest around her shoulders, and she forced herself to ignore her pounding heart and relax into the pose.

“This alright?” he murmured into her hair.

She stole a glance up at him and nodded. “It's perfect.”

“Alright, yeah, just hold that,” Jax called, snapping a couple photos. “Looks great, like you might kiss at any moment.”

Laci tried not to blanch, but Jordan's face was so close she could see the individual strands of hair in his beard. Absurdly, she wondered if it was coarse or if he cared for it and made it soft. She couldn't let herself look at his lips or she might actually get on her toes and kiss him.

“Excellent, I think we got the shot,” Jax said.

Jordan's arms dropped from around her, and she shivered at the loss of warmth. She needlessly adjusted her shirt and cleared her throat. Jax approached and showed her the picture, along with the message back to Dane that read: *Proof enough for you?*

The picture looked better than Laci expected. They looked... natural.

Was that fondness in Jordan's gaze? With a tug of his lips into the faintest of smiles? If she didn't know any better, she'd have thought they were a real couple about to deliver a sweet peck in greeting. She inwardly scolded herself for getting carried away.

"That'll do?" Jordan asked.

"Hopefully," Jax answered. "We'll see how he takes it. Thanks for helping."

Jordan's eyes lingered on Laci. "Sure thing."

She searched his gaze, wondering if he had more to say. He was a difficult person to read.

"Let me know if you need anything else," he said.

"Okay," she replied, a little breathless at the offer.

With a curt nod, he proceeded to the bus. She watched him until he was out of sight. Did he mean that she could come to him again if this didn't work? Surely, he was just being polite.

"Ready to go?" Jax asked.

She nodded. "Yeah, I think so."



Laci wiped the last bit of mascara from under her eye, preparing her face for her skincare then bed. After the match, she'd thrown together a pasta dinner, watched a bit of Netflix, and settled in for the night while doing her best to forget about Jordan.

She had never been so drawn to someone the way she was to him. He was barely friendly. But the way he looked at her... she couldn't shake it. Logically, she knew he was faking. That he was trying to look at her like a boyfriend would, but the way it made her feel...that was real.

Her phone dinged. With a sigh, she saw it was another message from Dane. She'd blocked the account but was unsurprised to see he'd created a new one and followed her from there. His message, featuring a screenshot of her brother's response, read: *Nice try. I saw you come home alone.*

"Fuck," she said under her breath.

What was it going to take for this guy to leave her alone? She had asked a family friend who worked in the police force about it, but he said since Dane had not actually done anything to her besides make her uneasy, there was nothing they could do. Even though he'd followed her home, he hadn't fully trespassed, and therefore, they couldn't charge him with anything.

An idea came to her.

She searched for Jordan Frawley on Instagram and found his page right away since he was verified. Perhaps, if she and Jordan carried on the charade a bit more convincingly, it would scare Dane off. All Jordan's posts were Stanmore related, but what stuck out to her was that the follow button said follow *back*. He already followed her. She pressed the button and returned the favor. Then, she tapped to send him a message.

She wrote: *Sorry to keep bothering you. But...how serious was that offer to help me with anything else?*

With a deep, hopeful breath, she pressed send.

Chapter 5

“What do you *mean* you haven’t answered her yet?”

Jordan held his phone away from his ear at the screech in Ava’s voice. It had been less than twelve hours since he’d gotten a message from Laci on Instagram, and he was still unsure how to answer. He’d let it stew and tried to paint to clear his head, but once again, his hands had a mind of their own and they painted Laci; this time with the whole canvas in blues, from deep navy to powder blue, covering all the different colors of the sky.

“I told you, I don’t know how to answer,” he said, putting his sister on speaker. “I can’t be her bodyguard. If this prick won’t leave her alone, she needs to get the police involved.”

“You know as well as I do they can’t do fuck all unless he hurts her,” Ava said.

He frowned as his chest tightened at the idea of any harm coming to Laci. He shook his head. “I just...I don’t know what she even means. What am I meant to do?”

“You can’t know that unless you fucking talk to her, knobhead.”

He huffed. “It’s not that simple.”

“J,” Ava sighed. “I know she’s special to you, in a way...but —”

“It’s more than that. She’s the person I’ve had inside my head since I was...I dunno, six? Before I can even remember.”

“I know, I know. But—can’t you forget about that for a while and help her out?”

He tapped the end of his paintbrush against his leg. “What she needs is protection. There are services she can—”

“But she’s asking you,” Ava cut him off. “And besides, maybe you could...get to know her so she’s more than just a picture in your head.”

He leaned back and sighed, staring at his painting while he mulled over the suggestion. Truthfully, he’d be thrilled to get to know Laci better. But this wasn’t how he wanted it to go. She was only seeking him out to deceive a persistent fan not because she was actually interested in him, Jordan. If they were going to get to know each other, he wanted it to be genuine. Continuing a pretense would only lead to him getting hurt, he was sure of it.

“I know enough people,” he muttered.

“Oh, is that so, mister I-only-go-out-half-an-hour-every-week- with-the-same-ten-lads-I-see-every-fucking-day?”

“Fuck off, Ava.”

“Answer her message.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Have you got anything better to do?”

“That’s not a reason to—”

“Answer her message then.”

“Ava—”

“Answer the fucking message, J, or I’ll reach clear through this receiver and choke you to death.”

“Fine!”

He snatched his phone, extra noisily to grate on Ava’s ears in retaliation, and pulled up his Instagram. He opened the message for what had to be the one-hundredth time and looked at the words Laci had written. *Sorry to keep bothering you. But...how serious was that offer to help me with anything else?*

He blanked. “What do I say?”

“Just say you meant it and ask what she needs. It may be as simple as another photo.”

“You’re right. That’s probably all it is,” he agreed, and began typing a reply.

“What are you saying?” Ava asked after a moment of silence.

“What you told me to say.”

“No, like what are the exact words you’re using? Read it aloud.”

Rolling his eyes, he read what he had. “You’re not a bother, and I was quite serious. What can I help you with?”

“Hm,” Ava said. “Are you sure you want to sound like a cashier?”

“I’m hanging up.”

“Don’t! I’m only trying to help!”

“What should I say then?”

“Make the question more casual. Like, ‘Did you need another picture or something?’ That way if that’s the case, it will take the pressure off her.”

He backspaced and typed what Ava suggested. He had to agree it was more conversational, something Ava was better at than he was.

“What are you saying?” she asked again.

“What you said.”

“In those exact words?”

“Yes.”

“Well, don’t do that! You wanna sound like yourself.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Ava!” he cried.

“Sorry!” she replied. “I’m sorry. Look, say it however you want, just don’t hang up on me.”

“You’re on thin fucking ice.”

“Noted.”

He used Ava’s words anyway and read it back to her. With her validation, he pressed send. He started to apologize for taking so long to reply, but Ava discouraged that, saying it made him look too eager. He was more open to that sort of feedback than comments about sounding like he was in customer service. The last thing he wanted was to push a boundary with Laci.

“What do you think she...”

Jordan didn’t hear the last part of Ava’s question because a gray text bubble appeared with three blinking dots. Laci, wherever she was, was writing back that instant.

“Fucking shit!” Jordan shouted and hurled his phone clear across the room. It rocketed into a blank canvas on an easel, making everything clatter to the floor.

He took a moment to catch his breath and ignored the faint sounds of Ava’s protest coming from the speaker. Inwardly, he scolded himself. He and Laci had interacted in person. Why was the thought of a message making him nervous? Was it the intimacy of it? After all, this was an interaction no one else could see, even if he was giving Ava the play-by-play. Suddenly, he wished he wasn’t.

As he slowly made his way over to his phone, Ava’s voice got clearer and clearer. “Fucking Christ, J, if anything’s happened to you...you’d better be dead, or I’ll kill you!”

Ignoring her still, he turned the phone—screen miraculously uncracked—and looked at the message.

There. From Laci. It said: *Could we meet for a coffee and talk?*

He nearly threw his phone again.

“I’m here,” he finally said to Ava.

“Did something happen?” she asked.

“She’s asked me to coffee,” he told her.

Ava paused. “What? Like a date?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“Are you gonna go?”

“Of course, I am. We’ve come this far, haven’t we?”

“What are you gonna say?”

He spoke as he typed. “Sure. When and where?”

“Oh, that’s good. Casual and to the point.”

“How long are you gonna keep analyzing this like we’re at a slumber party and some dickhead named Chad is texting you?”

Ava sucked her teeth. “First of all, his name was Eric. And second, you men are quite cryptic in your texts, so they need to be examined by the council.”

He rolled his eyes. When he looked at the screen again, the dots reappeared, and he just barely refrained from a second

throwing incident. The bubble appeared with the text inside:
How about this afternoon? Two at Coffeeify?

He checked his watch. That was in a couple hours. It gave him time to get the paint off his hands and change his clothes. Coffeeify was walkable as well. He sent a quick thumbs-up and relayed as much to Ava, who agreed with the simplicity of it. A little heart appeared under his thumbs-up, which Ava explained meant that Laci had liked it.

“Are you excited?” Ava asked.

“I...” he paused. “I dunno, it’s all a bit strange.”

His heart danced a jig at the prospect of meeting up with Laci, but his head reminded him it was under unfortunate circumstances, something he wouldn’t wish on anyone.



“Good afternoon!” a bright-eyed barista said, so sunnily that Jordan drew back from her. “How can I Coffeeify your day?”

He blinked. “Uh...just a medium black coffee, thank you.”

“Sorry, sir,” she replied, that plastered smile on her face making her look more and more like a deranged Barbie doll. “We don’t carry medium, only bean sprout or full bean.”

He scowled at her, regretting that he agreed to this. He’d seen Coffeeify when he walked to the shops to get his

groceries, but he'd never been inside since he preferred to make his coffee at home. Now he remembered why.

“Whichever is bigger,” he said.

“Full bean it is!” she chirped. “Will you be enjoying it here or taking your Coffeeify goodness with you to—”

“Put it in a to-go cup,” he cut across her.

She didn't even flinch. “Certainly, sir. Do you have a Coffeeify-Your-Day-Everyday-Rewards Card?”

He bit back a groan. “No.”

“Would you like to sign up? We offer—”

“No, thanks, can I just pay?”

“Of course, sir.” She beamed. “That'll be four pound fifty.”

He dropped some cash, told her to keep the change because he thought surely she must be doing this against her will, and found an empty table. He checked his watch. It was only five minutes to two, but his heart skipped a beat anyway.

What if Laci didn't show?

Unlikely, since she was the one who arranged it, but the thought made his stomach turn. He picked at the pink paint peeling off the table.

The door opened with that obnoxious twinkle of a bell over it and Laci walked in. God, she looked beautiful in her cream sweater dress and boots. She went right over to the counter where the cheerful barista was still smiling.

“Good afternoon, Laci!” she said. “How can I Coffeeify your day?”

“I’d love a full bean chai latte,” Laci answered with equal enthusiasm. She dug around inside her purse and found a plastic card, which she handed to the barista. When she flipped her hair out of her face, Jordan almost choked on the sip of coffee he was taking. “Here’s my rewards card. And I’d like it in a to-go cup, please.”

“Coming right up!”

She scribbled Laci’s name across a cup and got started. Jordan drummed his fingers along the side of his cup, willing Laci to look his way. When she did, he took a deep breath. Had she gotten prettier since he saw her the night before? Maybe it was because she was no longer wearing a fucking Chelsea shirt.

“Jordan, hi,” she said sweetly, making her way over to his table.

He stood up as she approached and cleared his throat. “Hey.”

“Thanks for coming,” she said. “You’re awfully kind.”

“I dunno about that,” he replied, dropping his gaze to the table as they sat, hoping she didn’t notice his cheeks had warmed.

“I do. You’ve been more than accommodating about a situation that is not your fault, and I’m afraid I’ve got to ask even more of you.”

He looked up, meeting her eyes again. “Have you?”

She nodded, her lips tightening into a grim line. “I, uh...this might sound completely mad, but—the whole pretending to be my boyfriend thing...would you mind maybe—carrying it on?”

He drew in a deep breath. Did he mind? Not at all. Did it worry him? Abso-fucking-lutely. This was a one-way ticket to Hurt Feelings Station, and that wasn't a train he was eager to board.

She must have sensed his hesitation because she said, “It would only be for a few months. I'm leaving for the States in the summer, so we'd only need to pretend until then.”

As it was early October, that left the winter and spring to get through. That was a lot of time to pretend. Not that it would be pretend in Jordan's case, but he couldn't exactly tell her that. Though he hardly felt he could refuse, especially with the way she was looking at him, all soft desperation behind her baby blues.

“I know it seems—drastic, I suppose,” she went on. “But, this Dane person is becoming more and more persistent. He knows where I live, and I'm not too proud to admit that I'm a bit frightened.”

“He what?” Jordan shook his head. “How'd he find out where you live?”

“He followed us after the pub,” she explained, glancing at her hands. “I had no idea, but when we didn't kiss goodnight

or anything, he made it clear he wasn't convinced, not by the photo after the match either."

"I see."

This seemed like a lot to try and convince one person, but Jordan *was* concerned that Dane knew where Laci lived. There was no way that would end well, especially if she dealt with it alone. Plus, the arrangement would be temporary. Maybe with an end in sight, he would be able to keep his feelings in check. But even so...

His thoughts were interrupted when the manager appeared at the table, which Jordan gleaned because he was dressed in a button-down instead of an apron, but it still had the shop's logo on the chest with his name, Kenny, stitched underneath. He set Laci's coffee in front of her and then began gesturing at her. Jordan's brow furrowed though Laci did not appear confused at all. She was smiling.

"Thank you," she said while also motioning with her hands. Jordan connected the dots—it was sign language. Laci continued, "I'm so happy everything went well. And your wife is feeling alright?"

Kenny nodded and signed some more.

"That's lovely," Laci replied. "Congratulations to you both."

Kenny made the thank you sign in return, then he nodded, patted Laci's shoulder, and went to help the barista behind the counter.

"You know sign language?" Jordan questioned, amazed.

“Yeah, the whole family learned it when we realized Tate—the brother you didn’t meet—was deaf,” she said, and she sipped the latte with a satisfied hum. “That’s why I get my coffee here. The whole staff is fluent in sign language. Kenny’s hugely generous to the deaf community, so I bring him business whenever I can. Plus, he and his wife just had their first baby, so they need all the help they can get.”

Jordan wondered if it was possible for someone’s heart to turn to mush and flutter at the same time because he was certain that’s what his was doing. This woman was not only stunning but kind as well? Kind enough to patronize a coffee shop purely out of love for her brother and a desire to help a community. How could he turn her down in her hour of need?

“So—what’s with the service?” he asked.

“Oh, the card and all that?” she clarified, and he nodded. “His wife’s American. He loves how they do customer service over there.”

“That explains it.”

Before she could respond Kenny came back over, talked to Laci again, but this time he pointed to Jordan.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I should have introduced you,” Laci said, getting to her feet, and Jordan joined her. “Jordan, this is Kenny.” They shook hands. “Kenny, this is Jordan. He’s my...”

She shot him an anxious glance. He thought of her kind heart and frightened eyes. He also thought of Ava, years ago, crumpled up on the floor because law enforcement failed her. He couldn't let Laci face Dane alone.

“Boyfriend,” Jordan said.

A slow smile parted her gorgeous pink lips and erased any doubts he had. She turned back to Kenny and signed, “Boyfriend.”

Kenny's jaw dropped, but he grinned and waved his hands emphatically before he gave Laci a hug. He shook Jordan's hand again, and Laci pulled out her phone.

“Would you mind taking our picture, Ken?” she asked.

He nodded and took the phone from her outstretched hand. He motioned for them to stand closer together and then signed something Jordan didn't understand. Whatever it was made Laci blush and glance at the floor before meeting Jordan's gaze again.

“He says you should give me a kiss,” she explained.

“Oh,” he said, feeling the color drain from his face. What were the ground rules here? “Uh...is on the cheek alright?”

“Yes, fine,” she said with a smile.

Jordan gulped as he looked at Laci's cheek, but he had to act fast if he wanted to avoid suspicion. He hugged her from behind, bent at the waist, and pressed his lips to her warm, soft, beautiful skin. He felt her grin as she leaned into him. The snap from the phone camera let him know he could stand

straight again. He hated it. When he stepped away, he even felt a tingle around his mouth signaling how badly he wanted more. Kenny handed Laci's phone back to her. She thanked him, and he congratulated them.

As they sat back down, she turned the screen so Jordan could see. He couldn't help but smile at how precious she looked, eyes closed, a soft grin on her lips, and her hand holding his. If he didn't know any better, they looked like a real couple.

"Would you like me to send it to you?" she asked. "So you can post it too."

He wrinkled his nose. He didn't post anything personal. "You think I should?"

"I think it'll be more convincing if we announce it together. Not right now, but a bit later today. That way Dane won't get any ideas about showing up here."

"If you think it's best, that's what we'll do."

She slid her phone across the table, unlocked. Her wallpaper was a photo she must have taken at the match the previous day. It was of her, her brothers, and a pretty Black girl that must have been a girlfriend to one of them. "Here, enter your number."

Still recovering from how touching he found her closeness to her family, he scrolled over to her contacts and added himself. She texted him the picture immediately.

"I hate to start a relationship and run, but I've got a meeting this afternoon to prep for a TV spot this week," she said. "I'll

text you later so we can work out the details of this... arrangement.”

He couldn't hold back a chuckle. “Very well.”

She reached across the table, took his hand, and squeezed. His insides felt like they dropped into an incinerator.

“Thank you for doing this,” she said. “Really.”

He tried to clear his throat but it came out as more of a wheeze. “Yeah, no...no problem.”

“See you later, then?”

“Later, yes.”

She got to her feet, crossed around the table, and kissed his cheek. Somehow, that was better than him kissing her cheek. He wondered what she might do if he reached out, took her face in his hands, and claimed her mouth with his. He pushed that thought away. If he was going to protect his heart, he couldn't use this as an excuse to act on every impulse.

When she was gone, he reached up to touch his face where her lips had graced it and found his skin flushed and prickling. He looked at the picture again.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered.

He grabbed his coffee and returned to the counter. The barista grinned.

“That, uh—fuckity save coffee day reward thing—”

“The Coffeeify-Your-Day-Everyday-Rewards Card?” she asked.

“That,” he said. “I’ll have one.”

She blinked, her smile faltering for the first time. “Really?”

“Yes.”

The smile came back. “Right away, sir.”



Back in his studio, Jordan added in some shadows to the Laci in Blue painting when he got his first text from her. It let him know that she had posted the photo, and he had her permission to do the same. Making a note to post before he went to bed, he pulled up her page first. There was the photo, already with several thousand likes and comments. She had even tagged him. He chuckled as he read the caption: *F*ck a soft launch*

Chapter 6

For the first time in his career, Jordan was late to training.

His teammates had shared their shock at his announcement in the comments on his Instagram post. So many DMs and texts had come through that he had to turn his phone off. Even turning it on silent didn't stop the screen from lighting up every two seconds. He hadn't minded ignoring it because he was hardly on the damn thing anyway. It just threw a wrench into reaching out to ask Laci when they could see each other again. But ignoring his prying teammates took precedence. Plus, he was almost finished with his painting of Laci in Blue.

With a sigh, he entered the locker room.

As soon as he came through the door, he was met with a dozen wolf whistles and jeers. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

“Well, well, well, if it isn't Romeo,” Hector Rizo, a young midfielder from Colombia, joked. Jordan affectionately

referred to him as “a walking shot of espresso” as it was the only apt description of his energy level.

“Fuck off, Rizo,” Jordan replied. “So I’ve got a girlfriend. What’s the big deal?”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were seeing her?” Luka, a Croatian left back whose tackles were some of the best Jordan had seen, asked.

“A man’s entitled to keep his business to himself, isn’t he?” Jordan said. “We don’t need to get all fucking—group therapy about it.”

“But, dude, it’s Laci Miller,” Israel Etefu Amare, an Ethiopian national and one of the finest center backs Jordan had the pleasure of working with, added. “She’s like—”

A sound from the other end of the locker room cut him off. It came from Peter O’Riley, a forward, and a prick in Jordan’s opinion. O’Riley had caused more than enough problems last season when the club signed Ethan Knight because O’Riley had wanted to play in the number nine position. This year he still wore a number eleven on his shirt, but the coaching staff was working with him as a sort of false nine. Whether or not that was because of their faith in Peter’s ability or the fact that they hadn’t been able to sign a proper striker to replace Ethan during the transfer window remained to be seen. The sound he’d made was unmistakably mooing.

Jordan stiffened as he heard it, followed by the snickering of Peter and his henchman both on and off the pitch, Devon Scully. Jordan’s frown sapped the lighthearted mood from the

locker room in an instant, all eyes flicking between him and Peter.

Stomach roiling with rage, Jordan approached his least favorite teammate. The smirk on Peter's face faltered only a moment before he reinstated it.

“What was that?” Jordan growled.

Peter scoffed and glanced around the room. The rest of the team averted their eyes. “Oh, come off it. You've all seen her.”

“Seen what?” Jordan pressed, drawing himself to his full height.

Peter took a small step back. “Look, no offense, Frawley, but she's massive. It's disgusti—”

Jordan rammed his forehead right into Peter's nose. Peter dropped to the floor, clutching his face and groaning. Devon knelt to help him, but Jordan faced the rest of the room.

“Anyone else have something to say?” he challenged.

They all shook their heads silently.

“Good.”

With Devon's assistance, Peter sat up and pulled his hand away from his face to examine it for blood, but it was clean. “Fucking hell, Frawley! What's the matter with you?”

“Mock her again, and you'll get worse.”

“You could've broken my nose!”

“Believe me, O’Riley, if I wanted to break it, I would have.”

Coach Warren yanked open his office door and emerged. His typical jovial nature was replaced with a frown as he glanced between his downed forward and his goalkeeper.

“What happened?” Coach demanded.

No doubt he was reluctant to have more problems among the team after the animosity between Peter and Ethan last season, but Jordan didn’t feel the least bit sorry. No one would ever disrespect Laci in his presence.

“O’Riley can’t keep his fucking mouth shut about my girlfriend,” Jordan said.

“He headbutted me!” Peter cried as he scrambled to his feet.

“I was setting a boundary.”

Peter looked at Jordan, incredulous, while Coach Warren pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“Alright,” Coach said. “Peter, best keep your opinions on other people’s partners to yourself. Jordan, you’re the captain. You know better than to resort to violence.”

“Didn’t resort, it was my first instinct actually,” Jordan admitted freely. “Anyone else with something disparaging to say can expect the same.”

“Jordan—”

“I’ve given everyone fair warning. That’s the best I can do, gaffer.”

“Are you fucking joking?” Peter protested as he rounded on Coach Warren. “You’re the manager, you’ve got to do something!”

“I’m not a schoolteacher, O’Riley, you’re adults,” Coach Warren replied. “Keep things professional, and there won’t be any more problems. Right?”

He met Jordan’s gaze. Jordan nodded. Then he looked at Peter, who huffed, turned on his heel, and stalked over to his locker and snatched his shirt from the kit boy. Coach Warren leaned closer to Jordan.

“Did he deserve it?”

“Yes, Coach.”

“Thought so.”

Jordan bit back a chuckle.

Coach Warren cleared his throat and addressed the room. “Alright, lads, get dressed, get on the pitch, and get warmed up, then we’ll play first team versus second team.”

A murmur of agreement went through them. On their way out to the pitch, Peter tried to shoulder past Jordan, but he saw it coming and moved out of the way. Peter’s momentum took him right into the back of Luka, who shrugged him off and proceeded out of the tunnel.

“I’m gonna get so many shots past you, Frawley,” Peter said.

“I don’t recommend trying that,” Jordan replied.

“Why? Afraid you’re not up to the task?”

“No, because we’re on the same team, you fucking knob.”



After training, Jordan recovered in the weight room alone by walking on the treadmill to work out the soreness in his knees. He switched on the television and checked his watch. Right on time for Laci’s spot on some daytime interview show. He found the correct channel as the jazzy intro music played and the hostesses introduced themselves as Robin and Kat. They sat on a tan couch while Laci sat opposite them on an obnoxiously pink armchair. The crowd applauded before quieting as Robin spoke.

“We are back, and we are live with one of my favorite people. The beautiful, sweet, and lovely, Laci Miller!”

The crowd clapped again, and Laci waved to them. Jordan’s mouth quirked up into a soft smile at how cute she was.

“Welcome, Laci,” Kat said.

“Thank you for having me,” Laci replied with a polite nod.

Jordan liked her makeup, bright, gold, glittery eyeshadow with graphic liner made her blue eyes pop, and the soft pink lipstick was subdued but flattering. She looked beautiful every time he saw her, but he appreciated the work that went into creating such a look.

“So, we’ve got to address the elephant in the room,” Kat went on. “Your new man! How in the world did you come to be in a relationship with Jordan Frawley?”

Laci’s cheeks flushed adorably as she grinned. “We met through his sister actually. The introduction was simple, but he asked me to dinner, and the rest is history.”

“How did you keep it quiet for so long?” Robin asked.

“Well, he’s quite a private person,” Laci answered. Jordan shook his head and smiled at what a cool liar she was. “But once we decided we were official and exclusive, it felt like the right time to make it public.”

“I thought it might have been interest from a jealous ex or something juicy,” Robin joked, turning her lips into a mock pout.

Laci shrugged. “It’s an interesting theory, but without any exes, I’m afraid it’s not possible.”

Robin and Kat exchanged a look and their sculpted eyebrows rose.

“No exes?” Kat questioned.

Laci shook her head. “Nope. Jordan is my first and only boyfriend.”

Jordan slammed the off button on the treadmill so he could safely stop walking, his knees be damned. He studied Laci's face as she answered more questions, trying to discern how much truth there was to that. The bit about his sister was rooted in honesty, and she had no reason to lie about not having had a boyfriend before.

While they gushed on the show about the flowers he'd sent her for good luck (her favorite, pink peonies, which he only knew from following her on social media for so long), Jordan's mind raced. If it was true that this was her first relationship, he felt horrible that it was fake.

He frowned. How was it possible that at her age and with her good looks, she'd never had a boyfriend? What else had she not experienced? And most importantly, why hadn't she told him?



Laci returned to her dressing room to a plethora of notifications on her phone, the most interesting being a single text from Jordan, which she opened.

Jordan: *We need to talk tonight. Can I come to yours around seven?*

Her brow furrowed. Was something wrong?

Laci: *Sure*

She didn't know what else to say, so she left it at that, gathered her flowers, and headed home. She wondered why Jordan had bothered sending her flowers. This was a fake relationship after all. He didn't need to do gestures like that. It worked out though since the producers saw it and mentioned it to Robin and Kat, so Laci got to gush a bit. And she really was flattered. He'd done his research.

But if Jordan was coming over, she wanted to make sure her house was in order, starting with putting the gorgeous peonies in a vase. They looked especially beautiful on her marble kitchen island. She finished putting the last of her dishes in the dishwasher as the doorbell rang. She pressed the start button and hurried to answer the door, flinging it open.

There stood Jordan, looking absurdly handsome in jeans and a cable-knit jumper. His dark hair curled around his brows, making him look like a nineties heartthrob, especially when he ran a hand through it, and it flopped right back into place. Laci swallowed, but her mouth was suddenly dry.

"Hi," she said.

"I, uh, brought dinner." He held up the bag in his hand. "Hope you like sushi."

"Love it," she told him. "Come in."

He stepped over the threshold. Laci resisted the urge to check the street and see if Dane was lurking and would see Jordan come in. The promise of sushi made her stomach rumble. And her mind was still running wild with speculations on what Jordan needed to talk about.

“Thank you for the flowers by the way,” she said, nodding toward them while he unpacked the takeaway bag. “That was really thoughtful.”

“Well, if I’m gonna be your fake boyfriend, I’m not doing it half-arsed,” he replied, a hint of a smile on his lips.

“Still,” she giggled. “You didn’t have to.”

“Wanted to.” He shrugged and met her gaze. She smiled softly at him, then he cleared his throat. “I wasn’t sure what kind of sushi you like so I got a bit of everything.”

Remembering herself, Laci went to the cabinet to grab them some plates. “Oh, that’s perfect. I love trying new things. We can sort of sample it all.”

A beat of silence passed between them that made the small clink of her plates hitting the countertops sound like a clap of thunder. Luckily, Jordan spoke first so she didn’t have to scramble for a way to break the tension.

“Y’know, it occurred to me today as I watched the show, how little we know about each other,” he said. “I reckon there will be more questions going forward. We should—sort that out. D’you agree?”

She was surprised she heard the question with how distracted she was by the warmth in his stunning brown eyes. She blinked.

“Um. Yes. I do. We should definitely know more about each other.”

She followed his hands—those large, strong hands—as he placed a couple of pieces of sushi onto her plate.

“But I feel like you’ve got an unfair advantage,” she said.

“How’s that?”

“I put so much of my life online—like the peonies. But the only things I know about you is that you’re Scottish, play for Stanmore, and you’ve got a sister called Ava.”

“Alright.” He placed her chopsticks neatly on the side of her plate and slid them toward her. “Ask me anything.”

She locked eyes with him again. “Anything?”

“If I don’t want to answer, I’ll let you know.”

Her mind went blank. These last few days, she’d been thinking nonstop about the things she wanted to ask him. Now that the moment had arrived, she couldn’t remember any of them. She took a roll of sushi into her mouth. She chewed and cursed herself for not jotting a list down in her notes app like she had for Britt. She decided to start with the obvious.

“Okay, easy one. What part of Scotland are you from?”

“Glasgow,” he said.

“That’s right—Rangers fan.”

“See, you knew something else about me.”

She chuckled. “That’s hardly significant.”

“Ask me something significant then.”

That stumped her. She paused, popping another piece of sushi into her mouth. Then, she remembered a question she read in a dating advice article. “When’s the last time you cried?”

He blinked and shook his head. “What?”

“You can’t question the questions.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know when I cried last?”

“How do you *not* know?”

“Am I meant to keep a record somewhere?”

“Just answer,” she insisted through a giggle.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair again. “Fuck...I dunno. I guess when my parents separated.”

Her heart sank. “Oh—gosh, I’m sorry. When did that happen?”

“Fifteen years ago, I think.”

She nearly choked on her next bite. “What? You haven’t cried in *fifteen years*?”

“Not a tear,” he said nonchalantly as he took a bite of his own. After he swallowed, he looked at her. “When’s the last time you cried?”

“Last night, when I watched *Titanic*. And don’t you dare judge me. It’s my favorite film and it’s a masterpiece.”

He shrugged again. “Can’t judge you, I’ve never seen it.”

She gaped at him. “You’ve...you’ve never seen *Titanic*?”

“I don’t like sad films, and that title isn’t exactly promising.”

“But it’s a masterpiece!”

“So you’ve said.”

“It’s one of the greatest love stories of all time!”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

She set down her chopsticks. “One of these days, I’ll get you to watch it.”

“We can watch it right now if that’s what you want.”

She blinked and her shoulders relaxed. She had braced herself for pushback or resistance, but lo and behold, he’d readily agreed to her wishes.

“Really?” she asked quietly.

“Sure, if it means that much to you.” He held her gaze and shot her a crooked smile. “What kind of fake boyfriend would I be if I didn’t indulge you a little?”

“True.” She chuckled and returned to her sushi.

“Can I ask you something?” he said after a beat.

She nodded.

“Was it true what you said about never having had a boyfriend before?” he asked.

She sucked in a sharp breath, which brought several grains of rice into her windpipe. Coughing, she pounded on her chest

to try and clear it. Jordan swore and jumped up to pat her back. Eyes watering, she looked at him.

“You...” She wheezed. “You heard that?”

“Aye. And once I did, I hardly heard anything after.”

She gulped some water, searching her muddled mind for something to say. It wasn't easy to explain that, at twenty-six, she'd never been seriously involved with anyone. She'd never even come close. It was embarrassing and confusing, and the one thing she remained insecure about in her life.

“Well, to answer your question, yes, it's true,” she said. “I've been on dates but nothing ever happened past one or two. And I know it's difficult with my schedule and everything, but there's just...I dunno, never been the right person.”

Her eyes found his, and she half expected to find amusement there or some kind of judgment, but all she saw was genuine interest.

“I can't say I understand,” he said. “But it's not like it's terribly unusual.”

“Feels like it is,” she muttered. “Everyone around me is meeting someone or getting engaged or having a baby. And I'm just...alone.”

“That, I understand. One of my teammates has got a five-month-old son. Another just got married. A third got engaged. And Ethan Knight, while not my teammate anymore, he's engaged, and I've got an invite to that wedding already.”

“Ugh, wedding invites. That plus one is the worst reminder of loneliness, isn’t it?”

His face shifted into an expression she couldn’t read. His mouth turned down, and he dropped his gaze as his brows knit together over his eyes. He drummed his fingers on the countertop.

“It’s not so bad, being alone,” he said. “I have been for a long time. I get hurt a lot less.”

“But if you isolate yourself, you shut out any chance of real intimacy.”

He raised his brows at her, but she didn’t regret what she said. The chance of being loved as well as desired was the reason she kept putting herself out there, which admittedly had to stop since she was in this pretend relationship with Jordan.

“Intimacy, eh?” he said.

“Yes,” she said, letting out a breath. When had she started holding it?

“That brings me to my next question.”

“Which is?”

“How do we prove we have it?”

Chapter 7

Laci's spine went ramrod straight. Part of her was scared of the question, and another part was glad he asked it. They hadn't confirmed the boundaries of this fake relationship, or what they would do to convince the world it was real, and he'd kicked down the door to that conversation. She kept her eyes trained on the counter as she scrambled for an answer.

"Well...first off, we'll need to spend loads of time together," she began. "Coming over with takeaway should be normal. That way if Dane is looking, he'll see at some point."

Jordan hoisted an eyebrow. "You sure you're not just in this for the takeaway?"

She shrugged. "Call it an added bonus."

He chuckled.

"Second, we'll need to make some public appearances," she went on. "Or at least go out where paps might see us together."

"And what is allowed in those scenarios?"

“Hand holding is a must,” she said. “And putting our arms around each other if we’re sitting down. A kiss or two could be good to make it convincing.”

“You have done some kissing at least, haven’t you?”

She shot him an annoyed look. “Of course I have.”

“Just checking.”

“So, while you’re here, we just...Netflix and chill I guess?”

It was his turn to choke. He swallowed down his sushi roll with a loud gulp and watery eyes. “What?”

“Netflix and chill. Y’know, hang out, watch movies.” She looked at him curiously. “Does it mean something else to footballers?”

“It means something else to everyone,” he said. He cleared his throat. “Okay, don’t take offense to this, but you’re fucking hot.”

“Why would I take offense? I am hot.”

“Right. So there’s no way that no one’s ever asked you to Netflix and chill before.”

Her cheeks warmed. “I mean, they *have*, but I’ve never agreed to it because I don’t think going to someone’s house to watch telly is a suitable first date.”

“In most cases, it isn’t. Because it doesn’t mean watching a movie, it means there’s a movie on while you shag on the sofa.”

If she got any hotter, she'd start sweating. In fact, her shirt clung to her back as she dropped her gaze.

“Oh. Well, I've certainly never done that before.”

“Which bit?”

“Any of it.”

She knew she shouldn't be embarrassed, but she couldn't stop the shame that crept up the back of her neck. Her heart pounded so much that she wondered if he could hear it. She wished he would say something. Anything to move past the admission.

“You've never...”

“Nope,” she confirmed.

“You're a—”

“Virgin, yes.”

He paused for a long beat. “How?”

She snapped her gaze to his face. “I...well...I haven't had the opportunity.”

“That doesn't make any sense.”

“Why not? I said I haven't had a boyfriend before.”

“You don't have to be in a relationship to have sex,” he scoffed.

“Look, I know that I *could* have sex if I wanted to,” she said. “And while I'm not necessarily waiting for the perfect

someone, I do want to be with someone I like and I'm attracted to—and trust.”

“Aye, well, that’s a good standard,” he said, and it was genuine.

“So, where does that leave us?” she asked.

“It takes Netflix and chill off the table, that’s for sure,” he said.

For some reason, that stung. She decided to cover it up with a joke, referencing his earlier comment. “Even though I’m hot?”

He cracked a smile. “Hot as you are, we shouldn’t. This is fake.”

“We don’t have to be in a relationship to have sex,” she reminded him in her best attempt at his accent.

“This is different, you’ve never done it before.”

“Why does it matter so much to you?” she asked earnestly. “What I have and haven’t done.”

“Because I feel a bit like I’m robbing you of an experience by being your fake boyfriend when you’ve never had a real one,” he answered. “I don’t want to do that with anything else. And sex—the first time, especially—you deserve to share that with someone you really care about.”

She paused to mull that over. Even the few times she had been involved with someone, there had never been so many mixed signals. Jordan was so stiff around her like he was at a

family gathering and someone brought up politics. But he had sent her flowers, her favorite flowers, when he didn't have to. In the same breath, he told her she was hot, but that he wouldn't be having sex with her. He wasn't even going to try. The reasoning, of course, was their false relationship, but even so, she was confused.

“Yes...” she said, trailing off after she swallowed some sushi. “And someone who cares about me.”

He looked away, his eyes tracked the pattern of her backslash. “Aye, that too.”

She gazed at him, searching his face, but he was stoic. Clearing her throat, she popped her last piece of sushi in her mouth. He turned to her again.

“So, shall we continue our game of twenty questions?”

She clapped a hand over her mouth until she swallowed. Giggling, she met his gaze. “I suppose after all that, there's very little we won't answer, is there?”

“Fire away,” he said with a chuckle.



Laci was still thinking about Jordan the next day as Amy, her makeup artist, swept eyeshadow over her lid. They'd had a successful night banging out the way they wanted this fake

relationship to work and got to know each other a little better. She learned that his father had owned a small grocery shop in Glasgow, but it went out of business, and his family had struggled. His favorite movie was *Moonstruck*, which surprised her. His only explanation had been a shrug and that he “liked watching Cher slap the shit out of Nicholas Cage.” He had also shared that he’d been single for almost seven years. He hadn’t gone into detail about why his last relationship ended. Apparently, they were just in different places.

But the only thing she couldn’t stop thinking about was that they wouldn’t be having sex. She had been okay with it at first, but the more she got to know Jordan, the less pleased she was with that decision. He made her laugh, and he was smarter than she thought a footballer might be. Not to mention, he was fit as fuck, which she already knew about him, but having seen his personality, she found herself craving him.

“Open your eyes for me, love,” Amy said, and Laci obeyed, looking straight ahead. “Looks nice and even.”

Laci stole a look at herself in the mirror. She looked like a sexy Christmas elf with the way the red and green shimmered in the vanity lights. The shoot was for holiday lingerie, so it was fitting.

“Hold on while I grab your lipstick,” Amy said, and she went to speak to a model a few chairs down.

Laci checked her phone and smiled because there was a text from Jordan.

Jordan: *Hey, I've got an event next weekend. A gala Ethan Knight's putting together for his new charity. Wanna go?*

Laci: *Hell yeah*

Laci: *What's the dress code?*

Jordan: *Black tie. So you can be fancy as fuck.*

Laci: *Physically, I'm in a makeup chair, but spiritually, I'm already shopping.*

Jordan: *Sounds about right.*

Jordan: *Good luck on your shoot.*

Laci: *Good luck at training!*

“Oi, it's lipstick time,” Amy said, drawing Laci's gaze away from her phone. “Ready to look like a blow-up doll?”

Laci chuckled. “Always.”



Jordan came over for dinner for the fourth time that week. She was cleaning the last bit of green glitter off her eye when the doorbell rang. This time, he brought Chinese food. Her stomach rumbled at the smell of the sesame chicken. The food wasn't all he had though. In his other hand, he held a tan box with a brown ribbon securing it, not small enough to be jewelry but not large enough to be, say, an air fryer. As he set everything down on the counter, she raised a curious brow.

“What’s that?” she asked, nodding toward the mystery box.

“Something for you,” he said. “Now that you’re my fake girlfriend, you’ll need to come to more matches.”

She picked it up and shook it. “It doesn’t sound like tickets. Unless you’re horrid like Jax and wrap everyone’s gifts up so it takes ages to actually see what they are.”

“No,” he said through a chuckle. “It’s not tickets. I’ll get you those as the matches come. It’s something else.”

“What is it then?”

“Open it up and see.”

She untied the ribbon with vigor, letting it fall away as she pried off the top. Once that was done, she realized it was a garment. She laughed. It was a jersey. Not just any jersey though. It was his jersey, with Frawley printed across the top and his number, 1, on the back.

“You got me a pink one!”

“Well, I thought you’d prefer it to the black.”

“I definitely do!” She held it up to her body. “How’s it look?”

His eyes went soft, and a small smile appeared on his lips. “Good.”

“Would it be unlucky if I put it on now?”

“No, wear it whenever you want.”

Without thinking, she pulled her hoodie over her head, leaving her in joggers and a sports bra. When she tugged the

jersey on and straightened it out, she looked at Jordan again. He was frozen. He held a spoonful of rice over a plate but made no move to deposit it. His eyes had missile lock on Laci as his mouth hung open.

“What?” she asked.

“You—” he began, but it came out a couple octaves higher than his usual speaking voice. He paused and cleared his throat. “You could’ve gone to the loo or something.”

“Oh, please. I won’t be banished from my own kitchen in my own house.” Her eyes flicked between the rice and his face. “Are you gonna put that down or...”

With a snap of his wrist, he turned the spoon and let the rice fall onto the plate.

“By the way, for the gala, I’ve got some dress options coming in from Emilia Wickstead next week. Want to help me pick one?”

“Depends. Does that mean you’ll keep getting undressed in front of me?”

“Oh my God! I was in a bra and joggers! Besides, you follow me on Instagram, you’ve seen me in less.”

“In pictures!”

“And? That’s different how?”

“Yes, it’s diff—” He set down the container of rice and frowned at her. “Look, we agreed on certain terms, right?”

“Right.”

“If you keep taking your shirt off in front of me, they’re going to be harder to honor.”

“Hey. There were no temptation clauses in our agreement. I can do whatever I want.”

He laughed, throwing his head back. “Temptation clauses?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, putting a hand on her hip. “Besides, I look as good with this shirt on as I did with it off.”

His eyes roved over her and something like hunger flashed behind them. “I’ll concede that point. You look fucking fantastic in my kit.”

She felt her cheeks get warm. “Thank you.”

He slid the plate toward her. “Ready to eat?”

“Oh, God, yes.”

Plates in hand, they made their way over to the couch. Laci already had *Love Island* queued up. To his credit, Jordan made no complaints. He even asked her questions about it. She hadn’t made him watch *Titanic* yet since her last viewing was so recent, but it made her hopeful that he wouldn’t write off her interests as “too girly” and, therefore, lower quality. He approached her choice with genuine curiosity.

When it ended, he cleaned up. As she watched him do dishes, she had the sudden urge to go over and wrap her arms around his waist and rest her head against his back. She appreciated him so much for all of this.

A notification on her phone drew her from her thoughts of domesticity.

Dane, once again, flooding her Instagram inbox with half a dozen photos. All of them were Jordan arriving at her home and leaving within a couple hours. It wasn't every instance but enough to show he was watching. He added a message: *So when is it my turn? I can take the nights he's not there.*

"Shit..." she said under her breath.

"What?" Jordan asked.

"Dane's been watching," she told him. "But he's seeing you leave. He knows you aren't staying over."

He turned off the sink. "So?"

"So he doesn't think we're serious."

"Let me see."

She handed over her phone, and he looked at the messages. It occurred to her that she must trust him if she was surrendering the device that contained her whole life, not to mention an embarrassing number of selfies. But she wasn't worried. As expected, he handed it right back without looking at anything else.

"I haven't got an extra set of clothes with me," he said.

Her heart swelled like a balloon. "You would want to stay the night?"

"Sure, you've got a guest room, don't you?"

Her shoulders slumped. "I do."

“I can stay there. I can sleep in my pants for one night.”

She heaved a sigh and leaned against the counter, her legs suddenly weak. It was stupid to ask this of him, and clearly, they weren't pulling anything off. If Jordan did stay the night, what did it matter? None of it convinced Dane. He was watching them too closely. He still thought he had a shot, and unfortunately for Laci, the relationship wasn't real. She locked her phone and slid it into her pocket.

“What now?” Jordan asked, moving to stand in front of her.

“I feel like maybe we should cut our losses,” she said. “He's clearly not giving up, and I don't want you to feel obligated.”

“No one's putting a gun to my head,” he replied. “I want to help.”

She held his gaze. “Are you sure? Who knows what he might do next?”

He stepped closer and took her face in his hands. For a moment, she stopped breathing. Then, she was breathing hard, her chest heaving. He was so close. Was he going to kiss her? If pouting was all it took, she could do that more often. But he stopped inches away.

“I'm a keeper, Laci,” he said, an edge to his voice she hadn't heard before. “I'm good at protecting what's mine.”

Chapter 8

The touch of Laci's hand against his drew Jordan's gaze from the window to her stunning face. She was glammed up and glowing. The gentle smile on her lips made his leg stop bouncing after a ride spent with his teeth on edge.

"Ready?" she asked.

He stole a glance over her shoulder and his breath hitched. Camera flashes illuminated the red carpet in the light of dusk. Several of his teammates were lined up, dates on their arms, and adjusting their ties and cuff links. Among them were Ethan's Chelsea teammates plus managers and staff from both clubs. Even Craig, the Stanmore kit boy, was there with a woman Jordan could only assume was his mother given her age. It was the first public appearance for him and Laci, and he was already considering slipping out the car door and bolting.

Not because of Laci. He loved spending time with her, but this would be their first attempt at showing the world, not just Dane, that they were together.

It hadn't occurred to him until he had arrived at her house and was surprised at how accustomed he'd grown to the sight of her front door. Two weeks ago, he never thought he'd meet Laci Miller much less act as her boyfriend or be invited to pick her up at home. Yet there he was in a tailored tux rapping his knuckles against her door. It swung open, and she had appeared, stunning in a light pink A-line gown with a floral lace appliqué. She almost came to his shoulders in the ankle-breaker heels she had on, but she did not appear to be struggling with balance. She smiled at him, and Jordan could hardly breathe.

"You look beautiful," was all he had managed to say.

Now, an hour later and a hundred times more anxious, he held her gaze and nodded. "Ready as I'll ever be."

She gave his hand a squeeze. He swore ten thousand bolts of electricity went up his arm. "Let's go, then."

The driver opened the door. Jordan took a deep breath and stepped out to help Laci and to ensure the driver didn't close her skirt in the door. Together, they walked up to the line in front of the red carpet.

"Nervous?" he asked and immediately wanted to kick himself.

"A bit," she said, and he lifted a quizzical eyebrow. "I'm comfortable enough in front of a camera. But usually, I'm alone."

"Making it challenging for you, am I?"

“Afraid so. I know my angles and my good side, but I’ve only seen you photographed in action shots.”

“Well, have a look. Tell me which side is better.”

He stared straight ahead stoically. She reached up with her hand and took his chin, turning his face left and right, then her brows knit together as she contemplated.

“I don’t think you’ve got a bad side,” she said. “You’re almost perfectly symmetrical, which works out well since my bad side is my left and—”

“Stop right there, I’ll not allow you to disparage any part of your face,” he said. Before he could stop himself, he added, “You want perfect? Look in the fucking mirror.”

She blinked, and her mouth parted. “I—”

“Next!” the PR director called while ushering them forward before Laci could say anything. She held Laci back. “Mr. Frawley alone first, please.”

Jordan glowered at her. “She comes with me, or I’m walking away right fucking now.”

The PR director heaved a sigh. “Fine.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” Laci said under her breath as she followed Jordan into the fray of photographers.

“Yes, I did,” he replied. “You’re my girlfriend. The whole point of bringing you here was to show you off.”

He refused to allow anyone to disrespect her. He pulled her into his side as they faced the cameras together. Laci was a

natural, shifting her gaze slightly so each photographer got a straight-on shot. Also, she posed her arm differently—first with a hand on her hip, then hanging at her side, then placing her palm on Jordan’s chest. His arm tightened around her waist.

“You alright?” she asked, looking up at him.

He faced her. “Great.”

“Give us a kiss!” a photographer cried, and several more shouted their agreement.

“Showtime,” Laci whispered.

Jordan grunted in response. He wanted to kiss Laci, but he knew kissing her would make things so much harder on his heart. He was both excited for and dreading it. But it wasn’t about him. He needed to protect her. Feeling as if he were moving in slow motion, he brought his hand up to cup Laci’s face, bent at the waist, and kissed her.

The moment his lips touched hers, the cameras and noise melted away. Visions of country lanes, folk musicians, sweeping gowns, and fresh flowers danced behind his eyes. Her mouth was warm and familiar as if he had been kissing her for years—centuries even.

They were the only two people in the world. The surge of emotion threatened to overwhelm him, so he pulled away. And he had no idea how much time had passed.

Laci met his gaze. Her eyes only half focused as she caught her breath. He searched her face for any indication that she felt

what he had, but he couldn't tell nor could he ask her there. He willed his heart to slow, and he cleared his throat, straightening.

“Got your shot?” he asked the paps.

They gave a murmur of affirmation.

Satisfied, and desperate to be away from the hullabaloo, he took Laci's hand and led her inside the venue. He needed a drink if he was going to shake off the feeling of her lips. His were still tingling.

The venue was an old warehouse that had been converted into a ballroom complete with a dance floor, tables, and a full bar. It was stunning. Soft, warm lights glowed on each table from the centerpieces. The place settings had name cards written in neat calligraphy. A string quartet played quietly on stage as the guests mingled and got drinks. An usher led Laci and Jordan to their seats, but they only stayed long enough for Laci to set down her bag before they headed to the bar. Jordan ordered a whiskey and Laci, a cosmopolitan.

“You're really a cosmo girl?” Jordan asked, hoping he sounded teasing so they could put the kiss behind them.

“Absolutely,” she said. “I'll take pretty much any opportunity to feel like Carrie Bradshaw.”

He chuckled. “I've never watched that either.”

“Jordan Frawley, we've got some serious catching up to do on your television and film education.”

She took a sip, and he watched her. It was absurd to feel jealous of a cocktail glass, and yet he was. That glass got to feel her lips. Fuck, that kiss was never going to leave his mind. Already, it was driving him crazy to think he might spend the entire evening yearning for more of her mouth.

Over her shoulder, he spied the hosts, Ethan and Billie, coming over to greet them.

“Duty calls,” he said quietly to Laci.

“Jordan!” Ethan said brightly in his rich southern American accent. It was as strong as Jordan remembered. He offered his hand, which Jordan shook. “How are you, man?”

“Good,” Jordan said. “Season’s off to a shit start, but we’ve come back from worse. I see you’re doing well at Chelsea.”

“Heck yeah, it’s great,” Ethan replied. “But even better is wedding planning.”

Jordan looked over at Billie, who had already introduced herself to Laci and was showing off her engagement ring. Laci cooed and asked about the cut and the metal she had for the setting, along with other specifics.

Jordan was glad to see Billie safe and happy. The last time he saw her, he’d bodied her boss off her and helped her press charges against him. Jordan was still helping with that investigation seeing as her boss, at the time, was the head of the legal department at Stanmore, and she had exposed him for hacking phones and emails to prevent specific players from transferring.

Ethan spoke again as if reading Jordan's mind. "I wanted to let you know how much I appreciate the way you helped Billie out of that jam with Tony. I can't thank you enough for keeping her safe."

"Fuck, Knight, you don't have to thank me for that." Jordan dropped his gaze to the floor. "I was only being decent."

"It's more than that. Who knows what might have happened if you didn't show up..."

"I mean, someone else might have—"

Jordan didn't get to finish that thought before the women joined them.

"What are you two whispering about over here?" Billie asked.

"Nothing," Jordan answered. "You alright, Billie?"

She held his gaze and nodded. "Yeah, I'm wonderful. Thank you."

He cleared his throat. "Ethan, have you met Laci?"

"Not officially," Ethan said, turning to smile at her. "I'm Ethan Knight. Real nice to meet you."

"You as well," Laci replied. "Gosh, you're friendly. You always seem to be on the telly, but it's good to know it's in person too."

"Laci's a Chelsea supporter," Jordan added.

"Hey, you're especially welcome now," Ethan joked.

“Good to know,” Laci chuckled, then shot Jordan a starry look. “But now that I’m with Jordan, my loyalties have shifted.”

His chest grew heavy at the look in her eyes, and he pushed down the desire to kiss her again. It took more willpower than he thought.

“That’s sweeter than apple pie, right there,” Ethan said.

Laci grinned. “I may have fallen out of favor, but could I bother you for an autograph? My brothers will kill me if I don’t.”

“I’d be happy to,” Ethan said and followed her to their table.

Jordan watched them go, and Billie remained behind. She caught Jordan’s eye.

“Laci seems nice,” she said.

“She is,” he replied.

“I was a bit shocked to hear about you two. Happened rather fast, didn’t it?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Says the woman who’s engaged to a man she met less than a year ago.”

She smirked and shook her head. “It seems mad, but we’ve known each other longer than that.”

“How do you mean?”

“It’s difficult to explain, but we really are soulmates.”

“Soulmates?”

“Yes. When I met Ethan, it felt like I’d met him before. It didn’t matter that he was from halfway across the world. I knew him. That’s why I’ve got his ring on my finger now. Maybe you’ve found that with Laci?”

Jordan failed to hold back a scoff. “No offense, Billie, but I don’t believe in soulmates. Even if I did, it’d be way too fucking soon to be saying that.”

“Believe what you want.” She shrugged.

He considered her words while remembering the night he met Laci when she asked if they’d met before. Never mind that her face had been in his mind since before he could remember. Then there was when they kissed outside and the things he saw. They sort of felt like memories. He shook his head. It was ridiculous. The stuff of fairy tales and novels.

“I don’t believe in it,” he said, half to himself.

“Are you sure?” She looked him over, her brows drawn up with skepticism. “Because I worked at Stanmore for years and never once saw you in a relationship.”

“I hadn’t found the right person.”

“In other words, a soulmate?”

“No... someone I was compatible with and that I liked.”

“Until Laci?”

“Right. But that doesn’t make us soulmates.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “If you say so.”

“I do.”

Billie shot him a knowing look before getting a glass of wine. By the time she took her first sip, Ethan and Laci were back.

“Darlin’, we better get ready to go on stage,” Ethan said. “You ready?”

She nodded. “So ready.”

“We’ll see y’all after,” he said to Jordan and Laci and then they were gone.

Jordan and Laci went to their seats. He pulled hers out for her and let her get settled before he took his chair to her left. Their table included Hector, Israel, Luka, Artem, and their dates who locked onto Laci. Before Jordan knew it, the women were all asking her for selfies. She happily posed with them until Ethan and Billie took the stage.

“Hi, everyone,” Ethan began. “In case you didn’t know, I’m Ethan Knight, and this is my beautiful fiancée, Billie Axton. We’ve invited you all here for a cause that’s very dear to my heart. You see, not many people know this, but my mother struggled with a heroin addiction. It was a fight she lost when I was ten years old.”

Jordan blinked. He had never heard this story before. He knew Ethan’s parents were not in the picture, and that his grandmother had raised him, but that? Jordan was even more surprised Ethan was so kind.

“Luckily, I had a great coach,” Ethan went on. “One day, when my mother forgot to pick me up from school, Larry

Lowe extended an offer to join the boys on the soccer field—or football pitch as y’all say over here—” The crowd chuckled. “And I found the passion for a game that would eventually become my career.

“Unfortunately, Coach Larry passed away earlier this year. To honor him, Billie and I started the Larry Lowe Foundation so other children of addicted or absent parents can have the chance to pursue their passions whether that’s sports, or theater, or music. The money we raise tonight will go toward paying for gear, instruments, or even rides to practice. Whatever their needs are, we will accommodate. I got very lucky to have someone believe in me the way Coach Larry did. All I want is to give that belief back and help kids like me, who might never have an opportunity without it. Thank you.”

Billie stepped forward to explain how the silent auction would work, and Laci turned watery eyes on Jordan.

“Did you know all that?” she asked, her lip wobbling.

“I had no idea,” he answered, startled at the sight of her emotion. “Are you crying?”

“No,” she whispered as she snatched her napkin to dab at her eyes. “It’s just really sweet.”

Jordan’s chest felt like melted chocolate on a hot day. Laci didn’t know Ethan, and she had been so moved by his story that it brought her to tears. There was something to be said for having a heart that tender. He admired it.

He gently rubbed her back.

She rested her head on his shoulder. “We’ve got to bid on something.”

“We will.”

Jordan had already resigned himself to the idea of spending money because Ethan was a friend, but after hearing the cause, he was sold. And he adored that Laci wanted to contribute as well. He shouldn’t have been too surprised, considering the way she supported Tate even when her brother was not around.

Bidding began after dinner. Jordan bid on a trip to the Maldives. Laci insisted on bidding on something as well, so she bid on a lot of the vintage jewelry that Billie’s old flatmate and best friend, Tessa Gallagher, had provided through a community of antique enthusiasts. The jewelry was gorgeous, all diamonds and sapphires, and he imagined Laci would look quite regal in them.

Tessa spotted Laci eyeing the jewels.

“They’re from around 1913,” she explained, and her Northern Irish accent took Jordan by surprise. “They belonged to the last earl of the Colfield family before he died in the First World War.”

“Wow,” Laci said. “How funny, my parents own the Colfield estate now.”

Tessa blinked. “They do?”

“Yes, my grandfather bought it in the fifties when the Colfields could no longer support it. Maybe I can return these

beauties to their proper home.”

Jordan looked on, an odd tug in his gut. Colfield sounded familiar, but he couldn't place where he'd heard it before. Almost like he'd seen a movie with that name ages ago but never rewatched it. He was certain that wasn't it. It felt too real, which started to concern him.

“Does your family own the farms and everything?” Tessa asked.

“No, just the house and the land it sits on,” Laci said. “The farms were bought out by the tenants or sold.”

“Have they made many changes to the house?”

“Only those necessary for modern living like updated plumbing, electric, Wi-Fi, and things like that. It's in pristine condition. We have all the old furniture and art too.”

“Would it be possible to let my group come and see it?” Tessa asked eagerly. “Not to be an imposition or anything, but —”

“Not at all,” Laci said with a charming smile. “My parents allow tours every once in a while, and they have professionals over all the time to appraise things. I'll ask them if they'd be open, but I'm certain they'll say yes.”

“I think you're my new best friend.” Tessa beamed. “No matter what you bid, you're getting these jewels.”

“I'll still be generous.”

Finally, a DJ took the stage to set the mood with Eric Clapton's "Wonderful Tonight." Laci finished bidding and stretched her hand toward Jordan, who was still reeling at having learned her family had enough money to own and uphold an old manor house of English aristocracy. He clearly had a lot more to learn about his fake girlfriend.

"You owe me a slow dance," she said.

"For what?" he returned with a smirk.

"You're my date. That's what we do."

He couldn't deny her anything, so he let her lead him onto the dance floor. Their arms fell naturally into place around each other, and they swayed to the slow beat of the song. She looked up at him and a smile threatened the corners of her mouth. She was so beautiful, so sweet. And her body pressed against his as they danced sent a rush of desire between his legs. He was more than tempted to kiss her again.

"Happy?" he asked instead.

"Perfectly." Resting her head on his shoulder, she softly sang along.

Chapter 9

“Check it out, we’re trending,” Laci said.

“We are?” Jordan asked.

“Yeah, under hashtag couple goals.”

She scrolled through her Instagram feed and explore page where her kiss with Jordan was plastered across celebrity gossip pages and sports pages alike. She offered her phone to him so he could see. The brush of his fingers over hers as he took it sent a shiver up her spine. She watched him for a moment, drinking in the sight of his chiseled jaw in the morning light before becoming engrossed in the movement of his large hands as he scrolled. Her stomach did a flip at the memory of that hand on her back the night before.

“I want to renegotiate the terms of our agreement,” Laci said, straightening her spine to appear more confident than she felt.

Jordan’s eyes flicked from the phone to her, but he said nothing. The grinder whirred behind the Coffeeify counter, the

other patrons chattered, and soft jazz music warbled from the speakers. All of it sounded louder with nothing coming from her fake boyfriend. He handed her phone back and sipped his coffee.

“Which terms specifically?” he asked.

“About the physical stuff,” she said.

“Such as?”

Despite her face burning, she refused to look away. “You know.”

“Sex?”

“Exactly.” She let out a huff. “Did you really have to embarrass me about it?”

“Maybe not, but you’re so damn cute when you blush.”

That made her drop her gaze to the table. Jordan said things like that fairly often even when they were alone with nothing to prove to anyone. But he wouldn’t so much as hold her hand unless they were in public. She had no idea what to make of it. Was he attracted to her? Was he only performing? Despite their best efforts, the lines were blurred.

“I think we should have it,” she said bluntly. “Sex, that is.”

She looked him in the eyes again, prepared to see shock, but that wasn’t what she found. There was initial surprise, of course, quickly followed by...desire? His gaze darkened, and the corner of his mouth kicked up into a smirk.

“Really?” he said.

She nodded. “I think...well, we like each other well enough, don't we?”

“Aye.”

“And you've mentioned before that you think I'm hot.”

“I do.”

“Likewise,” she said with a meaningful look. She took a sip of her coffee, grateful she'd chosen an iced latte this morning. This conversation had her skin warmed up like she'd taken a steaming bath. “And—I trust you. Plus, without the pressure of it being real, it might make things easier.”

A shadow crossed over his face before he shook his head. “I still don't think it's a good idea.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “The way you kissed me last night...I know you want more too. No one's that good an actor.”

That kiss was on her mind for hours after it had happened. When they went back to her place, she had considered having the same discussion with him then, but had suppressed it, thinking she was caught up in the moment. However, the more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that he was as desperate for her as she was for him. The nudge she felt from his trousers during their slow dance gave him away.

Jordan sipped his coffee. He swallowed slowly and licked his lips—those gorgeous, bearded lips. Now that she had felt them against her skin, she wanted them everywhere.

“I think that’s all the more reason we shouldn’t,” he finally said.

Her brow furrowed. “How d’you reckon?”

“Because we don’t need to complicate this,” he said. “Feelings could get involved—real feelings with the potential to hurt us both. And you’re leaving in a few months.”

For the first time, she cursed the job in New York. It was a runway show for a new designer who only designed for plus-size people. Laci’s agent of three years, BB, had jumped on the opportunity. It was a campaign with shows in Los Angeles, Boston, Atlanta, and Chicago, and it included events and photo shoots as well.

“Hold on,” she said. “You’re not saying you don’t want to.”

He leaned over the table closer to her. “I couldn’t say that. I’d be a fucking liar.”

“So if this weren’t fake, you’d be all over me?”

“It’s got to be fake,” he said. “I don’t believe in relationships. But if I did, you’d be just the sort of person I’d like to have one with.”

She blinked and shook her head. “You don’t *believe* in relationships?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

“Because I once thought my parents were the two people most in love in the world—until they weren’t. Something

always changes.”

That sort of explained some things for Laci, like the way he said he preferred being alone or that the last time he cried was when his parents split up. But plenty of people from divorced parents went on to have successful marriages. Not to mention the people that never got divorced like her parents. The tone of his voice did not imply this was up for debate though.

“That’s just sad,” she said.

“Sad?” He chuckled.

“I can’t speak to your experience, but I don’t think witnessing one failed relationship justifies ruling out the whole institution. It’s a sad way to view the world, looking at people and only seeing their potential to hurt you.”

He didn’t answer right away. He also couldn’t hold her gaze. For a long moment, he simply drummed his fingers on the table. “It’s also the safe way.”

“No, it isn’t. People, whether they’re your family, friends, or partner, are always going to hurt you. Or let you down. Or upset you. They’re not perfect. They’ll make mistakes. It’s our job to love them anyway.”

He stared at her. She searched his face, but his expression was stony. She feared that she had pissed him off and he would get to his feet and storm out, leaving her to handle Dane on her own. Thankfully, he remained in his seat.

“We can’t all have your optimism,” he said with a hint of melancholy on his face as he glanced out the window to his

left. “I did once. I’ve tried to make it work, but...I just can’t. I’m nearly thirty, and I’ve never...”

She reached across the table and took his hand. “Never what?”

“I’ve never...” He sighed and shook his hand, pulling his hand back toward himself. “Never mind. How’d we even get here?”

“You don’t want to sleep with me,” she reminded him.

“I sure as fuck never said that.”

“Exactly, which is how we got here.”

“Laci,” he said with a stern look.

“If it’s convincing you need, I’m more than capable.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I won’t cave.”

“I think you will.”

“Try all you want,” he scoffed. “I won’t.”

“Challenge accepted.”



That night, Jordan stayed at his place. He claimed it was because he had training in the morning, but Laci suspected he was worried that the resolve he was so sure he had would falter. Unfortunately, it also meant she could no longer justify

ignoring her mother's calls. Pam Miller had been calling and texting incessantly since Laci dropped the "big reveal," but she wasn't sure how to explain the situation. After talking it over with Jordan and her brothers (who were sworn to secrecy), she decided she would tell her mother the same thing the rest of the world was hearing.

"I'm confused," Pam said. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"I dunno, Mum, it was...it wasn't official or anything, and I didn't want to get your hopes up or—"

"All this time, I could have been planning parties for the two of you!"

Laci rolled her eyes, grateful this was not a FaceTime call. "Mum. We don't want any parties. We wanted to be lowkey until we were sure about each other."

"And you're sure now?"

"Yeah, pretty sure," Laci said, smiling to herself.

"So..." Pam said, drawing out the word for dramatic effect. "Tell me about him. Is he as serious as he seems on the telly? Shouting at his defenders and all that? He doesn't shout at you, does he?"

"First, all goalkeepers shout at their defenders," Laci said with a giggle. "Second, no, he doesn't shout at me. In fact, he's rather kind, and funny. Quite protective, but I don't mind that too much. Plus, he's—"

"Proper fit."

“Yeah, that too,” Laci chuckled.

She bit her lip, memories swimming to the surface of all the matches she watched with her mother on the couch at the estate, eating ice cream and sipping hot cocoa as they giggled about the athletes on the screen. If there wasn't a match on, they picked a romcom, but the atmosphere was the same. Those were the times she really got to talk to her mother about what was going on in her life. It was also where Laci got her best advice. She missed it so much, she ached.

“I'm sorry I kept you out of the loop.”

“It's alright,” Pam replied. “I'm sure you'll make it up to me by bringing him to meet us.”

Laci could imagine the wicked grin on her mother's face. “He's got a busy schedule. As do I. I'm not sure when—”

“How about Christmas?”

“What if he's got plans with his family?”

“He probably doesn't yet, which is why I'm trying to get dibs on the two of you.”

Laci had dreamed of bringing someone home to meet her parents all her life. But she wasn't sure how she felt about it when the relationship was fake. She didn't like lying to them, and the thought of spending several days doing that made her feel a bit sick. Especially when she was certain there would be an ice cream and pajama moment.

“I'll speak to him about it,” she said.

Pam squealed with excitement on the other end of the phone. Laci giggled.

“I can’t wait!” Pam said. “First Tate and Britt, now you and Jordan. All that’s left is to get Jax settled.”

“Mum, no one is *settled*. We’re all starting—”

She didn’t finish that sentence because her phone dinged with a WhatsApp notification. As her mother rambled, Laci switched to speakerphone and opened the app. It was another message from Dane with a photo taken from the window behind her. It was a shot of her with her phone to her ear in the clothes she had on, Jordan’s kit and some bike shorts. He must have taken it seconds ago. The message read: *All alone tonight?*

She whipped around, half expecting to see Dane’s wild eyes staring back at her, but the window was empty. Was he ducking beneath her hedges? She turned her eyes to the sliding glass backdoor, but she found it also empty, which was a relief. She went over to ensure it was locked, which it was, so she snapped the curtain shut.

“Laci?” her mother said, drawing her attention again. “What was that? Are you there?”

“Uh, yeah, sorry, Mum,” Laci said. She looked toward the front door. A shadow moved in front of the long window to the left of it. She sucked in a quiet breath. “I’ll see about Christmas, must go.”

“Hold on, Laci—”

“Love you!”

She hung up before Pam could protest further. Her breath was shallow as she approached the front door. The deadbolt was upright, unlocked. The figure moved again, and Laci threw her body against the door as the person outside—undoubtedly Dane—did the same. The wood shook as he banged his fists against it. Holding firm, she turned the deadbolt. A heavier thump at the door startled her, and she stumbled backward, landing hard on her rear. Her phone slipped from her grasp and skidded across the floor.

Then he was in the side window staring at her. A sinister smile parted his lips. She watched as he mouthed her name at her. Her heart jackhammered against her ribcage. She scrambled back and with shaking hands, picked up her phone to call the police. As she did, she aimed her phone’s camera and snapped a photo for proof. She only got one before he turned tail and ran.

Eyes stinging as she caught her breath, she dialed 999.

Chapter 10

Jordan's laptop whirred to life, the only sound in his otherwise silent flat. He pulled up the YouTube page he'd bookmarked and clicked on the next video called British Sign Language Basics, Lesson Four. The instructor began by going over the things they'd learned in lessons one through three, so Jordan glanced over his notes. Not only was he learning something new, but he was also getting practice at drawing hands by sketching out the signs. It helped him feel more connected to it. Sometimes, during a lull in training, he practiced the motions under his gloves. It was slow going, but he was determined to get it right.

Before he could draw the first line of the new signs, his phone rang and Laci's name flashed on the screen.

“Hello?”

“Jordan!” she cried. He stiffened at the frantic sound of her voice. “Jordan, he's at my house! Dane, he—oh my, God! He was here!”

Jordan leaped to his feet. “What?”

“He was outside my window,” she wailed. “He took a picture of me in my kitchen. He knew I was alone and—oh, God, Jordan, he was here. He tried to come inside!”

His pulse quickened and he saw red. An image came to him of grabbing Dane’s slimy little face and slamming it into the nearest wall. Taking a moment to breathe, he focused on Laci. “Are you alright? Did he hurt you?”

“No, I took a picture and called the police,” she said. “They’re on the way, but...can you come over? Please?”

“I’ll be right there.”



Flashing red and blue lights greeted Jordan as he pulled his Range Rover onto Laci’s street. He couldn’t get right up to the house, so he turned the car off, barely getting it into park before he threw himself out, and jogged the rest of the way to her door. She stood on her front steps, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, with a police officer who took notes while she spoke. Jordan pushed past the other officers lingering on the street and opened the front gate.

“Jordan, thank God!” she cried when she spotted him, and threw herself into his arms.

“I’m here,” he replied, holding her tight.

She buried her face in his chest. “I was so scared.”

“You’re safe, angel. I’ve got you.” She nodded. Jordan met the gaze of the officer and frowned. “Did you find him?”

“Afraid not,” the officer replied. “We did a sweep of the street, but he was long gone by the time we arrived. We’ve got her statement and a neighbor’s. The photo should be enough for a restraining order.”

“Like that’ll do any good,” Jordan snapped. “He was ready to break into her fucking house. Laws aren’t fucking stopping him.”

“It’s the best we can do for now,” the officer said.

“That so?”

“I’m sorry, but the law is set up to ensure the accused is treated fairly, not to protect victims.”

“That’s justice, is it?”

“Jordan,” Laci said, finally lifting her face to look at him. “It’s alright. They’re doing the best they can.”

“It’s not fucking good enough,” he protested. He cupped her face in his hands. “Are you alright?”

She blinked. A tear escaped her eye and slid down her cheek, which he wiped away gently with his thumb. She nodded again. “I think so.”

“D’you have anywhere else you can stay, ma’am?” the officer said. “At your boyfriend’s place, maybe?”

“No,” Jordan blurted out, mortified at the idea of Laci seeing his studio. He cleared his throat when Laci and the officer looked at him with raised eyebrows. “It’s not—clean.”

“And I don’t want to be forced out of my house,” Laci said, dropping her questioning gaze and facing the officer instead.

He glanced between her and Jordan’s scowling face. “Perhaps we can have a patrol car come by every night this week. Might scare the guy off for a time.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Laci said.

The officer nodded. “Goodnight to you both.”

“Goodnight,” Laci said.

“Fuck off,” Jordan muttered.

She elbowed him, but he ignored it. When the officer reached his car, Jordan led Laci inside, his arm still securely wrapped around her shoulders. Rubbing her arm, he realized what she had on.

“You wear my kit around the house?”

“It’s comfy,” she said.

He pressed his lips to her forehead. “I like it.”

She was so adorable that he nearly forgot the reason he was there. But with a glance at the door, that tense look on her face returned, and he was reminded all too well.

“I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep tonight,” she said. “I—I’ll need to get blinds for those windows. D’you think they sell blinds on Amazon?”

“They’ve got most things on Amazon,” he replied. “You’ll need to measure your windows.”

She cast a nervous glance at them and shook her head before shrinking further into Jordan’s body. “I’ll wait.”

“Can I do anything for you?” he asked. “Make you a cuppa or something to eat?”

Food has always been the go-to comfort in his home growing up. If he came home from a tough day of training, his father always had a treat waiting for him, until the store went out of business. Regardless, Jordan always had a chocolate or something around to give him a pick-me-up.

“Tea would be lovely,” Laci said.

He walked her right to one of the barstools at her kitchen island and helped her onto the seat. She was shivering, so he pulled his hoodie over his head and offered it to her. She slipped it on, the sleeves flopping loosely over her hands, and took a deep breath.

“You smell nice,” she said.

“Thank you,” he replied, smiling.

She suddenly went rigid. “Is the door locked?”

His eyes shifted over and he saw that he had locked it behind them. “Yes, it’s locked.”

She let out a breath. “Good.”

While he put the kettle on, he racked his brain for some other way to comfort her. “D’you wanna watch *Titanic*?”

“No,” she said. “I can’t deal with that kind of stress tonight.”

“Don’t you know how it ends?”

“Well, yes, but I feel it differently every time.”

He bit back a laugh. “Alright. What will make you feel better?”

“I dunno...” she said. “You pick something. Make sure it’s low stakes, preferably with a soothing soundtrack.”

“Uh...*Pride and Prejudice*?”

“That’s perfect. I’ll put it on.”

She got up and started toward the living room, but came to a halt before she was out of the kitchen. She turned back around.

“On second thought, I’ll stay until the tea’s done,” she said.

His gaze softened. “Laci—”

“I don’t want to be alone,” she said. “At all.”

He nodded and got back to work on their tea. She was still too nervous to eat, but Jordan made popcorn anyway in case she got hungry later. Together, they went to the living room and plopped onto the couch. Jordan pulled up the movie, and as he did, Laci tucked herself under his arm, pressing into his side and resting her head on his chest.

“Is this alright?” she asked. “I know we aren’t for real dating, but I need—”

“I’ve got you,” he interrupted and lowered his arm around her. “I don’t mind.”

“Perfect. Lovely. Um, thank you.”

“Sure.”

He pressed play, and she eased into him, relaxing with every note of the soft piano music. Delicately, he ran his fingers through her blonde curls. He knew she was on edge, but he hoped she would sleep anyway.

“That feels nice,” she said.

“Is it making you tired?”

“Not really.”

He considered arguing that her eyelids were slowing down with every blink but decided against it. “That’s too bad. Some rest would do you some good.”

“Maybe,” she said with a shrug.

A beat passed between them, the movie filling the silence.

“Jordan?”

“Yeah?”

“You really are a good fake boyfriend.”

He chuckled. “I told you, I’m committed to the bit.”

He could have sworn he saw her lips turn up, but it was fleeting. “Thank you.”

“Of course, angel.”

“I like that, too. You calling me angel.”

“Good to know we have an approved endearment.”

She reached up and took hold of his free hand with one of hers and interlocked their fingers.

Her palm against his, her cheek on his chest, and her thigh touching his hip was the most contact there had ever been between them, and Jordan’s body was on fire. All these little embers were making a crackling blaze. He wanted more. He wanted to feel every soft curve beneath his hands and taste her skin. He wanted *her*.

He wouldn’t dream of acting on it when she was so vulnerable. But holy shit, a man could only resist for so long. Maybe he should reconsider his stance.

He shook his head.

It would be her first time. She deserved something special, *someone* special, not a fake boyfriend, no matter how good she thought he was at it.

It was going to be a very long few months.



For a moment, Jordan wished he would drown.

It would be easier than hearing another recap of the previous match. But if he held his breath long enough in the ice bath, perhaps the tingling would make him forget it.

He surrendered to his natural instinct to avoid self-destruction and surfaced. His face stung with the sudden increase in temperature, but that wasn't what made him start. Coach Warren stood in the doorway looking unusually grim.

“Fuck!” Jordan yelled. “Cough or something next time, Coach. Don't be lurking like a desperate pap.”

“Sorry,” Coach replied. “In my defense, you were underwater when I walked in.”

“Then shout.”

“Noted.”

Coach stepped closer to the tub, and Jordan saw an uncharacteristic weariness about the Stanmore manager. Coach Warren was generally an upbeat man with an optimistic outlook. Especially after they finished the last season as FA Cup champions and higher on the table than they had ever been before. Coach Warren's cheeks had had more color, his blue eyes had an extra sparkle, and even his limp seemed less exaggerated.

And then the new season began.

“Ten draws,” he said, pulling up a chair and taking a seat.

“I'm aware,” Jordan replied bitterly. He turned his eyes back to the ice floating on the surface of the water. He wasn't going to be able to leave it behind him after all.

“I've spoken to the staff,” Coach continued. “But I want to know what you think. You see the game closer than I do, and

you're the captain of this squad. So tell me. What are we doing wrong?"

Jordan's gaze slid over to his manager. "We need a new striker."

"The transfer window is closed until January," Coach Warren said, though Jordan already knew that. "What do we do until then?"

Jordan didn't answer for a long moment. He went over every play they ran in training and recalled how it worked on the pitch. The problem being that it hadn't worked at all. In that day's match, the goal they got was the result of a lucky header off a corner kick, and the joy of it was short-lived. Liverpool equalized in five minutes. Jordan could still see the ball whizz past him before he could move to block it. It was the story of their season.

"Fucking stupid," he muttered.

"Pardon?" Coach asked.

"Nothing," Jordan shook his head. "Look, the false nine could be a solid strategy, but we need more accuracy."

"So you think O'Riley's the problem?"

Jordan hesitated to answer that. He didn't like to speak poorly about his teammates though Peter had it coming more often than not. The guy was all ego. Not to mention, he was selfish, immature, and obnoxiously misogynistic as if he thought it was the football world of the fifties. Jordan

struggled to find his redeeming qualities, especially after the mooring incident.

“He’s not hopeless,” he said. “He needs to stop fucking around in training. He needs to take it seriously.”

“How do you mean?”

“He needs to get it through his thick skull that just because we haven’t got a proper striker doesn’t make him the star,” Jordan explained. “We’re a team. We were before Ethan Knight, and we’ve got to be after him.”

“You think we should build our teamwork?”

“We need goals, so if O’Riley’s gonna provide them, drill the fuck out of him. Make him work for his spot. As for the rest of us? Yes. If we can rely on each other, we’ll all feel a wee bit more confident stepping out onto the pitch.”

Coach nodded, his lips drawing into a tight line. “We can work with that.” He paused for a beat. “How’s your girlfriend, by the way? I heard there was an incident this week.”

Jordan rested his head against the back of the bath and heaved a sigh. He had been at Laci’s every night since Dane had shown up at her house. She hadn’t slept at all the first night so neither had he. The second, she dozed every half hour, so Jordan hadn’t slept at all. “She’s mostly fine. Still a bit shaken, but fine.”

“That’s good. You seemed a bit off today. I figured you were tired.”

Tired was the tip of the iceberg. It was exhaustion from being around Laci constantly and having to remind himself every five minutes that he was not actually her boyfriend. He, therefore, had no right to kiss her whenever he liked or hold her hand for no reason, which was difficult because she cuddled so close to him right up until she went to bed. He took the feeling of her body pressed to his into the guest bedroom and lay awake for hours trying to hold onto it.

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m a bit tired.”

Chapter 11

“The manager hosts the whole team for Guy Fawkes Day each year?” Laci asked as they approached Coach Warren’s front door.

“Aye,” Jordan answered. “He’s really into it. Something about the quality time with his sons.”

“Here I thought everyone used it as an excuse to get pissed and disturb the peace.”

“That’s the general idea.”

She chuckled, but when he cast a sidelong glance at her, he noticed her swallow as she wiped away some sweat beaded around her hairline despite the chilly November air.

“You alright?” he asked.

“Mhm, yeah,” she replied with a stiff nod. “Let’s, uh, get this going, I suppose.”

He raised a skeptical brow, but she refused to meet his gaze, so he didn’t press. He led her into the house where most of his

teammates and their partners were already gathered in the kitchen. Their chatter guided Jordan and Laci from the entryway. Hector was the first to come bounding over.

“Capitán!” he cried. “Glad you made it!”

He pulled Jordan into a hug, then welcomed Laci with a friendly kiss to her cheek. The others came over after him, but Jordan noticed one was missing.

“Where’s Osahar?” he questioned.

“He and Nadia had plans with her sister tonight, so he bailed,” Luka told him before taking a swig of his beer.

He passed them beers of their own and then Jordan made introductions, but most of them remembered Laci from the gala. There were new dates on the arms of Peter, Devon, and Kâmil, but they were sweet and all fans of Laci.

“I love your work!” Keeley, Peter’s date, said, taking Laci’s arm. “I saw that swimsuit shoot you did last summer, and you were gorgeous, babes.”

“Thank you,” Laci replied with a smile.

“Give me a fucking break,” Peter said, half under his breath.

Jordan scowled, especially when he saw the stung look on Laci’s face. She recovered quickly, and struck up another conversation with Keeley, but Jordan shot Peter a warning look. Peter didn’t meet his gaze.

Keeley wasn’t the only one interested in Laci.

“We didn’t get to speak much at the gala,” Larysa, Artem’s wife, said. “How did you two meet again?”

“Through my sister,” Jordan said, repeating Laci’s half-truth from her TV spot to keep things consistent.

Artem blinked. “You have a sister?”

“Yes,” Jordan said with a disbelieving scoff. He had to have talked to his teammates about Ava. She was his only friend outside of them. “Ava. I’ve told you about her.”

They exchanged blank looks and a few of them shook their heads.

“You’ve never mentioned her,” Luka said.

Jordan frowned, growing defensive. “I must have.”

Callum started to speak up, but Coach Warren walked in, his face bright and red with excitement. “Alright, lads, nearly time. I’ve got a show that’ll blow last year’s out of the water.”

Jordan heard Laci suck in a sharp breath but didn’t have time to question her, as Callum spoke up. “Have you ever heard Jordan mention his sister, gaffer?”

Coach Warren blinked a few times and spotted Jordan. “You’ve got a sister?”

“Yes!” Jordan said indignantly. “She’s in a band. I’ve got their wee photo in my locker!”

“We had no idea that was your sister, bro,” Hector said. “I thought you liked their music.”

A murmur of agreement went through the room. Jordan caught Laci's eye and scowled when he saw she was covering her mouth to stifle a giggle.

“Do I honestly strike you as the sort of person who listens to a band called Nifty Bitches?” Jordan retorted.

“I don't know, dude, your taste is your taste!” Hector put his hands up innocently.

“Fuck off, Rizo.”

“Any other siblings we should know about?” Coach Warren teased.

“Nope, just the one,” Jordan snapped.

“Okay, okay, enough,” Astrid, Fernando's fiancée and fellow model, interrupted. She and Laci had done a few swimsuit campaigns together, so their meeting at the gala was more of a reunion. “I want to know more about you two.”

Laci recovered with a breath. “What would you like to know?”

“How...” Astrid bit her lip. “How does it work between you? You're so different.”

Jordan knew he should have been offended, but he wasn't. He and Laci were different. Even standing there, they looked like opposites, him in a dark T-shirt, black leather jacket, and dark wash jeans, and her in a bright pink dress with matching heels. He fought the urge to let go of her hand by giving it a squeeze instead.

“Well,” Laci began. “I dunno. I suppose we balance each other out.”

“Yeah, but it’s almost too different,” Astrid said. “Jordan’s been at Stanmore nearly a decade and no one even knew he had a sister. Meanwhile, you had your tits out at the last photoshoot we did together.”

Jordan choked on his sip of beer and laughter went through the room.

“Oh, come off it. It’s not like you haven’t seen them,” Astrid said, rolling her eyes.

Jordan wheezed, hoping his teammates would credit his red face to choking and not the burning humiliation he felt the longer Astrid talked about Laci’s tits. Had he thought about them? Absolutely, he was only a man, but he hadn’t seen them in person. He couldn’t. How was he supposed to pretend that he had?

“I, uh...” His brain scrambled for what a boyfriend should say in this scenario. “I didn’t realize so many other people had seen them.”

Laci looked at him, wide-eyed. “You can’t see them. In the final product, that is. We only had to be topless for the shoot.”

“Trust me, Jordan,” Fernando said with a shake of his head. “From one model boyfriend to another, other people are gonna see some stuff, might as well get over it now.”

“Oi,” Astrid said, swatting his arm and wiggling her left hand in his face, her engagement ring glittering. “You’ve been

promoted from boyfriend, remember?”

“Of course, baby, how could I forget?”

They kissed through their sickening smiles, and Jordan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. He disguised any further disgust by taking a sip of his beer. Laci nudged him, and he bent down to put his ear closer to her mouth.

“Was that a cock up?” she whispered.

“Fuck if I know.”

“I feel like it was.”

“No one’s asking questions, so I think we’re good.”

She paused to chew her lip. “You really never talk about Ava with them?”

“Fuck off,” he returned playfully, and she laughed into her drink.

The rest of the evening went smoother. They had their story nailed down, so any general questions, they were able to give almost identical answers though Laci had warned Jordan not to sound overly rehearsed—whatever the fuck that meant.

When the sun was fully set, Coach Warren came in from the garden and clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention.

“Alright, lads,” he said like it was a pre-match pep talk. “The time has come. We’ve been prepping, planning, and working hard. It’s gonna be a night for the books. Let’s get out there and make it our best Guy Fawkes Night yet!”

They gathered their drinks and started for the back door. Jordan looked around, prepared to take Laci's hand and lead her outside with him to watch the display, but she was nowhere to be found. He scanned the room twice to be sure.

She wasn't there.

He watched the others trickle out to the garden and hung back while they chattered. When the room was empty, he glanced around once more, but still saw no sign of Laci.

Before he let himself panic, he walked into the hall. Perhaps she was in the loo. But it was vacant—the door stood open, and the light was switched off.

Maybe she needed a fresh drink. So he proceeded to the kitchen. But the area was similarly empty. His heart rate quickened with anger. *Fucking Peter*, he thought.

Should he call out for her? He didn't want to worry anyone else even if sirens were blaring inside his head. Taking a breath to steady himself, he did one last sweep of the first floor.

Nothing.

He'd never been to the second level of Coach Warren's house. So he stood at the bottom of the stairs, glaring up, warring with himself. Should he go up and search through the hosts' private rooms and risk the humiliation of being caught? Or should he go outside and look like an irresponsible boyfriend by asking for help?

He started to turn toward the back door when a pre-teen boy walked into his line of sight. Jordan whistled, and the boy turned his head. Jordan recognized him as one of Coach Warren's sons from one of the photos on the coach's desk.

"Have you seen a girl up there?" Jordan asked.

"A blonde girl?" the boy returned.

"Aye."

"In a pink dress?"

"Aye."

"Yeah, she went into Mum and Dad's room."

He pointed down the hall, and Jordan thundered up the stairs. The first firework screeched into the sky, exploding with a boom. The light made the back bedrooms glow for a moment. Jordan looked Coach Warren's son up and down.

"What're you doing up here?"

The kid held up a Nintendo. "Getting my Switch."

"The fireworks not entertaining enough?"

As if on cue, another bloomed across the sky.

The kid shrugged. "We do this every year."

Jordan snatched the device from the kid's grasp, ignoring his cry of protest. "Go outside and spend some fucking quality time with your dad."

"Geez, fine." The kid scoffed, and stomped down the stairs.

Jordan proceeded into the bedroom the Warren boy had indicated and tossed the Switch onto the bed. He didn't turn a light on in case anyone outside was looking, so it took his eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. He still didn't see any sign of Laci.

Another firework erupted outside, and that's when he heard a whimper, soft, feminine, and frightened, coming from the closet. Jordan pressed his ear against the door. He could hear her frantic breathing, and his heart twisted at her distress.

He slowly opened the door.

She started as another firework burst outside. She let out a squeak before retreating further into the wall. She huddled in the corner with her hands over her ears and her knees drawn into her chest. Even in the dark, he could see her trembling. It was worse than when Dane showed up at her house. This was definitely not because of Peter. Her eyes met his, and he saw the wetness in them.

"Jordan, I—oh!" She stopped short when another firework blew up, and she hid her face behind her knees.

He knelt in front of her, placing a gentle hand on her knee.

"Laci," he said. "I'm gonna sit next to you. Is that alright?"

She nodded. It took some maneuvering since Jordan's height put him right in the middle of all Coach Warren's hanging shirts. With a huff, he shoved them all to one side and took a seat beside his girlfriend.

Fake girlfriend, he reminded himself.

“What’s this about?” he asked gently.

To his heart’s jubilation, she scooted closer to him. He took it as an invitation to put his arm around her, and she came even closer until they were hip to hip. She still had her face buried amid her knees and elbows, but he didn’t mind. His main concern was how clammy her skin was. Sweat shone on the back of her neck, and her dress clung to her skin.

“I’ve had this fear since I was a child,” she admitted through a muffled voice. “I had this—”

Another firework. She winced, and he tightened his grip around her.

“I have this anxiety,” she said shakily. “Every time I heard the sound of a firework or gunfire I—”

The next firework had Jordan cursing the whole event. She shuddered, and her hand shot out, gripping his shirt so hard her knuckles went white. She swallowed, but it went down like bitter medicine judging by the grimace on her face.

“I don’t know why. I always feel like I’m burning.” She put her free hand on her chest, and he wondered if she could feel it now. He guessed she could, given how she was sweating and shaking. “Here in my chest. I get so hot it’s unbearable. No matter what I do, I can’t make it go away until I’m somewhere safe.”

“And a closet was your first choice?”

“It muffles the sound.”

Another bang resounded from outside, and she jumped, moving into Jordan's side.

"Not enough apparently," he said. "Is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

He swallowed. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Why'd you agree to come if you knew it'd scare you?"

He felt like an asshole for asking the question, but it wasn't like this was a serious obligation. There was no one there who would be intent on getting their photo.

"I thought your teammates might find it odd if I didn't come with you," she said. "I didn't want to rouse any suspicions."

"We could have come up with an excuse, Laci," he said. "You didn't have to put yourself through all this."

"We've gotta keep up the ruse somehow, don't we?"

He didn't have time to answer before another firework went off. She whimpered and buried her face in his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You don't have to stay with me. It's not like you signed up to comfort me through my irrational fears."

"Fuck that. If you need me, I'm here." He watched the corners of her mouth twitch, but the smile never came to fruition. He gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "I'm right here."

It didn't matter that they were fake. It didn't matter that the fear was unfounded. It didn't matter what it looked like for them to be away so long. All that mattered to Jordan was the woman in his arms. He would protect her from Dane, from fireworks, from anything. Because, despite his best efforts, she mattered to him.

Chapter 12

“I can’t believe you’ve dragged us to a bloody Stanmore match,” Jax complained as he took his seat to Laci’s right. “I feel like we’re cheating on Chelsea.”

“It’s a football club, Jax, not our family girlfriend,” Laci returned.

To her left, Tate rolled his eyes. “It’s a small sacrifice to make our sister feel safe. Be a good brother, Jax.”

She shot him a grateful smile and signed, “Thank you.”

Proudly sporting Jordan’s kit over a jumper, she took her seat as well. With Dane still on the loose, she didn’t feel comfortable going to a match alone. However, it was important that she went so that she didn’t appear afraid.

“You could have gotten seats at midfield at least,” Jax said, hunching his shoulders against the late November chill.

It was Laci’s turn to roll her eyes. “My boyfriend is the goalkeeper. I wanted to be near him.”

She got seats directly behind the goal in the first row. The view from midfield was ideal if you were interested in the game, but Laci's sole purpose was to see Jordan in action as up close as she could get. She didn't know what half he would be starting on, but she wasn't particular. She only wanted to get his perspective.

It turned out he was on the opposite side of the pitch for the first half, which Jax pointed out irritably. Laci had him to get refreshments since he was so uninterested, and he did, muttering to himself all the way up the stairs toward the concourse. Tate nudged his sister's arm.

"Are you doing okay?" he asked with a sincere look of worry.

"I think so," she sighed. "It was really scary when I saw Dane by the house, but Jordan was there so quickly. With time, I'm sure things will feel normal again."

"I know it's all pretend, but I'm glad Jordan makes you feel safe," Tate signed. "Have you told Mum and Dad about Dane?"

Laci shook her head. "I'm afraid they'll insist I come stay at the estate. But with work, it's not something I can do."

"I think they'll understand. Him being at your house was in the news. They may come across it and be hurt you didn't say anything."

"That's a very good point. I'll call them after the match. But I'm not telling them about me and Jordan's arrangement."

“Oh, gosh, no. That, they would never get.”

“Exactly.”

Jax returned with crisps and beers in hand. Laci was genuinely impressed he was able to carry it all. She thanked him, and they settled in for the first half.

Unfortunately, Stanmore conceded a penalty early on because Peter O’Riley yanked on a Wolverhampton player’s shirt as he came inside the box. Jordan wasn’t able to block the shot. Laci groaned along with the rest of the crowd. A chance didn’t come for Stanmore until the forty-minute mark when Hector Rizo fired off a rocket from fifteen yards out. The ball swished into the back of the net, and the Hive cheered, but not an uproar since an equalizer meant the game might end in yet another draw, but they went into halftime with a glimmer of hope.

At the start of the second half, Jordan took his place in the goal directly in front of Laci and her brothers. She couldn’t help it, she ogled him—his strong shoulders as he stretched, his hand nearly touching the crossbar when he reached up, the muscles of his back as his kit rippled across them, his backside—she chewed on her bottom lip.

“Nice view, isn’t it?” she said, half to herself.

Jax gaped at her. “Do you think I’m someone else?”

She swatted his arm. “Oh, come on.”

“Seriously, do I look like one of your girlfriends?”

“Jax, it takes a man that is confident in his masculinity to admit another man is hot,” Tate added.

“Oi, I didn’t come to this match to get ganged up on,” Jax argued.

Laci ignored them and got to her feet, standing right behind the barrier. She cupped her hands around her mouth to make her voice louder. “Jordan!”

To her delight, he turned his head, finding her right away.

She smiled and waved. “Hi, babe!”

He waved back. “Hey, angel!” Then he spotted her brothers behind her and tugged off his gloves. And he signed, “Hello, lads.”

Laci’s mouth fell open. Jordan learned sign language? Had he known it all this time? She doubted that since he had seemed confused when they first met up at Coffeeify. He must have started learning it after he met her. She turned to look at Jax and Tate. They appeared equally stunned.

“Hello,” Tate signed back, a slow grin parting his lips.

“You...” Laci’s eyes watered. “You learned to sign?”

“A bit.” Jordan shrugged. “Just in case.”

The game was about to start again, so she didn’t have time to reply before he turned around to face the pitch. One hand covered her heart as she resumed her seat.

“That is the sweetest thing,” she said quietly.

“Are you quite sure this is fake?” Tate wondered.

“Yes,” she said. “It has to be.”

She was leaving in a few months. And Jordan didn't believe in relationships. He wasn't interested in a real commitment. All that said, he was certainly making a convincing show of being a boyfriend. Being there for her when Dane showed up was expected. It was the whole reason they were doing this. But comforting her through the fireworks? Learning sign language to communicate with her brother? That wasn't something she expected out of a real boyfriend, much less a fake one.

She didn't have long to dwell before the second half was underway. Thirty long minutes passed with Jordan as mostly a spectator. The Wolverhampton striker got near him once and took a shot. It went straight into his chest, and he fell securely down on top of it. Stanmore was playing better than they had in the first half, but they had nothing to show for it. The score was still one to one.

Laci could sense the frustration coming off Jordan in waves as he rolled his shoulders back to prepare for the goal kick. His chest rose as he took a deep breath. He let it out slowly, and his mouth turned into a set frown. Laci's breath caught in her throat. Why was that so hot?

Jordan released the ball with a punt that resounded through the stadium. All eyes followed it as it sailed over the heads of both teams, arcing over midfield, before it fell behind the Wolves keeper inside the penalty box, then bounced right into the goal. The stadium held its collective breath.

“Oh my God,” Laci whispered. “That’s a—”

“GOAL!” the announcer cried over the loudspeaker.

The stadium erupted. Jordan’s teammates sprinted down the field, but he didn’t wait for them. He hurtled around the left post and leaped over the boundary into the stands. Laci didn’t even get a word out before his mouth crashed into hers. This kiss was unlike the one at the gala in every way. It was frenzied, fiery, and fierce. His beard scratched her chin, but she didn’t care. She was dazed and breathless when they parted. He moved only to shield her from the fans that had surged forward to get their hands on him.

Their eyes locked, and suddenly, they were the only two people around. She didn’t hear the noise of the crowd, only the pounding of her heart and the sound of Jordan’s labored breathing. His cheeks were as flushed as hers must have been. She beamed at him.

“Well done, you,” she said.

He replied with another kiss, softer and swifter than the first. Security ushered him back onto the pitch. His teammates were on him in a millisecond—leaping on his back, pounding his chest, clapping his shoulders. He spared a last glance at Laci with an intoxicated smile still on his lips where she could also see the shine of her lip gloss under the bright lights. He didn’t bother to wipe it off.

The ninetieth minute arrived, and the official held up the sign with a bright red two that indicated two minutes of stoppage. The Wolves had not come up with a chance for an

equalizer. In another two minutes, Jordan's incredible goal would be the winner. Laci's heart pounded as the Wolves forwards sprinted toward Jordan.

Their striker ran straight for him. The Stanmore defense struggled to catch him on tired legs. The striker had no support from his Wolves teammates either. He would have to take Jordan head on with no option to cross. Jordan came out to meet the ball.

The striker didn't stop running.

The collision happened so fast, if Laci had blinked, she would have missed it. And yet, as she watched, it appeared to be in slow motion. Jordan secured the ball in his arms as the striker trampled over his head. She barely heard the grunts throughout the stadium as the sound of her blood roared in her ears.

The screech of the referee's whistle brought Laci's breathing back, but panic seized her chest the longer Jordan remained motionless on the grass. The striker turned around and was making his case to the ref holding a red card over his head. Jordan's teammates surrounded him as Israel screamed for the physio.

"He's bleeding!" he cried.

"Oh, God," Laci whimpered.

She resisted the urge to leap over the boundary herself, desperate to be by his side, but that would only get her in trouble. The medical team blocked Jordan's face, yet she saw

he was limp. They struggled a bit with the size of his body though they got him sitting up. A splotch of bright red on his forehead made her bury her face in Tate's shoulder. He put his arms around her and gave her a comforting squeeze.

“Laci?”

Laci looked up and saw a young woman in a Stanmore yellow hijab standing by their row. She was beautiful with expertly done makeup and a light frame. The kit and turtleneck she wore were tucked into a pair of wide leg trousers that made her appear taller than she was. After assessing her for a moment, Laci remembered where she had seen this woman before. At the gala.

“Hi,” Laci said. “Nadia, right? Osahar's fiancée?”

“Wife now, mashallah,” Nadia replied with a grin, then wiggled her left hand to show off a gold wedding band beneath a stunning engagement ring. “We got married before the start of the season.”

“Right, sorry,” Laci said. She'd met so many of the wives, fiancées, and girlfriends that night, plus a few new faces at Coach Warren's, it was difficult to keep everyone straight.

Nadia waved off the apology. “I understand. Listen, they're going to take Jordan back. Do you want me to show you where?”

Laci stole a look back at the pitch. Jordan was still slumped against the physio examining his head. She nodded. “Please.” She looked between Tate and Jax. “I'll be right back.”

“We’ll meet you outside,” Jax said. “If it takes longer, let us know, and we can head home.”

“Let us know how he is too,” Tate added.

“Yeah, that too.”

Laci tried to smile, but it probably looked more like a grimace. After giving them quick hugs, she followed Nadia up the stairs.

They reached the treatment room as the medical team brought Jordan in. They’d carried him on a stretcher, however, he was sitting up on his own. His glassy eyes found her behind the professionals. He reached out. Only then did the medics notice her.

She wasn’t sure if she was allowed to approach. With a nudge of encouragement from Nadia, she gave Jordan her hand and stepped up beside him. The team got right back to work.

Most of the blood was off his face, but Laci spotted a dried droplet on his cheek and wiped it off. The gash above his eyebrow made her wince, so she kept her gaze on his eyes. They were half-lidded and unfocused but locked on her. She stroked his clean cheek with her thumb.

“Jordan...” She sighed.

“Not to worry, miss, it’s not as bad as it looks,” one of the medics said. “Probably just a concussion.”

“Really?” she asked. “But what about all the blood?”

“That’s because it’s his head. It tends to bleed heavily. We may need you to step back for a moment to—”

Everyone paused as Jordan murmured something. His free hand came to rest atop Laci’s, sandwiching her hand between his palms. He cleared his throat.

“Caroline…” he said.

She snatched her hand away and drew back as if he’d swung at her. “Caroline?”

“Is that…is that not your name, miss?” the medic asked.

“No!” Laci cried, affronted.

He blanched. “Oh, well, um, perhaps it’s best you left us—”

“Gladly.”

Laci turned on her heels and stormed out of the treatment room. Nadia followed, but thankfully, said nothing. Laci was in no mood to talk. Her mind was too busy with questions. First, who the hell was Caroline? Second, was she someone important to Jordan? Third, how important was she? Fourth, was there someone else in life? In his heart?

If that was the case, how could he have kissed her like that? How could he have sat with her through the fireworks and held her all night when she couldn’t sleep because of Dane?

Why, when she knew their arrangement wasn’t real, did the thought of him with someone else hurt so much?



She didn't hear from Jordan until the next morning. He called her first thing. She didn't answer. It wasn't completely intentional. She had a photoshoot to keep her busy. Though she didn't escape her thoughts of him for long with the way the other models gushed about the kiss. Once again, she and Jordan were trending, but unlike the gala, she wasn't thrilled about it.

He called again around lunch, and she ignored that one on purpose. She knew it was petty, and she didn't care. Her feelings were hurt, and she wanted him to know.

When she went home, she didn't call though she was tempted since she was nervous about Dane showing up again. Worst case scenario, she could stay another night with Tate and Jax like she had after the match. Her anger outweighed her fear, and she went through her front door in a huff. She locked it behind her.

Halfway through making herself pasta, her doorbell rang. She almost dropped the spatula she was using to stir the sauce. She went to answer it, but before she did, she peered out the window and found Jordan looming on her doorstep.

She opened the door and glowered up at him, undeterred by the stitches that made him look like a hot, Scottish

Frankenstein.

“You can’t answer your fucking phone?” he demanded.

“If you’ve come here to accost me, you can leave,” she snapped.

“Have I done something wrong?”

“Why don’t you ask Caroline? We both know how much she means to you.”

He shook his head and blinked a few times. “Who *the fuck* is Caroline?”

“I was wondering that myself.”

“Laci—”

“Look, if you’re seeing someone, be out with it. I know we didn’t establish rules about dating other people while we’re doing this, but I think it’s pretty shitty of you to—”

“*Laci*,” he interjected firmly. “I’m not seeing anyone else. I told you I don’t do the relationship thing.”

“Right, so you can imagine my surprise.”

He scowled. “Can I come in?”

“Wouldn’t you rather be at Caroline’s?”

“I don’t know any fucking Caro—” he stopped short and collected himself. “I don’t want to talk out here and risk being overheard.”

She conceded and turned her back to him to return to her kitchen.

He followed, closing and locking the door behind him. “I don’t know anyone named Caroline. What are you on about?”

“You said her name after you got hit,” she said, keeping her eyes on the saucepan. She didn’t want him to see her face in case her expression betrayed the sting of it. She had no right to be hurt. This was a ruse, even if his kisses were so ingrained in her heart that she dreamed of them nightly. “You can come clean. I know I don’t have any real claim on you, so...”

“Laci.” His hand on her shoulder forced her to face him. His eyes were blazing. “Listen and hear me well. I don’t know any Caroline. I don’t know why I said that name. I’d just been fucking stomped on.” He cupped her face. “I promise. I swear on everything. The only person I wanted there was you.”

She blinked back the mist in her eyes. “So...there’s really no one else?”

“How could there be anyone else when I’ve got you? Fake or not, for the time being, you’re mine and I’m yours.”

Her heart stuttered at that, and she almost smiled. “Is that really what you want?”

“Aye. I don’t know any Caroline. But whoever she is, she doesn’t hold a candle to you.”

She giggled, the sound fractured by the lump in her throat. “How can you know that if you don’t know her?”

“I know you. And that’s enough.”

Laci wondered if she would ever breathe again after such a statement. No one had ever made a declaration like that to her.

Between that and seeing he'd been learning to sign, she was thoroughly charmed. Charmed was dangerous territory, though, so she closed her eyes, shook her head, and took a step back. She couldn't look at him any longer or she would kiss him.

"It is odd," she said. "If you don't know a Caroline, how did that name come up?"

"Fuck if I know," he said with a shrug. "My head was bleeding. I really am sorry, Laci. If there's any way I can make it up to you, say the word."

"Hmmm..." She turned the burners off. Perhaps this was the perfect bargaining chip to lift the sex ban. He had told her to try all she wanted the morning after the gala. "I can think of one thing."

He raised a curious brow as she stepped closer to him and ran a finger down his chest. She wasn't sure if it was as seductive as she intended, but she'd seen it in all the movies, so she figured it couldn't hurt. When his jaw tightened, she was certain it had some effect on him, especially when he grabbed her hand before it reached the waistband of his jeans.

"Something other than that," he said.

She huffed. "Oh, c'mon."

"There must be something else you want me to do."

"I dunno. You're already learning sign language and being otherwise perfect," she said, defeated.

“That doesn’t make me perfect, I’m...committed to the bit. Like I always say.”

“That’s way beyond committing to the bit, Jordan.”

“Tate is one of our secret keepers. I’d like to be able to communicate with him.”

She didn’t believe him for a second, but dropped it, trying to come up with something else. Then it occurred to her. “Oh! Have you got Christmas plans?”

His brow furrowed. “No.”

“You have now. You’ll join me and my family at our estate.”

“That, I can do.”

Chapter 13

The wipers of Jordan's Range Rover flicked away the light dusting of snow falling as they rumbled up the country lane that led to the Miller's estate home. Laci explained on the drive how her family had acquired it. The Colfield family lived there for centuries, but the last direct heir died in France during the First World War as Tessa said at the gala.

A distant cousin inherited it, but since he wasn't raised in the aristocracy, he struggled to maintain it. By the time the Second World War broke out, he was in mountains of debt even after selling pieces of the land. Laci's grandfather had made his riches in the banking industry, which was how he bought the remaining land and the house as it was his wife's wish to live in a grand home such as the Colfield manor. Laci's father grew up between there and London. He followed in his father's footsteps, took over the business, and maintained the house.

Jordan admired the land despite the bareness of the foliage this time of year. The branches of the trees stretched like spider legs across the skyline. He imagined it must look

beautiful in the springtime with fresh blooms and green grass. He wondered if he and Laci could come back for Easter.

He stole a glance at her, but her face was turned toward her window while she drummed her fingers against the armrest. Her leg was bouncing too. His brow furrowed. Was she nervous?

“Hey,” he said gently, and she looked at him. “You alright?”

“Yeah,” she answered, but it came out more like a squeak. She cleared her throat. “I’ve never brought someone home to meet my family. And now I’m going to lie to them for three days. But I can handle it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes. I’ll be fine. I may need to restrict my wine intake. Which is a shame, we’ve got such a selection.”

He held back an amused grin. “I thought you were a cosmo girl.”

“Not at home. When there’s about four hundred bottles of wine to choose from, who needs a cocktail?”

“Four hundred?” He almost stopped the car. “Where the fuck do you keep it all?”

“In the wine cellar,” she said as if it were obvious. She arched an eyebrow at him. “You’ve never been to a home like this, have you?”

“No,” he admitted.

He was still adjusting to his Premier League salary. He'd bought himself a nice flat with an extra bedroom he used as his art studio, but it was much smaller than some of his teammates' homes. He occasionally splurged on designer clothing or trainers.

He shifted in his seat, wondering how comfortable it would be to spend the weekend with people rich enough to keep four hundred bottles of wine lying around. This was a level of wealth his lower-middle-class child-self could not have imagined.

Laci must have sensed his hesitation because she reached for his hand and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "It'll be fine. My parents are lovely."

"Knowing you, that must be true," he said.

He meant it. Laci, despite living with some extravagance given the size of her home and expensive decor, never made anyone feel inferior. She offered him a small smile, and he cleared his throat.

"So how d'you want to handle socials while we're here?" he asked. "How many stories would a real couple post for the holidays?"

"Oh, I don't post during Christmas," she answered. "The only people we'll have to convince are Mum and Dad."

"You don't post during Christmas?"

She shook her head. "No, I take the time to be with my family. I rarely get to see them, so it's important to me."

“That’s very sweet.”

She squeezed his hand and looked back out the window.

When the house came into view, Jordan’s jaw dropped. He knew it was an estate, so he had some idea that it would be large, but it exceeded every expectation. It was better described as a castle than a house.

The mansion sat perpendicular to a wide circular driveway and neatly manicured holly bushes illuminated the path with the Christmas lights wrapped around them. Countless windows across the front cast a warm glow on the yard, each adorned with a wreath. Some of them also contained the silhouette of a Christmas tree inside.

As they got closer, Jordan saw large oak double front doors with black wrought iron hardware. Before he stopped, the door swung open and a plump, blonde woman that very much resembled Laci bustled out, wrapping a cardigan around herself. Jordan parked to the side where he saw Jax’s Mercedes and a Porsche gathering snow on their roofs.

Laci slid out of the passenger door before Jordan cut the engine. His hand felt cold where she had let go of it. The way she threw herself into her mother’s arms more than made up for it. Smiling to himself, he got out and retrieved the bags to give them a moment.

“You made it,” Mrs. Miller said, kissing her daughter’s cheek. “So happy you could join us, darling.”

“I’d never miss Christmas, Mum,” Laci replied. “Jax and Tate are already here, I see.”

“Yes, yes, they got in yesterday.”

While they chatted, Jordan looked at the house again. Now that the initial shock had worn off, it felt almost familiar. He wondered if they had ever allowed it to be used for a film or television set because the longer he looked, the more certain he was that he had seen it before. It filled him with inexplicable melancholy.

“You must be Jordan.”

Laci’s mother’s voice drew him from the sinking feeling in his chest. “Yes, nice to meet you, Mrs. Miller.”

“Please, call me Pam.” She took his offered hand and shook it. “We’re delighted to have you with us.”

“Happy to be here,” he said.

She smiled, and he saw the resemblance between her and Laci more prominently. As she led them inside, he heard her whisper to Laci, “He’s even more handsome in person!”

“Mum!” Laci hissed, nudging her with her elbow.

Pam only giggled. Jordan’s cheeks warmed a little at the flattery.

Walking through the entryway, he felt like he’d stepped right into an episode of *Downton Abbey* with the high ceilings, the grand staircase, the luxury furniture, and the fine artwork which all spoke to the home’s illustrious history. Of course, it

was all decorated with garlands, baubles, and lights to make it festive. And a fire crackled merrily in the hearth, making it the picture of elegance.

“This looks wonderful,” he said.

“Thank you, dear,” Pam replied. “Gene adores Christmas, so we’ve been decorating since the first of November.”

Then, as if summoned by the mention of him, a tall, slender, gray-haired gentleman came from the next room. His horn-rimmed glasses sat low on his long nose, so his twinkling blue eyes weren’t hiding behind them. He wore a Santa hat atop his head, a sweater with Rudolph embroidered across the chest (including a red light-up nose), and slippers that resembled green elf shoes with jingle bells on the tips of the toes. At this sight of him, the color drained from Laci’s face.

“Oh, Dad...” She sighed.

He ignored her, marched up to Jordan, and offered a hand. “Well, hello-ho-ho there. You must be Jordan. Lovely to meet you, son. I’m Gene Miller.”

Jordan clamped his lips together to hide a laugh, set the bags down, and shook Gene’s hand. “Nice to meet you too.”

“Welcome to our home. I hope your journey wasn’t too difficult.”

“There was some traffic coming out of the city, but we beat most of the snow,” Jordan reported. “It’s a nice drive out here.”

“It is.” Gene paused and turned to his daughter, and a smile so warm it rivaled the fireplace came over his face. “Hello, darling girl.”

Laci forgot her embarrassment and fell into her father’s arms. “Happy Christmas, Dad.”

“Happy, indeed, now that you’re here,” he murmured into her hair.

Jordan shifted on his feet. So much affection in one room was making his skin crawl. It was sweet, but he had no idea how to react to it. He wondered if all families were like that or if the Millers were the exception.

“Pam will show you up to Laci’s room. The boys and I have almost got dinner ready,” Gene said.

“Laci’s room?” Jordan questioned, shoulders stiffening. “We’re sharing?”

“Certainly,” Pam said. “It’s polite of you to speak up, but we’re all adults here. We aren’t so naive as to think you two aren’t having sex.”

Jordan cleared his throat loudly, shooting Laci a desperate look, but she had a smirk on her face. He frowned. She *knew* her parents would put them in the same room.

“Right,” he said. “That’s quite...progressive of you, but I...” Certain he was not getting any help from Laci, he conceded. “Lead the way then.”

“Up we go,” Pam said with a cheerful clap, and started up the stairs.

Laci's room was down a long corridor to the right of the second-floor landing. Jordan's heart hammered against his chest the whole way. At Laci's house in London, he used her guest room. He'd never so much as peered in the doorway of her bedroom. Sharing a room, maybe even a bed, would put them at a proximity he wasn't certain he could continue to resist her in.

"Here we are," Pam said, stopping. "I'll let you get settled. See you at dinner."

The moment the door closed behind her, Jordan rounded on Laci. "You are one sneaky wee fucker, aren't you?"

She blinked wide, innocent eyes at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"That didn't work when you wore lingerie around the house, and it's not gonna work now."

He remembered that night. It was the first time he truly regretted telling Laci to try her best to seduce him because it had damn near worked. She had floated around her kitchen, silk hugging her curves, and he had to grind his teeth to get the image of sitting her on the island and ripping it off her out of his mind. She'd played dumb, of course, but he knew she was aware of the effect she had on him.

"You can ask for a separate room if you want, but that'll make them suspicious," Laci said with a shrug.

"I won't ask for a separate room." He huffed. "I'll...sleep on the floor."

“For three days? Your back will be killing you for the match after Boxing Day.”

“I’m not caving.”

“Sleeping next to me isn’t caving.”

“It won’t make it easy.”

She laughed. “Have you really such little self-control?”

“Fine.” He scowled at her. “I’ll sleep in the damn bed. Happy?”

“I am if you are.”

He rolled his eyes and ignored her sarcasm. “Do we need to change for dinner?”

“No, it’s pretty casual. I mean, you saw my dad’s slippers.”

Jordan chuckled. “Yeah, I did.”

“God, they’re humiliating.” She sighed, fluffing her plaits in the mirror. “I mean, I love them to bits, but they’re such *parents*, y’know?”

“I suppose...” It wasn’t a feeling he could relate to, so he took a good look around the room to find a change of subject.

The furniture was in the same classic style as the rest of the house only it was all a distressed white color. The bed was topped with a thick, pink floral quilt and matching pillows. The dresser, where she was checking her hair, had a couple knick knacks on it as well as a jewelry box. The artwork on the opposite wall gave him pause.

“The Meeting on the Turret Stairs,” he said under his breath.

“What?” Laci asked.

“The painting.” He pointed. “It’s ‘The Meeting on the Turret Stairs’ by Frederic William Burton. It’s one of my favorites.”

He stepped closer to get a good look at it—a guard and his lady, taking a moment for a secret embrace. It was a print. Jordan had never had the time to get Ireland to see the real thing. But the image still stirred something inside him. The desperation in the way the guard held the lady’s hand always hit him right in the heart.

“I didn’t know you were into art,” Laci said.

“It’s just an interest, not something I do,” Jordan said with a shrug. “But I’ve always loved this piece. You can feel the hope between the couple, and the despair that they can never be together.”

“The original story was about a lady and her personal guard, right?” she asked.

“Aye. It’s all the more impressive that Burton captured it without showing their eyes. I’ve always admired that.”

“I’ve never given it much thought.” She looked on. “It is quite nice, isn’t it?”

“And sad,” he replied quietly.

“Is it some consolation for being tricked into sharing a room with me? You also get to share a room with your favorite

work,” she teased.

He met her gaze and smirked. “I suppose so.”

“Ready to head down?”

He nodded and hooked his arm around her shoulders as she led the way back downstairs to the dining room.

The dining room was as exquisite as the rest of the house. The table looked like something out of a magazine with the deep red tablecloth, emerald green runner, and porcelain reindeer centerpieces. Over it hung a crystal chandelier, which provided dim, intimate lighting. Gene, Pam, Jax, and Tate were already seated. Jordan pulled Laci’s chair out for her before taking his place beside her.

“Tuck in, everyone!” Gene said.

They served dinner on fine china that was more suited to caviar than a simple shepherd’s pie. It was delicious, nonetheless. Yet, Jordan struggled to find comfort even with the ease at which the Miller family exchanged playful barbs between updates on their lives. Her parents asked Laci about the report of an intruder in her house, and she told them a bit about Dane. They offered to hire her private security if the police weren’t sufficient.

“I feel safe with Jordan there,” Laci said, placing her hand on his. “Dane’s only ever been bold enough to try something when I’ve been alone.”

“But Jordan can’t be with you all the time,” Pam said. “Footballers have such packed schedules.”

“What happens if he gets hurt again?” Gene wondered. He met Jordan’s gaze. “I saw that injury during the Wolves match. You were out for two weeks, right?”

Jordan nodded. That was the longest two weeks of his life. He couldn’t train beyond light weights and a walk. Plus, Laci had pulled away for several days, still stung by the whole Caroline fiasco. “We managed.”

“Yeah, Dad, besides,” Jax said through a mouthful. “Wolves players are pricks, and they’ll only play them one other time.”

“Don’t say pricks, darling, it’s not polite,” Pam reprimanded.

Jax rolled his eyes.

“Don’t forget Jax and I are in town,” Tate interjected while Jax interpreted for him for Jordan’s benefit. “We can always show our faces every once in a while so he doesn’t get any more ideas.”

“Thank you,” Jordan signed across the table at him.

“None of you are professionals,” Gene said sternly. “I’m offering Laci the option of expert protection.”

“Thanks, Dad, but I think I’m fine,” Laci said. “Dane hasn’t shown his face in a while, he’s back to just texts.”

“I certainly won’t feel safe until that creep is behind bars,” Pam said, taking a sip of wine.

“Excuse me.” Jordan cleared his throat. “Um, where is your washroom?”

“Down the hall, past the south parlor,” Pam said. “That’s the sitting room where most of the furniture is green. Loo’s just on the left.”

“Got it.”

He rose from his seat and headed out. The house seemed larger now that he was walking through it alone. He followed Pam’s directions and found the south parlor. It was so green it might have been a forest. Across from it, he pushed on the door, which opened to a small lavatory.

When he finished, as he was heading back to the dining room, motion in the parlor caught his eye. He stopped and poked his head inside the room, but it was as empty as ever. The different shades of green melded together so he brushed it off as a trick of the light and continued down the hall.

“Samuel!” a faint, feminine voice giggled.

Jordan whipped around, heart rate quickening the way it did after warm ups. “Hello?”

No one answered. He shook his head. This was stupid. There was nobody around. The Millers usually had employees to help maintain the house, but they were all gone for the holidays according to Gene.

The voice must have been the wind or a creak in the old walls.

He took a deep breath to shake it off and started back toward the dining room. Until he heard another voice, masculine this

time, with a thick, Scottish accent, in barely a whisper say,
“Caroline...”

Chapter 14

Jordan returned to the table ashen faced. Laci looked at him and hoisted an eyebrow in question. She glanced at her family to see if they noticed, but they were deep in a discussion about getting Britt and her family to the house for New Year's. Laci elbowed Jordan gently and leaned closer to him.

“Are you alright?”

He gave a curt nod. “Fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yep.”

“You look like you've seen a ghost.”

“Fuck's sake, Laci, I only went to have a piss.”

“Don't bite my head off.”

He shoveled shepherd's pie into his mouth before taking a deep gulp of wine. She watched him, perplexed. He didn't usually drink much. And he refused to meet her eyes. He remained silent through the rest of dinner, dessert, and the

movie they all gathered to watch in the old smoking room. *It's a Wonderful Life*, her father's favorite. When they went up to bed, he simply sat on the edge and stared at the wall in front of him.

"Okay," Laci said, tossing her shirt to the side and putting her hands on her hips. "What's going on?"

"I'm not watching while you change," he said.

She yanked on her tank top. "That's not what I'm talking about."

"That's what I'm talking about."

"Jordan."

"Laci."

"Ugh, you're infuriating." She pulled off her jeans and tugged up the flannel shorts she packed, finishing the look with fuzzy socks. She sat on the bed to get them on. "I'm dressed now."

He still didn't look.

"Jordan?"

Nothing. She frowned at him.

"Hello?"

Still, he didn't answer. With a groan, she crawled over the bed and grabbed him by the shoulder, forcing him to turn around. He looked so anxious that her irritation melted away, replaced with genuine concern.

"Jordan, what's the matter?" she demanded.

“Is this place haunted?” he replied.

She blinked, taken aback. “What?”

“Is it?”

“I dunno. I’ve never seen any ghosts.” She paused for a beat.

“Did you?”

He shook his head and got to his feet. “No, I didn’t see anything. I...I heard...I heard...”

“Heard what?” she pressed.

“Voices. Names, by the sound of it.”

She squinted. It sounded outlandish, but Jordan was so perturbed by it that she knew *something* must have happened, something powerful enough to have the strongest man she knew completely shaken. She needed to hear him out.

“What names?” she asked.

“Samuel and—” he stopped short. “Samuel.”

“Two different Samuels or the same Samuel twice?” she joked.

“I don’t need your sarcasm.”

“What was the other name?”

“It’s not important.”

His avoidance only made her more suspicious. “What was it?” she asked again.

“I said it’s not important.”

“Stop dodging the question.”

He heaved a sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You won’t like it.”

“Try me.”

He took another deep breath. His gaze flicked over to the window, and he held it there for several long moments. The moonlight pooling through made him look like a statue—a sexy statue—but her patience was wearing thin.

“Just tell me the bloody—”

“Caroline,” he said.

Her heart folded in on itself. “You said you didn’t—”

“I don’t know anyone by that name. I swear to you, Laci,” he told her, stepping up to the bed to take her hands in his. “I meant it. I have no idea why it keeps coming up. I don’t know a Samuel either. All I know is what I heard.”

She pulled him closer, so he stood between her knees. “You’re certain?”

He nodded. “I know it sounds mad.”

“I believe you. I just...it’s odd.”

She shifted where she sat, unsure whether or not to reveal a secret she had carried with her since childhood. But he was being vulnerable, and if he could do it, so could she. She swallowed.

“When I was a little girl, I heard things around the house,” she admitted. “They sounded like voices or whispers, but I can’t remember exactly what they said. I told Mum about it

once, but she insisted I was dreaming, so I never told her again, or anyone for that matter.”

“Have you heard them since you were wee?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“The night we met, you said you thought you’d heard my voice before,” he said. “Was it here?”

She blinked, breathless that he remembered such a small detail. “I...maybe? It’s not clear enough.”

She gazed steadily up at him. The room was so dim his eyes looked almost black. Perhaps it was the way his pupils dilated after he noticed her shirt, where her nipples were clearly protruding. She bit back a smirk. He was definitely going to cave.

“You alright?” she asked innocently.

“Fine.” He cleared his throat and stepped back. “Perhaps it’s best we sleep this off. We’ll have clearer heads in the morning.”

He turned and she swore she saw him adjust his crotch. She let him off the hook and climbed back up the bed to slide under the quilt as he stripped down to his boxers. A scene that rid her of any concerns about voices or apparitions. All she could think about now was Jordan’s six pack and what it might taste like if she ran her tongue across that washboard. Or maybe traced the tattoos that stretched from over his heart down to his wrists. When he faced her again, he raised an eyebrow at her.

“Are you ogling me?” he asked.

“Yes, and I’m not even sorry,” she replied with a grin. “But you looked at me first.”

With a sly smile, he walked over to the empty side of the bed and nestled in beside her. She started to move toward him to cuddle like they did on her couch, but he snatched a pillow from behind him and placed it between them.

“Oh no,” he said. “You stay over on your side, and I’ll stay over on mine.”

“We can’t even cuddle?”

“No. I know what you’re up to, and it’s not gonna work.”

“I’m not the one that needs a pillow to control myself.”

With that, she rolled over and switched off the lamp on her nightstand. She listened to him sigh and do the same with smug satisfaction.



After breakfast, Laci gave Jordan a tour of the rest of the house and grounds. From the bedrooms above to the kitchen below, even the garden despite it being rather bare this time of year. Throughout the tour, she watched his face.

He kept getting this odd, faraway expression, like he was seeing something that wasn’t there. Each time, she wanted to

ask him about it, but she was afraid he'd insist it was nothing.

The last room she showed him was the library.

"This was always Tate's domain," she explained as they passed the stacked shelves.

"Big bookworm, is he?" he replied.

"You can imagine movies and telly don't have much appeal for a deaf kid. Books were his favorite."

"Makes sense." He stopped in between two shelves and stared down the row at the painting on the wall. "What's that one?"

One thing that held Jordan's attention throughout the estate was the artwork. He knew way more than he let on in her bedroom. At every piece, he rattled off the title, artist, and the year it was painted if he knew it. If he wasn't sure about a detail, he whipped out his phone to look it up. As a result, they'd spent a majority of the afternoon in the gallery. The painting in the library was one Laci liked except for its one flaw. She followed Jordan over to it.

"It's a family portrait of the Colfields," she answered. "From the Regency era, I think, based on the clothes, but we don't have an exact year." She pointed to the subjects in order. "That's the earl, Lord Colfield, his wife, the countess, and their three sons." She stopped at the part that always made her sad, the spot where part of the canvas had been burned, removing the final subject's face. "They had a daughter too. We don't know what she did to deserve that."

“Must’ve been bad,” Jordan said thoughtfully. “Who’s the artist?”

“No idea. We’ve never been able to find a record of it.”

“And it’s the original?”

“Seems to be. According to the experts Mum and Dad had look at it, anyway.”

He reached toward the girl’s missing face, but Laci slapped his hand away before it made contact.

“Oi, the artwork isn’t meant to be touched.”

He shot her a wolfish grin. “Best I stand back from you then.”

Her face burned only a moment before she stood on her toes to get within inches of his face and gave him the sultriest look she could muster. “It is, however, meant to be nailed against the wall.”

His mouth turned down, but his eyes went wide. “You are really having a go at this.”

“You said to try all I like.”

“I clearly didn’t have a fucking clue what I was in for.”

She opened her mouth to respond but didn’t get the words out before his phone chimed from inside his pocket. He fished it out and gazed at the screen. Laci glimpsed the name Nina. Jordan didn’t answer. He hit the lock button and slid the phone back into the pocket of his jeans.

“Who’s Nina?” Laci asked, trying not to jump to conclusions.

“My mother,” he said gruffly, then turned back to the painting.

“You have your mother in your phone under her first name?”

“What else would I use?”

“I dunno, maybe something more affectionate.”

He grimaced. “We’re not that sort of family.”

“Even so, if you want to take the call, you can. Don’t ignore her on my account.”

He shook his head. “I don’t speak to my mother. She calls every year around Christmas. I guess she’s hoping we’re in the fucking holiday spirit or whatever.”

“You don’t speak to your mother?” Laci questioned.

“No.”

“Not at all?”

“Not a word.”

“How can that be?”

“If it helps, I don’t speak to my father either.”

“What?” she sputtered. “That certainly does *not* help! That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard! You should call her back.”

“I don’t have anything to say to her.”

“Not even Happy Christmas?”

“No, angel,” he said, gently cupping her cheek and stroking it with his thumb. “Not even that.”

Laci wasn't sure if it was her upbringing clouding her judgment, but she couldn't imagine being so angry at one of her family members that she never spoke to them again. Especially on holidays. She knew he was still close to Ava, and he had used “we” earlier, which told Laci that Ava likely didn't speak to their parents either.

“You're sweet to worry, but it's been this way for a long time now,” he said as if reading her mind. “I'm used to it.”

She took his hand and removed it from her face and interlocked their fingers. “I think that only makes it sadder.”

She looked at the marred face of the Colfield daughter in the picture again. How could a family turn on one of their own? Brokenness like that should never be something one is adjusted to. Love had to have existed once because they all sat together for the portrait. She wondered as she studied Jordan's face if that was true of his family as well.



Laci's eyes fluttered open to reveal Jordan next to her. The pillow he had set between them was missing, and his arm was slung over her waist. She took a moment to observe his sleeping face. It was the most peaceful she'd ever seen him.

Gently, she traced his strong features with her finger, from his brow bone to his jaw, recalling the first time she saw him in that bar. He looked intimidating, which she was grateful for when Dane followed her in, but she hadn't been afraid, not of Jordan. He felt familiar even before she knew him.

“Samuel...” a hushed voice sighed.

She sat up with a jolt and gazed around the room, chest heaving. She couldn't tell if it came from her mind or if it came from outside of her. With the sun peeking through the curtains, there was enough light to know there was no one else in the room. No ghostly figures either. She took a deep breath to try and get her heart rate back down.

Jordan stirred beside her. “What’s the matter?”

“I...” she trailed off. “I heard someone say Samuel. It was like right in my ear. Maybe inside my head? I-I dunno...”

He sat up. “What?”

“I think it was a woman?” she guessed. “It was so fast and a whisper. It was weird.”

“Sounds like what I heard the other night at dinner.”

“What could it mean?”

Her bedroom door burst open, and in walked her father wearing a full-on Father Christmas get-up. Laci screamed. Her heart had only just started to settle down after the voice, but it was jackhammering against her ribcage again.

“Merry Christmas, kids!” Gene said jovially and completely unaware. “Hope you’ve been good because Father Christmas has—”

“Dad!” Laci cried. “Oh my God!”

Gene pulled the beard down. “What? I do this every year.”

Her face heated so much that she could have cooked on it. “I have a *guest* this year.”

Jordan had laid back down and buried his face in his pillow, but his shoulders shook with obvious laughter. Laci swatted him on the arm.

“Happy Christmas, Jordan!” Gene said.

Jordan wiped his eyes and a smile tugged on the corners of his mouth. “Happy Christmas, Gene.”

“Glad to have you with us, son,” Gene replied, then clapped him on the shoulder. Gene looked at Laci again. “Mum’s got breakfast on. Coffee’s ready too. So, get on your snuggliest clothes and let’s see what Father Christmas brought!”

He disappeared into the hall. Laci flopped back onto the mattress, wishing it would swallow her whole.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be.” Jordan was still chuckling. “It was funny.”

“To you, maybe.”

With an irritable huff, she got out of bed and wrapped her dressing gown around her before stepping into her slippers. Jordan pulled on joggers and a hoodie. Hand in hand, they

made their way to the dining room. Pam put out a spread of breakfast food as she did every Christmas with eggs, bacon, sausages, waffles, fruit, and more. Everyone helped themselves, and they sat together before opening gifts.

Jordan's eyes widened at his stack of gifts. Laci's parents and her brothers had shopped for him. Pam and Gene had even bought a little present for Ava, which Jordan, a bit hoarsely, promised to send along to her. Laci's leg bounced with the anticipation of seeing him open her gift.

"Wow," he said, pulling out the new keeper's gloves she'd gotten for him.

She grinned. "Look at the wrists."

He obeyed, turning them over to see where she had his initials embroidered on them with little Scottish flags on the elastic. His smile widened. "They're perfect, Laci, thank you."

He pulled her closer so he could peck her cheek. Then, he handed her her gift from him. She'd been eyeing it all weekend, unsure what the slim, rectangular box could be. She tried guessing but was wrong every time. She unceremoniously ripped the wrapping paper.

"Jewelry?" she asked, holding up the velvet box. It had a gold hinge on the back to open it.

Jordan shrugged. "Open it and find out."

She pulled it slowly, revealing a stunning replica of the Heart of the Ocean necklace from *Titanic*, a big blue stone with

surrounding diamonds and all. Laci gasped and nearly dropped it. Mouth agape, she started at Jordan.

“How did you...what—are you serious?” she cried.

He only smiled at her. “D’you like it?”

“I love it!”

“What is it?” Pam demanded from the opposite couch. “Show us, Laci.”

With a trembling hand, Laci took it out and held it up. It sparkled in the glowing morning light. Pam clapped a hand over her mouth. “Oh my!”

“It’s gorgeous!” Laci couldn’t take her eyes off it. “And perfect! It looks just like the one from the movie!”

“Well done, Jordan,” Tate signed from his spot on the floor.

“Thank you,” Jordan returned. He offered his hand to Laci. “Want to put it on?”

She nodded eagerly. “Yes, please.”

It didn’t matter that she was still in her pajamas with her hair unbrushed. She handed over the necklace and moved her hair aside. Jordan’s touch on the back of her neck made her shiver despite the warmth of the nearby fire. When he finished with the clasp, he put her hair back himself.

She looked down at the jewel.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, touching it with a deft finger. She met his gaze. “Thank you so much. This is the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever received.”

He started to answer, but she claimed his lips in a kiss. She tried to put everything she was feeling into it—gratitude, joy, impressed. Most of all, deeply moved. Jordan surprised her at every turn.

“Merry Christmas,” he said quietly when they parted.

“Merry Christmas,” she returned with equal tenderness.

“Just don’t go throwing it into the ocean like the old lady,” Jax said, killing the mood. “That was fucked.”

“Don’t say fuck, Jax, it’s Christmas,” Pam said.

“Who cares?”

“Jesus cares!” his mother insisted.

Laci let her family’s playful bickering fade away as her eyes fixed on Jordan. Once again, the relationship felt less and less like a ruse.



That evening, the guys went outside to play a little two-on-two football. Laci and Pam were unwilling to get cold and muddy so they remained inside with glasses of wine, face masks, and sugar cookie dough in a bowl. Laci still had her necklace on, insisting it made her dressing gown elegant. She tried not to let the insistent “Merry Christmas” messages from

Dane sour the mood. He sent a picture of a festively wrapped gift on her doorstep.

Her mother must have caught the disgusted look on her face.

“What is it?” Pam asked.

“Just Dane being creepy again,” Laci sighed. She turned her phone around to show her mother the picture.

“Oh, my.” Pam recoiled. “Forward that to the police.”

“Already done.”

They headed to the living room, where Laci set her phone face down on the end table.

“Let’s talk about something nice, like how sweet Jordan is,” Pam said as they took their seats on the couch. “I knew this was special from the way he kissed you at that match, but seeing you together in person is even more convincing. He adores you, Laci. That gift was just...perfect.”

Convincing. Laci swallowed a mouthful of cookie dough. “Yeah, I agree.”

“I hope you thanked him properly,” Pam said with a wink.

“Ugh, Mum!”

“Don’t clutch your pearls at me. I know what young people get up to. I was your age once too, you know.”

“Like you and Dad aren’t still going at it.”

“It is magnificent.” Pam looked dreamily into her wine glass. “Your father is truly my soulmate. And you may have found yours.”

“I dunno about that, but I think it is getting serious.”

“I should hope so. I’d hate to think you’re with someone you don’t see a real future with.”

Laci looked down at her lap. What she feared had come true. Her mother wanted to talk about her relationship. She was going to have to lie. Part of her wondered if she was underestimating her mother. Maybe a fake relationship was something she could get her head around for the sake of safety. And yet, Laci didn’t want to talk about the pretense either. Her heart was mixed up as the cookie dough they were eating.

Her eyes welled with sudden tears. “I don’t want it to end, Mum.”

“Why should it, darling?” Pam pulled Laci into her arms. “Oh, dear. I know the start can be shaky, especially as you get used to each other. But in the end, it makes you stronger.”

“Yes, but...” Laci sniffled. “I really...I think I’m falling for him.”

“Frightening, isn’t it?” Pam said, stroking her daughter’s hair. “All you can do is be honest. Let him know how you’re feeling. He might be exactly where you are, but if neither of you speaks up, how can you know for sure?”

But Laci was sure how Jordan felt. He’d laid it out in explicit terms that he was uninterested in real love. She wished he was bad at this. Maybe then it wouldn’t be so crushing. She went into this to keep herself safe, but the way things were progressing, she stood to get hurt.

Chapter 15

Face bright and cheeks flushed, she led him out of the ballroom. The music faded as they put distance between themselves and the waltzing guests. They headed for their usual hiding spot in the south parlor. He followed her, stumbling from intoxication. But it was not the drink that made him tipsy, it was her. Her soft blonde curls complemented her round, kind face. Her fierce blue eyes sparkled when she looked at him. And her sweet, gentle disposition made her radiant. He was drunk on all of her.

“This way,” she hissed, though he knew the route well enough.

He closed the door behind them and pinned her against it, caging her between his arms.

“We must be quick,” he whispered. “Your father and brothers will notice you’re gone.”

“Let them notice,” she said. “I’m telling them tonight.”

His eyes went wide. “Are you sure?”

“Quite.” Her eyes betrayed no fear. “I love you, my darling. I don’t care if they disown me. I don’t need an inheritance if I have you.”

“But what about your family’s line?”

“My father has three sons. My children will be of little consequence to him.”

“They are of great consequence to me, angel.”

She giggled. “How many shall we have?”

“As many as the Lord blesses us with, seeing as I cannot keep my hands off you.”

She only grinned and yanked him in for a blazing kiss. He kissed her back as if he wanted to consume her. Desire stirred in his belly and spread through his body with each pump of his heart all the way to his fingertips, which he trailed along the delicate skin of her neck. She shivered as she always did.

“More, please, my love,” she sighed as their lips parted. She reached for the buttons of his waistcoat. “You said we must be quick. Do not keep me waiting.”

A rumble sounded from deep in his chest. He loved it when she begged for him. With a wicked grin, he placed fiery kisses along her jaw, letting his tongue flick out to that sensitive spot behind her ear that made her squirm.

“Please,” she whined.

With surprising boldness, she took him by the wrist and put his hand between her legs. He groaned. She was gorgeous like

this.

He could not deny her any longer, so he yanked up her skirts, layer by layer, cursing the need for ladies to wear so many. She looked so much more appealing with it bunched around her hips while she panted for him.

He ran his fingers along the apex of her thighs. Her legs trembled at his touch. Finally, he sank a finger inside her. She threw her head back and gasped.

Jordan sat straight up in bed with a sharp breath. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the dark room. Laci's room in her parents' estate. Not that such a realization was helpful considering it was the setting of that dream, the most vivid dream he could recall in recent years.

The woman in the dream had Laci's exact appearance, from her face to the shape of her body, which was much harder to admire in the empire-waist gown she was wearing. The feeling of her body beneath his created a painful strain in his crotch.

He distracted himself by trying to make sense of it. He had sounded like himself. He had felt like himself. But he'd never worn boots like that. Or a waistcoat for that matter. Was he dreaming they were in costume? It didn't feel like that. The desperation between them was too genuine. Plus, Laci only had two brothers. Dream Laci had three.

He looked over to where she slept beside him. She hadn't stirred when he sat up, which he was grateful for. She looked so fucking cute as she slept. In the darkness, he could make out the shape of her lips pressed into the pillow. Her chest rose

and fell with her breathing. After all the sleepless nights, Jordan was glad for anytime she got to rest.

Looking at her closed eyes brought him right back to the dream. With a curse under his breath, he threw the quilt off his legs and slipped out of bed. He changed into his joggers and a sweatshirt, pulled on his trainers, and tiptoed out the door. Moving was the only way to shake this. Remaining in bed next to her would only foster further thoughts of her moaning.

The cold air burned his lungs, but it was not enough to clear his mind of the images in his dream like Laci in that dress, the desperate look in her eyes, the way she arched into him. He pushed himself to a quicker pace. He normally worked through any frustration with physical exertion. Going a little harder would help him forget.

Except every step, every turn around the grounds conjured up more visions. He saw the dream version of Laci strolling with her family or playing games with them in the grass. Taking her horse for a trot or brushing its hair, then seeing her face in the window of a passing carriage as they headed out to a ball.

“Fuck!” Jordan cried and came to a stop.

He doubled over to catch his breath. He kept his eyes on the vapor it created in the chilly air, just for something to focus on. At least they only had to get through lunch before they would be leaving. Then he could put all this creepiness behind him. It was getting out of hand, and he was worried another night would have him calling the Ghostbusters.

He stood up straight again and looked around, noting the concrete details around him, the sight of the trees with their jagged branches, the smell of wet earth that he inhaled with each breath, the feeling of the gravel beneath his shoes, and the sound of the crunch as he shifted his weight.

It was 2023, and he was with his fake girlfriend and her very nice family. There were no carriages, no girls in fine frocks, and no secret meetings in the parlor. Grounded in reality, he started to jog again.

The dream troubled him less for the remainder of the run. With his blood pumping, he finally managed to drown everything out and work his body the way he was used to and keep it in the back of his mind. But when he reached the house, he looked up at the terrace. Laci stood there in that pink dress as a soft breeze tossed her blonde ringlets over her shoulder.

He skidded to a furious stop, shook his head, and screwed his eyes shut. When he opened them again, Laci was still there but in leggings and his Stanmore jumper, her hair in a bun. Relieved, he trotted up the stairs. He started to smile at her, but she didn't return it. She held his phone out toward him instead.

“It's been ringing all morning,” she said.

“Sorry, I should have put it on silent,” he replied. “Did it wake you?”

“Yes, but that's not what's bothering me.”

“What is it then?”

“It’s your mother. All the missed calls are from her.”

He rolled his eyes. “Laci, let it go.”

“She must really miss you if she’s still trying,” she went on. “Can’t you ring her back? Or text. Just to let her know you’re alright.”

He frowned and snatched his phone from her, stuffing it into his pocket. Anger nipped at his heart like a mad dog. That was easy for her to say.

“She doesn’t deserve it,” he said stiffly.

“She’s your *mother*.”

“So what?”

“So you’re family. It can’t have been so bad that—”

“Dammit, Laci, you don’t understand!” he snapped. “We’re not like your family, alright? It wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows and hugs. It was *fucked!*”

She drew back. His breathing came heavily, and not from the run. He meant what he said, but he couldn’t bear to look at her shocked face, so he dropped his gaze to the ground. An apology bubbled up in his throat, regretting that he shouted at her, but he swallowed it.

“You’re right, I don’t understand,” she said, so softly that he looked up at her again. She took his hand. “But I’d like to.”

“No, you wouldn’t.” He tugged his hand free.

He wasn't sure what was making this so annoying. She was pressing on a bruise that would never heal. Normally he could endure that kind of strain.

Maybe it was the dream still lingering. Maybe it was the sexual frustration. Maybe it was that by staying with Laci, he hadn't gotten to paint in weeks, and besides exercise, art was his only outlet.

He felt like a shaken-up soda can, and she was tugging on the tab. He was afraid of what might come out if she kept pressing. He started toward the house.

“Jordan, look, I know this isn't what either of us expected it to be, but we could at least be friends,” she said. “I would like to understand whether you believe that or not. But the only way to find out is for you to trust me.”

“Trust you with what, exactly, Laci?” He whirled around, tension claiming his every muscle. “You wanna know how my dad lost his business and wasted away drinking?”

She blinked, and he almost laughed. Now that he'd been cracked open, it all came spilling out.

“You wanna know how his neglect drove my mother into the arms of another man? How, for two years, they were so caught up in hurting each other that they forgot they had children at all?”

“I didn't kn—”

“How their fights were more important than recognizing their fifteen-year-old daughter was dating a piece of shit

twenty-something guy who beat her up?”

Her eyes welled up with tears. She opened her mouth to say something else, but Jordan barreled on.

“They weren’t even around to answer the phone when the police called, and I—their seventeen-year-old son—had to go peel my sister off the floor of some dingy flat! My *mother* had already moved to Newcastle to be with the man she was spite-fucking while Dad left us to fend for ourselves because he was too busy rotting in his own piss!”

He had to catch his breath after that. Laci blinked, and a tear rolled down her cheek. He was still too angry to feel guilty.

He swallowed. “So, no, I won’t be calling her back. She’s got no right even calling herself a mother.”

She sniffled and dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. Unable to bear it, Jordan turned on his heel and stormed back down the stairs, prepared to sprint across the grounds. He was tempted to run all the way back to London and put this mess behind him. His legs refused to go any faster than a slow walk, so he came around to the side of the house and paced. For how long, he couldn’t say. All he knew was that the rage and guilt stewed inside him.

He hated that he’d yelled at Laci, but he couldn’t take any more of her insisting that he speak to his mother. How could she understand with a family as perfect as hers? He never wished his circumstances on anyone, but he resented her ignorance.

A disruption of the stone pattern along the wall caught his eye, and he slowed to a stop. He thought the whole thing was the same tan stone, but he was wrong. There, beside the trash and recycling bins, was a wooden door, not nearly as grand as the one out front. It was much simpler and worn from the sun. However, the main difference was the rust-covered padlock holding it shut.

Without thinking, Jordan stepped toward it. The moment he did, the wind picked up around him. Dried leaves swept over the dead grass, making a hissing sound that grew louder and louder. The two voices he heard at dinner, and in his dream, swirled around him like a waltz—*Samuel, Caroline, Samuel, Caroline*—as clear as if the speakers stood beside him. Finally, he heard a desperate “Caroline, no!”

“Leave me the fuck alone!” Jordan covered his ears and turned his back to the door.

To his alarm, Gene stood there, holding two full bin bags in one hand and flattened boxes in the other. Everything stopped.

Chapter 16

Jordan lowered his hands and opened his mouth to apologize, but Gene only smiled.

“Funny place for a door, isn’t it?” he said. “Never have been able to get the blasted thing open. Perhaps we’re better off.”

He shuffled over to the bins and flipped open the lid. Jordan went to help him lift the bags up.

“I saw Laci inside,” Gene said. “She was quite upset but wouldn’t say what happened. Is everything alright between you two?”

Jordan heaved a sigh and took care of the boxes as well. “We had a fight.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Gene replied. “I’m sure you’ll work it out. Love always wins.”

“Not always.”

Gene raised a curious eyebrow. “Bad as all that, is it?”

“I dunno...”

“Forgiveness is a pillar of a good relationship.”

“Easy to say with a perfect marriage.”

The words came out before Jordan could stop them, no matter how much he wished he could snatch them out of the air and swallow them. Gene blinked.

“Perfect?” he questioned, and a chuckle rose in his chest. “Oh no, son. Pam and I are far from perfect. We’ve worked hard to get to this place in our marriage.”

Jordan was barely able to resist rolling his eyes.

“I know it seems unlikely given what you’ve seen,” Gene went on. “But there were significant bumps in the road. Some I worried weren’t bumps at all, more like cliffs.”

Jordan didn’t answer, but his skepticism must have shown in his expression.

“Pam had an affair once,” Gene said. “Right after Tate was born.”

That could have knocked Jordan over with a feather. Laci’s mother, that sweet, devoted woman who looked at Gene like he placed every star in the sky just for her, had strayed? How was it possible? Was any relationship sacred?

“I was working a lot,” Gene explained. “Caught up in London. And even though I swore I’d be home on the weekends, more often than not, I stayed in a hotel to save myself the drive out here. I hired a nanny to help Pam out with the kids, but that wasn’t exactly the solution she was looking for.” He paused, looking out over the grounds with a pensive

stare. “She had a landscaper out here to update the garden, and she started seeing him—for months. When I finally came home for Christmas, she told me everything.”

Jordan was still reconciling that something like this could happen to a couple who danced around the dining room to “She’s a Bad Mama Jama” the night before.

“How...” he swallowed. “How did you get over that?”

“I didn’t get over it,” Gene answered. “We got through it. Together.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Well, to put it simply, I had two options: I could forgive her or not forgive her. I knew what would happen if I chose not to forgive her, a divorce that would lead to a love I deeply cherished dissolving and seeing my children even less than I did. I knew what that would do to me, and I wasn’t keen on it.

“So, I chose to forgive her. It was undoubtedly the more difficult decision, but she wanted our marriage back as much as I did. It was worth it to us. So we dug in and did the work. We went to counseling, I cut back my hours at work, and eventually sorted it out so I could work from home full time and only go to the city for meetings. We became partners again. We became intimate again. Before I knew it, we were a family again.”

Jealousy roiled in the pit of Jordan’s stomach. So, it could be done. When you had enough love, you could overcome

feelings of neglect or an affair and avoid a complete breakdown of the family. Why couldn't his parents have had that? Had they not wanted it bad enough? Even for him and Ava?

"How did the kids handle it?" Jordan asked, hating himself for how he treated Laci.

"They never knew," Gene told him. "We never let them know, that is. I didn't want them to look at their mother any differently. Some things are better left unsaid. A bit like that door."

Jordan leaned against the wall and took a deep breath through an unfamiliar tightness in his throat. They cared enough to protect their children. Memories swam to the front of his mind of the screaming matches his parents got into in front of him and Ava, the way their mother flaunted her affair, and how their father would wave the divorce papers he refused to sign in her face.

"I trust your discretion by sharing this with you," Gene said, a knowing look in his eye.

Jordan nodded. "I won't say anything to Laci."

"I appreciate that."

"I admire what you did," Jordan said. "I wish...well, not every family is as lucky as yours."

"All circumstances are different. Just as all people are different. Love isn't always enough to keep people together, but forgiveness? That is a powerful thing. And sometimes, all

it takes is one person to make that choice in order to restore what's been broken.”

Unsure of what else to say, Jordan nodded. Gene stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“I’ll give you a moment,” he said. “When you’re ready, Laci’s in her room packing.”

He left. Jordan let his head fall back and his eyes close. His mind raced with the events of the morning, he wished all of it had gone differently. He wanted more than anything to go home. But that wouldn’t solve anything. He needed to apologize to Laci. But there was one thing he needed to do first.

He pulled his phone from his pocket. His lock screen was a picture of Laci in his kit and added another gut punch of guilt as he opened up his messages. He opened a new message and typed in his mother’s name.



Laci sniffled while carefully rolling Jordan’s jeans and tucking them into his suitcase. She’d left some comfortable things out for him to wear on the drive home, and she had dirty clothes in a separate packing cube, also in his suitcase. She’d already packed her things, but she needed more to do so

she wouldn't keep hearing his voice ringing in her ears with all those horrible things that had happened to him.

She winced at her foolishness. The difference in their upbringing suddenly mattered like it never had before. She was so privileged that she couldn't even conceive of something like what his family endured. So she had pushed him into revealing parts of himself he might have otherwise kept private. What she said to him was true, she did want to be his friend, but that didn't entitle her to his entire family history, did it?

She knew she would apologize. She hoped he would as well since he lashed out so harshly, and it was hurtful, but she wouldn't hold it against him if he didn't. After all, he was already doing so much for her. He hadn't even stayed at his own house for weeks. She wondered if that was part of it. Maybe he was getting tired of playing this game and of sacrificing so much of his life for her. The possibility scared her.

A knock on the door made her turn her head.

She got to her feet. "Jordan."

He grunted back at her, looking uncharacteristically sheepish with his head ducked down and his eyes on the floor.

"Are you alright?"

He grunted again, toeing the hardwood with his shoe.

"I'm sorry about what happened outside. I never should have pushed you about your mum. It's your business, and I should

have kept my nose out of it.” She paused for a beat. “I’m also sorry all of that happened to you, and to Ava. This isn’t pity or anything, I just...I wish it had been better for you.”

Another grunt, but this time, he met her gaze. She waited several long seconds for him to reply, but he didn’t. She shrugged.

“Alright, well, when you remember how to speak, let me know.”

She returned to packing. She heard Jordan step further into the room, but she carried on as if she didn’t know any better. She gave a start when she felt his arms wrap around her from behind. Quickly, she relaxed into him, letting some of her weight rest against his chest.

“Is this alright?” he asked, almost like a child after being scolded.

She nodded, putting her hands on top of his. “Of course.”

“I’m the one who should be apologizing,” he murmured into her ear. “You were only trying to help, and I acted like a fucking asshole. I’m sorry.”

“You were right though. I had no idea what I was talking about.”

“Doesn’t matter. Shouting at you wasn’t the proper reaction.”

“Apology accepted.”

She felt his muscles relax against her.

“Not to make excuses,” he went on. “But this place has got me on edge. And I had this fucking dream last night...I was trying to shake it off.”

“What kind of dream?”

“Hm, wouldn’t you like to know?”

He growled quietly against her skin and pressed his beard into her neck, tickling her. She let out a squeal of a giggle, struggling against him to no avail. She lost her balance and they toppled onto the bed together. He spooned her when they landed, but his grip was loose, so she was able to wiggle around to face him. She held his gaze.

“What was the dream?” she asked again.

He groaned and rolled on top of her, claiming her lips in a searing kiss. As his mouth worked hers, she reached up to thread her fingers through his curls. She could hardly breathe from the intensity of it. Or maybe it was his weight. She didn’t care. All that mattered, all that existed, was Jordan’s kiss.

Her eyes were closed, but she saw something. Jordan, and yet, it wasn’t Jordan.

He was kissing her, but she wasn’t in her leggings and his hoodie. His hands were clamoring with layers of skirts. They weren’t on a bed, but against a wall, fiddles were playing faintly in another room. Not enough to drown out the moan she released into his mouth. Then he pulled away.

She caught her breath while staring into his eyes as her chest heaved.

“Did you see it?” he whispered.

She nodded. “Yes, but what does it mean?”

“Jordan! Laci!” Her mother’s voice echoed from the landing before he could offer an answer. “Lunch is ready! I know you’ve got to get back to town, so no dawdling!”

Jordan cleared his throat. “We should head down.”

She couldn’t believe his suggestion, but she didn’t want to argue again. “Alright.”

He helped her off the bed. Laci went over to the dresser, where she picked up a small box. He shot her a quizzical look.

“It’s the jewelry from the gala,” she explained. “I thought I’d give it to Mum before we go. It’s best to keep it here, I think.”

Jordan’s face shifted like a light bulb had gone off over his head as his eyes locked on the box.

“Don’t tell me that’s got you seeing things now,” she said.

“No, it reminded me of something...” He shook his head. “It’s not important. Let’s go have lunch.”

Pam adored the jewels, but Laci couldn’t stop thinking about all that had taken place over the holiday like the voices, the strange visions, and how she and Jordan had gotten closer. As if Dane hadn’t made her life enough of a horror movie, now her parents’ house was possessed? For the first time, she wasn’t gutted to be saying goodbye.

“Do come see us again soon,” her mother said after a lengthy hug. “We’ve so enjoyed having you.”

“Both of you,” her father said as he shook Jordan’s hand.

“Thank you for including me in your holiday,” Jordan said politely.

“Happy you could join us, dear,” Pam replied, engulfing him in a hug.

“You’re welcome anytime,” Gene added.

Laci went to her father and held him close. All of it had exhausted her, but she always found refuge in her father’s arms. He kissed the top of her head.

“I’m so happy for you, darling girl,” he whispered. “You’ve found a wonderful man.”

She looked over at Jordan saying goodbye to her brothers, signing to Tate that it was good to see him again. “I really have.”

It would have made her happier if she wasn’t certain Jordan was not interested in being with her. As it was, it only broke her heart. But she didn’t let on in front of her parents.

Jordan led her to the car, and as they drove off, she waved to her family out the window. When they were out of sight, she relaxed into the passenger seat.

“Well, that place is fucking haunted,” Jordan said.

She nodded. “So haunted.”

Interlude

Summer, 1815

The sun warmed Caroline to her bones. She nuzzled further into Samuel's side. His arm came around her shoulders and his fingers danced along the exposed skin of her arm. She closed her eyes at his touch and let herself forget that this was improper. They were in their hiding place by the cellar door. No one would look for them there.

"Samuel," she said.

"Yes, my love?"

"Tell me about Scotland again. What will life be like when we go?"

She heard the rumble of a chuckle in his chest. "It won't be as grand as all this. My family owns a wee cottage in the country that's been empty for years. Once we're married, I thought we might use it as our first home."

“Why has it been empty?”

“My parents lived there for a time, but my father caught illness and died. My mother moved to the city to work as a seamstress.”

“She owns her shop now, right?”

“That’s right, love, well remembered.”

She smiled at his praise. “You wouldn’t want to live close to her?”

“Not at first,” he said. “As much as I love my mother, I’ll be wanting you all to myself for several months at least.” He cupped her cheek, and she opened her eyes to meet his gaze. “That way I can ravish you as often as I like.”

Her face heated, and she looked away. It didn’t matter how many times they had been together, it still made her flush when he looked at her that way. And when spoke so brazenly about his desire for her, it made her head swim. Plus, she considered herself well ravished at this point.

His cheerful laugh made her swat playfully at his arm. “You’re a beast to tease me so.”

“And you, my love, are too sweet not to tease,” he said gently as his pointer finger traced her jaw.

She hummed and turned her face to kiss his palm.

“Tell me more,” she said. “I want to keep talking about our future.”

“How would you like to honeymoon on the Isle of Skye?”

“I’ve never been. Is it nice there?”

“There’s nothing like it, miles of green, and the views of the seaside are to die for.”

“Sounds heavenly.” She toyed with a loose string on one of his buttons. “And after the honeymoon? How will we live?”

“I’d like to start painting more and selling my art,” he told her, looking back at the clouds crawling across the blue sky. “Not the portraits of you, of course, but I could do landscapes or family portraits.”

“I think you’d do quite well,” she said. “I’m glad to hear you being so confident.”

It had taken months before he had shared his art with her. But she’d assured him of his talent and had even convinced her father to let him do their family portrait. The earl was so impressed that he hung it up in the library and promised Samuel extra pay if he would do individual portraits of each member of the family. Particularly, the earl himself and his eldest son, to go along with the portraits of the earls that came before, lining the walls of the gallery.

“You’ve given me that,” he said. “No one believed in my art before you.”

“They were foolish. You’re the next great master. I’m certain.”

He pulled her close and his lips captured hers with tender affection.

“Once we’re settled, I’ll make you big and round with my child,” he went on, lowering his hand to her tummy.

She ignored her instinct to push his hand away as he had shown her on several occasions how much he adored every curve on her body. A smile parted her lips as the image appeared to her of her belly poking out with life and Samuel’s hand there in that spot, maybe feeling their child kick. She returned her gaze to his face, which had shifted. His eyes were still warm, but his mouth was pressed into a tight line.

“Samuel?”

“Are you sure it’s what you want, love?” he asked. “I cannot give you the life you’re accustomed to. Our children won’t have—”

She put her fingers to his lips to stop him. “Our children will have everything they need. Parents who love them. And we shall have enough to keep them fed and dressed, don’t you think?”

“Aye, that much is certain,” he replied, his smile slowly returning. “Will it be enough for you? You are giving up so much.”

“Such as? A society that has consistently rejected me? A family that sees me as nothing more than a means to an end? A lifetime beside a man who cannot give me a fraction of the happiness you can?” She shook her head. “I will gladly trade it all.”

He cupped her face in his hand and pulled her in for another kiss, which solidified her decision. There was little she would not give up to keep his kisses.

“I think you might miss your family,” he said. “They do love you.”

“And I love them. But I am only a daughter, the third born. The only way I’ll be of use to them is by securing an advantageous marriage. And, believe me, no one is interested in marrying me.”

“That’s not true,” he said, feigning offense. “I’m extremely interested.”

She giggled. “You’re the first.”

“I’ll be the only,” he said firmly. “You’re mine now, my love.”

He accentuated the point with a deep, possessive kiss that left her breathless.

She wondered if she should tell him about her mother’s latest proclamation that Lord Seymour was planning to call. Evidently, he and her father had been speaking for some time, and Seymour was on the marriage market. It had been a respectable amount of time since his first wife had passed, though his estate was so far away, not many of the London debutantes were clamoring for his affections. Plus, he had a reputation for being rather standoffish if not rude at times.

She decided against telling Samuel. It was too early. Besides, once Lord Seymour saw her and her size, he would certainly

not agree to the match. There was no need to worry Samuel, or herself for that matter. All would be well when they finally escaped England and made their happy life in the Scottish countryside.

Chapter 17

For the first time in over a decade, Jordan laid eyes on his mother.

She sat at a table by Coffeeify's front window, the very table where he and Laci had agreed to their arrangement. Somehow, with Nina, it looked further away.

He watched her turn her head, her dark brown curls and sharp features, which so resembled his, caught the light. Last time he saw her she was exhausted from the divorce from his father and everything that came after. She looked younger now. When she caught his eye, she smiled.

He attempted to smile back but couldn't muster a proper one, so he pointed to the counter to let her know he was ordering, not ignoring her. She nodded and sipped her coffee. Jordan ordered a full bean black coffee, so it was ready in no time. Bracing himself with a breath, he went to the table.

"Hi," she said, and up close, he saw her smile falter.

Appreciating that she didn't try to hug him, he took a seat.
"Hi."

"Thanks for agreeing to meet me," she said, scooting her chair closer to the table. "Bit chipper this place, isn't it?"

"They do a lot of good," Jordan returned with a shrug. "I come here a lot."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I've even got the Coffeeify-Your-Day-Every-Day Rewards Card. Fucking mouthful, but it's worth it."

"That's nice." She cleared her throat. "I wanted to let you know how sorry I am for how I handled things with your father. And for not being there when you and Ava needed me. It's the biggest regret of my life. I expect I'll spend the rest of my days making up for it."

He also appreciated that she didn't attempt any niceties before getting right to it. But they weren't that kind of family. He wouldn't have been comfortable updating her on his life until he was certain he wanted her back in it. So far she was off to a good start.

"Thank you," he said stiffly though he meant it. He'd waited years to hear those words. Though he acknowledged that he hadn't made it easy on her to say them given how determined he had been to ignore her.

"I've seen a counselor who helped me realize that while I was a victim of my ex-husband's behavior, my response victimized my children. And that was not okay. I should have

been a better mother to you. I was just so hurt and angry—” she stopped short and shook her head. “No. No excuses. I’m sorry. And that’s that.”

Jordan sipped his coffee while his brain clamored for a reply. As grateful as he was for the apology, and that she had worked on herself, it didn’t erase everything that had happened. It certainly did not rid him of the memory of Ava, barely conscious on the floor, bruises blooming over her eyes, and blood dribbling from her mouth. His expression soured.

“You left a fucking mess for me to clean up,” he said.

“I know.” She hung her head. “Ava told me what happened and—”

“You’ve spoken to Ava?”

“Yes,” she said with a swallow. “She and I have been speaking for a few months.”

His frown deepened. “She never told me.”

“She was afraid you’d shout at her.”

“I would have.”

The corners of her mouth quivered upward. “You’re a good brother to protect her so well. I’m glad she had you then. I’m glad she has you now.”

“She shouldn’t have to rely on me,” he shot back. “Then or now.”

“You’re right.” Her face fell. “I’m sorry.”

“Not that she needs me now, she’s off to fucking Australia,” he said, bitterness in his voice. His eyes snapped up to his mother, who was poised to speak, but he beat her to it. “And don’t say I can’t protect her forever. She’s my sister forever.”

Nina closed her mouth and sat back. “Aye, so she is.”

Uneasy silence fell between them. Jordan stewed about Ava keeping this from him, but he knew he would have to let it go. She had every right to begin a relationship with their mother again if she wanted it. It wasn’t as if he had consulted her about this meeting. He leaned forward, something else on his mind.

“Can I ask you something?” he said.

Nina nodded. “Anything.”

“What are you hoping to gain by reaching out to us now?”

She didn’t respond for a long moment, drumming her fingers along the side of her cup. She chewed her bottom lip, and he waited, an expectant look in his eyes.

“I made a terrible mistake, leaving you,” she said. “And I know I cannot undo it. But I’d like to start fresh with you both, form a new relationship, and be in your lives consistently. I see David with his children and grandchildren, and it makes me ache.”

Jordan bit back a scoff at the mention of David, the man she had cheated on his father with. They were married now. The gold ring on her left hand was evidence enough, but she had also sent him and Ava invitations to the reception since the

wedding itself was at the courthouse. He only knew it was an invitation because Ava had opened it and told him. He had put the unopened parcel straight in the bin the moment he saw who it was from.

“To sum it up,” she went on, “I want my family back. I’m willing to do whatever it takes to get you both to trust me again. Even if it means I’ve got to get on my knees and beg.”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t be dramatic.”

“I’m only emphasizing how much it means to me. You’re my child, Jordan. I love you.”

He couldn’t look at her once she said that. He hadn’t heard those words from either of his parents in over fifteen years. His chest felt like it was in a vise grip. He remembered Gene’s story about how it took effort from both parties to repair his relationship with Pam. Well, Nina was doing the work, holding up her end. All Jordan had to do was reach out and match her.

“Yeah,” he choked out, blinking away the sting in his eyes. “That’s why it hurt so much.”

“I know.” Her bottom lip trembled. “But if you let me, I’ll spend every day making it right.”

She held her hand out over the table, palm open and welcoming. Jordan took a deep breath and offered his own, wrapping his fingers around hers. He vividly recalled when he was a boy, and his mother would read to him. She had held his hand because he wanted to help her turn the pages, an image he quickly pushed down or he was certain he’d start

blubbering, and his fifteen-year streak of not crying would be over.

“Alright,” he said. “We can...alright.”

“I know it’ll take time,” she said with a watery smile. “I’m just glad we can finally start.”

He nodded, then he took a large sip of coffee and shook away a sniffle, letting go of her hand. “You know Ava’s not giving you grandchildren, right?”

“Aye, she’s made that clear,” she chuckled. “What about you? I know you’ve only been with Laci a few months, but —”

“How d’you know about Laci?” he asked.

“I’ve kept up with you on social media.”

“Really?”

“Really. I watch all your matches on telly too.”

He blinked. “All of them?”

“Never miss one.”

“That’s...wow.”

“I did a selfish thing back then, but I’ve never stopped caring.”

“Yeah...”

She moved a little closer. “I’m happy you’ve found someone. And how remarkable that she looks so like that girl you used to draw all the time. Are you still doing that?”

“Art? Aye,” he said still recovering from learning she had kept tabs on him all these years. “I paint as well as sketch. Hardly get a fucking minute for either now that I’ve got a girlfriend, though.”

“I’d love to see your work sometime if you’re open to it,” she said. “I could hardly keep a pencil out of your hand when you were wee. And it was always that same girl. God, what was it you called her?”

He raised an eyebrow. “She had a name?”

“Aye, she did,” she said, looking thoughtfully at her coffee cup. “I know I know it. It’s just—oh! Caroline! That’s what you called her. It was definitely Caroline.”

Jordan’s blood went cold. “It was Caroline?”

Nina’s brow furrowed. “Am I wrong? I thought for sure—”

“No, no, I don’t remember her having a name. I just…” His mind whirled with questions. Not of her, but of himself. “Was it really Caroline?”

“*Lady* Caroline sometimes,” she said, amused. “You had a whole story for her too. She was an English lord’s daughter or something. I can’t remember the details, but I think there was a wee bit of romance? I dunno. I wish I’d written it down.”

Jordan wished that she had too. Perhaps his childhood mind had some answers to the mystery of Caroline. And maybe Samuel too. Because how did his imaginary story tie into the Colfield estate? How could there be a connection between that

and a Scottish boy hundreds of miles away? Not to mention centuries?

He had an idea. One that formed after Laci mentioned the jewelry she got at the gala, and he remembered something Billie said to him that night. *When I met Ethan, it felt like I'd met him before. It didn't matter that he was from halfway across the world. I knew him.* He had half a mind to call her up and demand to know what the fuck that meant. What had they discovered that made them so convinced they were meant for each other after just six months?

“Jordan?”

His mother's voice drew him out of his racing thoughts. “Sorry?”

“You alright? You look like you're gonna be sick.”

“Fine,” he told her. “Fuck, that brought up a lot.”

“This has been a lot,” she agreed. “If you want, we can stop. I'm in town for a few more days, and I'd like to see you again to catch up. Could we have dinner one night? Or maybe I could visit you at training?”

“Dinner is fine,” he said.

He was still adjusting to speaking to her. He didn't want his teammates as an audience.

“Alright,” she said with a soft smile. “Dinner then. I'm looking forward to it, Jordan, really.”

“Me too,” he replied and checked his watch. “I’ve got to get to training, so how about I text you later and we can plan something?”

“Perfect.”

He stood up and stilled, wondering how to say goodbye. She got to her feet as well. She didn’t go in for a hug, but she wasn’t closed off either. She was letting him take the lead. He considered a hug, but hesitated. He wasn’t sure he was ready.

“Uh...I’ll see you,” he said with a nod.

“Right,” she said, resigned as she picked up her purse.

After one last lingering look, he left the coffee shop.

Chapter 18

After checking her hair to ensure it had that proper sexy fluff about it, Laci headed down to her kitchen. She got to keep the lingerie she wore for her photoshoot that day, and it was the perfect pink, sheer lace weapon for another attempt at getting Jordan to cave. It left little to the imagination, which was precisely what she was after.

She set the mood, too, with the fresh peonies he'd gotten her in the vase on her counter, a couple candles flickering, and her lights dimmed. There was no mistaking the romantic atmosphere.

As attracted as they were to each other, there was something else as well. She couldn't explain it—and there was a lot she couldn't explain these days—but she knew what it meant. Maybe, after being with her, Jordan might see that relationships weren't so bad and what started off as pretend could become real.

She glanced at the clock. He was due back from training any minute. She chose that day because she always felt the most

confident after a lingerie shoot. Looking down, she wondered what she could do to make herself more enticing.

“Nipples!” she said with a snap of her fingers.

They’d be more tempting if they were hard, so she trotted over to the back window. The chilly January air would perk them up. She slid the window up, and a blast of cold did the trick. They became more visible beneath the fabric of her bra. Jordan would lose it.

The triumph was short-lived as a mass of gray swooped over her head with a feathery flapping sound. She screamed and ducked, protecting her head with her arms. When silence followed, she chanced a look.

A fat pigeon stood on her kitchen island.

It cooed, and its head twitched around as it strutted over the marble. Laci watched in horror as it walked over the cheese plate she’d set out. Pigeons in London weren’t timid, but this crossed a line.

“Okay,” she whispered, taking a deep breath to draw on her courage. “Okay, it’s a bird. Just a bird.”

Keeping her eyes trained on the bird and her back pressed to the wall, she sidestepped into the kitchen. It fluttered its wings and hopped. Laci yelped with alarm, but it didn’t take flight again. She had a small saucepan drying on a rack by the sink that was about pigeon sized. Even if it wasn’t, it was all she had. In slow motion, she reached for it and wrapped her

fingers around the handle. Her eyes tracked the bird as she took hold of the lid with her free hand.

Like a lioness on the hunt, she slunk toward the counter, the saucepan poised and ready to strike. The bird ruffled its feathers, and she froze. Thankfully, it carried on again. She realized how absurd she must look, stalking a pigeon in the middle of her kitchen, wearing lingerie no less, but that didn't matter. She needed to get the damn thing out of her house.

Holding her breath, she raised the pot over her head, waiting for the bird to stop moving. The moment it was still with its wings tucked in, she brought the cookware down over it in one swift motion.

It moved.

She squealed and held it firm.

“Ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod, ohmygod,” she squeaked, pulling it over to the edge of the countertop, lid at the ready.

Shuddering at the sound of wings rapping against the metal, she closed it in. Then she let out a breath. The bird was secured. All she had to do was get it out. On wobbly legs, she made her way back toward the window it had flown in through. She was wondering if it would fly right back in when the front door opened.

“Laci,” Jordan said as he walked in, throwing his bag to the side. “I’ve got something great to tell you. I spoke to my mother this morning.”

“You *what?*” she gasped, letting her arms fall to the side and releasing the pigeon back into the house. “Oh, fuck!”

It flew straight at Jordan’s head. He caught it out of the air like a cat with reflexes no doubt formed from endless hours of keeper drills. He shot her a bewildered look.

“What have you got him for?” he asked.

“He fl...he flew in!” she cried. “I opened my window to... to...well, it’s *my* window to open as I please, and he just flew in!”

“So, you were going to...boil him? As punishment?”

She huffed. “No, I was trying to get him back outside.”

He spied the open window behind her, walked over, and hurled the bird through it before closing it again. Without saying anything else, he went to the sink and washed his hands. Keeping his back to her, he spoke again. “Any reason you were doing all this in your knickers?”

“You *did* notice,” she said with a smirk.

“How could I not? You look fucking amazing.”

“Thank you!” She only let herself be flattered for a moment. “Wait—more importantly, you spoke to your mother? How did it go?”

He faced her and leaned against the counter while he dried his hands with a tea towel. “It went well. I’ll see her again before she heads back up north.”

“Where is she living?”

“Newcastle.”

“I see,” she said and paused for a beat. “Tell me more about it. What did she say? And what did you say?”

“She came right out with an apology,” he said. “She told me she went to counseling and worked on herself. She wanted to be better when she came back into our lives. To her credit, she acknowledged how shitty it was of her to leave us in the first place. She wants to make up for it anyway she can.” He stopped and swallowed. “For the first time, I actually *wanted* to forgive her. I think I can finally get there.”

“Jordan, that’s wonderful,” Laci said. She stepped closer, and he wrapped his arms around her. “It takes a lot to forgive the things you went through with her. I’m so proud of you.”

The soft smile he showed her turned her legs into jelly. Luckily, she was leaning on him.

“I’ve got you to thank,” he said. “Seeing your family together, and a nice chat with your dad, showed me a new perspective.”

She beamed. “That’s lovely.”

He tucked her hair behind her ear, his gaze warm like melted caramel. It was like she’d never seen before. He showed more than affection, he was being vulnerable.

“I’m starting to see some other things differently too,” he said.

Her heart slammed against her chest. “Are you?”

“Aye.”

He said nothing more as he captured her lips in a tender kiss. She yielded to him. All thoughts or doubts banished from her mind at his embrace. It wasn't about the physical after all. He'd finally surrendered when something on the inside changed. Her arms coiled around his neck, and she pulled him closer. His tongue sought hers out, and she gave it to him, but they hardly had time together before he pulled away again. Laci showed her displeasure with a nip at his bottom lip. He groaned before he opened his eyes.

His gaze traveled hungrily down her body, his fingers following and tracing the edges of her lingerie with a feather-light touch. When he grazed the side of her breast, she gasped.

“This all for me?” he asked.

She nodded. “I wanted to seduce you properly. The pigeon threw quite a wrench in that.”

“I see.” He chuckled. “Why were you opening the window at all?”

“To get my nipples hard,” she admitted with a sigh.

He threw his head back and laughed. “Fucking hell, Laci.”

“It's not as if pigeons are flying into my home regularly. I hardly expected—”

“That's not what I'm talking about,” he said, pulling her in close again. “I meant I don't want you opening windows when your man isn't here to protect you.”

It took her a moment before she realized he was talking about Dane still being out there somewhere. For a fleeting second, she was furious that she couldn't be comfortable in her home again. But he was the reason she and Jordan were in this position at all. And that left one elephant in the room that couldn't be ignored. No matter how much the ache between her legs throbbed at the thought of stopping now when she was so close to what she wanted.

“My man, are you?” she asked, quirking an eyebrow. Maybe this conversation didn't have to completely kill the mood. She toyed with the collar of his shirt. “For real? Or only for my protection?”

“I'd like to try for real,” he answered, taking her hand. “If you want me.”

She swallowed the screech of excitement that bubbled up in her throat and glanced down at her outfit. “I think it's pretty clear.”

“You're sure it's me you want?” His eyes searched hers. “To be your first?”

Her lips longed for his again. Her skin ached for the pressure of his hands. The heat in her belly demanded his weight on top of her. “Yes, Jordan,” she said breathlessly. She would have jumped him right here in the kitchen if her legs would let her. “I want you.”

His forehead touched hers, and he inhaled deeply. “Say it again.”

She met his gaze. “I want you, Jordan.”

His hands slid down over her ass, and he squeezed, making her gasp.

“Again,” he growled.

“I want yo—”

She hardly got the words out before his lips were on hers, and he lifted her into his arms.

Chapter 19

He carried her all the way to her bedroom. At her size, she never thought a man would carry her anywhere, much less up a flight of stairs and down the hall. But Jordan made no noise of complaint. He eased her onto the bed before covering her body with his, his mouth staying locked on hers. She whimpered against him, pulling him closer, needing his touch everywhere.

His lips trailed down to her jawline, teasing at her neck, before he murmured into her skin, “Slow down, angel. We’ve got all night.”

“I want—oh!” She gasped when he nipped at her ear.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered.

“Your clothes off,” she sighed.

The friction of his cotton T-shirt against her soft lace was nice, but she was aching to feel his skin. Her fingers were at his hemline. He kissed her swiftly before standing up and tugging his shirt over his head. She could get her hands on

those abs at last. Her lips turned up into a grin, and she started to get onto her knees.

“Oh, no,” he said, gently returning her to her back. “Tonight’s about you. While I get undressed, I want you to tell me every fucking thing you’ve ever dreamed about for your first time. I want to make it happen.”

She blinked, bewildered. She’d often thought about what her first time might be like, but she never nailed down a dream scenario. She just wanted it to be fun. She wanted to enjoy herself, and she wanted to be with someone she trusted. He already checked those boxes.

Trying not to get distracted by how much of him she could see as he yanked his jeans down his legs (that *ass*), she tried to conjure up specifics.

“Uh...oral,” she blurted out. “I’d like that.”

“I assume you mean receiving,” he returned with a smirk.

She nodded. “I can reciprocate too.”

“Another night,” he said. “Anything else?”

She opened her mouth to tell him she wanted to play it by ear and let things flow naturally, but at that point, he tugged his boxers off and kicked them away. He stood before her stark naked, his cock at attention, and it was *large*. Not that she had any real experiences to compare him to except things she’d seen in porn, but he definitely measured up to guys like that. Her throat went dry.

“Hey,” he said, taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger. He tilted her face toward his. “We’re taking it slow, alright? I’ll make sure you’re ready.”

How he had such a read on her, she didn’t know. He spared her from having to say anything else with another blistering kiss. He kissed her through taking off her robe and tossing it aside before they parted for air.

“Jordan,” she said softly. “I don’t want to give you a laundry list of things to do. I just want to go with what feels right. For us. In this moment.”

He stroked her jaw with his thumb. “I want it to be perfect for you.”

“It will be.”

“You think so?”

“Of course,” she said. “I’m with you.”

Unadulterated affection filled his eyes before he kissed her again.

“I’ll check in with you plenty,” he said.

She nodded. “I’m glad for that.”

His lips turned up into a wolfish grin when his finger found the strap of her bra. “Someday, I want to fuck you in one of these wee sets you model.”

She shivered at the suggestion. “But tonight?”

“Tonight, I want to see all of you.”

He glanced at her face for permission, and she smiled before he reached behind her and unclasped her bra. Her breasts fell free, and she fought the instinct to cover up. When she saw the look on his face, the urge disappeared altogether. He gazed at her like a freshly unearthed treasure, a hungry gleam in his eye.

“Fucking gorgeous tits, angel,” he said.

“Show me how much you like them, then,” she shot back.

He didn’t keep her waiting. He took one pebbled nipple into his mouth and flicked his tongue across the tip. His hand covered her other breast and kneaded it between his fingers. Heat pooled in her belly.

The heat of his mouth, the pressure of his hand, the tingle of his beard against her skin was more overwhelming than she had imagined. She wanted more. It wasn’t enough when his mouth and hand switched places. She rubbed her thighs together to ease the mounting tension between them.

“Jordan,” she whined. “More, please.”

He pushed her back on the bed and kissed her some more, leaving a fiery trail of kisses down to her tummy. She giggled, and he shot her a questioning look.

“Your beard tickles,” she said.

A wicked smile claimed his lips. “That so?”

Her eyes went wide. “No, Jordan—”

It was too late. He ran his beard all over her skin along with his mouth and fingers, tickling her relentlessly. She shrieked with laughter and wriggled around in a useless attempt to keep him at bay. As she was running out of breath, he let up.

“Not fair,” she panted. “Tickling is decidedly unsexy.”

“Laughing together is super fucking sexy,” he argued. “I like hearing you laugh. Besides, it’ll help you relax.”

He was right. She was confident that she wanted him but felt nervous nonetheless. The tickling had relieved some of that tension from her muscles. She craned her neck to kiss him again.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Can I kiss you somewhere else now?” he asked, his fingers dancing along the elastic waistband of her panties.

She nodded. “Yes, please.”

He grinned and moved to kneel between her legs, regarding her thighs with an adoring gaze as he slid his hands over them. Finally, she understood what he had meant about Burton capturing longing without showing the subject’s eyes. As Jordan looked over her body, she saw it, a perfect portrayal of desperate yearning. As if he was worried looking away might make her disappear. He tracked every inch of her, following his hands as they dragged her knickers down her legs. When they were off, he leaned over and pressed his lips to the inside of her knee.

“You’re fucking beautiful,” he said, meeting her eyes again. “The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Her heart nearly stopped beating, but the feeling of his mouth approaching the apex of her thighs got it going again—rapidly.

“Gonna make you come with my mouth first,” he rasped. “Get you nice and wet for me.”

Her hips rocked toward him in reply. He went slow, leading with his tongue, using the tip to circle her clit. She nearly jumped off the bed at the contact. A breathy moan fell from her lips, which was all the encouragement he needed. He pressed his whole mouth against her and groaned, sending a fresh wave of pleasure up her spine.

She had used vibrators in the past to get herself off, but it was nothing like this. Jordan’s mouth was pure magic. As if he had tasted her a hundred times. Every touch, every motion found exactly the right spot to make her arch her back and whine his name.

The spring in her belly tightened. She could barely keep her eyes open. Hell, she could hardly remember her name. The only thing in the world was the man between her thighs and the devilry that was his tongue. He worked her up until she couldn’t breathe. Finally, with one last stroke of his tongue, white exploded behind her eyes and she came undone.

“Jordan,” she sighed, tugging on his hair from where he eased her back down.

He kissed her thigh. “You alright?”

She nodded, still trying to form words.

He crawled over her again, kissing her on her chest, neck, and cheek before finding her lips. She tasted herself on him and moaned.

“I’m gonna make you come again,” he said between kisses. “This time with my fingers. That alright?”

“Yes.” Her pussy clenched at the thought. “Oh, God, yes.”

He shifted so that he was beside her, and his hand snaked over her body until it reached her wet heat. He ran the pad of his middle finger over her throbbing clit, and she gasped but did not pull away. She bucked up instead, longing for more of him.

“Laci,” he said hoarsely as he toyed with her. “Have you ever had anything inside you before?”

“J-just my fingers,” she told him. “But not much. I can’t get the right angle to make it feel good, so I usually just use my vibrator on my clit.”

She heard a rumble from his chest. “Vibrator, you say?”

“We can try it another time,” she said. “Tonight, I want you.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said. “Relax for me. We’ll start with one finger.”

She nodded. He sank his middle finger into her. Her head fell back, and she moaned. When he crooked his finger toward

himself, her breath hitched and a jolt of desire ran through her body.

“There?” he asked, a smug smirk on his face.

“Don’t stop,” she groaned back.

He continued with a slow, deliberate rhythm, stroking her G-spot as his thumb worked her clit. Her lower belly stirred like molten lava. Yet still, she wanted more.

“I’m gonna add another finger, is that alright?” he asked.

It was like he was reading her mind. She nodded again.

When he slid his index finger in, she felt the stretch she often heard or read about that accompanied the first time. It wasn’t nearly as uncomfortable as everyone made it seem. In fact, the exquisitely slow pace he used to drag his fingers in and out had her chewing her bottom lip. Her hands gripped fistfuls of the sheets to keep her hips from rolling despite how desperate she was to ride his hand until she finished.

“How’re you feeling?” he asked.

“I...” Her words melted into a hoarse little whine when he applied more pressure. “Oh, *fuck*, Jordan, right there.”

“Yeah? Making you feel good, baby?”

She nodded with a whimper.

“Can I go a little faster?”

“Please,” she sighed.

He pumped his fingers, setting a steady pace that had her heels digging into the mattress. That pressure built in her belly

again. Her walls clamped around his fingers. The faster he went, the more they fluttered. White hot lust coursed through her. She couldn't hold her body back anymore, and her hips bucked into his hand.

“That’s it,” he said softly. “Doing so good, angel. We’ll stay like this until you come.”

She was close. Agonizingly close. True to his word, he maintained his even rhythm and pressure, hitting exactly the right spot with the consistency of a machine. She toppled over the edge with a lurch and choked on a cry of his name while holding tightly to his arm.

As she caught her breath, she felt his beard against her cheek. Her heart was pounding so hard that it rang in her ears, so she didn't hear the words he murmured into her skin. But she felt the praise in them. She squeezed her eyes shut and opened them. His face came into view. The moment he met her gaze, he bent to kiss her. Slow and soft.

“We can stop here,” he whispered when they parted. “Are you tired?”

“You haven't quite worn me out yet, Jordan Frawley,” she teased. “I want all of you.”

He grinned, then kissed her again, hot and heavy.

“Have you got any lube?” he asked.

“Nightstand, top drawer,” she answered, so he reached for it.

Wet as she was, she appreciated that he thought of lube, as well, given his size.

“Birth control and protection?” he went on.

“I’ve got an IUD, and no previous partners, so I’m good,” she said. “You?”

“My latest tests have come back clear. But I can still wear a condom if that would make you more comfortable.”

She shook her head. “I want to feel you.”

He nodded and popped open the bottle of lube. Even though he’d given her two mind-blowing orgasms, her cheeks warmed as she watched him rub himself with a liberal amount of it to cover the length of him. Her blush deepened when he let out a sigh of relief. He caught her eye.

“Are you enjoying watching me touch myself?” he asked.

“It’s really hot,” she said with a sly grin. “Wouldn’t you like to watch me sometime?”

“You’ve got no idea how much I’d enjoy that,” he groaned. “But, for now, lie back down.”

She hadn’t realized she’d come up onto her elbows, but she didn’t want to take her eyes off him even for a moment. That gorgeous, sweet man was going to be her first. She didn’t want it to be a blur. She wanted to commit everything to memory including the look on his face as he crawled back over her once more.

“Laci,” he said, and her eyes found his. “Take a deep breath for me.”

She inhaled as much as her lungs could take.

“And let it out—slowly,” he went on.

She obeyed, letting the air out through her mouth in an easy stream. With it, she released any remaining doubts, anxiety, or fear. It was Jordan after all. Her fortress of a man, behind whom she was totally safe. No harm would come to her in his arms. Her keeper.

She felt the tip of his cock at her entrance. His forehead came to rest against hers, and their eyes fell closed.

“Deep breath in, angel,” he instructed, and she did, letting the sound of his voice engulf her. “And back out.”

She exhaled.

“Spread your legs a bit wider for me—that’s it.”

He pushed into her.

Her mouth fell open, and she gasped as he filled her up inch by careful inch. The stretch was ten times as intense as the feeling of his fingers. His dick was so much thicker, but it didn’t hurt. She swore she had never felt more satisfied.

Her breath came in short, sharp bursts as she adjusted to him.

“Fuck, you take me so well,” he said, his voice low. “Feel so good, angel.”

She clenched at his praise. Her arms, as if of their own accord, wrapped around him to bring him closer and deeper into her. She could feel him everywhere. Inside and out. In her blood, in her heart, down into her very bones. He was there. And he belonged.

“Move,” she whispered. “Please, move. Jordan, please.”

He slowly rocked his hips, using shallow strokes to get her used to the motion. She keened beneath him, her back arching up off the mattress, and he picked up speed with his thrusts.

Her cries increased in volume and pitch as their bodies rolled together, their rhythm as constant and true as the tide.

Sensitive as she was from the first two orgasms, Laci climbed toward her next peak with surprising speed. How was every thrust so perfect? How did he know exactly the right thing to say? How did he feel as if he were made for her? Her nails bit into the skin of his back as her legs trembled. His name tumbled from her lips again and again as he drove it home, and she unraveled.

“Fuck, Laci, that’s so good,” he groaned. “Fucking perfect pussy. *Fuck!*”

His release followed hers. They rode out the high together and came down with deep breaths and pounding hearts.

As she lay boneless beneath him, an image appeared behind her eyes. She was still under Jordan only he had much longer hair, and they were at the estate house. Rather, they were outside the estate house, behind the terrace, with a blanket

between her dress and the grass. She could feel the heat of the sun on her face.

“Laci.”

She opened her eyes to see the real Jordan hovering above her. His brows knit together over his eyes.

“You alright?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she answered, far too quickly. “Yes, I...sorry, I’m...”

She tugged him close for a kiss, holding the picture in her mind as she did, hoping it would help him understand as it helped her when he’d had a dream. When he pulled away wide-eyed, she knew he’d seen.

“We have got to figure that out,” he said.

“I agree. But how?”

“Dunno, really. I can’t even think right now.”

She giggled. “Me either.”

He kissed her swiftly on the lips. “I’m gonna pull out. It might not feel good.”

She nodded and braced herself. It stung a little, but it was over before it caused any serious discomfort. He rolled over beside her and pulled her into his arms. She tucked her head beneath his chin, settling into his chest.

“Jordan,” she said softly.

“Yeah?”

“It was perfect.”

Chapter 20

Jordan couldn't recall a time he'd gotten better sleep than he had the last week he spent making love to Laci every night. He was out so hard that even the dreams about the estate house no longer woke him. They had become more frequent since he and Laci had gotten intimate. But he hadn't wanted to ruin everything by trying to place meaning on them. They were only dreams, after all.

That was until he awoke one night to the sound of a cry like a wounded animal coming from the end of Laci's bed.

His eyes snapped open, and he sat up, his arm shooting out to cover Laci, who had also been startled awake. She yanked the sheet up over her chest. Jordan blinked, forcing his eyes to adjust to the darkness. His blood ran cold.

Dane stood at the foot of the bed.

His spindly form and shocking eyes were unmistakable. For a fleeting moment, Jordan wondered if it was a nightmare. But an object in Dane's hand glinted in the moonlight as it slipped

from his grasp and hit the floor with a metallic clatter. He let out another sob and fell to his knees.

Laci screamed.

It was real.

Jordan sprang from the bed and tackled Dane. Dane wept, but Jordan could only make out the words “it’s true” and “she’s ruined.”

“Laci, call the police!” Jordan cried.

She snatched her phone.

At the mention of police, Dane made the first semblance of a struggle. He caught Jordan by surprise with a knee to the stomach, which knocked the wind out of him. Jordan fell to the side, allowing Dane to slip free. Jordan scrambled to his feet, but stopped short when he saw a knife on the floor. A knife. From Laci’s kitchen. He took off after Dane.

He thundered down the stairs and looked around. The silence made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He hadn’t heard a door close, so Dane still had to be inside.

The only sound he could detect was the pounding of his own heart. Panting, he rounded the corner into the living room.

He heard Dane’s shout before he felt his weight against his back. Jordan went to ground, turning so he would land face up. Dane fell on top of Jordan, but the latter was quick. He put his hands up to catch Dane on the chest, then shoved with all his might to get Dane off him before he could be overpowered.

Dane stumbled back and landed on the coffee table.

The glass top shattered beneath his weight. Jordan scrambled to his feet. Dane stood, and shards crunched beneath his sneakers. Jordan stepped back.

Absurdly, he realized how vulnerable he was in only his boxers. He knew Dane had been armed. And with the cargo pants and coat he had on, there were plenty of places to conceal more. He didn't dare steal a glance at the knife block to see if any more were missing though. He couldn't risk taking his eyes off Dane for a second.

Laci appeared on the stairs.

Dane spotted her as soon as Jordan did, and Dane lunged. She jumped back with a yelp, but Jordan blocked Dane with a shove in the back before he could get close. Dane slid across the floor, stopping before his back hit the front door. He clamored to his feet and squared up to Jordan again.

Before they could trade any more blows, blue lights flashed outside the window, accompanied by the wail of a siren. Dane's eyes went wide, and he bolted for the back door.

Jordan grabbed him by the coat. "Gotcha!"

"You wish." Dane shrugged out of it. He hurtled over the couch and was in the back garden within seconds. Jordan pursued.

He heard Laci call after him, but he ignored her.

He scanned the darkness as he caught his breath. There had to be some way to tell where Dane went, motion in the bushes

or tracks in the grass, but there was nothing.

He vanished.

“Fuck!” Jordan punched the siding on the house.

“Hands up!”

Jordan looked up at two officers approaching with sidearms drawn and pointed directly at his chest. He obeyed with a scowl. Before he got his hands in the air, Laci came out as well.

“Not him, that’s my boyfriend!” she cried.

“The guy you’re after took off,” Jordan explained, putting an arm around Laci’s shoulders. She was trembling.

The officers nodded and headed into the yard. Jordan led Laci back inside where a third officer, the same one who’d come the first time Dane showed up at Laci’s house, stood looking forlornly at the smashed remains of her coffee table. He turned to Jordan and Laci.

“We missed him?” the officer asked.

Jordan nodded. “Aye, he’s a slippery wee fucker.”

“I’ll need your statements.”

He interviewed Jordan and Laci separately. Laci went first so that the medics could look Jordan over, but he only had minor scrapes and bruises, nothing worse than what he got in training. He found himself impossibly angrier retelling what happened than he was when it happened. He should have been faster. He should never have let his guard down. He should

have smashed Dane's fucking skull in. Each time he looked at Laci, ashen-faced and frightened, he went through all the things he should have done again. How could he have been so careless?

"Miss Miller, I believe it is time to stay somewhere else," the officer advised. "Especially since you don't know how he got in. You're certain the door was locked?"

"Positive," she said. "I check every night before we go to bed."

"Have you been away from home recently? Did you travel for Christmas?"

"Yes, but what's that got to do with it?"

"It's possible he cased the home while you were gone. Did you have any security installed? Cameras? Anything like that?"

"A couple outside by the doors."

"We'll need to see the footage from those. It could help us sort out how he managed to get inside."

"Of course."

"Do you have somewhere else to stay?"

"She'll stay with me," Jordan said firmly, discovery of his studio be damned. He had to keep her safe.

"Very well," the officer said. "I suggest you pack for several weeks. Don't return to this home alone if you have to come back."

“But I—”

“We’ll let you know if we find anything.”

He walked off, pulling on gloves, as he bent to pick up Dane’s abandoned coat on the floor. Laci looked up at Jordan with watery eyes.

“Oh my God,” she whimpered, and buried her face in his chest.

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips to the top of her head. “It’ll be alright.”

“What if it doesn’t stop?” she sobbed. “What if he keeps following me? Even to America?”

He blinked. He’d almost forgotten the whole reason Laci suggested a fake relationship was because there was an expiration date. With everything going on, it had slipped his mind. His chest grew painfully tight at the thought of her being so far away and outside of his protection. The job she had there was on an indefinite timeline. He had no idea when she would be back or what it meant for them now that things were no longer pretend.

“He won’t,” he said with a shake of his head. His feelings weren’t important right now. “You don’t leave for months. They’ll catch him before then.”

“What if they don’t? Nothing’s guaranteed, and he’s not giving up. What are we going to do?”

Her use of *we* gave him some comfort. She was still thinking of them together.

“The what ifs will drive you mad,” he said. “You’re safe, angel. That’s what we should focus on. We’ll get you to my flat and get you settled in. It’ll be alright.”

She looked up to meet his gaze. “Thank heaven for you, Jordan.”

She stood on her toes, and he bent at the waist to meet her for a kiss.



Jordan got Laci away from her house as the news crews were arriving. It hadn’t taken her long to pack what she needed. His main concern was what she might think of his place. It was a mere two-bedroom flat as opposed to her three-bedroom house. Plus, there was the issue of his studio.

He’d converted the second bedroom into his ideal workspace when he moved in. Inside, there were paintings of Laci everywhere. He wasn’t ready for her to see them, so he was thinking of ways to get her to his room without her seeing.

“Don’t worry if your place isn’t tidy,” she said. “You haven’t been there in a while.”

“I’ve kept it up alright,” he replied.

Truthfully, he’d hired a cleaning lady to go in once a week to straighten up and do basic maintenance. He’d only been back

to grab things he needed every once in a while. Hell, these days he was even doing his laundry at Laci's.

“Still,” she said. “All I want is to have a shower and go to bed. I won't be snooping around.”

He reached over and took her hand.

When they arrived, Jordan led Laci to the bathroom off the master, gave her a towel, and left her to it. He went into his studio, prepared to lock the door and join Laci in the shower, but he found himself rooted to the spot in front of his latest work: Laci in Blue.

It wasn't quite finished. He reached out and touched it, fingers following the paint strokes. The familiar urge to create made his hands twitch. Unable to resist, he picked up his pencil and sketchbook. Maybe he could do something quick and get it out of his system before Laci was done.

The moment he put the pencil to paper, he heard a soft sob from the other bedroom. He put everything down, locked the door, and went to Laci.

She sat on the bed in his hoodie and her shorts as damp hair hung around her face, which was wet with tears. Her eyes found him when he appeared in the doorway, but she made no effort to hide her emotion. She hugged herself.

“I'm so sorry, Jordan.” She sniffled. “I'm so sorry I dragged you into this...this *mess*. I've put you in danger, and now I've invaded your home, and—”

“Hey,” he said, kneeling in front of her so he could cup her face in his hands and wipe the tears away. “I’m not sorry for any of it.”

“You’re not?”

“No. I hate that you’re going through something so frightening, but I’ll never be sorry that this brought us together.”

A smile tugged at her lips, but it faltered and faded. “I wish it had been normal. Like we’d met somewhere and dated like normal people.”

“I believe that would’ve happened,” he said. “Even if Dane hadn’t come into the picture, we’d have found our way to one another.”

“Really?”

“Of course.” He paused and gave her leg a soothing rub. “Laci, I can’t fucking imagine a world where I don’t know you.”

Her bottom lip quivered. “That’s a lovely thing to say.”

“It’s true,” he said.

“I felt like we’d met before the night I found you,” she said. “I still feel like we’ve known each other longer than a few months. Don’t you?”

“Aye, I do.”

“Can you come up here and cuddle me?”

He chuckled. “Aye, I can do that too.”

He pulled the duvet back and crawled up beside her, taking her under his arm and holding her close. She snuggled down and let her head rest on his chest. Her fingers trailed along his arm, tracing his tattoos.

“Here I am saying I feel like I’ve known you forever, and I’ve never asked about your tattoos,” she said.

“We don’t have to go into that tonight,” he said. “If you want to go to sleep, feel free.”

“I won’t be able to sleep.” She shook her head. “Please. Talk to me.”

He gave her a comforting squeeze. “Which tattoo d’you want to know about?”

“All of them. We’ve got all night.”

“At the top, we’ve got lilies,” he said. “Ava and I have matching sleeves, and we started with the lilies to—now, this is a bit sad—but, to commemorate the death of our childhood.”

“Fuck, that *is* sad.”

“We thought it was funny.”

“You’re both terribly morbid but go on.”

He talked her through each piece down the length of his arm, then the opposite arm. He listed when he got it, what it meant, and how it related to something Ava got if it wasn’t an exact match. They always collaborated on tattoos. He wasn’t sure how normal that was for a sibling bonding ritual, but it was

theirs. Laci listened, adding comments here and there on the ones she really liked, the floral designs in particular.

“Maybe I’ll get peonies next,” he said. “That way you’ll have some whenever we’re together, no matter where we are.”

She smiled at last. “Would Ava agree to that?”

“Absolutely, she would. She’s part of what brought us together.”

“Mm, that’s true.” She interlocked her fingers with his. “Any reason you’ve only got black and white?”

“I meant to have some with color, but I went to my first school visit as a pro,” he said. “The kids were all blown away by my tattoos. This wee blonde girl came up to me with markers and asked if she could color them in. I said yes, and it was the most beautiful I’ve ever seen them. Now, I do it every time we see kids.”

“That is,” she placed a kiss on his chest. “The sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. You’re actually a teddy bear, aren’t you?”

“Only for you. If anyone else asks, I’m a fucking grizzly.”

She giggled, and he thanked the heavens for the sound. It meant things could go back to normal after the ordeal with Dane. They would find joy together. And maybe if he distracted her enough, she could get some rest.

“Can I come with you to training tomorrow?” she asked, looking sheepish.

“Of course,” he said, and he kissed the top of her head.

So much for going back to normal. But if she needed to be close for a few days, he could give her that. He hoped the police found Dane quickly, so the only things left to sort out were her trip to America and how they would make it work. *If* she still wanted to make it work by then.

At that thought, Jordan picked up the book he'd abandoned on his nightstand. Laci asked him to read it aloud, and he obliged. He read until the first light of dawn peered through the curtains.

Chapter 21

“What are you doing?”

Laci peeked out from between her fingers to meet Jordan’s eyes.

“I’ve never been inside a locker room before. If films and telly have taught me anything it’s that there’s rogue man bits behind that door, and I’m not eager to see them.”

“You don’t have to cover your eyes while you’re walking,” he said through a chuckle. “You don’t even have to go inside if you don’t want to.”

She stole a nervous glance at the door. A shirtless Israel walked by, and she averted her gaze. “Yeah, I’d rather not.”

She knew she was being ridiculous. She’d seen countless male models in far less than that, but standing next to Jordan, her cheeks warmed at seeing another man without a top on. Jordan, thankfully, only appeared amused, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Are you embarrassed?”

“I’m sorry, would you rather I looked at your half-dressed teammates? Maybe see if I chose the right one?”

His jaw tightened.

“That’s what I thought,” she said, folding her arms over her chest.

“I’ll let Coach know you’re here,” he said.

He pecked her on the lips and opened the door. The chatter behind it floated out into the corridor before dying down again as it fell closed. Guilt tugged at her gut when she heard Luka asking Jordan why he looked so tired.

She turned, letting her back hit the wall as she squeezed her eyes shut. She wished with all her might that they would hear the news of Dane’s arrest as soon as possible. She briefly imagined getting a call from the police today and the relief it would bring. Maybe then she and Jordan could move forward normally. It wasn’t likely given Dane’s track record, but a girl could dream.

“Are you alright?”

Laci opened her eyes at the sound of a feminine voice with an eastern European accent. A tall, stunning blonde stood in front of her with a cheerful baby on her hip, but her gray eyes were clouded with concern. Laci remembered that she was Artem’s wife, Larysa.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Laci said, righting herself. “Just...came to see Jordan at training today.”

“Oh, good, we will have company then,” Larysa said, giving her son a little bounce that made him grin, wide and adorable with his three teeth. “This is Yuri.”

“Lovely to meet you, Yuri.” Laci took his hand and shook it playfully.

Larysa smiled, but it faded. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah, it’s been a long night, that’s all,” Laci said with a sigh. “Someone broke into my house last night.”

“Oh my God, really?” Larysa’s eyes went wide. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, nothing happened beyond getting scared. Jordan was there, thank goodness.”

“I am sure whoever did that was sorry when they saw him.”

Laci tried to smile, but it didn’t reach her eyes. She still couldn’t rid her mind of the image of Dane standing over her bed, knife brandished before he dropped it. The sound of it landing kept echoing in her ears regardless of how hard she tried to hold Jordan’s voice as he read to her instead. She was worried about the coming evening as well and whether or not she would be able to sleep without dreaming of it. Larysa looked at her and swallowed.

“You want to sit together to watch training?” she offered. “Maybe some baby cuddles will make you feel better.”

“I’d love that,” Laci replied.

As she spoke, Jordan opened the locker room door and stepped out. He blinked in surprise before offering a nod in greeting. “Hey, Larysa. Yuri.”

Yuri squeaked back and raised his hands with excitement. He had a strand of athletic tape in his fist.

Larysa blanched. “Where did you get that?”

She tried to take it from him, but the child pulled it away.

“Obviously, he’s the new physio,” Jordan joked, and Yuri beamed. “Gonna wrap us up, are you, mate?”

Jordan reached out to pinch his cheek affectionately. The boy released the tape, and Jordan caught it before it floated to the floor. He turned to Laci, who felt like he ought to be calling for a mop because, surely, she’d melted into a puddle.

“You’re good to stay and watch,” he said. “Looks like you’ve got company.”

“Yeah, we’re all set.” She held his gaze for a long moment. “I...thanks for letting me come with you. I know it’s probably not the best situation, I—”

He cut her off with a kiss. “You’re always welcome with me, angel.”

She flushed but smiled. “I’ll see you after?”

“See you then.”

With one last kiss to her cheek, he disappeared back inside.

“You two are a very sweet couple,” Larysa said. “Ready to go?”

Laci nodded and followed her out to the practice pitch.

Laci stood Yuri up on her lap, met his bright blue eyes, and cooed at him. The little boy's mouth turned up into a half-smile, but he must have deemed her friendly because he babbled back to her. It was precious. He looked remarkably like his mother, smiling to Laci's left.

"He likes you," Larysa said.

"I like him right back," Laci said, and kissed Yuri's chubby little cheek. "He's adorable. I could eat him up. Well done, you."

Larysa chuckled. "Artem did a little bit of the work."

"Alright, he's allowed *some* credit, but you did the hard stuff."

Laci turned Yuri around and sat him on her knees so he could look out at the pitch. He squeaked with excitement.

"He loves football," Larysa said, rolling her eyes. "He doesn't even get that happy for kids shows."

"To each their own, I suppose," Laci replied. "Is he talking much yet?"

"Not yet, but our uh...what's the word for the children's doctor?"

"Pediatrician?"

"Pediatrician, yes," she went on. "He says everything is good. Most kids don't really talk until they are one year old."

"Do you speak to him in Ukrainian or English?"

“At home, Ukrainian. We want him to know it. But outside, we use English. Hopefully, it means he will know when to use them, but it’s still early.”

“I’m sure he’ll be perfectly bilingual,” Laci said with a nod. She kissed the top of his head. “You’re a genius, aren’t you, darling?”

Yuri replied with an absentminded “awoo” and stared at the athletes doing their warm-ups.

“Remind me, what did you do for work before?” Laci asked. “I’m sure you told me at some point.”

Larysa nodded with understanding. “I can hardly remember if I’ve eaten most days, keeping up with this guy. But, to answer your question, I was a ballroom dancer.”

“Wow, that’s amazing! Did you compete?”

“Yes, my partner and I were doing very well and winning championships before I met Artem. When he got a contract in England, he asked me to come with him.”

“And you did?”

“I didn’t agree initially. I told him it was too far to go for a boyfriend, so he asked me if it was too far for a husband. I asked if that was a proposal. He said yes...and I did too.”

Laci’s heart softened. “That’s actually so cute. Did he have a ring?”

Larysa shook her head, but the smirk on her face was amused. “No, but he said he’d get me the ring I deserved when

he had more money from playing in this league.” She lifted her left hand and wiggled the fat diamond on her finger. “He followed through.”

“I’ll say,” Laci replied. “Can you even go swimming with that thing or will it drown you?”

Larysa laughed. “I’ve never tested it.”

“I don’t blame you.” Laci paused for a beat. “Did you keep dancing after you came to England?”

“Yes, but not like before,” Larysa answered. “I started teaching lessons at a studio in Manchester—Artem played for City before Stanmore—so I was able to keep dancing, and competing, just differently. I did the same when we moved to London, for a bigger studio, and when I started thinking of competing professionally again, we got pregnant.”

“Aw, bad timing, Yuri,” Laci fake scolded. “When will you go back, d’you think?”

Larysa chewed her lip. “I...I don’t know if I will.”

“Really? But don’t you miss it?”

“I do, but sometimes, things happen, and what you always dreamed of becomes less important than the life in front of you.”

Laci turned curious eyes on her. “How d’you mean?”

“As a girl, I never thought anything would be more important to me than dance,” she said. “Winning trophies and ribbons felt like the most rewarding part of my life. But no

trophy can make you feel the way you do when you first meet your baby's eyes. Or the first time they smile at you. There are so many moments that I don't want to miss for dance. My dreams look different now."

"I sort of know what you mean."

Laci looked out at the pitch, and her eyes found Jordan standing in goal with his back turned out. The drill was that he could only turn around when he heard his teammate's boot strike the ball, then he'd have to block it at the last second. So far, no one had gotten a shot past him, which was made more impressive as he was running on no sleep.

The more she watched him, the more her enthusiasm for the job in the States diminished. It was months away, but she and Jordan would only get closer in that time. If she wasn't prepared to leave him now, she would be even less ready come summer.

"There's a job for me in America," she blurted out, and Larysa looked at her. "And I was really excited about it before. Well, before things with Jordan got real. Now, I'm not so sure."

Larysa tucked her hair behind her ear. "You pursued modeling because you loved it, yes?"

"Yeah," Laci said with a nod.

"Same as me with dance. And there's nothing wrong with pursuing what you love. But—there is also nothing wrong with pursuing *who* you love."

Laci looked down at Jordan again. The word *love* hovered in the air. Was that what she felt for him? Her heart leaped inside her chest every time she saw him. Lying beside him at night, knowing he was there for her was the only thing getting her through this ordeal with Dane. Plus, she admired him. His thoughtfulness, his dedication, his sense of humor, and his tenderness. She shook her head and cleared her throat.

“It’s certainly something to think about,” she said.

“Do,” Larysa replied. “It may turn out better than you thought.”

Before Laci could say anymore, Yuri started to fuss.

“Why so sad, Yurochka?” Larysa cooed. “Are you hungry?”

Laci handed him back to his mother who gathered up her diaper bag and rose to her feet. She gave Laci one last serious look.

“Whatever you choose, good luck, Laci.”

“Thank you.”

She left. Artem jogged over but didn’t get his question out before Larysa shot him a thumb’s up and let him know she was taking the baby inside to feed and change him. He blew her a kiss. Laci barely contained an “awww” that started to form in her mouth.

She turned her gaze over to Jordan, who caught her eye and smiled. A grinning Hector whispered something to him, which made Jordan roll his eyes and shove his teammate away from

him. He stole another glance at Laci before getting back on his line. Her chest warmed.

She couldn't say for sure that it was love. Not yet. But it was pretty damn close.

Chapter 22

Jordan watched Laci, withdrawn, sitting on his bed as she tugged a brush through her hair. She'd barely spoken a word on the way back from the Hive, and he worried she was still shaken up. He wasn't sure he could deal with another sleepless night with a match coming up. Sliding behind her, he wrapped his arms around her waist and slipped the brush from her grasp. He took over, gently raking the bristles from the crown of her head to the ends of her hair. To his relief, she closed her eyes.

"That feels nice," she said with a sigh.

"Nice enough to make you sleep?"

"Perhaps. Keep going, let's find out."

He obeyed, using his fingers to comb through the hair the brush didn't reach. Goosebumps erupted over her skin. She leaned into his chest and rested.

"What are we going to do if they don't catch him?" she asked.

Jordan needed no clarification about who she meant, so he answered. “We’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe, which you are right now.”

She opened her eyes and turned her face to meet his gaze with an uncharacteristic frown. “I know I’m safe when I’m with you. I just...”

He paused his ministrations with the brush. “Just what?”

“I can’t turn my mind off,” she said. “It’s like every time I start to relax, I wonder what’s going to happen next. I’ve got a photoshoot tomorrow, and I can’t even talk or post about it without being terrified he’ll turn up there. Not to mention, you’ve got training and can’t come with me. I don’t know how I’ll feel safe going to and from the studio. My father keeps texting me about different private security companies, saying he’s going to send someone to sit by my house. Which only makes me want to scream. I know it’s serious, and I’m scared to death, but I want to forget about it for a moment. God, I...I want it all to stop.”

Her forlorn expression made his chest tight. He had an idea. It crossed his mind that she may not be up for it, but he wouldn’t know unless he tried. Testing the waters, he lowered his lips to her shoulder and moved the strap of her tank top aside to kiss her soft skin. He trailed all the way up her neck until his mouth hovered by her ear.

“Let me help,” he murmured. “I bet I can make you forget.”

She shivered. “Yeah?”

“Only if you want. If not, I can keep doing this...”

She snatched the brush out of his hand and tossed it to the floor. She brought his hand up to cup her breast, and he smirked. She needed it more than he thought.

“Go on, then,” she said. “Make me forget. Please.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and scooted back to the headboard, dragging her with him. She giggled. What a sweet sound that was. He pulled her between his legs, her back pressed to his chest.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered. “Focus on the feeling.”

She let out a breath and did as he asked. He sat her up for a moment to take her shirt off, which freed her breasts.

“No bra tonight?” he teased with a nip to her ear.

“I much prefer your hands,” she breathed back.

“That so?”

He gave them to her, taking the full weight of her breasts in each palm and kneading them softly, at first, but with each motion, he added a bit of pressure while rolling her hardened nipples between his fingers.

She gasped and arched her back. His lips found her throat again, and he flicked his tongue on the spot by her jaw that drove her wild, earning him a whimper. Her head tilted to the side to grant him further access, and he took advantage. He slid his tongue all the way back down to her shoulder and sank his teeth in.

She hissed, but a moan followed. He didn't bite hard just enough to surprise her and leave a spot of redness behind, which he soothed with his tongue. When she eased back down, he tweaked her nipples. Again and again while she drew in sharp breaths.

“Jordan, please,” she whined. “Please, more.”

He ran his hands over the round curve of her belly, toying with the elastic of her shorts.

“Want these off, do you?” he asked.

She nodded. “Please...”

“Lift your hips, angel.”

She did, and he hooked his thumbs beneath the waistband of her shorts and panties before pulling them down her legs. She settled back against him with a sigh.

“Spread those legs for me,” he grunted.

She hardly had time before he took hold of her thighs and yanked them apart. He caressed the soft skin of her legs and let his thumbs brush by her center, making her squirm.

“When I touch this pussy, is it gonna be wet for me?” he growled into her ear.

“Yes,” she sighed.

“Good girl.”

He ran his index finger up her slit. She was soaked.

“All that just from playing with your tits? So sensitive, angel.”

Her hips rocked toward his hand. He decided to cut her some slack and give her relief. After all, he didn't want to edge her. His goal was the opposite. So with one hand, he parted her folds to expose her further, and with the other, his first two fingers floated right over to her clit and pressed down, drawing a groan from her throat. He started with slow, gentle circles.

“I'm gonna make you come,” he told her gruffly. “As many times as you can take, aye? Until the only thing in that pretty head is how fucking good your man makes you feel.”

She took her bottom lip between her teeth and nodded. Judging by the flush of her cheeks and chest, she was well on her way to orgasm number one. He hooked his ankles over hers, to pin her legs in place. When he sped up with his fingers, her hands snapped down to his thighs. Her head fell back against his shoulder.

“Oh, fuck,” she moaned.

He smirked, pride warming his chest from the inside. He loved getting her to swear. It wasn't that she avoided it, but she used strong language sparingly, so he knew he was making her feel good when one slipped from her mouth. His own desire stirred at the breathy whine of it, but he pushed it down. This wasn't about him.

“Jordan,” she mewled. “I'm gonna—oh, fuck, yes!”

She stiffened, her grip on his legs tightening, and she groaned his name. When her hips moved again, they jerked. Her chest heaved as he coaxed her back down from the high.

“That’s it,” he said, and kissed her cheek.

Eyelids fluttering, she turned her head and claimed his lips. Her hand found its way to the back of his head, and she laced her fingers through his hair to give it a cheeky tug. He grinned against her mouth.

“Eager for more already?” he teased.

“You said as much as I can take,” she reminded him.

“Aye, so I did.”

He sank his middle and ring fingers inside her, curling up directly into her G-spot. Her grip on his hair tightened once more as she let out a sinful moan. His thumb found her clit, and he stroked it again, setting a cadence with his hand that had her panting in seconds. Each rub of her clit matched the thrust of his fingers. When her voice raised an octave, he knew he’d found the right rhythm.

“Oh, yes, Jordan, just like that,” she called.

“You got it, angel.”

Her hips moved with his pace. He felt her walls clamp down around his fingers, fluttering with her coming release. All he had to do was stay on course, which was hard to do because his dick was throbbing with his need. She was so fucking hot like this. He ached to pin her beneath him and drive into her until she screamed. But not tonight.

The fingers of his free hand danced along the swell of her breast, grazing her nipple and giving it a light pinch. Her nails dug into his scalp.

“Fuck, I’m close,” she whined.

“Don’t hold back. Fucking come for me, Laci.”

Her legs trembled, and she unraveled. He slowed his hand while she caught her breath. His mouth left a hot trail from the back of her ear down to her shoulder.

“Good fucking girl,” he whispered.

He swore he heard a purr at the back of her throat.

Holding her steady, he reached over to the nightstand and pulled open the drawer. She had brought her vibrator, but they hadn’t gotten to use it yet. Tonight was the perfect opportunity. And it was so incredibly Laci, bright pink, soft silicone, delicate, and practical. It had both an insert and a clit stimulator.

“Ready for the next one?” he asked.

She nodded. He clicked the toy on, and her eyes snapped open at the buzzing sound. With a devilish grin, she nodded again.

“How many settings does it have?” he wondered.

“Five,” she answered.

He hit the power button again to get it to the second speed.

“Keep those legs open,” he told her. “And relax.”

Her mouth fell open when he brought the tip to her entrance, soaking it in her slick, before trailing it back to her clit. Something like his name sounded from her mouth, but she was no longer coherent.

She came with a jolt before a minute went by, but Jordan didn't let up this time. He held the vibrator firmly in place as tremors rolled through her body. He built her up into her next climax as she was coming down from the last one.

Again and again, he made her come, alternating between fucking her with the toy until she gushed around it and using it on her clit until she writhed.

She reached her limit and collapsed, a sweaty, fucked out mess in his arms. His cock was painfully hard at the sight of her breathless and satisfied. Her mouth moved, but she couldn't form words. He pushed her hair off the damp skin of her neck and kissed her softly.

“You're fucking amazing,” he told her. “Did so good.”

“So good,” she muttered back, looking at him through heady eyes. “M'tired.”

He lay her down on the pillows, kissed her forehead, and slid off the bed to get in the bathroom. The temptation to take care of himself was there. His joggers were tented, and his body was on fire, but he needed to attend to Laci first. He returned to her with a cool washcloth and cleaned her between her thighs. She hardly moved though she did hum at his touch.

He pulled a fresh blanket over her, and she snuggled down into the mattress. The even rise and fall of her shoulders told him she was asleep or at least well on her way, which was what he wanted.

He went back into the bathroom and stripped off his joggers and boxers to take his leaking cock in his fist and give himself a good stroke. He doubled over with relief. All he needed was the knowledge of Laci in his bed and the memories of what transpired to get him right to the edge of his own release. He imagined it was her hand...her mouth...her pussy. He groaned and picked up the pace.

He was already close from getting her off until she could hardly breathe.

She was so gorgeous through it all with her head thrown back, sweat beading over her delicious skin, and crying out with that sweet soprano of a voice. He would never tire of her ecstasy and all the little ways she offered herself to him. She trusted him, felt safe in his arms. Nothing made him feel like more of a hero than her constant faith.

With one last pull, he finished into his hand.

He wiped himself clean with a couple tissues as he caught his breath. Turning eyes on Laci's sleeping form, he walked out to join her.

As he climbed into bed, she instinctually moved toward him, not waking up. He wrapped an arm around her to secure her to his side. He wondered how he'd ever gotten to sleep without her. And how he would manage when she went away. He was addicted to her, and withdrawal loomed before him like the mouth of a dark cave.

Chapter 23

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive you to your photoshoot?” Jordan asked, approaching Laci from behind and putting his arms around her.

“I’m sure.” She met his gaze in the bathroom mirror before she turned her head to kiss his arm. “I don’t want you to be late for the match. Plus, Jax is already on the way.”

He moved her hair away from her face so he could kiss her cheek. “I guess that means no time for preemptive Valentine’s celebrations.”

“Preemptive?” she laughed. “We’re already two weeks late thanks to you.”

He feigned offense. “I don’t control the Europa Conference League schedule!”

“You’re right, I’ll write a strongly worded letter to UEFA. I simply cannot allow them to take my boyfriend all the way to Austria when he’s supposed to be home giving me orgasms.”

He chuckled. “I’ll make up for it tonight.”

“I’ll hold you to that.”

He let his lips trail down over the soft skin of her neck, his lower belly tightening at the sigh that escaped her throat. When he glanced up, he saw her eyes fluttering in the mirror. She opened them with a snap and met his gaze.

“Seriously, babe. Later.”

He groaned. “Fine.”

He backed off and she picked up her earrings from the counter.

“Do I look alright?” she asked. “They told me to come with no makeup on, but this is my first Charlotte Tilbury and I—”

He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him, away from the mirror. He locked onto her gaze. “You’re gonna smash it, angel.”

“Thank you,” she said with a smile, and she stood on her toes to kiss him. “Who’re you playing today?”

“Brighton. Tough match, but I think we’ll be alright.”

“You’re gonna smash it.”

He kissed her again, but before they could get carried away, she drew back. “I’m gonna change my top. Will you check my phone and see if Jax is getting close?”

“Your outfit is perfect,” he argued.

“I thought of something better. Please, Jordan.” Her eyes were pleading.

The way she said please should have been illegal. It gave her far too much power over him. “Alright. Where’s your phone?”

“Kitchen counter. I’ll be changed before you can miss me.”

He kissed her forehead and padded out. Her phone’s pink case stood out on his dark countertop. He picked it up and checked her messages. There were a couple from her brother.

Jax: *A bit behind, London traffic is shit*

Jax: *As usual*

A few minutes later there was another.

Jax: *I’m five minutes away. But I swear I’m moving, fuck’s sake*

Jordan wrote back, letting Jax know who was texting and that Laci was almost ready. After he pressed send, he noticed her inbox full of messages from an unsaved number. The message preview told him right away that it was Dane. Hardly thinking, Jordan opened them and began reading.

Are you going to the match today?

I’ll be there

I need to see you

You haven’t been home in ages

I don’t know where you’ve gone, but there’s so much I need to say.

Please, Laci. You don’t understand. If you let me, I can explain everything.

I hope I'll see you there

Jordan tore his eyes away from the screen just as Laci emerged from the bedroom in a soft pink sweater. He wished he could say the sight of her slowed his racing heart.

“Anything from Jax?” she asked. Her smile disappeared at the look on Jordan’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“You’ve got new messages from Dane,” he said. “A lot of them.”

“I try to just ignore them. I block as many numbers as I can, but he always gets new ones.”

Jordan looked at her incredulously. “Have you been getting more?”

She shrugged. “He went quiet for a few days after the break in. But now he’s back to creating three new numbers for every one I block.”

He swallowed down a roar of frustration. The only consolation was that, by his own admission, Dane didn’t know where Laci was. Jordan knew she was careful about having her location off for any and all apps on her phone, and posting places after she left them. She also never posted from Jordan’s flat, inside or out. It still made anger roil in his stomach at the thought of Dane continuing to torment her after everything he already put her through.

She held out her hand, and he handed her phone over. She tapped the screen a few times, no doubt blocking this latest number, and then she sighed.

“Until he’s caught, this is my life,” she said, her voice catching.

Jordan pulled her into his arms. He hated this for her. And he hated how helpless it made him feel. He pressed his lips to the top of her head and hoped she could feel how badly he wished he could take it from her.

They jumped apart at a knock on the door. Laci blinked back the mist in her eyes and forced a smile. “That’ll be Jax.”

Jordan went to the door and looked out the peephole to be sure, and it was Jax’s familiar form on the doorstep. He opened it.

“Morning,” Jax said cheerfully. He held up two coffees. “Sorry I’m late. I stopped by Coffeeify.”

Laci accepted the one he held out to her with a grin. “You’re definitely forgiven.”

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“One sec,” she said, and turned to face Jordan, rising to kiss him tenderly.

Jordan wondered if it was too late to tell Coach he was sick. Surely the squad could handle Brighton without him. All he wanted to do was keep Laci in his arms. A dream cut short when she pulled away.

“See you after the match,” she said.

“After, aye,” he replied, breathless. “I’m looking forward to it.”

Biting her lip through a smirk, she followed her brother out. Jordan watched them until they reached the car. He would need to forget Dane for a while if he could.



“Oi, Laci,” Amy, her makeup artist said, pulling the brush away. “Stay still. This is a Charlotte Tilbury commercial. Your skin has to look flawless.”

“Sorry,” Laci replied, leaning back into the chair. “It’s...my boyfriend’s match is on.”

From her phone’s small speaker, the announcer yelled, “And a massive save by Frawley though he may be feeling that one in the morning!” She tried to take a peek to see what he meant, but Amy stood in front of her.

“Listening will have to do. I’ve got to powder you and do your lashes.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll listen.”

She closed her eyes while Amy dusted her face with pressed powder. Luckily, it sounded like the action moved away from Jordan’s end of the pitch.

“I’m not going to look too matte, am I? This is supposed to be a glowy look?”

“Right, but glowy isn’t the same as oily,” Amy returned. “I can practically see my reflection in your T-zone.”

“Ouch,” Laci chuckled. “Understood.”

“Good, now stop talking so I can make it look like you’ve never moved your mouth.”

Laci bit back another laugh and Amy carried on. The lashes were next, so she held herself still as a statue while Amy placed them. When she opened her eyes, she saw her agent, BB, in the mirror. Her black hair was slicked back into a neat bun at the nape of her neck, but what caught Laci’s eye was the large bouquet of roses in her hands, which almost covered her black suit jacket.

“Look what came for you,” she said in a sing-song voice, waving the flowers in front of Laci before putting them on the vanity. “Mr. Frawley is late to the Valentine’s Day celebrations.”

“No, he had an away match on the day, so we’re celebrating tonight,” Laci said. Her brow furrowed. “But why would he send me roses?”

“Oi, keep your face neutral. You’ll ruin my brilliant work,” Amy scolded.

BB frowned. “What’s the matter with roses?”

“Nothing, I suppose, but he knows I prefer peonies. Can you hand me the card, BB?” Laci said. She nodded toward Amy. “I’m afraid if I move, this one will wring my neck.”

“And you’d be right,” Amy muttered.

BB slipped the card from the ribbon around the stems and handed it to Laci. She examined her name written across the front. It didn't look like Jordan's handwriting, but she reasoned that could be the florist's. She opened it, pulled out the note, and started reading.

Laci,

You have evaded me for now, but rest assured, I will find you again. In the meantime, I know exactly where to find him. I'll get rid of all obstacles keeping us apart. No matter what.

Yours, Dane.

Laci drew in a sharp breath.

"Watch it!" Amy warned.

"I'm sorry, I..." Laci's heart hammered inside her chest, and she fought back the tears welling up in her eyes. "I can't believe this."

"What is it?" BB asked. "Is he dumping you? If that piece of shit is dumping you with flowers, I swear I will beat him senseless, and you know I can do it because I'm crafty!"

"They're not from Jordan!" Laci cried. "Look."

She handed over the card. BB's dark eyes scanned it. Amy read over her shoulder. Both of their mouths dropped.

BB narrowed her eyes. "Who the fuck's Dane?"

Laci let out a long breath. "There's something I haven't told you..."

She explained everything except the bit about her and Jordan's relationship being fake. But everything Dane had done, she relayed, including the current state of affairs. He'd gotten away, and she had no idea where he was or what he was up to other than sending her an absurd amount of texts.

"So...I guess now he's coming for Jordan," she said with a sigh.

"I don't understand," Amy said. "If he doesn't know where Jordan lives, how would he know where to find him?"

BB rolled her eyes. "Everyone knows where he *works*, Amy."

Laci's stomach dropped. Dane said in his latest texts that he was at the match. She hadn't heard any excitement from her phone, but she glanced at it again just to be sure.

Amy didn't look convinced. "What's he gonna do at a football match? There's loads of security there. It's not like he'd be able to reach Jordan. Not to mention, all the people. Y'know, witnesses."

"You think it's an empty threat?" Laci asked.

"I do," Amy answered. "I think he's trying to make you change something so he can find you. The routine you've got certainly hasn't led him to you, but if you disrupt it, that could change."

"That's a good point," BB said, her brows relaxing. "Maybe the best course of action is nothing. Chuck the note and the

flowers in the bin and let him reveal himself when he inevitably fucks up trying to get to you.”

Laci wanted to argue. Something in her gut told her it wasn't that simple. After all, they still didn't know how Dane had managed to get inside her home. Slipping past security at a football match was a different story. He'd never make it in a stadium with a weapon or anything else he might want to use to hurt Jordan. And if he tried to get to the pitch or the dressing room, he'd be stopped right away. Logically, it wasn't possible. But she couldn't shake the feeling he wasn't bluffing.

“How did he know where to send these flowers?” she asked suddenly.

“He sent them to my office,” BB said. “Not to the studio.”

Laci nodded. Her representation was in all her social media bios, and the address of the firm was on their website. She had been extra careful about her location settings and not posting things she was doing until hours after when she was safely with Jordan. If Dane truly didn't know, and resorted to the easiest point of contact, maybe he was slipping.

She handed the note to BB. “Chuck it in the bin.”

“Atta girl,” BB replied, snapping up the flowers as well. “I'll get rid of these, and we'll have a fucking great shoot!”

“Hell yeah!” Amy cheered.

Laci drew her lips in. “Am I allowed to smile if I agree?”

Amy giggled. “Just this once.”



Jordan winced as he placed an ice pack between his legs, cursing the Brighton striker. At the time, he accepted the guy's apology, but now, he wished he'd at least gotten a shove in. He eased himself onto the couch with a groan. He was grateful that he didn't need to pick Laci up. She texted him earlier to let him know she'd gotten a ride with her makeup artist, and she was due back any moment.

As if summoned by the thought of her, she came through the door. He turned his head to look at her, and she beamed at him.

"Happy Late Valentine's Day," she chirped. He winced back at her, and she frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I know we talked about...y'know...having a lot of hot Valentine's Day sex tonight, but I...I can't."

"Why?"

His face burned. "My balls are bruised."

She blinked. "What?"

"My. Balls. Are. Bruised."

"They can be bruised?"

"Of course they can, they've got...skin, muscle tissue, and shit, and—don't laugh!"

Giggles poured from her steadily as a waterfall, and even though it embarrassed him, he couldn't resent that rosy shade of pink on her cheeks. It was a color he could have painted with if art was capable of accurately recreating her beauty. She didn't even try to stop herself.

"I'm sorry!" she wheezed. "It's...it's a little bit funny. Admit it. If we were in a movie, you'd be pissing."

"No, I fucking wouldn't!"

"You would!"

"Stop it!"

She took a deep breath and composed herself, but the corners of her mouth twitched.

"Okay, okay. I'm fine, I'm not laughing," she said. "But can I ask, how this happened?"

"One of the Brighton guys took a shot. It bounced off the pitch and hit me."

"Did you at least make the save?"

"Of fucking course, I made the save."

She smiled gently, then approached to lean over the back of the couch and wrap her arms around him. She placed a kiss on the top of his head.

"My poor baby," she cooed. "Can I do anything to make you feel better?"

"You can open up your present," he said. "It's on the kitchen counter."

She stood and clapped her hands with a squeal of excitement, then disappeared into the kitchen before coming back with everything he'd laid out for her in hand. The flowers, chocolates, and box wrapped in pink paper.

She took a seat beside him on the couch and placed them on the coffee table. He watched her eyes linger on the flowers for a long moment.

"Peonies," she said, almost under her breath.

"Of course," he replied, brow furrowing. "Did you want something else?"

She gave him a long kiss that left him dizzy. When she pulled away, she held his gaze. "They're perfect."

He cleared his throat in an attempt to subdue the desire stirring in the pit of his stomach. "Well, open the gift."

The box fit into the palm of her hand, which had made it a bitch to wrap, but Laci told him at Christmas how much she enjoyed unwrapping gifts, so he promised himself he'd always do it. She tore it from the corner to reveal a small black box. Eyeing him with a sly grin, she pulled the top off. Her mouth fell open.

"Are these...diamonds?" she gasped and pulled out the stud earrings he'd picked out. Princess cut and classic.

"They are," he told her.

"Jordan, they're gorgeous! I can wear these with anything!"

“Since the last bit of jewelry I bought you was an occasion thing, I thought I ought to get you something simple you can wear every day and think of me.”

She was already taking the gold hoops out of her ears. “If you continue to get me jewelry like this, I’m definitely keeping you.”

He chuckled as he reached over to hold her hair out of her way. “You weren’t already?”

“I was considering it,” she joked, but it made his heart twist anyway. Perhaps there was some truth to it since she was still planning on leaving for the States. “But you’re a keeper in more than occupation, I think.”

He forced a smile. “Glad to hear it.”

“How do they look?” she asked, turning her head this way and that so he could see them.

They glittered in the dim light of his flat, but he kept looking at her face. “Beautiful.”

She kissed him again. “Thank you so much.”

“I’d give you anything, Laci.”

“I know.”

He held her gaze for a lingering moment, and the tips of his fingers traced along her cheek. How would he go on with this sweet face halfway across the world?

“D’you wanna see what I got you?” she asked.

“If you want. I’m content to look at your gorgeous face all night.”

She shook her head before getting up to get her bag. She retrieved a book from it, a thick hardcover she had to carry with both hands. He appreciated that she hadn’t wrapped it as Jordan hated unwrapping gifts. She must have remembered that conversation as well.

“Here.” She held it out to him. “I found it in a specialty shop.”

He took it. A collage of classic art made up the glossy cover. The title was *Art Through the Ages: History as Told by the Brush*. He recognized a few pieces from the cover, but when he opened it and flipped through the first few pages, he saw a couple that were new to him.

“Holy fucking shit, this is cool,” he said.

“You think so?”

He looked at her to find she was chewing her bottom lip, uncertainty furrowing her brow. “Fuck yeah, I love it!”

She grinned. “I was so impressed with all the art you knew at the estate, so I thought you might like something like this. It’s a great coffee table book.”

“It’s perfect, thank you.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Jordan.”

“Happy Valentine’s Day.”

They kissed again. When they parted, he tucked her hair behind her ear, and the diamond in her lobe caught the light with a sparkle.

“How was your shoot today?” he asked.

“It was good. Average day, really,” she said, cutting her eyes to the couch for a fleeting second before meeting his gaze again. “What do you wanna do for dinner? I’m thinking takeaway since neither of us is up for cooking.”

His brow knit together at how fast she changed the subject. Normally, Laci gave him some details like how Amy did her makeup or if the other girls shared any gossip. One of the other models was a woman Laci had done a few shoots with, and she was trying to discover if her boyfriend was cheating or planning a proposal, and Jordan was anxious to know if they’d figured out which.

Laci picked up her phone and pulled up the number for their favorite sushi place. He hoped she was simply hungry and not keeping something from him.

Chapter 24

“Tell me again what you like so much about this wee movie,” Jordan said, taking a seat beside Laci on the couch.

“First of all, it’s a solid three hours, so I’m not sure ‘wee’ is the best descriptor,” she replied with an amused smirk. “Second of all, I love it because it’s deceptively profound. On the surface, it seems like a romance, but it isn’t. There is a love story in it, but what it’s really about is a young woman finding her agency. Through that love, and through one of the most famous disasters in history, she finds herself.”

Jordan raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Yes! I know it’s basically a meme these days, but it’s a beautiful film if you watch it closely.”

“You feel quite strongly about this, don’t you?”

“I do.”

Her fingers found the replica necklace and her eyes set on the screen as Jordan pulled up *Titanic*. They decided the best day to watch it was on the anniversary of the ship’s sinking.

Jordan wasn't sure how seriously he could take the movie since all he knew were the memes, but he'd promised Laci he'd give it a shot.

The famous shot of Kate and Leo in their embrace on the bow filled the screen. Perhaps with her beside him, he'd be able to see it through her eyes a bit. He pressed play.

The first part of the film took place in what was then the present day. It surprised and intrigued him. Before too long, he found himself invested. He liked Jack as a character, mainly his survival instinct and his artwork. He found Rose compelling and tragic, in her own way, but knew based on Laci's earlier statement she would make it out.

"I love Rose," Laci said as they watched. "I've always sort of related to her."

"Why?" Jordan joked. "You once took a third-class lover too?"

She swatted his arm. "No, nothing like that. I just..." She took a deep breath. "Rose has all these expectations on her, right? To be a certain kind of woman in order to keep the people around her comfortable."

"How do you relate to that?"

"When you're the big girl, there's certain expectations as well," she said. Jordan blinked and looked at her, but her eyes were on her lap. "There are only so many roles for the fat girl—comedic sidekick or insecure counterpart to a confident main character. That was so clear in my life. When I talked

about fashion and beauty, no one took me seriously. But I took myself seriously, and that made people uncomfortable.”

He'd never heard her talk about her body with such reservation before. He paused the movie and waited for her to go on.

“I never told self-deprecating jokes. I held myself in the same regard my thin friends did. I forced myself to see me as a complete person, deserving of love and respect and dignity. I refused to fit into the roles that made other people comfortable with my size. It took a lot of work to get to the place I am today. But I'm really glad I did.”

Several thoughts went through his head at once. First, anyone who couldn't see how beautiful she was had to be blind. Second, anyone who made her feel bad about herself deserved to be thrown over a cliff. And third, she was impressive. When he thought he couldn't admire her more, she showed him a new side of her.

“Not that you need my validation or anything, but I'm fucking proud of you for getting there,” he said. “Finding your confidence is damn hard, and you did it on your own.”

Her cheeks flushed. “I had a wonderful support system in my family. But yeah...I did the inner work myself.”

“And you're fucking badass for it.”

“I love it when you talk so sweet to me.”

He chuckled, and she shimmied over the couch to nestle under his arm.

“Okay, play it again,” she said.

Jack and Rose’s story continued on the screen, and Jordan found it all the more charming with Laci properly in his arms. When it came to the famous, “Jack, I want you to draw me like one of your French girls” scene, Laci held him closer. He felt her cheek move against his chest, which let him know she was smiling.

“You like this part?” he asked softly.

She nodded. “It’s my favorite scene.”

A piano played the soft melody of “My Heart Will Go On” while Jack dragged the pencil across the parchment, and Rose held still.

“It’s so...dreamy,” Laci said. “The thought of someone capturing me like that is like, my biggest fantasy.”

“What do you mean?” Jordan looked incredulously at her. “You’re photographed all the time.”

“It’s different,” she insisted. “A photo is a reflection of exactly how you are in reality. A portrait is how that artist sees you. I can hardly think of anything more romantic.”

His heart did a triple Axel inside his chest, but his mind issued a warning: *it doesn’t mean she’d be impressed that you’ve been painting her since before you met.* On the other hand, perhaps it was the perfect time to show her. Not only did she deserve to be taken seriously, but she deserved to know her biggest fantasy was within her reach.

He paused the movie again. She raised her head and looked at him.

“Jordan?”

“I’ve got something I need to show you.”

She sat up when he nudged her. He took her hand and helped her off the couch. On his way to his studio door, he grabbed its key off the hook.

“What are you—”

“Hold on a moment,” he said as he worked the key and turned the lock. With a click, he opened the door, revealing the canvases within.

She peered inside and her jaw dropped. “You’re an artist?”

He nodded and took her hand again to lead her inside. “Have a look.”

Smiling, she stepped into the room, her gaze traveling from one piece to the next, the contemporary rainbow painting he’d shown Ava the night he met Laci, a Renaissance-style portrait of her with waist length hair and a billowy dress around her curves, one of her face, up close, leaning on her hand with a pink background, a pose he’d seen on her Instagram. Her eyes fell at last to the unfinished “Laci in Blue.”

Jordan’s heart pounded, unable to tell if her watery gaze was because she was horrified or touched. Her trembling lips turned up.

“I...I’m your muse?” she asked, voice hoarse.

“Aye,” he said, releasing a breath he wasn’t aware he was holding. “You are. You have been for a long time.”

She blinked. “How long?”

He cleared his throat. “Since I was a boy.”

Her eyes went wide. He reached out and cupped her face.

“I don’t know why, but your face came to mind when I thought about beauty,” he said. “Before I knew who you were, I was thinking of you. After seeing you, I was thinking of you even more. And now that we know each other and are— together this way—I still find myself thinking of you. All the time.”

He barely got the words out before Laci leaped into his arms and kissed him with staggering vigor. His back hit the wall, which stabilized him while he held her up. Her lips seared onto his, burning him up from his head to his toes. He could taste her passion on her mouth.

“That,” she said between kisses. “Is. The. Sweetest. Thing. I’ve. Ever. Heard.”

He responded with a deeper kiss and carried her over to his desk so he could sit her on it. His cup full of paint brushes clattered to the floor. He hardly had her balanced before she was pawing at his shirt. He stood back to let her pull it off. When his top was exposed, she yanked him in by the waistband of his joggers. It was the sexiest thing she could have done. His mouth swooped down on hers to show her how much he enjoyed it.

His lips traveled from her lips to her neck, and she whined, pulling him even closer. So close he could feel the heat between her legs through her pajama bottoms. He groaned into her mouth.

“Fucking hell, you’re so hot,” he murmured.

She peeled off her top and tossed it aside, her bralette following. He’d never get tired of those tits. He gazed at them like it was the first time, in awe of their perfection. *Her* perfection.

She put her hands on his chest and forced him a step back so she could slide off the table. She shimmied out of her pajamas. He swallowed the dryness in his throat as he looked at her wearing only that necklace and a thong.

“I know I’m hot,” she replied. Same as she had when they first met. “Knowing you paint me makes me hot *for you*.”

She dropped to her knees in front of him. With one tug, she freed his cock.

“Laci, you don’t have to—”

“I want to,” she said, looking up at him through her lashes.

She didn’t give him time to retort before she wrapped her lips around his tip. A sigh fell from his mouth when she swirled his tongue around it. His fingers wound through her hair and held her in place.

“Oh, fuck, baby,” he groaned. “Feels so good.”

She responded with a moan that sent a shiver up his spine.

She took him deeper and his legs trembled. His free hand shot out to grip the table behind her and keep himself upright. Fuck, her mouth was incredible. The warm, wet heat of it, combined with her hand cupping his balls with a soft squeeze, he could have finished any second.

She worked his cock with a steady rhythm. Her tongue slid around his length with the finesse of a dancer. His lower belly tightened up like a spring, the release threatening. His head tipped back and he bit his lip. He couldn't let go, not yet.

He tugged on her hair, pulling her up to him and capturing her lips in a messy, fervent kiss. A guttural moan sounded from his throat when she whimpered into his mouth. The sound was sweeter than any song he'd ever known.

She pulled away, her face centimeters from his, and she looked up at him. He held her gaze.

"The paintings," she said breathlessly, searching his eyes. "Are they how you see me?"

"Aye," he said with a nod. "But they don't come close to how beautiful you are in reality." He ran a hand over her flushed cheek. With his free hand, his fingers danced over the swell of her breasts. He tweaked her nipple and she gasped. "Especially like this. Or when I'm fucking you until you can't speak."

She smiled. "I wish I could see."

He paused. "Give me a moment."

He stepped away from her and went to the wall where a sheet hung over the mirror he used sometimes for posing references. He was his only model because the only other person who knew he painted was Ava. He tugged the sheet away to reveal the mirror. Laci grinned and mischief danced in her eyes. Jordan stalked over to her and guided her closer, then stood behind her so she could see herself. He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips to her neck.

“You want to see?” he asked. “How’s the view?”

“Incredible,” she replied.

“Excellent,” he said, and nipped at her shoulder. “Hands and knees.”

She turned. “What?”

“You heard me, angel. Hands. And. Knees.”

With a smirk, she bit her bottom lip, and obeyed, sinking to her knees and settling on all fours. The flush deepened on her cheeks when he crawled up behind her. He tugged her panties down and bent over her as his warm hands slid up her back until his fingers were laced firmly in her hair. He pulled her head up, and their eyes locked in the mirror.

“Look at yourself, gorgeous,” he growled. “Watch while I take it.”

He thrust into her until he was buried to the hilt. Her mouth fell open, and her breath seized in her throat, but she did not drop her gaze.

“You’re never lovelier than when my cock is inside you,” he said after his first thrust.

“Jordan,” she whined, her hips pressing back into him.

The hand he didn’t have in her hair, reared back and spanked her ass. The sound clapped like thunder, but didn’t drown out her desperate, filthy moan.

He fucked her strong and deep. Each relentless rock of his hips claimed her more and more. His to paint, his to fuck, his to adore. And with the way her pussy gripped him, he was just as much hers. He knew she owned him. It was a physical law of the universe, and he saw it in the mirror on his own face. Yearning had bloomed into need. She was part of him, ingrained in his heart and soul. Every atom of his being was hers.

“Jordan,” she panted. “I’m gonna—oh, fuck, *fuck!*”

She came, and he watched the way her cheeks and chest flushed bright pink in the mirror, amazed. He could never capture that in a painting nor the perfect muss of her hair falling over her shoulder. No, this was not a beauty that could be confined to a canvas. It was too real, too fleeting. So, he committed it to memory the best he could.

Her head dipped at last as her limbs gave out beneath her. He was right behind, spilling into her with a grunt, but he didn’t collapse. He hovered above her to catch his breath.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured into her skin as he kissed her shoulder. “So fucking beautiful. And all mine.”

She turned over, lying on her back, and reached up to cup his face. "I am all yours."

He bent to kiss her, but not for long with how out of breath they were.

"I mean it, Jordan," she said when they parted. "I'm yours."

"I believe you," he replied.

"Jordan." Her eyes roved over his face before she met his gaze again. "I've decided I don't want to go to America this summer. I'm gonna turn down the job and stay with you."

Chapter 25

At the panic stricken look on Jordan's face, Laci regretted her words. Her brows knit together to disguise her hurt.

“Jordan?”

“I...” he trailed off and got to his feet, pulling his joggers back up around his hips before helping her up as well. She felt far too exposed. “Laci, you can't.”

She crossed the room to gather up her clothes and put them back on. “I can't? Why not?”

“Because you...” He ran a frantic hand through his hair. “That's not—what about—”

“Are you going to finish any of those thoughts?”

He shot her a warning look. “Laci, this job has been something you've wanted for years. You can't give it up for me.”

“I want something different now,” she said and folded her arms over her chest.

“You told me it was your dream.”

“Dreams change.”

She remembered her conversation with Larysa. The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that Larysa was right. Things could come into your life that shift its trajectory. Laci never thought about being in a relationship before, so she hadn't taken it into consideration. But with Jordan in her life, her priorities were different.

“They don't change that much, not for another person,” he argued.

“Yours did for me, didn't they?” she replied. “You had no intention of ever being in a relationship, but because of me, because of *us*, you changed your mind.”

“That's different. I wasn't sacrificing anything.”

“Weren't you? What about that lifetime of solitude you were so looking forward to?”

“It's not the same, and you know it.”

“How's that?”

“Being alone wasn't something I worked hard for, it was something I had resigned myself to. This job, Laci...you've been working toward this, putting effort into it. And you deserve to take that chance.”

“I don't understand.” Her defiant shoulders dropped. “Do you want me to go?”

“No, of course not,” he said, putting his hands on her arms. “Especially since we don’t know when you’ll be back. I don’t want you to wake up in ten years and regret this.”

“Ten years from now, will I be waking up next to you?”

“God, I hope so.”

“Then I won’t regret it.”

His face softened for a fleeting moment before he frowned again. “Laci...”

“No, listen,” she said firmly, pointing her finger at his chest. “I’m not just saying this in the heat of the moment, I’ve been thinking about it for weeks. I love my job, and the US job is a great opportunity, but it’s not the *only* opportunity. I’ll find more jobs. There’s plenty here in London or other parts of Europe. But there is only one you.”

“But I—”

“I’m not finished!” He closed his mouth, though she swore she saw a hint of a smirk take over his lips. “My point is, I can imagine my future without that job. I’ll be fine. I cannot, for the life of me, imagine my future without you. It breaks my heart too much.”

She took a breath. “I love you, Jordan.”

His eyes went wide. She watched as every muscle in his body turned to stone, and he cut his gaze to the floor. She did not regret saying it. She meant it. She had been feeling it for long enough, and the realization that it was love was what had made up her mind about the job.

She loved him. More than any job, more than any dream.

“You don’t have to say it back,” she said gently. “It’s how I feel. That’s where my heart is.”

He stayed silent, eyes fixed on the ground. He was so still, she wondered if he was even breathing. When she was about to poke him to be sure, he cleared his throat.

“I, uh...” He stopped and ran a hand through his hair. “Do you, really?”

His eyes found hers, and behind his irises, she saw crippling doubt. She blinked, surprised.

“Is it so hard to believe?”

“A bit, yeah,” he answered through an uncomfortable laugh.

“Why?” she asked softly.

“You’re so kind and talented and beautiful—”

“You don’t think those things about yourself?”

“Fuck no. Maybe talented. I’m good at my job, but I never fucking dreamed that someone like you could actually...”

He looked away. She stepped into his line of sight and searched his gaze. His arms coiled around her waist as if drawn by magnets. His eyes were shining.

“Could actually love someone like me,” he finished.

“You see?” she said, reaching up to touch his face. “Dreams can change.”

He held her gaze for a long moment. Her heart hammered against her chest, willing him to say something, anything to assure her that he felt the same even if it wasn't "I love you." She meant it when she told him he didn't have to say it back. But she had dangled her heart in front of him. All he had to do was take it.

"Think on it," he said.

She deflated, letting her hand fall from his cheek. "I already ___"

"I know," he said, and he tucked her hair behind her ear. "But, please, for me, reconsider. No matter where you go, for however long, I'll be here for you. I'm yours, Laci. Hopelessly. Fucking...pathetically yours."

A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, but it didn't reach her eyes. She glanced around at the paintings, her likeness staring back at her, and her chest warmed. His dedication was there. It was a start.

"I see that," she said. "In the spirit of belonging to each other, I'll think about it some more. But, Jordan, I want you to know that no matter what I choose, it's for me, first and foremost."

He nodded.

As they returned to the living room to finish the movie, she wondered what it would take for him to crack himself open. She had been as vulnerable as possible with him. Was that not enough to convince him he could trust her? Was he still

holding on to his hurt from his parents' divorce? Worst of all, was there some part of him that was still convinced that would be their fate if he fully surrendered to their feelings for each other?



“Okay,” Laci said to her brothers. They had a rare afternoon where all three of them were available, so she suggested meeting for lunch. Jax looked up and nudged Tate, who looked between them for a moment before his gaze landed on Laci. She set down her fork so she could sign. “I need an opinion from a man’s perspective.”

“Trouble with Jordan?” Jax asked.

“Not trouble so much as...I dunno. I feel like we’re off step. Out of sync.”

“Seems like trouble to me,” Tate signed. “What happened?”

“I told him I’ve decided to give up the job in the States,” she explained, and they exchanged a surprised look. “With it being indefinite, it could take a toll on our relationship, and I don’t want that to happen...”

She explained everything, what she said, what he said, and what he *didn’t* say. The only thing she left out was Jordan’s paintings out of respect for his privacy.

She'd been telling herself for a week that she was fine and that she could wait for him to be ready to say "I love you" but the truth was, it stung when he didn't say it back. Even if he had assured her of his commitment to her. Telling her brothers brought some heat to her cheeks that she hadn't expected, but it only proved her point. Even when they were faking, she wasn't this insecure about the relationship.

She looked at Tate. "Have you and Britt said it yet?"

"Yeah, but I said it first," he signed. "She said it right back."

Laci's shoulders sagged.

"Sorry," he added with a sympathetic look.

"Don't be sorry. I'm happy for you," she replied. "I...I don't know. I feel so let down. Like he's pulling away from me."

"Okay, don't freak out, but that might be the case," Jax said.

Her eyes widened. "How am I supposed to not freak out at that?"

"Maybe he hasn't had proper time to consider his feelings," Jax went on. "Now that you've said it, I'm sure he'll come around. You probably just surprised him."

"I surprised Britt, too, and she did the opposite," Tate interjected. "It seems to me like maybe you guys *are* a little off step. It doesn't mean that's the end. It means there's things to work on, which is really an opportunity for you both to grow. Talk to him again and unpack his feelings with him."

“Your optimism is admirable, Tate, but if she comes on that strong again, she’s gonna send him running for the hills,” Jax said. “Or the highlands, given that he’s Scottish.”

“He’s from Glasgow. This isn’t bloody *Outlander*,” Laci said.

“He said he’s hers,” Tate protested. “That’s I love you in different words.”

“But it’s not I love you, is it?” Jax said. “He avoided it for a reason.”

“Which is why he may need support in discovering that reason,” Tate countered.

“He’d be better off doing that on his own. If she puts pressure on, he’s gonna freak out.”

“Not everyone is as immature as you. Jordan clearly cares deeply for Laci, and if he’s serious about her, it shouldn’t scare him,” Tate signed.

“You are woefully naive, Tate.”

“Excuse me!” Laci interjected before either of them could continue. “All this talk is about Jordan’s feelings, but I’m the one who got hurt here.”

They looked at her, back at each other, and then at her again. She took a deep breath.

“I...yeah, I’m hurt,” she said slowly.

“So maybe it’s not Jordan who needs space,” Jax said. “Perhaps it’s you who needs to take a step back.”

“What? So I can like, lick my wounds or whatever?”

“Something like that,” Tate added. “We’re taking Dad shooting this weekend. Mum’s going to see Nan up in Nottingham. Why don’t you head to the estate? Take some time for yourself.”

“Without Jordan?” she questioned. “I’m not sure it’s safe.”

“You could take a friend if it’ll make you feel better to not go alone. But I think Jax is right. If you’re feeling hurt, maybe spend some time with yourself before opening the door to another conversation that might lead to more confusion,” Tate suggested.

“That’s quite the heel face turn you did,” she tried to joke.

“What can I say? On the rare occasions that Jax is right, he’s right,” Tate added.

She giggled as Jax rolled his eyes.

“We just want to be sure you’re feeling alright,” Jax said. “Fuck Jordan’s feelings.”

“I don’t know if I’d go *that* far,” Laci said, an amused smile threatening to break, and she reached for her soda to take a sip. “But I think I will take a few days. I met someone at the gala who’s interested in seeing the house. Maybe I’ll take her up there and use that as an excuse.”

“Excellent,” Tate replied. “And, by the way, we’re sorry you’re going through this. It’s never easy when there’s uncertainty.”

“Yeah...” she said with a deep sigh. “Thanks, guys.”

“Anytime, Lace,” Jax said, then bit into his sandwich.

Laci forced a smile and looked at Tate. “So, how did you and Britt say I love you?”

“It came out of nowhere,” Tate began. “We were out to dinner, and I was looking at her, and she looked so beautiful in the candlelight. I couldn’t help myself. I said it. She was shocked at first, but then she got this big grin on her face and she said it back. I can’t even believe how obsessed I am with this woman...”

Laci paid close attention to his words, trying not to be too disheartened that it hadn’t gone as well between her and Jordan. But maybe her brothers were right. Some time apart might be what they needed.

Chapter 26

Jordan wheeled Ava's suitcase in front of him, his body moving robotically through Heathrow, but his mind was entirely with Laci. She'd been more reserved around him since she said those three all-consuming words, and even though she had assured him he didn't have to say them back if he wasn't ready, he could tell she was thrown off. They hadn't even had sex in three days.

"Hello? Earth to J."

He blinked and looked at his sister. Her brow curled down over her eyes with a frown to match.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "You're acting weirder than usual."

"Fuck off," he shot back.

"God, I wish I had a drink for every time you told me to fuck off. I'd never be sober again. What a glorious life that'd be."

He rolled his eyes. "Look, I'm...something happened between Laci and me, and I think I fucked it up."

She narrowed her eyes at him. “What did you do?”

“Nothing! It’s what I didn’t do, or say, rather, that I think caused the problem.”

“What happened?”

He looked away. “She told me she loves me.”

“And that’s a problem because...”

“I didn’t say it back.”

Ava snatched her airplane pillow from around her neck and smacked him over the head with it. He grunted in surprise, but she didn’t stop. She pummeled him relentlessly with her pillow, striking any place she could reach. She managed to get a few blows to his face despite him putting his hands up.

“You! Dumb! Mother! Fucker!” she cried, each word accentuated with a strike.

“Ava!” he protested, dodging a hit to his left cheek. “People are staring!”

“You think I give a fuck?” She nailed him in the chest.

“Fucking Christ...”

She stopped to catch her breath. “Have you completely lost your mind? She’s the woman of your dreams, and you’re too much of a pussy to say three little words?”

His face grew hot when a couple walking by turned their heads at her volume.

“Ava,” he said, lowering his voice. “You don’t have all the information.”

“What’s the rest then?” she demanded.

“She told me that because she loves me, she wants to give up the job in America and stay here, a job she’s wanted for ages.”

“Is that supposed to convince me you’re not a fuckhead? Because it doesn’t.”

“But she—”

“Oh no, the woman I love loves me so much, she doesn’t want to leave me,” she said in a mocking voice. She folded her arms over her chest and scowled. “Boo-fucking-hoo, J. Your life is *so* hard. I feel *so* bad for you.”

“Listen!” he insisted. “If she gives up that job, she’ll resent me. I know it. And we both know what resentment does. I can’t let us end up like...like...”

“Mum and Dad?”

He nodded.

Ava heaved a sigh. “You really are a pussy.”

“I’m trying to do the right thing,” he said, becoming indignant. “It’d be selfish of me to ask her to stay.”

“You aren’t asking, you knobhead. She was trying to tell you what she *wants* to do,” she retorted. “D’you really think she doesn’t know her own mind?”

“I think it’d be a mistake.”

“And you know best, do you? It’s 2024, J. Women can decide for themselves.”

“What if she hates me for it down the line?”

Ava glowered at him. “When are you gonna stop making this about you?”

“This isn’t about me at all!”

“Isn’t it?” she cried. “Laci put herself out there by telling you what was on her mind, on her heart. And you shat all over it because you’re so afraid of getting hurt. Well, guess what, J? People are gonna hurt you no matter what happens. People are arseholes. Might as well be with the arsehole you love.”

“Don’t call her an arsehole,” Jordan said. “I’ll thump you even if you are my sister.”

She rolled her eyes and ran a hand through her hair. “Laci’s braving the hurt for you. When are you gonna do the same for her?”

He paused to let that percolate through his heart. He’d never thought about it in those terms, but it was true. Laci took a big leap toward him, and instead of reaching out and catching her, he’d drawn back and let her fall. He heaved a sigh.

“I’m a fucking idiot,” he said.

“Just realizing that now, are you?”

“How do I fix it?”

“Tell her you love her.”

“I know that. I meant *how* should I tell her?”

“I dunno, J. You know her better than I do. How d’you think she’d like to hear it?”

He considered that. He had no idea what she wanted from such a moment. He did, however, know what she deserved. Something thoughtful, personal, and extremely romantic.

“The *Titanic* scene,” he said under his breath.

“What?” Ava asked.

“Her favorite film’s *Titanic*,” he explained. “We were watching it the night she said she loves me. Her favorite scene is when Leo’s doing the wee drawing.”

“The nude one?”

“The nude one, aye. She knows about my art now. We could recreate the scene and then I can tell her.”

Ava blinked. “She knows about your art?”

“Aye...” He rubbed his hand over the back of his neck. “We were watching that scene, and she told me it was sort of a fantasy of hers to have her portrait done. So...I showed her my work.”

“How’d she take it?”

“We fucked in front of my studio mirror.”

“Wow,” Ava chuckled. After a beat she continued. “I think that’s a great idea. But just to be clear, you do love her, right?”

“Of course,” he said.

It seemed obvious to him. Every time he looked at Laci, his heart thundered inside his chest. He painted her because he could think of no one lovelier to capture on canvas. He had

kept her as safe as he could from Dane, and he would protect her for the rest of his life from anything that came her way. He needed to give her the words along with his actions.

“Good,” Ava said. “I didn’t want you saying it just so you don’t lose her.”

“I wouldn’t,” he assured her. “You’re right. I’m being a pussy.”

“Pure noonie,” she agreed.

He smiled. “C’mere, you.”

When he opened his arms, her eyes went wide, and she shrank away.

“Don’t you dare,” she warned. “The fuck you are, Jordan!”

It was too late. His arms went around her shoulders, and he held firm despite her wild struggle against his embrace like a cat trapped by an overly-affectionate toddler. Made all the more convincing by the strangled sounds coming from her throat even though his arms were nowhere near it. He gave her a squeeze for good measure while lifting her feet a couple inches off the floor to get a particularly annoyed grunt out of her. When he felt the sharp contact of her finger flicking his forehead, he released her.

She gulped in the air as if emerging from a pool. “Jesus fucking Christ, what was that?”

“A hug,” he said, rubbing his stinging forehead.

“Never do that again.”

“Y’know most siblings hug.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d have thought you were dying.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic.”

Before she could retort, their mother arrived, out of breath and swiping her hair out of her face as she adjusted her bag on her shoulder. She rose to her full height and settled, looking at Ava.

“Good,” she said, still winded. “I haven’t missed you.”

Ava offered a half-smile. “No, not yet.”

Nina turned toward Jordan and patted his arm, a little awkwardly, but he didn’t mind. Her brow furrowed as she looked at him. “Why’s your forehead all red?”

“Ava thumped me.”

Ava bristled. “You little tattletale fuck—”

“I don’t want to know,” Nina said, cutting her daughter off. “Have you got everything you need for Australia?”

“Aye,” Ava assured her. “What I don’t have, I can get there.”

Jordan left them and found an empty corner so he could give Laci a call. It rang three times before she answered.

“Hello?”

He frowned. Normally, when she answered for him, he was greeted with a sunny, “hi, babe!” He must have really upset her, which made his stomach turn, but he knew he was going to make it up to her.

“Hey, angel,” he said. “I wanna do something special this weekend. I’ve got a match on Saturday, but I was thinking Sunday, we could—”

“Actually,” she cut across him. “I’m going up to the estate this weekend. I told Tessa I’d take her at the gala, remember?”

He swallowed, his throat tight. “Aye, I remember.”

“Well, it’s the perfect weekend. Jax and Tate are taking Dad shooting, and Mum’s visiting my grandmother in Nottingham. So, it’ll be just me and her.”

He stiffened. “I don’t think that’s safe.”

“Dane doesn’t know where the estate is. It’ll be fine.”

“How can you be sure?”

“He doesn’t even know where you live, so I reckon he only knows my house.”

“Wait. How do you know *that*?”

She hesitated. “I...uh...he hasn’t shown up there. If he knew where I was, he’d have turned up by now.”

He glanced around at the people milling about and turned his back to them. He faced the wall and lowered his voice. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No!” she answered quickly. Too quickly in his opinion. “I...I think maybe we need some space.”

Space?

Panic shot through his body. That was the last thing he wanted. He really had fucked it up. She was pulling away. No, he'd pushed her. He'd let his fear get the best of him and he was paying for it. He'd asked her to reconsider, and she would, but without knowing how he felt. Would that change her mind again? He had to do something.

“What are you saying?” he forced himself to ask.

“I want a few days to myself, that's all.”

That didn't feel like all it was.

“Laci, I know I disappointed you the other night, but—”

“I'm fine, Jordan, really. It's just a couple days. You'll hardly miss me.”

That was not true. He'd fucking ache for her while she was gone. Especially when he had something so big he needed to share with her.

“This is really what you want?” he asked.

“It is.”

“Then I'll do it. But can you do something for me?”

“Sure.”

“Stay in touch. Let me know when you get there and if... anything happens.”

“Of course, I will. I'll see you Sunday night when I get back, alright?”

“Alright.”

A beat passed in silence.

“Jordan?”

“Yeah?”

“Love you.”

The line went dead. He held his phone away from his ear and stared at it. His heart dropped like a sandbag. He didn't know what to feel or what to think. It was the first time she'd said it since the initial “I love you.” But that felt more like goodbye. He wondered if she was taking the next few days to figure out how to tell him she wanted to go back to being pretend, that the original plan would move forward, and they would part ways once Dane was in custody or she was safely across the ocean from him. He leaned his forehead against the wall and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Fuck!” he cried through clenched teeth and whirled around, coming face to face with a young woman holding hands with a little boy, maybe six or seven years old, in a Stanmore keeper jersey. The blood drained from Jordan's face. “Oh. Hello. Sorry about the, uh...the fuck.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Twice. Jesus.”

The woman fiddled with the Sharpie in her hand. “I suppose this is a bad time...”

“No, not at all.”

He plastered a smile onto his face and crouched to the boy's level. After another quick apology to the mother, he got the kid's name, posed for a photo, and signed his kit. The boy

walked away beaming, but Jordan could swear he heard him asking why fuck was such a bad word if both his father and Jordan Frawley used it. Jordan would have found it funny if his heart wasn't breaking.

Slowly, he made his way back over to Ava and his mother.

“Jordan,” Nina said brightly. “That was so sweet, you with that wee boy. Big Stanmore fan, is he, or—” She stopped short at the look on his face. “Are you alright?”

He shook his head and locked eyes with Ava. “I fucked it up.”

Ava's shoulders drooped. “What happened?”

He told her and Nina about the phone call. Unfortunately, neither of them had much time to give him advice before Ava had to leave. Jordan, on the cusp of losing Laci, had to say a gut-wrenching goodbye to his sister and best friend, the one person who could be there for him if he ended up getting dumped. But he had to, once again, force a smile and pleasantries. She was taking a once in a lifetime opportunity with her band, and he was happy for her. And he was going to miss her so fucking much.

If it was that hard to send Ava off, he couldn't imagine what it would be like when Laci went.

When he got back to his flat, he went straight to his studio. The only sound was the drag of his pencil along the fresh canvas as he sketched the outline for his latest painting. He pulled a reference photo from a magazine of him and Laci at

the gala, thinking he might have something to give her when she came back.

When he reached the section with him in it, he stopped, questioning. He had never painted himself before. He didn't know how to feel about it. He wasn't sure he deserved to be painted beside her. The longer he looked at the photo, the more convinced he became that he didn't. Laci was elegant and graceful. He looked like a giraffe standing awkwardly beside her. She was confident and honest, and he couldn't even muster up the courage to tell her how he felt.

Shaking his head, he erased the line that started his arm.

Chapter 27

“This is the library,” Laci said as she guided Tessa inside.

Tessa snapped photos of the entryway, the sliding ladder across the back wall, and the paintings on the walls between the shelves. She’d been clicking away all day once Laci gave her permission (and had cleared everything with her parents). Tessa ran a hand over the thick leather volumes in front of her, a wistful smile on her lips.

“This is incredible,” she said. “And pure class from your parents to keep the integrity of a home like this. I can’t tell you how many perfectly whimsical old homes are being turned into minimalist hellscapes.”

Laci chuckled. “Our family is far from minimalist. Besides, we like the character of it. I’m a bit ashamed by how little I know of the actual history.”

Throughout the tour, Tessa had had more than one question Laci didn’t know the answer to, mostly about the Colfields and

their time in the home before it passed out of their family. Laci's parents hardly talked about them.

From the time she was young this had always been the Miller's house. She glanced at the painting of the family from the early nineteenth century with the daughter's burned away face, and an ache bloomed in her chest. She wasn't sure if it was because she still felt sorry for the girl or if it was because the last time she was here, it had been with Jordan, and she missed him like flowers miss the rain. Tessa followed her gaze and blinked.

"What happened there?" she asked.

"Not sure," Laci said with a shrug. "We think the daughter must have done something to upset the family."

Tessa stared at it some more. "Poor Lady Caroline."

Laci sucked in a sharp breath. "What?"

"The daughter, her name was Caroline," Tessa said. "Not much is known about her because she died as a young adult, wee critter. It seems Lord Colfield got rid of any reminders of her."

With everything going on with Dane and the tension with Jordan, Laci had nearly forgotten about the mysterious Caroline and Samuel.

She didn't have long to dwell on them before Tessa spoke again.

"Why didn't you join your family this weekend? Surely there'd be more craic in that than playing tour guide."

Laci shook her head. “Not at all. I’d go with my mum, but my grandmother hates my job and finds any excuse to tell me how inappropriate it is for a young lady to be photographed in her undergarments.”

“Jesus,” Tessa scoffed.

“I can’t go shooting because I can’t bear the sound of gunfire. I went once when I was younger and was petrified. Had an absolute meltdown.”

“Did you now?”

“Yeah. I don’t know where it comes from. Guy Fawkes Day is a nightmare for me.”

Tessa chuckled. “I imagine so.”

“Thank God for noise canceling headphones.” Laci clapped her hands, ready to change the subject. Especially after yet another reminder of Jordan, who had been her comfort when she had been without her headphones. “Now that you’ve had the tour, how about dinner? The cook’s already left, but there’s plenty of leftovers in the kitchen.”

“That’ll be grand.”

The kitchen was in the lowest level of the house, almost like a basement. Laci’s parents never had one put upstairs to maintain the historical accuracy of the home, which was a bit burdensome when making a meal because they’d have to bring it up to the dining room, but they didn’t mind. As kids, she and her brothers would race to see who could get their platter to

the dining room fastest without spilling anything. Laci was the reigning champion.

Once there, she pulled some stools up to the prep counter and retrieved some meats, cheeses, fruit, and bread. She served it with a bottle of cabernet, which Tessa initially protested, but Laci insisted it was no trouble to open a bottle. They had hundreds, after all.

“Tessa, can I ask you something personal?” Laci wondered as they ate.

“Sure,” Tessa replied. “If I don’t care to answer, I’ll let you know.”

“Certainly,” Laci said. She shifted her weight on the stool, suddenly unsure. “Um...have you ever been in love?”

Tessa set down her wine glass and cut her gaze from Laci’s. “I have.”

“May I ask with whom?”

“Out of respect for her privacy, I can’t tell you her name.”

“I understand. What happened? Why aren’t you with her?”

Tessa turned her wine glass in half circles. Her gaze softened, as if seeing something that wasn’t there, something far away in her memory.

“She wasn’t quite ready for what I wanted,” she said. “That is...she wasn’t out. I kept waiting for her to get there as patiently as I could. She’s sort of well-known, and she had a certain image to keep up. It was mostly for her parents, but she

was scared for the world to know too. And I couldn't love her out of being afraid."

A sharp pang of worry cut through Laci's heart. Fear was holding Jordan back too.

"We were together a year and a half, and I couldn't wait anymore, so I broke it off," Tessa went on. "I needed to be with someone brave enough to love me the way I loved them. I could see she wasn't going to get there any time soon."

"Was it dangerous for her to come out?" Laci wondered, hoping there were extenuating circumstances, some reason other than fear holding the mystery woman back. "Maybe she couldn't."

Tessa shook her head. "No, in her line of work, she'd have been well supported. There are a lot of other gay women in that community. Plus, she no longer lived with her parents, and she made good money, so she wasn't relying on them. She just couldn't bear to disappoint them even though they treated her like pure shite."

Laci fidgeted with her shirt. "Were you able to stay friends?"

"No, I'm not a believer in being friends with exes," Tessa said. "Besides, she moved to Manchester. Dunno if that was because of me or just an extremely well-timed job opportunity, but either way, we were done. No use dragging it out."

"I see."

A few beats of silence passed while Laci panicked. Was she looking at her future?

If Jordan couldn't meet her where she was, in vulnerability and honesty, would she be able to stay with him? She loved him, but she knew what she deserved. Like Tessa said, she deserved to be loved proudly and openly.

He certainly behaved as if he loved her though. The paintings, his support of her work, and his unwavering protection of her in the face of all that had happened with Dane all indicated it. But without the words, how would she know for sure?

Suddenly, the walls of the kitchen felt like they were closing in on her. She needed fresh air before she suffocated. Spying a full bag of recycles in the corner, she looked at Tessa.

"I, uh...I should take this out," she said. She held up their empty wine bottle. "Get rid of this as well. I'll be back in a minute."

Tessa raised a skeptical brow. "Are you alright?"

"Yep. Yeah. I'm good...I'll be back."

She didn't give Tessa time to pry before she wrapped up the bin bag, yanked open the back door, and stepped out into the dark night, her heart aching.

When she reached the side of the house, she slung the bag into the bin and let the lid fall closed with a slam. She turned to head back inside, but the sound of a soft rattling stopped her in her tracks. It sounded like a doorknob, but the only door

around was the one to the closed off cellar. Or what they assumed was a cellar, but they never had been able to get it open. She looked at it but shook her head.

“It’s the wind,” she told herself.

She started to return inside again, but the bushes rustled. That made the hair on the back of her neck stand up. Had Dane managed to find her and follow her here? Of course, the one time she was without Jordan. She bit back a swear and wondered if it would be too risky to call for Tessa. Another rustle made her jump with a gasp. This time, she saw the swish of the branches.

Heart pounding, she stole a sideways glance at the second bush, expecting it to move as well. If it were Dane, it was likely he was moving to get behind her and take her by surprise.

She heard a voice. A soft, feminine voice, not unlike her own.

“Samuel?” it called.

She whipped around. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark, but she saw nothing around except the shrubbery.

“Samuel?” the voice called again, louder this time.

Laci stumbled back until she hit the wall, pressing her body to it in hopes that the spirit or ghost, or whatever it was, passed her by. She slammed her eyes shut, but when she did, it was not the back of her eyelids she saw. Instead, she was standing in the precise spot she was in, only the sun shone in the sky,

and she wore a long dress. Jordan strode toward her in the most absurd outfit she'd ever seen, a Regency era get-up made complete with waist coat, cravat, white billowy shirt, and breeches. His dark curls were down to his shoulders and tied loosely back with a ribbon. Her heart soared at the sight of him.

“Samuel,” she heard herself say.

Samuel? That was Jordan. What was going on?

Whoever he was, he pulled her into him for a long, adoring kiss that banished all her questions from her mind. When they parted, she was breathless.

“You didn't think I'd forgotten, did you?” he asked.

She shook her head, her eyes still fluttering. “Of course not. It's...I wasn't able to tell my family last night, about us.”

He nodded, understanding in his eyes. “I thought as much with your brother announcing his engagement and all.”

“I didn't want to cause a stir when they were all so happy. I'm sorry.”

He tilted her chin to look at him. “It's alright. We don't have to tell them right away. We've got time.”

“I'm not so sure.” She chewed her bottom lip. “I'm certain my father is in favor of a match between me and Seymour. He's come to call three times this week. My mother is ecstatic, saying he's sure to propose any day.”

His brow furrowed. “Has he said as much?”

“I don’t know. I was missing for part of the ball,” she replied with a sly grin.

When he didn’t return it, she grew worried. He tapped his chin with his forefinger, silent for so long, she feared he wouldn’t answer at all.

“Did you dance with him?” he asked.

“Only twice. No more than proper. I assure you, the man is as much of a bully on the dance floor as he is off it.”

“We should tell them soon. The longer we wait, the more likely it is that Lord Seymour will ask for your hand.”

“I hope not. He frightens me so.”

“I’d never let him hurt you.”

“I know. But I was thinking...what if we didn’t have to say anything? We could sneak away in the night, leave a note explaining ourselves, and go to Scotland together like we planned, and—”

“Caroline, no.” He stopped her. “I’ll not steal away with you in the night like a thief.”

“But we could—”

“Are you having doubts?”

“No,” she assured him, putting her hand on his forearm. “I love you. I’d marry you this instant if I could. I worry that now there’s an eligible match available, my family might not take it as well. They may not allow us to leave.”

He placed his hand over hers, curling his fingers around her palm and lifting them to his lips, pressing a feather light kiss across her knuckles. It gave her butterflies from her stomach to the ends of her hair.

“I’ll give you anything, Caroline,” he said like a promise.

She stepped closer and stood on her toes, getting close enough that their noses touched. “You have given me everything already. Simply by being mine.”

She kissed him properly—deep, passionate, and slow. Every time she kissed him, she wondered how the things they did could be called a sin when he brought her to heaven with every touch. Whatever life existed beyond this one, she would carry the memory of his kisses with her.

They parted for breath, and she held his gaze.

“I should go,” she said ruefully. “Mama will be looking for me soon.”

“Will I see you tonight?”

“Of course, here, as usual.”

“Good. I’ve got a new painting to show you that I think you’ll love.”

He pressed his lips to her forehead and departed. She waited two minutes before she would leave in the opposite direction.

When she turned to go, she saw the housekeeper with her mouth agape, and the blood drained from both their faces.

“M-my lady,” Mrs. Hughes began. “What have you done?”

The darkness of present day returned to Laci when she fell on her bum. Her back slammed against the locked door, making it clatter again. She panted like she'd run a marathon. Or seven. What on earth had she seen? It was a scene straight out of a historical romance novel, but she was looking through the eyes of the heroine. No, she *was* the heroine. And worse, it had filled her with the worst sense of dread she had ever experienced. Almost as bad as the day she went shooting with her father and brothers. A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Fuck,” she whimpered, pressing her hands against her eyes to wipe away the wetness and prevent more tears from escaping.

Her heart was beating so fast, she felt like it would detach from her any minute. She tried to draw breath but found it stopping in her throat. Her fingers tingled like they were going numb. More tears escaped down her face, but she didn't stop them. It was all she could do to not curl up on the ground and scream.

“Laci?”

Tessa's voice made her look, but it sounded far away, like she was calling through a tunnel. She appeared, kneeling in front of Laci with her brow knitted over her eyes. Laci blinked to try and force Tessa's face into focus, but there were two Tessas swaying in front of her.

“I...” she barely managed to say. “I can't breathe.”

“I'm gonna check your pulse, is that alright?”

Laci nodded. Right away, she felt Tessa's fingers against her throat. She wasn't sure if her skin was hot or if Tessa had cold hands.

"Jesus, it's like a machine gun," Tessa said, half to herself. "Laci, I need you to tell me three things you can hear."

"What?"

"Three things you can hear, just say them."

"Uh, you, first of all. Where's your accent from?"

"Derry. Now, two more."

"The wind."

"Grand. One more."

"My heart."

Tessa shook her head. "Nope, something outside of yourself."

Laci squeezed her eyes shut and listened. After a moment, she said, "An owl, somewhere in the distance."

Tessa led her through two more similar exercises by naming three things she could feel and five things she could see. By the time she got through it, her heart rate was almost back to normal. Her skin was clammy and cold, but nothing a shower wouldn't fix.

"How'd you know what to do?" she asked, looking sidelong at Tessa, who had taken a seat next to her.

"My ex, the one I told you about, she used to have panic attacks like that a lot. I learned what to do so I could help

her.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a panic attack before.”

“Are you feeling any extra stress?”

Laci paused, wondering how much to reveal. She decided to skip the vision part so she wouldn’t sound like she was going mad. “I’ve got a stalker.”

“Fucking hell, really?”

“Yeah. I saw the bushes move and thought maybe it was him. But it was the wind.”

“That’d normally be enough, but judging by the exhaustion in your voice, it sounds like you’ve been dealing with him for a while.”

“I have. It isn’t likely he knows how to find me here.”

“Anything else?”

“I’ve got this job lined up in America that I’m not sure I want anymore.”

“Tough call. Have you spoken to your agent about it?”

“No. I’m sort of afraid to tell her.”

Laci looked at her hands and sighed.

Tessa blinked at her from behind her glasses. “There’s something else isn’t there?”

Laci nodded and pulled her knees into her chest. “I told Jordan I love him, and he didn’t say it back.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Tessa said softly. She offered her hand, and Laci took it. The contact was refreshing on her sweaty palms. “I’m so sorry, love.”

Laci sniffled. “I’m sorry too.”

Chapter 28

Jordan hit the ground fucking pissed off. They were already down one-nil against Chelsea, which was bad enough, but they were also at home. It was only the first half, so there was still time to come back, but a shot from Ethan was much too close and had Jordan bellowing at his teammates. He set the ball up for a goal kick, and he could still feel the stretch in his side from the earlier save. In his heart, he knew chasing the game wasn't the only reason he was angry.

The days without Laci had been miserable. She hardly answered his texts, so he hadn't bothered trying to call. The only solace he had was his paintings and training. But even those were not proving to be complete distractions. He missed her so much he ached. He desperately wanted to tell her how he felt about her. Thinking about it had him so riled up that when he punted the ball, it sailed clear over both teams and right into the Chelsea goalkeeper's gloves.

He rolled it out to one of the defenders, and Jordan braced himself for their attack. They surged up the pitch in his

direction. He barked a few orders at Israel and Luka.

He tracked the ball as it went between the Chelsea forwards, and he bit back a groan. Stanmore was making it much too easy on them. They were cutting through the back line like a hot knife through butter. One good cross and they would double their lead.

Hector managed to dispossess one of the Chelsea wingers at last, and he made a swift turn to head in the other direction. But a Chelsea defender flew in and pushed him from the back. Hector went down with a cry, and the scream of the whistle brought everyone to a halt.

Only the defender didn't stop.

He started dribbling the ball toward Jordan despite the shouts of protest from Stanmore players and fans alike.

Jordan having had quite enough of the bullshit, stormed off his line and drove his shoulder into the Chelsea man, putting the latter flat on his back.

“Fucking whistle blew, shitebag!” he shouted.

“What the fuck?” the downed defender returned.

Jordan snatched up the ball. “Push Rizo again, and I'll tear your fucking arms off.”

The man scrambled to his feet and squared his shoulders, coming within inches of Jordan. He didn't quite have Jordan's height, so he had to stand on his toes.

“You think you’re a big man, do you?” Jordan mocked, and with one hand, forced the defender back a few steps.

He stumbled, but it was enough to get him bristling. “Fuck you, Frawley!”

Jordan’s teammates flew to his side, but the Chelsea guys were there as well. Pushing and shoving ensued with more profanity-laced barbs back and forth.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Ethan interjected, stepping between his current and former teammates. He put his hands out toward them both, glancing between them. “Everybody settle down.”

“I’ll settle down when he stops being a sneaky wee bitch,” Jordan spat.

Ethan lifted a questioning brow at Jordan but didn’t get to voice his concern before the referee made it through the chaos, showing a yellow card first to the Chelsea defender for the push on Hector and then lifting a second yellow in front of Jordan. He waved it off, not bothering to plead his case. He stepped back into position and got ready for the free kick.

Tempted as he was to waste a bit of time and piss off Chelsea further, he was on a yellow and couldn’t risk it. He took the kick with enough force to get his guys a good way into Chelsea territory. Peter grounded the ball and passed to Devon who no one was marking. Jordan watched. Maybe, if they played it smart, they could get an equalizer before the break.

Devon took a shot, but the goalkeeper batted it away. Hector received the ball, took one touch to shift his weight so he could shoot with his preferred left foot and fired off a rocket from the edge of the box. It swished into the upper right corner of the net to the roar of Stanmore supporters around the stadium.

The team celebrated. Jordan lifted his hands and clapped from his end of the pitch, his confidence growing. There was still five minutes plus stoppage before the half, maybe they could—

SLAM.

A sudden, heavy weight barreled into Jordan's side. He went to the ground as a fist came toward his head, which he blocked with his gloves. He covered his face, so he couldn't see who it was. He thought maybe it was the Chelsea guy, coming back for round two, but everyone was seemingly on the other end of the pitch. This had to be pitch stormer, but how had they gotten past security?

“She's mine!” the attacker shouted, and Jordan recognized the voice. Dane. “She was promised to me!”

Furious, Jordan grabbed Dane by the throat, twisted around, and smashed him into the grass. In his peripheral vision, Jordan saw his teammates and security arriving. While he had the chance, he held Dane down, took off one glove with his teeth, and drove his freed fist into Dane's nose. He thought on the nights Laci lost sleep and the terrified look on her face as

she trembled in his arms, and he punched the fucker again. This time drawing blood.

Dane broke free of Jordan's grip, scrambled to his knees, and grabbed him around the waist in an attempt to tackle him again. But Jordan dug in. They pushed at each other like wrestlers. Luka and Israel moved to grab Dane and remove him from their captain, but Ethan snatched them by their jerseys and held them back.

“Knife!” he warned.

That made Jordan stiffen. When had Dane drawn a weapon? It hardly mattered with how quickly Ethan acted. He kicked Dane's hand. Jordan heard a few fingers crack. Dane howled, dropping the knife, and cradled his hand into his chest. Luka and Israel moved to help Jordan to his feet as security surrounded Dane.

Somehow, Dane had the energy to resist them. He wriggled wildly, but he was outnumbered and overpowered. He looked wilder with wet redness smeared across the bottom half of his face. Jordan caught his breath. He felt a clap on his shoulder and turned to see Ethan there.

“You alright?” he asked in his Southern drawl.

Jordan swallowed and nodded. “Think so.”

“Gotta watch for those knives. I tell ya, nothing will put a bigger hitch in your giddy up.”

Jordan opened his mouth, prepared to call him a wanker and move on, but Dane interrupted again.

“She was promised to me!” he cried, yanking his arm against the security guard holding him. “She should be mine!”

Jordan shook his head. “Fuck off, Dane. Laci’s a person. She doesn’t *belong* to anyone.”

A tiny part of him disagreed with that. He felt possessive of Laci, but certainly not enough to stab anyone, unless she wanted him to. If she asked him to stab Dane, he’d do it without hesitation.

“Before she was Laci,” Dane went on. “When she was Caroline.”

Jordan’s blood went cold. His heart squeezed in on itself. Every muscle in his body went rigid. How in the world did Dane know about that name?

“That’s enough out of you,” the security guard said.

“Wait!” Jordan said, stepping closer. With his free hand, he took hold of Dane’s shirt, ignoring the shouts of annoyance from the crowd to resume the match. “What are you on about? Before she was Laci? What does that mean?”

He wanted to punch the smug smile off Dane’s face, but the blood running from his nose would have to satisfy him.

“You haven’t realized yet, have you?” Dane said with a sneer. “You lost her once before, Frawley.”

Jordan opened his mouth to question Dane, but the referee put a hand to his chest and ushered him back toward the goal. Security dragged Dane off the pitch. He’d stopped fighting it, but then he started laughing. His wicked cackle echoed all the

way into the tunnel. Jordan stood there, stricken, until Fernando placed a hand on his arm.

“You good, Captain?” he asked.

Jordan didn't answer for a long moment, his gaze on the purple bruises blooming over his knuckles. He wasn't good. He wasn't even within a hair of somewhat okay. He felt like the pitch had been jerked askew, and he was struggling to keep his boots on the ground. Dane's voice rang in his ears. *You lost her once before, Frawley. You lost her once before, Frawley. You lost her once before, Frawley...*

He shook his head to clear it.

“I'm fine,” he lied. “Let's get back to the match.”

Ten minutes of stoppage time were added on to the end of the first half to accommodate the interruption, and Jordan had no doubt pundits and social media would be having a field day with the mysterious pitch stormer. Stanmore returned to the locker room in complete silence, but he could feel his teammates' eyes on him. Curious eyes. Worried eyes.

Before Coach Warren got started on a game plan, Jordan cleared his throat and stood beside him at the white board.

“Sorry, Coach, I think I've got to explain what happened back there,” he said.

Coach Warren searched his face, and when he found no reservation, he gave Jordan the floor.

Jordan looked around at his teammates. “So, I know that was fucking bizarre. I'm sorry you all had to see it, but the guy

who attacked me is my girlfriend's stalker. He's been after her for months, breaking into her house and shit. I never thought he'd try and get to me at a match, and it put you all in danger. I'm sorry."

They blinked back at him for a few long moments.

"So *that's* why you punched him twice," Hector said finally, breaking the tension.

A chuckle went through the dressing room. Luka spoke up next.

"Dude, why didn't you tell us?" he wondered. "We could have helped you guys."

Jordan blinked. "What?"

"We could have driven by, had you guys stay at any of our houses, all that stuff," Israel said. "You and Laci didn't have to take this on alone."

"You..." Jordan swallowed the sudden lump in his throat. "I couldn't have asked it of you. It was a lot, and—"

"You would have done it for us," Artem interjected. "Hell, you beat up a lawyer last season looking out for Ethan's girlfriend. Of course, we would have helped."

"I didn't *beat him up*, I..." He didn't have an argument, Artem was right. If any of their wives or girlfriends were in need of help, Jordan would have stepped up. He'd never thought of what he did for Billie as heroic. The fact he thought they wouldn't do the same for him made him feel foolish. "I'm

sorry. I should have been honest with you. We are a team, after all.”

He put his hand out in front of him. One by one, they got to their feet and joined him, placing their hands atop his. Coach Warren too. Even Peter, begrudgingly and rolling his eyes, participated. Jordan looked around, meeting each of their eyes.

“Stanmore on three,” he said, and they nodded. “One... two...three!”

“STANMORE!” they chanted in unison.

The second half passed in a blur. Jordan blocked a few superb shots from Ethan, but ultimately, the match ended in a two-two draw. After which, he showered, changed, and headed out to the parking lot.

“Jordan.”

He lifted his head to see Ethan standing near the boot of his car. He looked more serious than Jordan had ever seen him.

“Knight,” he replied.

Ethan glanced around and took a step closer, leaning his head in like he was about to share a secret. “I think you should come to me and Billie’s place tomorrow. Bring Laci.”

Jordan’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

“We might be able to explain some things that guy said tonight.”

“What the fuck, Knight?”

“I know it sounds ridiculous, but I promise, it’ll make some sense if you let us explain it.”

Jordan frowned. What could Ethan possibly know about the Caroline thing?

“Will it sweeten the deal if I promise to feed you?” Ethan pressed. “I mean, not cooking. Billie, bless her heart, she is lost around the kitchen.”

“If I agree, will you let me go home?”

Ethan chuckled. “You bet.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow.”

They clapped hands, and Jordan climbed in behind the wheel of his Range Rover. He glanced at his phone and saw Laci had texted him several times.

Laci: *OMG, are you okay??? I just saw what happened.*

Laci: *Jordan, are you alive?*

Laci: *Does this mean Dane is out of our hair?*

Laci: *Please answer. I know matchday is mad, but please let me know.*

He bit back a smile at her level of concern and tapped on her contact to call her. She picked up before the first ring finished.

“Jordan, oh my God,” she said, and she sounded out of breath. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, angel,” he replied. “Thanks for checking in.”

“I can’t believe it’s all over. He’s actually in custody.”

“Yeah...”

“I need to confess something to you.”

“What’s that?”

“Dane warned me he was coming for you. He sent me flowers the day we were celebrating Valentine’s Day. In the note, he implied he knew where to find you. I didn’t think it meant anything at the time. I thought he had to be bluffing.”

“Laci, what?” he said. “You never told me about that.”

“I know,” she said, and he could picture her chewing her bottom lip. “I’m sorry. I thought it was an empty threat and I didn’t want to ruin our night.”

He swallowed his complaint and shook his head. “It’s fine. Nothing happened.”

“It could have been horrible. Did he really have a knife?”

“Aye, but if he’d stabbed me, you’d already know.”

A shaky laugh left her. “I am really sorry, Jordan.”

He took a deep breath, unsure what else to say. He must have messed up indeed if she hadn’t confided something like that in him. But Valentine’s Day...that was before she said I love you, and he’d let her down. Had she been pulling away all this time? Now that Dane was in custody, was it over between them? He couldn’t bring himself to ask. Not when he was so fucking raw.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Look, I’ve got us some dinner plans tomorrow night. When d’you think you’ll be home?”

Chapter 29

Holding Laci's hand, Jordan rang the bell at Ethan and Billie's front door. He was surprised by Laci's nonchalance since they hadn't had a chance to talk when she returned from the estate. All they'd gotten out were some hellos and a kiss before they had to change and get ready to go to dinner. Jordan's insides were twisting. He wanted to talk to her about everything and put his cards on the table, but he didn't want to rush that kind of conversation either. So, once again, he was forced to put it off. He stole a glance at her while they waited, but she looked resolutely at the door.

Billie answered with a smile on her face as she tucked a brown curl behind her ear.

"Hey, you two!" she said brightly. "Come in, please."

She stepped aside, and Jordan let Laci go through first before following her over the threshold. The house was simple yet elegant with a soft vintage charm about it. In the entryway, there were what appeared to be framed handwritten letters. Jordan spied the date on one as he hung up his coat. It was

from June of 1944. When he took Laci's jacket, he caught her looking at them too.

Billie led the way to the kitchen where Ethan was opening a bottle of wine. There were only three glasses on the table because Ethan didn't drink. Jordan admired that though he understood it better now that he knew Ethan's mother struggled with addiction. He looked up and a smile crossed over his lips.

"Hey, y'all!" he said sunnily. "Come on in."

The kitchen maintained that feeling of days gone by. Helped along by the turntable in the corner playing a soft oldies tune Jordan didn't recognize, but the warbly sound of the singer made him think of old black-and-white movies.

Laci took the glass of wine Ethan offered and sipped it. Jordan was reminded brutally of the days when they were faking and how he envied her drinkware for its proximity to her lips. Soon she'd be in America, and he wouldn't even have the luxury of looking on and feeling that jealousy. He wasn't sure if that was better or worse. God, he was a wreck. He needed to pull himself together, at least long enough to get through this dinner.

To Jordan's immense frustration, they started with small talk. Laci asked how the wedding planning was going, and Billie replied with a litany of things that were still up in the air. She had her dress though, which she showed Laci a picture of.

"That's gorgeous!" Laci praised.

“Thank you!” Billie replied. “I tried to show it to Ethan, but he absolutely refuses to look at it.”

“It’s bad luck!” Ethan insisted.

“You could have at least helped me pick out my earrings!”

“I told you, darlin’, I don’t want any clues about what you’re gonna look like that day. I wanna be blown away when you walk down that aisle.”

It carried on that way through much of dinner. Jordan briefly imagined downing the rest of his wine and shoving his head through the wall behind the table. The only respite was that Laci was smiling and giggling. When Ethan and Billie discussed their vows, Laci put her hand in Jordan’s and gave it a gentle squeeze, so he forgave them for all the wedding talk.

After the meal, Billie was the first to get down to business. “Who was that guy who stormed the pitch yesterday?”

Laci swallowed. “He’s sort of my stalker.”

“Sort of?” Ethan questioned.

“He’s a full-on stalker,” Jordan said. “He broke into your house, he’s crossed that bridge.”

“He *what?*” Billie gasped.

Laci told the story starting from when Dane first followed her after her photoshoot, all the way up until the present day. She included his threatening messages, his appearances, everything. She even included that she and Jordan were faking their relationship initially, which surprised Billie and Ethan.

“Really?” Billie blinked. “You two seemed so smitten at the gala.”

“I was,” Jordan said.

Laci glanced down at her glass. “I was too.”

He wasn’t totally convinced. The admission about their pretense also had him nervous. Did that mean she was ready to call it quits?

“But Ethan told me Dane said some things that implied he knew more than he let on,” Billie said, drawing Jordan from his worry. “Things about who you were...before.”

Laci cast a sidelong glance at Jordan. “He did?”

Jordan scrubbed a hand over his face. “I haven’t had time to debrief Laci on everything, but yes. He said you were ‘promised to him’ and then he said it was when you were Caroline.”

She stiffened, then took another sip of wine. Billie and Ethan exchanged a knowing look.

“Have either of y’all ever seen something or dreamed something you couldn’t explain?” Ethan asked.

“Yes,” Jordan and Laci answered in unison.

“Before I knew Laci, I’d seen her face in my mind,” Jordan said.

“The night we met, he felt sort of familiar,” Laci added. “I even asked if we’d met before.”

“Sounds about right,” Billie said. “I said as much to Jordan at the gala. When Ethan and I met, we both felt like we’d met before. And we’d both been having dreams we couldn’t explain. Mine were about receiving a letter that devastated me.”

“And mine were about being in a snowy forest while explosions went off all around me,” Ethan added.

Jordan’s brow furrowed. That didn’t sound anything like his and Laci’s dreams. For the most part, they were pleasant, just baffling in their content. Ethan disappeared into the hall and returned with a box, which he placed on the table. The name Maggie Owens was scribbled across the cardboard side.

“The longer Billie and I were around each other, the more we started to see,” he said. “We saw dance halls with jazz music, making love in a barn, lying beside each other in a field of yellow flowers. It sounds like y’all are a little better than us and have shared what you’ve seen with each other.”

“Aye, we have,” Jordan said. “We’ve even been able to kiss and show each other what we’ve seen.”

“It was always stronger for us when we were close, too,” Billie said.

Jordan frowned. “What was?”

“The connection,” she explained. “To us before.”

Jordan wanted to scream at them to get on with it. From the box, Ethan withdrew a smaller one. It was frayed with age, so he handled it delicately as he placed it beside the larger box.

He carefully removed the top and pulled out three black and white photographs. He placed them in a row before Jordan and Laci.

Laci gasped, and Jordan drew back. There, in the pictures, were Billie and Ethan. The first photo was a wedding portrait, Billie in a silk gown with puffed sleeves, and Ethan in a military uniform complete with garrison cap and shined shoes. In the second picture, Billie was in dungarees, her hair tied back with a scarf, and Ethan was in shorts and a T-shirt that read US PARATROOPS. He had his arm around her shoulders and was kissing her cheek. In the third, Ethan was back in uniform, sans jacket, and Billie was in a casual dress, her hair up in victory rolls with her arms around Ethan's neck. Jordan glanced between the photos and the couple in front of him, too stunned to speak.

“Uncanny, I know,” Billie said. “The couple is Henry and Maggie Owens. They met in 1943 when the US Airborne was stationed in Aldbourne in the months before D-Day. Maggie was a Land Girl working one of the nearby farms, and Henry was a paratrooper.”

“They fell in love, and after Henry shipped out to France, they wrote letters back and forth,” Ethan continued. “He survived France, and when he came back to England, he and Maggie got married. He went on to fight in Holland, and later Belgium, but sadly, he was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. Maggie got the letter a couple weeks later.”

Jordan shook his head. “Wh-what’s that got to do with—”

“Maggie lived the rest of her life alone,” Billie went on. “She died in 1994. The year I was born. Ethan and I found our way back to each other after nearly eighty years apart.”

“You...you mean, they were you?” Laci asked. “Actually you just in a-a...”

“Past life,” Billie finished.

Jordan blinked and shook his head. *That* was what she meant when she said Ethan was her soulmate? He hadn't thought she was using the term so literally. This was the stuff of fairy tales, not real life. It couldn't be possible. It didn't make sense. And yet, there was no mistaking the photographs. And the way Ethan and Billie looked at each other with a fondness that could only be explained by decades of longing.

“The letters in the hall—” he began.

“Written by Henry and Maggie,” Ethan said.

Jordan rested his hands on the table and took a deep breath. It was so out there. Could that be the case for him and Laci? It didn't seem like their story had any elements of the Second World War about it.

It was older than that.

Jesus, he was already thinking in those terms? It wasn't something he should even be considering.

“This is mad,” he said. “It can't be. Two people don't just reincarnate or whatever the fuck this is.”

“So...it’s a coincidence that an American moved to England due to papers he’d signed and found the love of his life there?” Ethan countered. “We just *happen* to look exactly like these two people even though they ain’t relatives? And before you ask, we looked into it.”

Jordan shot a desperate look at Laci, hoping to get some backup, but she was still staring at the photos, a pensive expression on her face.

“I don’t know if it’ll be this easy for us,” she said. “Caroline and Samuel are from even further in the past. Regency England, I believe.”

Jordan huffed, incredulous. “You don’t honestly think—”

“What else explains the things we’ve seen, Jordan?” she argued. “Especially at the estate. And Tessa confirmed this weekend that at that time, Lord Colfield had a daughter called Caroline.” She looked at Billie and Ethan. “There won’t be photographs of them to confirm what they might have looked like.”

“That does complicate things.” Billie tapped her chin. “Are there any portraits of the family?”

“One, but the daughter’s face looks like it was burned away,” Laci told her.

“Any other traces of the family?” Ethan asked.

“Some, but mostly of the father and the sons. All evidence of the daughter is gone. Tessa said she died young.”

“There must be something left of her,” Billie said. “I know it was centuries ago, but surely...”

She kept talking, but Jordan could no longer hear it over the roar of his heartbeat in his ears. It couldn't be. He had considered it back when he first reconnected with his mother, and she told him that the girl he drew was also named Caroline, but he dismissed it. Whatever strange occurrences, there had to be some logical explanation, didn't there?

He ran through everything he knew for sure:

He had been drawing Laci's face since he was a boy. His mother had confirmed it.

Laci had asked if they'd met before on the night they found each other, so she recognized him on some level.

He'd said Caroline's name when he'd gotten his concussion.

When they went to her parents, he heard her voice and his own calling out to each other.

Laci admitted that she had heard their voices as a child as well.

She'd awoken Christmas morning to the sound of the voices.

He had the dream of them sneaking away during a ball. On the side of the house near the bins, he'd heard them again.

The first time they had sex, Laci had that snippet of a vision.

But that didn't necessarily mean past lives, did it? Soulmates? If they were soulmates, why was it so hard for him to say I love you? Shouldn't that have made it easier?

He shook himself into focus when he realized Laci was speaking.

“This weekend, when I went to take the rubbish out to the bin, I had the clearest vision of all,” she said. “It was me, in Caroline’s body, looking through her eyes while she stole a moment with Samuel. She—that is, I—told him—or rather, you, I suppose—that someone else was asking for her—er, my —”

“Why don't we stick to addressing them in third person?” Billie suggested. “For simplicity’s sake.”

Laci nodded and went on. “There was someone else asking for her hand.”

Jordan’s stomach gave a furious lurch at the thought, and he realized some part of him must be buying into this because it was pissing him off to think of anyone other than Samuel marrying Caroline.

“She was afraid of him. She told Samuel that they should consider sneaking away so that they could elope to Scotland without her family’s interference. He refused, saying it would be like stealing, but said he wanted to speak to her family soon, before this other man could propose. They arranged to meet that night, and Samuel said...” she shot Jordan a meaningful look. “He said he had a painting for her.”

Jordan blanched. If nothing else could convince him, that did the trick. Samuel painted. Just like Jordan. Samuel painted Caroline as Jordan painted Laci. Jordan saw Laci's face because it was the face of his soulmate. Samuel's love. One and the same.

“A painting?” Ethan questioned, and Jordan jumped, forgetting they were with other people in his stupor. “What’s important about a painting?”

“Jordan paints,” Laci said, and Jordan didn’t even care that she told them. He would have said the same thing if he could find his voice. “He’s painted me since before he knew me.”

Billie and Ethan turned shocked, curious eyes on him. Still unable to speak, he nodded. He was afraid that if he opened his mouth, he’d either scream or throw up, and neither was appropriate as a guest in someone’s home. But the way his mind was warring with his heart, what else could he possibly do?

“Things carried over for us too,” Billie said. “I was terribly afraid of loss because Maggie had lost her parents and then Henry got killed. Ethan hates the cold because of how he froze in the woods outside of Bastogne. What about you, Laci? Anything you’ve never been able to explain?”

Laci pondered it for a long moment. “I’ve got an irrational fear of gunfire, which, thankfully, I don’t have to deal with very often. But I don’t know what that has to do with Caroline and Samuel.”

“I think we should confirm it first,” Jordan finally spoke up. “There must be something at the estate, anything that can prove they were there and what might have happened to them.”

Laci shook her head. “I dunno, Jordan. My parents have searched every inch of that house for bits of its history. Anything they found would’ve been in Dad’s study, and there’s hardly anything. Tessa found Caroline’s birth certificate, but there’s nothing at all on a Samuel.”

Jordan racked his brain for where else they might look. Then it hit him. Some of the most powerful moments occurred outside the mysterious locked door.

“The cellar,” he said, and his heart quickened. “The one with the rusty lock that you’ve never been able to get open. I bet you anything, there’s evidence in there.” He got to his feet so abruptly, he knocked his chair over. He held his hand out to Laci. “We’ve got to find out.”

She blinked. “What? Right now?”

“Right now.”

“We’re at dinner!”

“He’s right, you should go,” Billie interjected. “We understand.”

“Probably better than most,” Ethan added with a chuckle.

Laci got to her feet and took Jordan’s hand, letting him lead her out the front door.

“Thank you for having us!” she called back to them. “We’ll see you at the wedding!”

She hardly got the words out before Jordan slammed the door behind them.

Chapter 30

The only thing keeping Laci grounded in the present moment was Jordan's hand in hers. He was speeding down the road toward the estate, going as fast as her mind was racing with everything they'd learned. About Billie and Ethan and themselves.

It all seemed so incredulous. Had there really been another lifetime where she and Jordan had already been together? She kept coming back to one thing she was too afraid to say out loud. Billie and Ethan's past life had ended in tragedy, and Tessa said that Caroline had died young. Was that why she and Jordan had found each other again? Were they trying to secure the life they never got to share?

Jordan's fingers tightened around hers, and she looked at him. His eyes were resolutely on the road, but the tension in his jaw and the deep frown on his lips told her that he was as worried about what they might find as she was.

The house came into view, dark and stately against the skyline. She glanced around to check if her parents' cars were

there but didn't see them. Plus, all the windows were dark. They hadn't arrived back from their weekend excursions yet, but it was typical for them to return on Monday morning after the work traffic cleared up.

Jordan brought his Range Rover to a skidding halt in the driveway, released Laci's hand, and was out the door almost before the engine was off. He opened the passenger's side door, and Laci clamored out to join him on the gravel. He offered his hand again, which she took, and they went to the side of the house.

"Have you got a light?" he asked as they walked.

"Just on my phone."

"That'll do."

She retrieved it from her back pocket and turned on the light before handing it over to him. The beam was small but pierced through the darkness enough for them to see where their steps landed. The closer they got to the mystery door, the more the hairs on the back of Laci's neck stood on end, and not from the spring chill. She grabbed hold of Jordan's arm.

With her heart in her throat, they reached the door. An eerie silence came over them. Not the hoot of an owl or a rustle of the grass could be heard. Laci grabbed handfuls of Jordan's sleeve and gulped. The door stood before them. The air was still. The time had come.

"How..." She stopped to swallow. "How d'you suppose we'll get it open?"

“I’m gonna ram it open,” he said.

“It’s rusted shut. We haven’t even been able to open it with tools.”

“I know, I’m gonna use my body.”

“Are you joking?”

“I’m strong,” he said.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “I know that, but—”

“And big.”

“Of course, you are, but Jordan...”

He handed her phone back to her and gently pulled himself free of her grasp. “Stand back.”

“Jordan!”

He was already backing up, lining his body up with the center of the door. He squared his shoulders and let out a long breath like a bull about to charge a matador.

“Jordan, I really think we should consider—”

He surged forward and hurled himself at the door. His broad shoulders made such heavy contact that she winced. The rusted iron rattled, but she also heard the wood groan under his weight, and with a crack, it began to splinter in the middle.

Her mouth fell open.

Jordan caught his breath, backed up again, and repeated the action. The door gave a little further. Laci couldn’t believe it. All this time, her family had tried to open it by removing the

padlock or the hinges. It had never occurred to them to come at it in the center. Then again, they were more concerned with potentially damaging what might have been an original part of the house. Laci had shared that concern before, but in the face of the answers she needed, she considered the door a necessary sacrifice.

With one last charge, the door broke cleanly open. Bits of wood flew off and skittered across the dusty floor. Laci rushed to Jordan.

“Are you alright?” she fretted, looking him over. “Have you dislocated anything?”

“I’m fine,” he said and brushed some of the debris off his jacket.

“Good. I’m not cut out for popping bones back in. I would do it for you, but you’d have to be okay with me getting sick, like, immediately after.”

A fleeting smile graced his lips, but it disappeared when he looked at the shadowy opening that yawned before them. “Ready to go in?”

“God no, but I suppose we must,” she said.

“Aye, so we must.”

He led the way, and Laci held up the light. He shielded her from the protruding fractured wood with his body and let her step inside. She aimed the light around the room, and her stomach dropped when she saw canvases lining the wall. They were all portraits of what appeared to be her around the estate,

only she was in Regency dresses, her hair curled and pinned in a debutante's hairstyle. Jordan stiffened at her side when he took them in as well.

“Fucking hell...” he murmured.

“I...” she trailed off. “It’s Caroline.”

She couldn’t explain it, but more than the face, she recognized the art. Brief, murky images swam to the forefront of her mind of when she saw them for the first time. She could see the paintings, but the thing that stuck out more was the pride on Samuel’s face.

“Laci.”

Jordan’s voice, and a nudge from his elbow, brought her out of her stupor. She looked at him and then followed where his finger was pointing. In the corner sat a large wooden chest. She turned the light toward it to get a better look. It had no locks, so she figured whoever placed it there must have intended for the lock on the door to do its job.

“Should we open it?” she asked.

“Who’s gonna stop us?” he returned.

She conceded that point, and together they approached it. As she stretched out her hand to flip the top up, an overwhelming heaviness sat on her chest. It was as if she could feel Caroline’s presence, not only within her, but around her as well. It was not only her will, but Caroline’s influence too that guided her arm toward the chest.

Jordan helped her lift the top. The musty smell of age wafted out from it along with a few plumes of dust. Laci shined the light inside at a few dresses. Time had faded the color, but they were recognizable as some of the ones she wore in the paintings. A thick, leather-bound book rested on top of them.

“What is that?” Jordan wondered.

“It’s her diary,” Laci said automatically.

The only explanation she had for knowing that had to be the connection to Caroline was true. She carefully picked up the journal and opened to the first page. The parchment was aged and dry, and some of the ink had been soaked up so the words weren’t clear. But the first date was September 24, 1813.

As she gazed at it, Laci could picture Caroline up in her room, the same one Laci had today, at her desk, her hand sliding over the page as she wrote the words in neat script.

“Father hired a new fencing instructor for the boys today,” she read aloud. “His name is Samuel. Samuel MacPhairse. I’ve never seen a man so handsome, not in all of London. But, perhaps, it is also his kindness that makes me so drawn to him. He actually looks at me. After two seasons as a wallflower, I was beginning to feel altogether invisible. But I think he sees me.”

Laci flipped ahead until she found another entry that was legible.

“Today Mr. MacPhairse asked me to call him Samuel, but I feel that is entirely too familiar at this time. Suitable for my

private thoughts, certainly, but not for out in the world. Though I will mention the way he says my name, even when he is calling me Lady Caroline...I will say I've never quite understood the word 'swoon' until rather recently."

Laci skimmed forward

"I learned today that Samuel is an artist," she went on. "I was out for my morning walk in the garden when I saw him sketching some of Mama's roses. He confessed to me that he is more adept at painting, but since he was traveling all the way from Scotland, he didn't feel he could bring his supplies with him. I am resolved to get him some when we go into town next week for my new dress. I would very much like to see what he comes up with."

She skipped ahead again, this time much further, until the date read 1815.

"Lord Seymour is beginning to concern me," she read. "He is not the most gentlemanly of men. He seems more interested in my dowry than he is in me. And his eyes...so frightening and icy blue. They look almost wild at times. I cannot imagine looking into those eyes for the rest of my days." She looked meaningfully at Jordan before she continued. "Not that it matters as I have promised myself to Samuel. In fact, in every way but on paper, Samuel is my husband. All that is left is to tell my family and then we plan to elope in Scotland. I wish we could go sooner, but Samuel insists on being honest."

When she turned a few more pages, an envelope slipped from the back and fluttered toward the ground.

Jordan caught it before it landed and turned it over in his hand. They saw the name written on it. Caroline.

He cast a hesitant, sidelong glance at Laci, and she gave him a nod. The envelope wasn't sealed, so Jordan was able to tug the letter out with ease. He unfolded it and began to read aloud.

“Caroline,” he began. “Your father has learned about us. I don't know how he discovered it, but I told him the truth. The whole truth of what we are to each other. I am to meet him at dawn for a duel. I intend to aim my pistol at the sky. I am writing to tell you just once more how much I adore you...”

The memory hit Laci like a freight train. She recalled seeing the letter slip under her bedroom door. She felt her trembling hands as she read it, felt her heart break at the thought of losing the love of her life, and realized what she had to do. She had to stop the duel.

Without bothering to dress, she called for her maid to bring her traveling cloak, boots, and gloves. Then she instructed her maid to alert a trusted footman to bring her horse. There was only one place they could be having the duel, the clearing at the north edge of the property.

The moment she was on her horse, she urged him forward until she was at a full gallop, flying over the hills with only one thing on her mind. Save Samuel.

She burst through the hedge into the clearing as the sound of a gun firing erupted around her. Her horse reared back and threw her.

“Caroline, no!” someone shouted, but she hardly registered it as she hit the ground. Her chest burned. The fiery feeling spread through her blood. She couldn’t move. She couldn’t breathe.

“Caroline!”

Blearily, she looked up at Samuel. His eyes brimmed with tears, and his hand cupped her face. It was warm. How could her skin feel so cold when she was blazing on the inside?

“S-Samuel,” she choked out.

“Shh, don’t talk, my love, the doctor’s coming,” he replied, and he looked up.

Someone must have been standing there. She couldn’t see them. She kept her eyes trained on Samuel.

“It w-was the house-housekeeper,” she said. “She s-saw us.”

He wasn’t listening. His pleading gaze was on the man standing over them, but she couldn’t hear what he said. It sounded far away.

“Samuel,” she tried again, and finally his eyes locked on hers. “Hold me, p-please.”

Her vision was darkening, but she felt his arms around her shoulders.

“Please don’t leave me, love,” he said softly. “Please don’t go.”

“We-we’ll get away,” she said, struggling to make her mouth form words.

“We can. We will. Stay with me.”

He barked something at the other man, but she didn't hear it. She wanted to hold on, to tell him all would be well, and they had a lifetime ahead of them. But she could feel herself slipping away. It broke her heart to leave him.

Her body lurched, and Samuel held her fast to him. She tried to curl her fingers around his lapel, but she didn't have the strength.

“I l-love you,” she stammered. “Forever, Samuel.”

His anguished eyes found hers again. He stroked her cheek with his thumb. A tear slid down his face. He pulled her into his chest and held her there, rocking her. She closed her eyes, resting against him one last time.

Everything faded to black.

A bruising kiss brought Laci back to the cellar in the present day. Jordan had her pressed against him, his lips on hers and then they were everywhere else—her cheeks, her jaw, her forehead. She forced her mind to focus so she could hear what he was saying.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “Fucking hell, I'm so sorry, Laci.”

She gripped his arms to steady herself. “You saw it too?”

He nodded. She got a good look at his face. There were tears flowing down his cheeks like Samuel's. She blinked, stunned. The man who had not cried in fifteen years was weeping. For her.

“Jordan, you’re...you’re crying,” she said with a gasp. His quivering hands pulled her into him again. “And shaking.”

“I love you,” he said, and he kissed her again, messy and frenzied and raw. She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on. “I love you, Laci.”

Emotion bloomed inside her chest and then she, too, was blinking back tears. She didn’t fight them for long. He’d dropped his armor at last, so she would make herself vulnerable too. When he raised that shield again, it would be around them both.

“I’ll never lose you again,” he whispered, engulfing her in his embrace. “Fuck, I love you so much.”

“I love you too.” She nuzzled into his chest and gripped handfuls of his jacket. “Forever, Jordan.”

Chapter 31

“...and Stanmore finished in sixth, securing a Europa League spot. Coach Warren is hopeful about new signings over the summer to get them off to a winning start next season. In other Stanmore news, the women’s team was promoted back into the WSL, and they’ve signed midfielder Jamie Hupp from Manchester City two years before her contract was up. Any thoughts, gentlemen?”

The Sky Sports reporter turned toward the two men on her right who shifted in their seats and launched into their opinions. Jordan switched the TV off and used the mirror on the sitting room wall to adjust his tie and make some finishing touches on his hair. Laci was upstairs, no doubt making herself gorgeous.

He crossed to the center of the room and picked up his coffee from the table, the one they had to replace after Dane had broken it, and he took a moment to be grateful they no longer had anything to fear from that man. He was still in custody,

Laci and Jordan pressed charges, and the first hearing had gone their way.

But the apprehension of Dane wasn't all Jordan was thankful for. In the weeks since their discovery of their prior lives, they had moved in together at Laci's place. She transformed one of the guest rooms into a world-class studio for him, complete with wooden models, fresh canvases, mirrors (that were also used for extracurriculars), and a flood of natural light. They christened it by recreating the *Titanic* portrait scene, and Laci's picture, necklace and all, was displayed on the wall in there.

In other parts of the house, they had some of Samuel's artwork framed and hung. The rest was displayed in the gallery at the Miller's estate. Caroline's clothes were donated to a fashion history association in London, but Laci kept the diary for herself.

After discovering Caroline's tragic end, they did some research to see what became of Samuel. They couldn't find much on him after leaving the Colfields, but they discovered he went back to Scotland and died around middle age. He never married. Jordan often had dreams where he was stumbling around the streets of old Glasgow, drunk and miserable, calling out Caroline's name. He guessed Samuel drank himself to death in his grief. He couldn't say he blamed him. If it had been Laci who died in *his* arms, he'd burn the whole country down.

Luckily, he didn't have to worry about that as Laci, alive and beautiful, came down the stairs. She wore a fabulous pink

cocktail dress that hugged her curves so well, he considered asking if she'd like to go back upstairs for a while. But when he checked his watch, he realized they didn't have time.

He smiled at her. "You look awfy braw."

"Thank you," she replied with a grin.

"You might upstage the bride if you aren't careful."

She rolled her eyes. "I've seen Billie's dress, and there's no way."

He pulled her close and bent to kiss her. She kept it brief to spare herself from having to reapply her lipstick, so he settled for keeping his arm around her as they walked to the car. He opened her door and helped her in before crossing to the driver's side and climbing in. As soon as they were on the road, he took her hand again.

It was a little under two hours to the village of Aldbourne. Billie and Ethan chose the location because it was where Henry and Maggie had met and fallen in love. Jordan hoped to do the same with Laci by taking her to Scotland to get married there, the way Samuel and Caroline always planned.

He hadn't pitched it to her yet, but it was only a matter of time. Maybe in another year, it would be them celebrating their union in front of all their friends and family. He stole a glance at her in the passenger's seat, scanning her phone and felt a comfortable warmth in his chest imagining Laci with his ring on her finger.

She heaved a sigh and set her phone in her lap, looking out at the M4 as they rolled along. He gave her hand a squeeze.

“Alright?” he wondered.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “Just thinking.”

“About?”

“About the past life stuff,” she said. “I know we’ve discussed it to death, but it’s still hard for me to wrap my brain around. Imagine, there could be thousands of people out there, millions, maybe, all trying to find each other. Or they’re like Dane, and they’re holding on to something from back then that’s driving them mad.”

“Don’t tell me you feel sorry for him,” Jordan said incredulously.

“Of course not!” She paused for a beat. “Perhaps a tiny bit.”

“*Laci*—”

“I know, I shouldn’t have an ounce of sympathy for him, but I can’t help it.”

“You’re entirely too sweet.”

She offered a half-smile before looking down at their clasped hands. “He’s changing his plea, you know.”

“I got the email from our solicitors.”

“No contest. What does it mean?”

“It’s a way of saying he’s guilty without really saying it.”

She tucked a flyaway curl behind her ear. “I suppose that’s good.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed the back of it. “It’s very good.”

She smiled wider. But it didn’t reach her eyes.

“Anything else, angel?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. I’m fine.”

He didn’t quite believe her, but he didn’t get the opportunity to press her further. She glanced at the back seat and shot him a questioning look at the large, rectangular object covered with a blanket resting across the bench.

“What’ve you got back there?” she wondered.

“Wedding present for Billie and Ethan,” he told her.

She lifted a skeptical brow. “They didn’t want any gifts. They asked for donations to the Larry Lowe Foundation.”

“I wanted to give them something extra. Especially since they were so helpful to us.”

She studied it again, and her face lit up with recognition as it dawned on her. “Did you paint them something?”

“Aye. The wedding portrait from the forties. Thought they might like it in color.”

Her jaw dropped. “Jordan, that’s lovely!”

He shrugged. “Least I could do.”

“You’re sharing your art at last.” She leaned over the console to kiss his cheek. “I’m so proud of you.”

His cheeks heated at her praise. She rarely came into his studio, so he wasn’t surprised she didn’t notice it. It did take him off guard that she was so thrilled he was finally showing a piece to someone other than her or Ava. He never thought he was talented enough for it to be worth sharing. And besides, the subject matter was usually Laci, which meant it appealed mostly to him.

The sun shone on the English countryside, growing brighter the closer they got to Aldbourne.

The ceremony in St. Michael’s Church was beautiful, traditional, and short. Ethan stood near the altar as his grandmother gave his shoulders an encouraging squeeze. A string quartet played as Billie, in a stunning white dress that made her look like a princess, came down the aisle on her father’s arm. With giddy smiles, she and Ethan pledged their lives to one another. Jordan put his arm around Laci, and she rested her head against him. He swore he heard her sniffle.

When the officiant pronounced them husband and wife, Ethan took Billie into his arms and dipped her as they kissed to seal the deal. Jordan pressed his lips to the top of Laci’s head.

The newlyweds went to take photos with the bridal party and family, so Jordan and Laci followed the other guests to the reception at a pub called the Blue Boar. It was across a grassy plaza from the church, so no one had too far to go. Laci held

on to Jordan's arm, and she gave it a small squeeze a few times, but she didn't come close to losing her balance. He frowned. Something had to be bothering her.

He got their drinks, whiskey for him and a cosmo for her, and they toasted the happy couple before returning outside and taking seats at a picnic table by the entrance. A swing band played a jazzy number from a bandstand across the courtyard and couples took to the floor. Jordan spotted Artem and Larysa, beaming at each other.

Laci's eyes were on them as well, and she sighed, then she put her hands in her lap definitively as if making some firm decision. Her eyes slid to his.

"I need to tell you something," she said.

"Fire away."

"I lied earlier. In the car. When I said there wasn't anything else on my mind."

"Shocker," he said, disguising his sarcasm behind a sip of whiskey.

She picked up on it and swatted his arm, but the upturned corners of her mouth betrayed her amusement. "It's about the job in America."

Jordan set down his glass. After everything that happened, Laci told him she was firm in her decision to stay in England. He thought it was a bad idea, but he promised to support her decision, so that's what he had done. Yet he couldn't ignore

the way his stomach dropped at the thought of her changing her mind and actually leaving.

“What about it?” he finally managed to say.

“When I told BB I was turning it down, she was really upset,” she began. “I told her I was disappointed too, but I wanted to focus on us right now because I value our relationship, and I don’t want to jeopardize it.”

She paused to take a breath, and Jordan was about ready to jump out of his skin. If she was going, he wanted her to say it. Rip the band aid off and get it over with so he could start panicking properly. Inside, of course. Outwardly, he would be the supportive boyfriend if called upon. The “but” was coming, he could feel it.

“But,” she went on, and he fought back a wince. “BB, being the brilliant superstar she is, worked it out with the designer. They’ll let me work just the New York and LA shows in July. Afterward, I’m free to come back home to London.”

“Fuck...” he said, letting out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “That’s...that’s great fucking news.”

She grinned mischievously at him. “Had you going, didn’t I?”

He smirked back at her. “Aye, so you did.”

“You’re alright with it?” she asked seriously.

“How long will you be gone?”

“A month. Two weeks in each city.”

He knew the next question was pathetic, but he asked it anyway. “Can I come with you?”

She blinked, taken aback. “You’d want to?”

“Fuck yeah. I’d love to see you in action. You look so hot on your magazine covers and shit. I know you’d bowl me over on the runway.”

Her lips parted into a flattered smile. “I’d love to have you there.”

“I don’t know if I can stay the whole time with our pre-season schedule, but fuck, I’d miss you too much to go a whole month without you.”

“I’d miss you too,” she said and rested her head on his shoulder. “Which brings me to my next thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Since we will be apart for some time, I wanted to...well... see how you felt about committing to each other. Really committing.”

“Are we not already?”

“We are.” She lifted her head to meet his gaze. “I mean in a way that’s more public and official—”

“Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce for the first time as husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Knight!” the DJ called.

Billie and Ethan arrived on the dance floor and a smooth trumpet solo began. They swayed together and guests

surrounded them to witness their first dance. Laci started to get up, but Jordan took hold of her wrist and guided her toward him, so she was standing between his legs.

“You were saying?” he asked.

“We should go see the first dance.”

“Laci, tell me.”

“I was gonna say...” she trailed off. “I want to be committed in a way that’s, y’know, legally binding.”

He was so stunned, he almost dropped her hand.

“Laci Miller, is this a proposal?” he asked, keeping his tone light so she could play it off if she wanted. But God, she had his hopes up.

She nodded. “Are you saying yes?”

He pulled her onto his lap and cupped her face. “Absolutely-lutely.”

He kissed her, deep and tender. When they parted, he saw her eyes shining.

“You want to get married before you go? Don’t things like this take time?” he questioned and looked toward the dance floor.

She shook her head. “I want to elope.”

That took him aback. He half-expected Laci to want all the bells and whistles kind of a wedding in a big white gown with all her loved ones around them. Something like the event they were at. It would have been miserable, but he’d do anything to

make her happy. Even endure a day of traditional wedding bullshit. Hearing she could forgo all of that felt almost too good to be true.

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “With our jobs, so much of our lives are public. Becoming your wife...I want that to be just us.” She searched his face. “Is that alright with you?”

“Better than alright. I think I love you even more,” he replied, and kissed her again. She giggled into his mouth. “When do we leave?”

“How’s tomorrow?”

“You’ve got yourself a date, angel.”

He kissed her once more for good measure, so she could feel the promise in it.

Epilogue

Laci let out a choked moan as she sank onto Jordan's cock, never tired of how he filled her. A groan rumbled from deep in his chest, and he gripped handfuls of her ass. She felt the steely chill of his ring bite into her flesh.

“Fuck, you feel so good,” he sighed.

Her cheeks burned. They'd been at it for hours, but he continued to let her know how she made him feel, another thing she'd never tire of. He laced his fingers through her sweaty hair. She braced herself on his shoulders, and the diamond on her left hand caught the golden light of sunset pooling in through the wide window of the cottage. She took a moment to admire it before she started to move. Rocking her hips into him at a slow, steady pace that made his breath catch in his throat.

“Fuck,” he grunted as she found her rhythm, and her nails sank into his skin.

“Perfect,” she whined, letting her head fall forward, so they were forehead to forehead.

Their panting breaths mixed together. Their lips lingered around each other’s, but they didn’t quite have the strength to kiss nor did they have the desire to stifle the other’s soft noises. Laci especially loved hearing Jordan in bed—his words, his groans, his praise. She wondered how she’d gone her whole life without them.

It hardly mattered. She had the rest of her life with them to enjoy.

“I’m so fucking close, angel,” he muttered into her neck.

She could feel it in the grip of his fingers and the shake of his breath. A fresh boost of arousal shot up her spine, and she rode him faster. “Cum for me then.”

With a cry of her name, he shuddered and released inside her. Her own climax was close behind, so she held on tight as she eased herself down from the high. She claimed his lips in a tired, languid kiss, his beard nothing short of magical against her mouth. One more thing she’d cherish forever.

His lips, and that glorious beard, trailed down her neck, peppering her skin with affection. He was extra needy right after an orgasm, and she never minded. She needed him as much. To show him, she wound her arms around his neck and pulled herself close until they were chest to chest. Heart to heart.

“Love you,” she murmured.

“Love you,” he replied right away.

Once her legs were no longer jelly, she climbed off his lap and settled into his side to rest her head on his shoulder. She gazed out the window at the expanse of the Scottish seaside stretching before her and sighed contentedly.

They’d found last minute accommodations in Elgol on the Isle of Skye. On the cliffs, with no one but an officiant and a photographer with them, they got married and then retreated to the cottage for their honeymoon. From the moment they picked out rings on their way out of London to the moment the words *I do* left her mouth, Laci felt her heart on the rise, ballooning inside her chest as she chased forever with the man of her dreams. Her soul, alight with Caroline’s memory, soared.

Her gaze dropped to her rings, a two-carat solitaire diamond on a rose gold band with a dainty, ruby and diamond adorned wedding band to match. Jordan had gone with a white gold wedding band, classic and strong. She slid her gaze back to his face and saw he too was staring at the new jewelry on his hand.

“Still in shock?” she teased.

“A bit,” he chuckled. “Mostly that you’d marry the likes of me.”

She poked his side. “I can think of no one more suitable for me.”

“Unless Jack Dawson comes around?”

“He is the obvious exception, but given that he’s not only fictional, but also dead, I don’t think you’ve got much to worry about.”

He let out a sigh of a laugh and held her closer.

“The moment I’m back from the States, I’ll start on changing my name,” she said. “I hope you don’t mind my making one last tour as Laci Miller before I’m Laci Frawley forever.”

“Take as long as you like,” he replied with a shrug. “You don’t have to take my name at all if you don’t want to.”

“I want to. One day, we’ll have children and I want us all to have the same name. My brothers will no doubt be providing more Millers, so you and I can supply the Frawleys.”

He chuckled and kissed the top of her head. “My sweet wife.”

She snuggled further into him. “My amazing husband.”

They returned to comfortable silence for a long moment. She tore her gaze from the scenery and looked up at him.

“D’you think we should tell everyone now?” she asked.

The corner of his mouth kicked up into a crooked smile. “Sure.”

Wrapping a blanket around herself, she got to her feet and fetched their phones, which had been abandoned on the kitchen counter. As far as their friends and families knew, they were taking a short holiday together before Laci took off. For the first few days, they were happy to let everyone believe

that. But they knew, at some point, they would need to come clean.

“Let’s text our families first,” she suggested. “They should know before the rest of the world.”

“Agreed.”

The first few pictures from the photographer were stunning and perfect for the big announcement. Laci pulled up her family’s group chat, picked her favorite photos, and sent a message.

Laci: *It’s official! We’re married! Sorry to spring it on you, but we wanted this to be for us. We hope you understand, and we can’t wait to celebrate with you when we get back.*

She looked up to find Jordan already finished. She blinked. “That was quick.”

He turned the screen toward her so she could see. He’d sent exactly one photo to Nina and Ava and wrote: *Got married*. Biting back a laugh, she rolled her eyes. A message from Ava popped up almost immediately. It said: *Fuck yeah* with a thumb’s up emoji.

“You two are unbelievable,” Laci said.

She looked at her phone and found paragraph-long messages from her family, all congratulating her and her mother already planning a reception at the estate. Finally, she pulled up her Instagram to share the news with the public.

“What are you gonna say in the caption?” Jordan wondered.

“You’re gonna love it,” she replied with a wry grin.

When she finished, she showed it to him, and he barked out a laugh when he read: *F*ck a soft launch—Husband Edition*

Acknowledgements

As always, I must start by thanking my family. We had a major loss this year, which served as a reminder of how important it is that we love and support each other. We also celebrated a couple new additions to our crazy group! For all of you who take the time out of your parenting, work, and other interests to read my book, I am so so grateful. I'm grateful every day.

My best friend, Christy. I mention this to anyone and everyone, but without our weekly story times, I swear it would take twice the amount of time to write without your encouragement. I love you for that and so many other things. Thank you for being my friend.

My editor, Brittany, thank you so much for your encouragement, support, and advice. You helped me get my book to its highest quality. I appreciated every bit of your hard work.

My cover designer, Enni. You jumped into a series and matched my vision for this book, while also maintaining the style from the first book, and you did it wonderfully. It's

absolutely stunning, and I am so grateful for your willingness to take it on.

Finally, I'd like you thank you, the reader! Thank you for choosing my book, and I hope you enjoyed Jordan and Laci as much as I did.

About the Author

Thanks again for reading!

I grew up in Charlotte, NC, where I still live today, and have been writing since the tender age of six. While my stories have matured, my passion for them has never faded. I'm a lifelong reader as well as writer. I'm also an avid soccer/football fan (Chelsea supporter) and amateur ballroom dancer.

Keep up with my upcoming books on my website: www.kelseypainterbooks.com and be sure to follow me on Instagram and TikTok for the latest news (@authorkelseypainter)

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