



MORTAL *gin*

a silver fox age gap romance

BRIANNA SKYLARK

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MORTAL SIN
A Silver Fox Age Gap Romance



BRIANNA SKYLARK

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Mortal Sin: A Silver Fox Age Gap Romance is the fourth book in the **Silver Fox Romance - Jack & Anna** series and continues on immediately from where the previous book ended.

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Silver fox Jack Temple's secret is out, and Anna's heart is shattered... but the past is complicated, and **sinful sister Kate** has her own side of the story to tell.

Betrayed by her best friend, dumped by her ex, deceived by the love of her life, and lied to by her sister, Anna has only one place left to turn.

But she can't hide from the truth forever, and as Jack pursues her across Manhattan, **their explosive past catches up with them**, in more ways than one.



Time stops.

My heart burns.

I take a single, painful breath and try to hold back the tears that are welling up behind my eyes. I read my sister's message again as my knuckles turn white around Jack's old cellphone, and I try not to scream.

I can't keep lying to her Jack.

As I read each sentence the words stab into my chest.

I can't do this anymore.

Every syllable cuts into me like a knife.

We have to tell her. She has to know. She has to know about us.

About *us*...

My sister and my fiancé.

I know they have history. I know that something happened back then, back when I was too young and too naive to fully understand, but I knew and I'd accepted it. I didn't want to

confront it. I didn't want to look at it or acknowledge it, but I'd accepted it - and I am *such* a fucking idiot because it's made me blind.

What am I not seeing?

My mind races, re-examining every moment, every conversation, every look that Jack or Kate have given me in the last two weeks - Jack's resentment of Alex, how he almost didn't come to their wedding, how he failed to answer why when I asked. Al always teasing him and being so insecure around him, Kate acting fucking weird all the time and her repetitious cryptic bullshit.

'Be careful,' she'd said. 'He's a good man, but he's... damaged.'

Fuck.

I can't keep lying to her. I can't do this anymore.

Her words resonate in my head even as I drop the phone from my shaking hands, but it doesn't matter. I don't care about their past. I don't care if they slept together. I care about being *lied* to.

Nick lied to me. He lied, he cheated, he stole my best friend and he tried to steal my life's savings. Jack rescued me from that and I trusted him. I trusted that he wouldn't do the same. That he'd be honest, and I damn well expected the same from my sister too. To discover they're both hiding something from me *hurts*.

I close my eyes as my stupid empathetic heart tries to justify their behaviour. Everything has happened so fast, maybe Kate hasn't had time to talk to me, maybe Jack is afraid of losing me, or maybe they both have their own reasons for keeping whatever this is between them.

Or maybe this isn't about the past.

I read it again, in a new light - Kate is *wanting* to tell me, she wants to come clean, she wants to be honest, she doesn't

want to be lying to me... but that implies that Jack does.

Fuck.

I don't understand. Why would he want to lie to me? What do I not know? What *can't* I know that Kate does? What have they been keeping secret all this time? What are they hiding?

I can't do this.

I can't face this.

Not right now, it's too painful.

I just-

I-

*

Jack



I haven't been apart from Anna for more than two minutes in over a week, and I smile to myself at that thought as I keep searching inside the drawers in the little kitchen of my apartment.

I don't throw much away because I don't have much. The less you have, the more you treasure the little things, and I know I still have what I'm looking for somewhere up here.

It's probably yellowed with age and I don't even think the number on it will still be legible. Besides, the old man who gave it to me has probably long since died, but this dumb idea hit me on the plane and I've been mulling it over in my head like an excited schoolboy ever since.

There's only one thing I enjoy more than making Anna come, and that's making her smile, and I reckon this will do more than that. This dumb gesture is a promise, and it's one I intend to keep, but then an old photo slips out of the pile of papers I've stacked beside me and sails to the floor and my attention derails.

I cast my eye in its direction and then I stoop to pick it up, reading the writing on the back.

July 2nd 2012 - Jack and Kate

Shit.

I turn it over in my hand, knowing what I'm going to see as my heart beats a little faster, and there I am, a decade ago,

looking like an idiot.

I'm a little younger, with a few extra muscles, a little more hair on top and a little less on the chin - both darker. I'm wearing an old flannel shirt that's still hanging up in my bedroom. The collar is up, the two sides are hanging loose and underneath I'm wearing a white shirt that's two sizes too small for me, along with a pair of old Levi's that I don't fit into any longer.

I'm sitting on the hood of Al's old Dodge, the one he totalled on Route 508 six years ago. The suspension is having a hard time holding me, but there I am staring into the sun, my cheap knock-off Aviators as goddamn useless then as they are now.... and there's Kate with her bare and freckled knees tucked up, sitting right beside me, looking up into my face and smiling as the sun shines through us both.

Then it hits me.

This photo was taken that night. *The* night. The night that everything changed.

Her hair is different. She used to wear it long, like Anna does now, and she's wearing those goddamn short-shorts that used to drive me fucking wild. For a moment my gut twists and I have to take a deep breath as I try to bury the memory. The top she's wearing is the same colour as her eyes. I remember that too. It didn't leave anything to the imagination. I can still see the shape of her nipples all these years later, pushing against that tight blue cloth like they were trying to cut free. But the thing that strikes me most about this photo, is how much Kate looks like Anna does now.

Fuck.

No wonder I was drawn to her. My eyes blur as I think back to that day, and how the four of us had taken the old Dodge to New Jersey. I had the same goddamn phone then as I do now and Kate had something even older. It seems crazy to think that as recently as ten years ago people didn't have their heads lost in a damned device all day long like they do now.

Al's Dodge had an old cassette player and three tapes, all of which were country and fucking western. I laugh, remembering how he used to murder every one of them and Kate used to beam up at him like he was God's gift to music. I guess that's why she married him. I don't mean for his voice. It was godawful. I mean because of her rose-tinted spectacles. She wouldn't sing with him, try as he had to encourage her. She couldn't, for whatever reason, and she hadn't for a long time.

That was, until...

Fuck.

Kate saw the world a different way, back then - still does. She didn't see things in shades of black and white. She didn't see in grey either. I used to imagine that if I looked through her eyes I'd see rainbows. Big fucking rainbows, cross-crossing the sky, like a unicorn with dysentery. I've never understood what she saw in Alex, but then I never understood what she saw in me eith- *never mind.*

I close my eyes as another stab of guilt spears my chest.

Fuck.

I go to tear that damned photo in half but something stops me, then I go to screw it up but I can't do that either. Instead, I close my eyes and shake, and then I grit my teeth and slide it back between the stack of papers I've unearthed before throwing it all back in the drawer.

Fuck it.

I must have lost that damned card years ago. It was a dumb idea anyway.

I close my eyes and rub them.

The door to the bar opens and a moment later it slams and I frown, before somehow the card I've been looking for slips out and falls to the floor face up.

Doc Brown - Vasectomy Specialist.

I pick it up and tuck it in my pocket, cursing myself for not locking the door to the street. I don't want Anna dealing with some drunk entitled asshole at this time in the morning, but as I get to the top of the stairs I don't hear anything and I jog a little faster as I come down, thinking about that asshole ex-boyfriend of hers and what he might do if he swung by and found her all alone. But when I emerge into the bar, it's empty.

‘Anna?’ I call.

Nothing.

I look around. There aren't many places she could hide, so it doesn't take long. I head to the stalls to see if she's gone out to the bathroom, but there's no sign of her there either. As I walk back in I realise that her coat's gone, and her bag, and then I click one last detail.

My cellphone.

It's on the floor, unlocked, screen up. Anna must have been holding it, or looking at it. I frown and crouch to pick it back up, but I don't have to wonder why for much longer as I read the words on the screen.

Kate.

Fuck.

And the bottom falls out of my world.

*

Kate



‘Jeez,’ I laugh, shielding my eyes as Anna’s goofy old camera practically blinds me, the flash so bright that all I can see out of the corner of my eye is a hot blur of colour. I don’t mind though, because Jackie Temple’s side portrait is seared into the rest of my vision, and it is a handsome sight.

‘Sorry,’ says my gawky little sister. She looks down awkwardly and winds the film on whilst I stretch my legs out on the hood and shuffle back, squinting and smiling as Jack’s eyes trace my golden skin.

‘You should get a digital one,’ I say, throwing up a peace sign. ‘Move with the times, sister.’

Anna winces and half turns away. ‘I like film,’ she says quietly.

‘Don’t listen to her,’ says Jack, making Anna blush harder than a beet. ‘I like analog.’

‘You like anal?’ I tease, prodding him with my foot, but of course, he doesn’t move. Jack’s all killer, no filler.

‘What’s that?’ says Al, as he comes bouncing out of the house and onto the driveway. ‘Jack likes getting fucked up the ass?’

‘Fuck off, Al,’ he says, lowering his head and taking a breath. *What is with these two? I think. If they ain’t fighting they’re talking about fucking.*

‘*Shit,*’ cackles Al. ‘Now I know why you spent so much time with all those Afghan goats, motherfucker. They were *riding* you like a *rodeo.*’

Al starts acting out some horrifying charade involving buck-a-roo, humping the air and braying like a donkey as he runs circles around Anna.

‘Al,’ warns Jack, taking off his shitty shades.

‘Eeeeeoorr,’ screams my sort-of-summer-boyfriend.
‘Eeeyoorr.’

‘I will break your-‘

‘Alright boys, that’s enough,’ I say, sliding my kicks down onto the concrete and standing between the two of them as they square off. ‘You got what you need for school, sweetie?’ I say sideways.

Anna nods, using the distraction to slip away and back into our house, but I can’t help but notice how she takes one last glance at Jack before she heads inside.

She’ll be dining out on that photo for months, I imagine, and I don’t blame her - once she’s spent a couple of hours developing the damned thing that is.

‘You two assholes done scaring my sister?’ I say. ‘Or do you want to say some more inappropriate shit in front of a high school kid?’

Al, to his credit, actually looks upset. ‘Sorry Kate, should I go apologise?’

He takes a half-step toward the house but I shake my head. ‘You want to scare her even more?’

Jack on the other hand, just lets out a low growl like a goddamned bear before standing up and sending the hood of Al’s Dodge bouncing, and I hate to admit it, but my tummy tingles when he does.

‘We’re sorry, babe,’ says Al, taking hold of my hips and walking me backwards until I’m sitting on the hood again, pushing my thighs apart as he grinds against me. ‘We’re just screwing around. Ain’t that right, Jack?’

‘Ain’t got nothin’ to apologise for,’ he rumbles, turning away from the pair of us as Al’s lips find mine, his tongue sliding into my mouth as I melt.

Al may be a fucking moron but he sure can kiss, and he sure can fuck.

As he pulls away I turn and brush my lips, blushing a little as Jack opens the door of Al's Dodge before glancing back toward the front porch.

I follow his gaze before instinctively pushing Alex away at the sight of my dad, standing and peering out at the three of us.

'You taking the old girl out?' he asks.

Al spins around as smoothly as Fonzie. 'We sure are, sir,' he says, slapping the hood. 'I've checked her oil, filled her up, and lubed up her shaft.'

'Is Temple going to fit?' he says, eyeing the big guy as he lowers himself inside.

'There's plenty of room in the back, sir,' says Al with a wink.

'I was talking about Kate,' says my dad before slapping his thigh.

'*So was I,*' roars Alex, throwing his arms up and cheering, and I die inside as the pair of them fall about laughing.

'I'm going to be sick,' I say as I walk away, watching in horror as my dad slaps Alex on the back and walks him around to the driver's side as he holds him close like a son.

My dad loves Al. The idiot appeals to his ridiculous, mortifying and inappropriate sense of humour, and Al *loves* it. I sometimes wonder if he likes Alex more than me - the son he never had. We've barely known each other for more than three weeks but Al and my dad act like they go way back. I hate that he likes him, nobody wants their dad to approve of their bad-boy boyfriend, but deep down I love it.

'Now you go easy on her,' he says as I place my palms over my ears and shrink down into my seat. 'She's got a multipoint injection system.'

'*Ooooh,*' I groan, wishing the car would swallow me up as Al slides in next to me.

‘She’s hungry for oil,’ he continues, leaning on the armrest through the open window. ‘She’s a guzzler. You gotta keep her topped up. Especially when she’s got a full load in the rear.’

‘*Oh my god,*’ I cry. ‘*Dad.*’

‘I’ll bear all that in mind, sir,’ says Al, crying with laughter as he starts the engine, the vibrations sending a purr through me that’s hard to ignore.

‘One last thing,’ says dad, and I cringe as I await his final crass joke. ‘Take Anna with you.’

I blink, and then my eyes blow wide open as I turn to look at him. ‘What?’

‘Your Mom and I are going out until the small hours-‘

‘Then get a *babysitter,*’ I snap.

‘-and your little sister is too old for a babysitter.’

‘She’s *sixteen,* dad,’ I say. ‘She can be at home on her own.’

‘No,’ he says shaking his head. ‘I want to know she’s fine, and if she’s with you and these two boys, then I know she will be.’

Al just nods. ‘It’d be a pleasure, sir.’

As if on cue, the front door opens and Anna steps out. She’s carrying her book bag, and I can tell straight away that she wants to be coming with us even less than I want her to be, but her eyes zero in on Jack in the back and she blushes, and I shake my head and laugh in despair.

‘Fine, whatever,’ I say.

‘Don’t worry about her, sir,’ says Alex, practically saluting. ‘She’ll be safe with us.’

‘That’s what I like about you, Al,’ says dad as Anna’s gangly ass walks awkwardly toward the car. ‘You’re a straight shooter. I got an instinct for it.’

‘Instinct my ass,’ I say. Jack opens the door and slides across as Anna climbs in, saying nothing, and I slump back in


the seat and slam my head against the headrest. 'Fuck.'

'Language,' says dad, then he looks into the back again and smiles at Anna, before once again nodding at Jack.
'Temple.'

'Unbelievable,' I say, and then Al throws the car into reverse and rolls back out the driveway, and I cross my arms and fume.

*

Anna

A decorative flourish consisting of a central swirl with two long, wavy lines extending outwards to the left and right.

I stumble down the block, trying to hide my tears as I attempt to process... *whatever I've just read*, and as I do so I surge across the street onto West 45th, heading towards Times Square. A cab driver hits his horn hard as I step out, screaming obscenities at me and making awful gestures, but I barely notice, ducking between two parked cars and under the never-ending forest of scaffolding that covers the sidewalk.

My throat feels tight and my chest hurts as pain rips through my heart like a chainsaw. I want to call Kate and fucking *scream* at her until my lungs bleed, but I can't make sense of anything right now. I feel like the world beneath my feet is made of jelly and the whole of Manhattan is sinking into the ocean, and for a moment my vision blurs and I have to reach out and hold onto a set of dark railings as I try to stop myself from vomiting.

I fail.

Airplane food burns my throat as I hurl it back up, my stomach retching as I bend double, my cold fingers burning as they cling to the freezing metal. I have enough sense to pull them away before they stick but my palm comes away red-raw and I cry out and sob.

'Why?' I hear myself cry out loud with more syllables than necessary, but it doesn't sound like me, and as the pain redoubles I drop to my knees, lose my balance, screw up my face, and hurl again.

Fuck.

I breathe and watch as big long curls of steam rise out of my burning mouth and drift away into the city like the mist from a manhole cover. My knees are cold and wet, my tights have soaked through and the left one is torn, and then it hits me.

I don't have anyone left to call.

Nick dumped me, Rachel betrayed me, Jack lied to me, and my own sister conspired against me.

I am alone.

I close my eyes.

The only people left are mom and dad. I reach into my pocket, my shaking fingers frozen and numb, and then I tap-tap-tap on the screen until it starts to ring.

Dad answers fast.

'Happy birthday, sweetie,' he says brightly, and my heart burns with pain. I don't have it in me to reply but somehow my dad already knows something's wrong. 'Anna? What is it?'

How do parents do that? How do they *know* when you're in trouble? Then my chest aches again as I think, *Guess you'll never find out*, and I instinctively hold my tummy and mourn for the baby I might never have.

'Dad?' I sniff, my voice breaking along with my heart. 'Can I come home?'

*

Jack



I step out into the street and look left and right, searching for any sign of Anna. I'm an ex-Marine and a trained tracker, but following someone in a city isn't easy, they don't leave much trace.

I hear a horn blast a block and a half away, and then another, and another, followed by a siren and someone shouting.

Fuck.

This is New York City, horns and sirens are part of the goddamn ambience. You don't worry when you can hear them, you worry when you can't.

I need to think but my mind is racing. *Where would she go?* Anna doesn't like confrontation. She may want to talk to her sister, but she won't go straight to her. She'll try to gather herself first. She'll need support. A friend.

Shit.

Her life just blew up a week ago, and now my stupidity has blown it up again. Her ex? Gone. Her best friend? Gone. Her fiancé? An asshole. Her sister? A liar.

Fuck.

She has nowhere to turn. Nowhere to go.

I should've been honest with her from the start. I should've told her everything so she could make her own damned mind up, but everything happened so fast that I ended up being afraid of losing her too soon. That was my mistake, and my second was asking Kate to lie for me too.

I am a goddamned idiot.

And then I feel the *click* and my stomach turns.

No.

Not now.

A car backfires in the distance, a taxi flashes past too quickly, the glint of the wing mirror like the flash of tracer fire. A pile of trash nearby shifts as a rat crawls from the depths and something metal screams at me, someone shouts in Pashto, or maybe-

No. Not now. Please.

I close my eyes and clench my fists as my gut begins to twist. I try to stop it from happening but I know there's nothing I can do, my mind and body are already back there.

Kandahar.

Adrenaline rushes through my veins as my mouth goes dry, and a second later I can taste the sand on my tongue. Despite the sub-zero temperatures I feel sweat dripping off my forehead, and as the dread kicks in I *know* that I'm still in Hell's Kitchen but I may as well be back there, and then finally, I can smell the kerosene burning.

I fall backwards, slamming into the window as I try to get off the street, my eyes darting to the rooftops, my hand trying to grip a rifle I don't have, and I twitch and duck as the same car backfires again - another flash, another shout - and I'm falling.

I hit the floor and fight my way back into the bar as I kick the door closed with my boot, and then I'm under the table and scrabbling for my phone as my chest cramps.

My shaking, crooked fingers hit the buttons I've memorised ever since I got this damned thing and then I drop it onto the floor beside my head as I curl up, the world crushing me piece by piece as it swallows me whole and drags me into the darkness, down and down, and on the edge of hearing, I find a voice.

'Jack?' it says. 'Jack? Is that you?'

‘Marlie,’ I grunt.

She goes silent. ‘I’m on my way.’

*



I am being a child, and I know it. I am pouting, my arms are crossed, and I am fuming. If I were a cartoon there would be steam coming out of my ears and a coil of black lines quivering above my head.

The bass line inside the club is so deep and loud that I can feel it in my chest and we're not even inside yet. I like this song, it's one of my favourites, but instead, we're waiting to one side as everyone else heads in.

I did *not* sign up to be a babysitter for my not-so-little sister. This is *not* what I had in mind when I suggested the three of us hang out this evening. Actually, in all honesty, what I had in mind was a lot more *x-rated* than the outline of activities specified in my invitation.

Yo, let's all hang out tonight. Take the Dodge down to Ocean Grove, hit up a club... and see where the night takes us XxX

The last line was an extremely subtle lure of tacit acceptance for the pair of them to rail me one after the other - *or both at once* - over the hood of Al's Dodge in the moonlight down by the bay. The presence of my annoying baby sister rather precludes my salacious little fantasy. Because you know, that's the *only* reason why I'm no longer going to get fucked by two gorgeous, musclebound Marines tonight.

Sure.

I close my eyes and huff, and then I squish my thighs together as my pussy rages in defiance.

Al is negotiating with the club's owner. Apparently, they go way back. It would seem that letting a sixteen-year-old into your club carries an inherent risk that Al's old pal appears reticent to take. There's a lot of head shaking, hand gesturing and disapproving glances in our direction. I'm about ready to give up and fucking *walk* home when the tone shifts, and suddenly the club owner is all smiles. Al shakes his head and the pair of them shake hands, and then the rope lifts and the bouncer waves us through.

'Told you I'd get us in,' Al says as he joins us, and I can't help but smile.

His cocky swagger is what attracted me to him, but his warmth makes me stay. It's more than that though, there's something real about him. He's an asshole, he's immature, and he's dumb as fuck, but he's got heart and he genuinely cares about the people around him.

It's like I have my own personal puppy - one that would fight to the death for me in a heartbeat. Jack, on the other hand, is like a daddy bear. He'd tear a platoon apart to keep me safe.

We don't get far before we're queuing again, and it takes ten more minutes to stow our shit, and by the time we're out on the floor the bar is standing room only.

'I'll go get us some drinks,' says Al as he steers us toward the VIP area. 'The deal is that Anna doesn't leave the booth.'

'We have a *booth*?' I say, blinking as my jaw drops. I break into a smile for the first time since we left home. 'All to ourselves?'

Al nods and winks, placing his hand on the bare patch of skin on the small of my back and squeezing me as I tingle. I've never been in a booth before.

As we approach, the bouncer opens the little velvet rope and waves us through and I get goosebumps as we climb the

set of stairs that place us literally and figuratively above the rest of the crowd.

Neon tubes line the edge of every surface, glowing shades of pink and blue as blacklight fixtures make our teeth shine, all except Anna's - because her mouth is closed tight. It's then that I realise that my little sister looks petrified, and a pang of guilt cuts through my chest like an icepick.

'Hey,' I say, leaning in close as she looks down and plays with her fingers. 'I'm sorry. I know I've been a bitch.'

'It's okay,' she says, her voice barely audible over the music. 'I know you wanted to hang out with your friends.'

I laugh softly and shake my head, taking a deep breath as I slip my fingers between hers and stroke them. 'You know you're my best friend, right?' I say.

'I know,' she says.

'And I'll always keep you safe.'

'I know.'

She looks around and takes a breath.

'It's a bit quieter up here?' I suggest.

She nods and smiles a little. 'I have to stay here?'

'That's the deal.'

She looks into the corner and then back at me. 'Can I read my book?'

I smile wider and nod. Only Anna would want to read a book in a nightclub.

'Of course you can.'

She glances sideways at Jack as he places both hands on her hips and slides past into the booth, and her blush shines like a lighthouse as she stops breathing altogether and bites down on her lower lip.

I grin knowingly as her wide eyes find mine and then Al returns before either of us can say anything, carrying two

drinks in each of his big hands as he roars and humps the air like an idiot.

'Let's get this fucking party started.'

*

Anna



The taxi rolls to a stop outside mom and dad's house with a final bump, the driver hitting the high curb buried under the still melting snow, and as I look up toward the porch, the inside light flickers on.

'Ridgewood,' says the cabbie, the first words he's spoken since we left Manhattan. 'Nice neighbourhood. That'll be one hundred fifty dollars.'

That's twenty more than I know it should be, but I haven't got it in me to argue. I tap my phone against the reader and it beeps, and my bank account feels a little lighter. Then I look up again to find dad standing in the porch light, peering toward me, and I pull open the door and step out into the snow.

I try to put on a brave face as the driver pulls away, but the moment dad's arms wrap tight around me I crumble and cry, and the pain feels fresh all over again.

'What's wrong, sweetheart?' he says, his familiar voice crumbly and faint.

'Is mom home?' I ask, wiping my eyes.

'Of course,' he says, his eyes hurting.

Dad always wants to fix my problems, but I don't know if he can fix this one, and I doubt he'll want to - he never liked Jack.

I step inside, holding his hand for longer than usual and squeezing it tight before he takes my coat. The feel of his papery skin fills me with warmth and when I breathe in, everything smells like home.

‘Has mom been baking?’ I say, trying to control my emotions.

‘Actually,’ he says, with a flash of pride. ‘I have.’

‘You have?’ I ask, more than a little surprised. The number of times dad cooked whilst we were growing up could be counted on one hand.

‘New hobby,’ he says, leaning in almost conspiratorially. ‘I bake cakes now.’

‘You bake cakes?’ I repeat, almost forgetting about why I’m crying.

‘Sure do,’ he says, with a little involuntary heel rise. ‘Baked you one.’

‘You made me one?’ I say, aware that I’m starting to sound a little too incredulous.

‘For your birthday,’ he says brightly, and then he looks a little guilty. ‘And then I ate some of it.’

I laugh. ‘Now that sounds about right,’ I say, watching as he hangs up my jacket.

‘In my defence,’ he says, holding up his hands as he turns around. ‘Kate told us you were in Sicily with your new boyfriend.’

My heart aches at the mention of my sister and my throat closes up. I look down and shudder and then I shake my head. ‘Not anymore.’

‘I see,’ he says, and then he steps forward and wraps me in his arms again, holding me tight as the tears come hard this time. ‘I’m sorry.’

After a while, dad relinquishes his tight squeeze on me just a little and I smile. Then he looks me up and down and frowns as he notices my torn tights.

‘You don’t look your best, honey,’ he says. ‘You wanna take a shower? We still have some of your old clothes in your closet?’

I breathe a long staccato breath, thankful that dad's sense of smell is poor at best, and then I nod. 'I'd like that.'

He smiles warmly as he hooks one arm around my shoulder and kisses my forehead. 'Why don't you go sit down first, and I'll bring you through a slice of cake first?' he says. 'It's not often both my girls are home at the same time, even if it isn't under the best of circumstances.'

I blink, my heart thumping hard in my chest as his words wash over me. 'What do you mean?'

Dad frowns. 'Kate,' he says. 'Kate's here too. You didn't know?'

And my jaw drops.

*

Jack



I can feel the butt of my old rifle in the crook of my shoulder; the familiar dull ache like a lost limb; an echo from the cave where the darkness always lies in wait. The straps of my kevlar dig into my chest, the *thwup-thwup* of the Black Hawk overhead drills into my skull and then everything slows down. I don't know how long I've been lying here. Five minutes? An hour? I've lost all sense of time. Then the door opens and I cover my head and wince, and Marlie's voice calls out softly from the darkness.

'Jack?' she calls out, just like she did that day.

'Here,' I breathe.

I see her feet before I see her face. She sits down with her back against the booth, the leather compressing against her shoulders as she stretches her long legs out along the floor.

'How're you doing, boss?'

'Bad,' I say.

'What was it this time?'

I breathe in. 'Car.'

'Backfire,' she nods, then she shakes her head and sighs. 'They fucked us up, man.'

'I know, Marl,' I manage.

'I ain't gonna sing for you,' she says. 'Not like she did.'

'God, no,' I manage.

Marlie laughs. 'You wanna ground instead?'

‘Mhm,’ I grunt.

‘I’ll start,’ she says, looking around. ‘Barstool.’

I open my eyes a piece and do the same. ‘Door.’

‘Exit sign.’

‘Hanging light,’ I say, my shoulders loosening.

‘Cash register.’

‘Smashed optics.’

Marlie laughs. ‘TV.’

‘Table leg.’

‘New category. Smells,’ she says now, then she laughs.

‘*Your* rotten ass.’

I sniff the air. ‘Perfume?’ I say. ‘You on a date, Marl?’

She flicks me the bird. ‘I get mine. Fumes,’ she continues.

‘Trash,’ I say.

‘Cigarette butts.’

‘Fuck New York,’ I laugh and this time Marlie reaches back and takes my hand, squeezing it softly.

‘Sounds,’ she says now. ‘Siren.’

‘Thank fuck,’ I say. ‘Horn.’

‘Subway,’ she says as the bar shakes gently.

‘Some asshole shouting,’ I add, squeezing her hand back, and then she falls silent.

For a little, while we both stay quiet, listening, watching, and breathing, and then Marlie says. ‘Anna gone home?’

‘I fucked up,’ I say.

She nods. ‘You forget her birthday?’

I freeze. *Fuck*. ‘That too.’

‘Shit,’ she continues as the silence lengthens. ‘But that ain’t it, right?’

‘No,’ I manage to get out, but the memory of the strap of my helmet feels like it’s holding my jaw shut.

‘Take your time, boss,’ she says. ‘You’re safe. This ain’t then.’

I nod and force out one word. ‘Kate.’

Marlie nods. ‘You told her?’

I shake my head. ‘No.’

‘But she found out?’

I hesitate, don’t answer, and then shake my head again. ‘She doesn’t know, but, she knows.’

‘Got it,’ she says. ‘What are you gonna do?’

‘Find her,’ I grunt.

‘And I guess you need my help for that too?’ she says.

‘Semper Fi,’ I say, my body still shaking.

‘*Oorah*, boss,’ says Marlie. ‘*Oorah*.’

*

Kate



Al grinds into my pussy as I dance, his dick rubbing softly against my clit as my body *sings* for him. As the crescendo of 80s synth builds I push my ass backwards and roll my hips against Jack and every part of my soul tingles with lust.

I am in fucking *Heaven*, right now. Sandwiched between my two best men, a perfect buzz taking the edge off and releasing the few inhibitions I have left, my favourite Kate Bush song thrumming in my heart, and four powerful hands holding and exploring my body.

Al pulls me toward him fast and kisses my neck as I reach back, grabbing hold of Jack's mits and sliding them around to my hips, his fingertips brushing against my bare tummy as they slip just a little way beneath my belt.

Oh, fuck.

I shiver with ecstasy as the beat drops, Al's lips finding mine in the strobe lights as his palm grazes its way up and over my tits and his tongue circles my mouth. He squeezes my nipple hard and I squeal with delight, biting down on his kiss as I feel Jack's hard cock pressing against my ass, my little denim short-shorts leaving little to the imagination.

I want to slide them down right here in the middle of the dancefloor and let them both take me, and I almost do, but for just a second the crowd parts and I see Anna watching us from the booth and I blush and take a deep breath as I get a grip.

Jack's hand slides away from my tummy as Al spins me around, sending me pirouetting into another couple before he

swoops in and wraps his arms tight around me again like a cocoon.

‘Fuck, Kate,’ he says, eyeing me up and down as he licks his lips. ‘I’m harder than a fucking diamond right now.’

‘The kind you put on a ring?’ I say, biting my lip as my tummy flips.

‘One day, baby,’ he says and I blush and beam. ‘One day.’

‘What if I like Jack too?’ I ask, raising my eyebrows.

‘You want to fuck, Jack?’ asks Alex, his cock still grinding into me, maybe even getting a little harder.

I shrug and then shake my head. ‘No,’ I say, running my fingers along his belt line. ‘I want him to fuck *me*.’

‘Is that right?’ he says.

‘One in the front,’ I grin, as I reach into his pants and tease the tip of his member as my tummy tingles with taboo. ‘One in the back.’

I glance toward Jack now, still dancing as he watches us, and then for some reason I flick my gaze toward Anna again and my heart drops.

Some asshole is practically *oozing* onto her, his tattooed arm is wrapped around her neck and he’s leaning into her and talking into her ear as she’s trying to shrink into the corner of our booth. The look on her face tells me everything I need to know about what he’s saying, and then I realise this greasy fuck’s other arm is under the table and bile breaches my throat as the *red fucking mist* descends.

Al sees my expression change and he follows my gaze and in an instant he’s gone, cutting through the crowd like a hot knife through butter, and I don’t see what signal he gave Jack, but he’s gone too, and I don’t know *how the fuck* a man that big can move through three hundred people in a goddamn heartbeat but he does.

Before I can even take three steps forward Jack’s at the velvet rope, and my heart sinks as the bouncer steps in, and

then somehow the guy just *disappears* and Al's ascending the steps faster than I can blink.

By the time I get there, it's all over. Anna is shaking and in tears, several other bouncers are raging, Al's fist has clearly made an impression in *Greasy Fuck's* face and judging by the blood on the table he's lost a few teeth too. Jack is standing over him like a bear with a fresh kill, Al nipping at the scraps, both of them sporting expressions that clearly state they're barely tolerating the abuse being thrown at them right now, and then I realise that the chaos is because the guy underneath his boot *is* one of the fucking bouncers.

I slide past and take hold of Anna's hand, holding her tight against me as she cries.

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'I'm *so* sorry.'

'It's okay,' she says, shaking her head, tears rolling down her cheek as my heart breaks. She's been harassed in a nightclub and it's all my fault because I left her on her own and she's *still* forgiving me.

'What happened?' I say. 'What did he do? Did he touch you?'

'He came over and he said he'd like to talk to me,' she sobs. 'And I said *no thank you*, but he just sat down and I couldn't move, and then he kept saying these horrible things and he kept touching me and-'

Jack and Alex overhear her words, then one of them growls, and the creep screams in pain.

'Motherfucker,' says Al. 'She's *sixteen*.'

The guy goes pale and throws his hands up. 'I didn't fucking know, man.'

'Oh, you think that excuses it?' says Al, licking his teeth before he bears them like a tiger and draws in close.

'What the fuck is she doing in here-*aaarghh*,' he cries as Jack digs his size-twelve heels into his neck.

'Hey,' says someone else. The bodyguards part as he approaches. '*Hey, enough*.'

‘What the *fuck*, Charlie?’ says Al, springing up faster than my eyes can follow.

I watch, unafraid as each one of the assembled crew takes a step back in unison. No one wants to fuck with my men, and I don’t blame them.

‘Al,’ says Charlie holding his hands up. ‘I don’t know what the fuck is going on here-‘

‘Your *boy* here felt up my girlfriend’s kid sister,’ he sneers, pointing. ‘*That’s* what’s going on here.’

‘Then he’s fired,’ says Charlie.

‘Boss, what the *fu-*‘ shouts the creep.

‘Get him the fuck out of here,’ Charlie continues, gesturing to the other bouncers. Jack boots him in the ribs and he rolls sideways where he’s pulled to his feet by his pals. ‘Al, what can I do to make this right?’

‘Fuck that, we’re done here,’ says Al, and my heart swells with pride.

‘Al, come on,’ says Charlie, his face panicked. ‘She shouldn’t have been in here anyway.’

‘Are you fucking kidding me?’ says Al and in a flash he’s up in Charlie’s face, his hand around his throat. Before I can even blink the bouncers let go of the creep and step toward their boss, but Jack is faster.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ he says.

‘She was in here because I asked,’ says Al. ‘I was clear about her age, I was clear about who she was, and I was clear about my goddamn expectations.’

‘We had a deal,’ squeaks Charlie.

‘And now the deal’s off.’

Al lets go of him and he stumbles backwards, brushing the attention of his useless crew away, and then I realise the creep is missing and my stomach turns. What if he’s outside waiting for us?

‘We’re leaving, now,’ says Jack, then he holds his hand out for mine and I realise it doesn’t matter, our boys would keep us safe no matter what.

I take his powerful paw and stand up, my whole body trembling with adrenaline as I gently urge Anna to her feet beside me. She’s shaking like a leaf too and I feel sick to my stomach for her. I promised to keep her safe and my stupid fantasy got in the way. She won’t tell dad, that’s not what I’m afraid of. I’m hurting because she’s hurting. She’s my best friend and I’m hers, and I’ve let her down.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she says as we step back out into the night air. ‘I didn’t want to ruin your night.’

Again my heart thrums with shame. ‘Oh gosh,’ I whisper, squeezing her hand. ‘You haven’t ruined anything. This wasn’t your fault. *None* of this was your fault.’

‘I’ll take her home,’ says Alex as Anna looks up. ‘I’ll make sure she’s safe. Then I’ll come back and the three of us can head down to the beach.’

I can’t help but smile as Alex winks, that taboo feeling coming back and stirring again in the depths of my tummy, but I shake it off this time. My priority is my sister.

‘Anna?’ I ask. ‘Is that okay with you?’

She nods, her eyes still tearful, and then she glances toward Jack and blushes again. This time I catch her eye and grin knowingly, and she laughs.

‘Are you sure?’ she says quietly to Alex. ‘Don’t you want to hang out with Kate?’

Al’s eyes flick to Jack who’s now leaning against a low brick wall and looking up into the night sky. ‘Ain’t no way the Temple Wrecker is driving my Dodge,’ he laughs.

Sometimes I wonder if Al likes his car - and my dad - more than me. Tonight I don’t have to wonder. ‘Temple Wrecker?’ I ask.

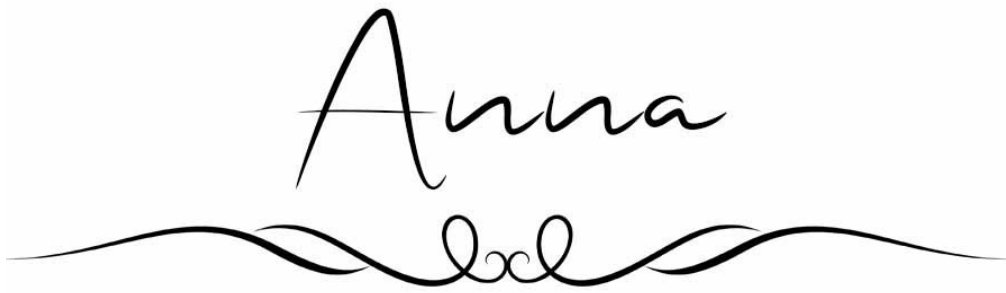
‘Don’t ask,’ he says. ‘Yo, Jack. Can you babysit Kate till I get back?’

Jack just raises his middle finger.

‘What does that mean?’ I ask.

‘It’s his way of saying yes,’ says Al, then he turns to Anna.
‘Come on Princess, let’s get you home.’

*



‘Kate?’ I repeat. ‘*Kate* is here?’

I must have given something away with my voice because dad frowns with concern. ‘She sure is. She’s in the living room with mom,’ he says.

‘Oh, fuck,’ I whisper, my eyes darting this way and that as I begin to panic.

‘What is it?’ says dad, taking a step forward and reaching for me, but I back away and stumble into the coat rack, and then the world spins as I hear her voice.

‘Anna?’ she says from out of sight. ‘Anna? Is that you?’

Then there she is, stepping through the doorway, her lying eyes wide and full of worry as she takes three steps toward me. All I can do is stare, my mouth moving as nothing comes out, and then I back into the corner, cover my eyes and scream.

‘*Anna?*’ says Kate again, darting toward me, her hands grabbing my elbows and then reaching for my hands. ‘*Dad? What’s going on?*’ she cries.

‘I don’t know,’ he says.

‘*No,*’ I shake and kick. ‘*Get away from me.*’

‘Jesus, fuck,’ she says. ‘Anna, did Jack hurt you? Did he-’

‘*No,*’ I scream, throwing her hands away as she touches me again. ‘*You hurt me.*’

‘Me?’ she says, her face paling as she blinks.

‘What is *happening* out here?’ says mom as she limps on through, her sciatica worse every time I see her.

‘I have no idea,’ says dad.

‘*Girls,*’ mom snaps like we’re still four and twelve years old and wrestling too roughly. ‘*Enough.*’

‘I saw your text,’ I hiss. ‘*I saw it. I saw* what you sent to Jack.’

‘Jack?’ asks dad.

Kate’s mouth drops open as her cheeks flush red. ‘Oh, Anna,’ she says, her hand rising to her mouth as she takes a step back at last. ‘Oh, *fuck.*’

I nod, my stomach churning as my heart aches and every part of my soul burns with pain. ‘I saw it. I know you’ve been lying to me. I *know.*’

‘*I’m sorry,*’ says my sister, tears welling up in her eyes as she starts to shake. ‘Anna, I’m so, so sorry.’

*

Jack



‘You want a whiskey?’ says Marlie from behind the bar, already pouring one out.

‘Scotch,’ I say from my new position, my back against the booth and my head in my hands. Call it what you will, but it’s progress. ‘On the rocks.’

‘So where’d you think she’ll go?’ asks Marlie.

‘I got no idea,’ I say, shaking my head.

‘Best friend?’

‘Pregnant by her ex.’

‘Fuck,’ laughs Marlie. ‘What are you marrying into? Dallas?’

I shake my head. ‘This is serious, Marl.’

‘So was my date,’ she says.

‘Shit,’ I say, exhaling. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ she says as she comes back round, holding my drink out in front of her as she spins a chair and sits down.

‘Ain’t that what you used to say?’

‘Don’t apologise for other people’s actions,’ I say, quoting myself. ‘Pretty sure this one’s on me though, Marl.’

‘This one’s on *them*,’ she says, raising her glass. ‘Oorah.’

‘Oorah,’ I say, and I take a swig.

‘So, not with the best friend?’ Marlie continues.

I shake my head. ‘Unlikely.’

‘And not with her sister,’ she says.

‘Doubtful,’ I say. Anna doesn’t like confrontation.

Marlie ponders for a moment. ‘Her ex?’

I grimace, hoping to god she isn’t right. ‘Heard you taught him a lesson?’

Marlie clenches her fist and shows me the bruises. ‘Sure did. He was a good listener,’ she laughs.

‘Slow learner though,’ I say.

‘Parents?’ asks Marlie.

That would make sense. There’s a good chance she’s gone there. ‘They live in Ridgewood,’ I say, looking up.

‘Last name?’

‘Walker.’

Marlie whips out her phone and starts tapping away. ‘Doesn’t narrow it down much, any other details?’

‘Father’s name is William,’ I say. ‘He doesn’t like me much.’

‘I don’t blame him,’ says Marlie without looking up, then she frowns before raising her eyebrows. ‘He a retired General?’

‘That’s him,’ I say, grimacing.

‘Shit, Jack,’ she laughs. ‘This ain’t *Dallas*, this is *Dynasty*.’

‘Fuck off, Marl,’ I say.

‘Is this him?’ she says, turning the phone around. General Walker stares back at me from twenty years ago, his expression of disapproval unchanged.

‘That’s him.’

‘North Ridgewood,’ she says, slipping the device away. ‘I got the address.’

‘You’re a fucking magician,’ I say.

‘I’m a fucking *oracle*,’ she says, correcting me.

‘Same difference,’ I say as I stand up, my legs still wobbling.

‘Ridgewood?’ she asks, standing too.

‘Ridgewood,’ I nod.

*



As Alex and Anna disappear around the corner I sashay slowly over toward Jack and hop up onto the wall beside him.

Somehow he's still taller than me even though I'm so high up, and I smile and shake my head.

'I'm sorry about what happened,' I say. 'I should have been watching her more closely.'

'Don't be sorry,' he says. 'Don't apologise for other people's actions.'

'I know but-'

'Are you questioning me?' he laughs, turning just half an inch toward me with a devious grin on his face. A tingle of naughtiness trembles through me as his words wash over me. I'm not used to being spoken to like that, and it's kind of exhilarating.

'What if I was?' I say.

'Then there'd need to be a consequence,' he says.

'What kind of consequence?' I ask, biting down on my lower lip.

'Keep talking,' he says. 'Find out.'

I laugh and look down at my bare legs, swinging from side to side and for a brief moment I picture myself bent over, my short-shorts tight around my knees, my panties bunched up, with Jack behind me, spanking me over and over as punishment for my transgressions.

I take a deep breath and squish my thighs together, puckering my lips as anxiety builds in my chest. ‘You wanna head to the beach?’ I ask.

‘Sure,’ he says, kicking away and walking off immediately.

‘Hey,’ I laugh, dropping down and almost twisting my ankle as I try to catch up. ‘Wait for me.’

The sand down by the bay still feels warm as I slip off my shoes. I hook the heels with my fingers and swing them loosely by my side, scrunching my toes as I walk, the light of the full moon casting a silvery shadow on the wavy dunes whilst Jack lumbers along beside me.

I hear a *whoosh* and I gasp and look up as a flutter of red and sparkling lights illuminates the world around us, and then a sharp sizzle of sound collides with our ears followed by several loud bangs. I look up and marvel at the sight above us, sulphur raindrops tinkling down in a huge circle from the heavens like a halo of light. Another whoosh emanates from up ahead and shoots up into the sky as I brace myself and squeal, gripping hold of Jack’s arm as they both burst.

BANG-BANG, they roar, shattering the tranquillity; the gentle rhythmic shush of the ocean as it meets the shoreline drowned out as my ears ring and my heart thumps with adrenaline. I glance up at Jack, my eyes smiling broadly as I search for his, hoping to find them sparkling, but one look at the expression on his face and I know something is deeply wrong.

He looks afraid.

No.

He looks terrified.

His cheeks turn sallow and ashen as his eyes begin to dart left and right, focusing on unseen things and narrowing as his mouth twitches.

‘Fuck,’ he grunts, his knees bending as if he’s fighting the urge to crouch and then he breathes and shakes his head, throwing my hand aside as if he’s losing control.

For some irrational reason, my mind equates his jerks and twitches to an old werewolf horror film I saw in my teens and I take an involuntary step back before coming to my senses.

‘Jack?’ I ask. ‘What’s wrong?’

But he just grunts and shakes his head and then drops to the sand, and I see as another flare of blood-red light bathes the sand around us that he’s sweating, beads pouring down his face.

‘Jesus. Jack,’ I say, dropping to my knees beside him and grabbing his powerful arm. ‘Are you having a heart attack?’

He shakes his head, wipes his brow, grits his teeth and gasps. ‘Flashback,’ he breathes.

‘Flashback?’ I blink.

Oh shit.

I run through all my college first aid training in a heartbeat and realise that I have nothing. I can bandage up a broken arm, cool a burn, bind up a wound, and resuscitate a dummy, but I have nothing for how to help someone experiencing a flashback.

My cheeks flush as I realise how useless and helpless I am right now. I look around and shout for help as he rolls onto his side in the sand, but my cries are drowned out by the very thing sending Jack over the edge.

BANG-BANG-BANG.

Overhead more and more fireworks burst, and now I stop thinking of them as beautiful and start seeing and feeling them as Jack does; bullets, explosions, tracer fire; and my heart aches for him.

‘Jack, please,’ I whisper in a gap in the furore. ‘What can I do?’

‘Si-,’ he starts, the effort to speak immense. ‘*Sing.*’

‘Sing?’ I ask.

‘Sing,’ he whispers, and his eyes close.

‘Jack, I,’ - *I can't sing.*

I hate my voice. I've been ashamed of it ever since I was a little girl. I don't even like to mime.

But then I close my eyes and take a shallow breath and from somewhere deep inside me, the lyrics of a long-forgotten song begin to flow.

‘I am the wind, in a sea of sorrow, your eyes, a promise of a better tomorrow. I am the shore, too far to reach, a love that's real, but I won't preach.’

Jack's eyes close slowly as his breathing evens out. ‘Don't stop, Kate,’ he says and I half-smile, a gentle buzz of elation running through me like a spark of electricity. Somehow *I am helping.*

‘I am the moon in a starless sky, my love for you will burn eternal bright. You are the sun, too far to reach, a love that's pure, but I won't preach.’

I take Jack's hand, gripping his massive fingers with my little ones, intertwining them and squeezing them softly as he rumbles and twitches, and after a while, he opens his eyes.

For a moment we just look at each other, our eyes sparkling as the world fades away, and I see a vulnerability there that I didn't know existed. Jack's entire persona is strength, but right now he's hurting, he's exposed, and something *clicks* inside of me.

I lean in close and press my body against his, nudging his face between my breasts as I hold him and cradle his head, every part of my soul tingling as my lips run dry.

Then I take one long shuddering breath, pull down the edge of my top, and slip my erect nipple into his waiting mouth.

And I *moan.*

*



‘*Why?*’ I cry.

Kate crumbles before me, her shoulders dropping, her sobs of pain as loud as mine as mom and dad look on.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispers again, and I can practically hear her heart breaking.

‘William?’ says mom, as if he might be able to shed some light on the fracture occurring before them in real-time.

‘I don’t know what’s going on,’ he says, and then he takes a thoughtful breath. ‘But I think maybe we should leave them to talk.’

Part of me wants to scream *no*, to tell Kate to get out and leave me alone and never come back, but I can’t. I’m not wired that way. I don’t want to hate my sister. I don’t want to never see her again - I *love* her. But right now I hate her too.

‘Tell me the truth,’ I whisper. ‘Just tell me.’

‘I was going to,’ she says, her cheeks wet and flushed. ‘I wanted to, and so did Jack. We just didn’t know how.’

‘Then why didn’t you just *tell* me?’ I ask, snapping. ‘I’m your sister. Your best friend. You said you’d always keep me safe, and now I find out that you’ve been *lying* to me.’

‘I didn’t want to hurt you,’ she says. ‘And Jack didn’t want to lose you. He loves you.’

‘Fuck Jack,’ I whisper. ‘And *fuck* you.’

Kate winces. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘I knew that you’d slept with him,’ I say. ‘I’m not stupid. I wasn’t then, and I’m not now.’

This takes her back. ‘What?’

‘I was *sixteen*,’ I say. ‘You were twenty-four and had two marines *lusting* after you. Of course you were going to fuck them.’

‘Anna,’ she says, frowning. ‘It’s-‘

‘What?’

‘It’s not,’ she pauses. ‘It’s more than that.’

‘What do you mean?’ I ask, my heart beating darker.

Kate turns away, takes a breath, and looks down at the floor. ‘You need to understand something first,’ she says.

‘Understand what?’

‘About Jack,’ she says.

‘He’s damaged?’ I quote. ‘*Right?* That’s what you keep saying. Damaged. You keep telling me, over and over. *He’s damag-*‘

‘He’s got PTSD, Anna,’ she snaps and for a moment I don’t understand what she means, and my expression clearly conveys this as Kate continues. ‘Post-traumati-‘

‘I know what it means,’ I say.

‘It’s bad. He-‘ she begins, closing her eyes as she deflates again. ‘Something happened to him in Kandahar. Something truly awful. Alex and Marlie were with him, kind of, but-‘

I lean forward, confused. ‘I don’t-,’ I start. ‘Kate, I don’t understand.’

She closes her eyes and exhales, and in that moment I see something in her that I haven’t seen in more than a decade. It’s as if she’s been carrying a weight, something so monumentally huge that keeping it a secret all this time has taken its toll on her, and just breathing word of its existence has somehow given life to it again, and in turn, it’s... *broken* her.

Shit.

I can't help it.

I'm so bad at this.

I should be fucking *furious*. I'm full of pain, rage, snot, and hate, and yet I can't change who I am, and I can't stop loving my sister.

I step closer, lean forward, and wrap my arms around her and hold her tight as she begins to sob, and after a few seconds her arms rise up and wrap around me too, and just like that - we're whole again.

And then my phone begins to ring in my pocket.

*

Jack



‘Goddamit,’ I say, holding Marlie’s phone out in front of me.
‘Answer.’

She throws the old Hummer in reverse and pulls out too fast from the alley behind the bar, prompting a volley of abuse from two assholes, a screech of tyres and a horn blast from a yellow cab driver unfortunate enough to be passing by at that moment.

‘Fuck off,’ she says, flipping the bird to all three as she mounts the curb and hits the street.

‘Old habits die hard, huh?’ I say, trying to stay light as my hands shake. Being back in a Humvee isn’t helping how fucked up I feel right now, but I don’t have many other choices - and none that’ll get me to Anna faster.

‘She’s not answering?’ she says.

I shake my head, the sun glinting off my helmet in the rearview mirror - *fuck* - I close my eyes as my muscles tense, clinging to reality. ‘No.’

‘You alright, boss?’

‘Just keep going,’ I say as my arm rises up to grip the hand-hold tight. As long as I can focus on the things going on around me I might have a hope of staying in the here and now for a little while longer, but on some level I know things are going south.

My eyes start to dart from car to car as I bunch up and lean forward - that same tension I felt every time we went out on

patrol back in a heartbeat - and then Marlie's hand reaches across and squeezes me and I shrink back into my seat.

'What are you going to tell her?' she asks.

'*I don't fucking know,*' I snap. That's not important right now. What's important is the goddamn road and I don't understand why my driver doesn't get that. I'm her goddamn CO and she's chatting shit while we're in the zone of action, I-

Fuck.

I breathe hard, panicking as sweat drips down my forehead again. My arm is crooked, my palm is open and I can practically feel the cold steel barrel against my skin and the butt in my shoulder. I straighten out and flush out my chest, but my fingers are cramped and all I can hear is the *thwut-thwut-thwut* of the gunner and the *ting-ting-ting* of the shells as they rain down all around us.

Marlie guns the Humvee up onto the on-ramp of the George Washington Bridge, the massive steel and concrete construction disappearing above us as she sweeps east, coming all the way around until we're inside and cruising along the lower level. I know she's talking, trying to distract me, but the smell of the diesel fumes and the rot drifting through the vents overwhelms my senses as the great steel girders pass rhythmically overhead, and then from somewhere high above I hear the *thump-thump-thump* of the Black Hawk, and I'm back.

Snap.

'What is that shit, Corporal?' I ask. The kid next to me is banging his head in time with the death metal screeching out of the shitty headphones looped around his neck as we bounce along through pothole after pothole.

'*Bone Corpse, sir,*' he says enthusiastically.

'Fuck me,' I say, shaking my head. 'Whatever happened to jazz?'

'Doesn't fit the mood, sir,' says the kid, and I gotta admit he's right.

I glance across at his lapel. I can only make out half, but I guess it spells out *Gordons*, and then I get a twinge in my chest - *Déjà vu* - and in an instant, I'm on high alert. Gut instinct counts for everything out here and the moment something doesn't feel right means it usually isn't.

'Slow down,' I say.

'Sir?'

'Slow the *fuck* down,' I repeat, pissed off now.

The kid hits the brakes and the moment he does the radio crackles with static, my CO's voice coming through broken and distorted but un-fucking-mistakeable.

'Fuck's going on up there, Temple? Over.'

I grab the handset and squeeze. 'Something doesn't feel right, sir. Over.'

'We're on the clock, Captain. Over,' he says, but I don't reply. Instead, my eyes scan the dusty street, taking it all in.

Two women talking, a third carrying a torn plastic bag, and six kids kicking a ball around in the alley to our east. Some asshole shouting in Pashtu. I make out a couple of words, but nothing meaningful. Two motorbikes, one on its side. Half a dozen shop fronts, most of which look as though a light breeze would take them down. Trash piles higher than a truck, each one crawling with fucking rats. I scan the curb, looking for something out of place, anything.

'Are we moving? Over,' says my CO, he's two vehicles back with Marlie and I can already see her rolling her eyes.

'Not yet. Break,' I say, shaking my head. *Impatient fuck*. 'Hold.'

I bring my rifle up, feeling the cold steel of the barrel and then I push the butt hard into my shoulder as I tense, every muscle in my body tightening as I narrow my eyes. Two of the boys playing football stop and one of them has his hand in his pocket, he's watching me and I'm watching him as my grip starts to tighten.

'The fuck does he have?' I mumble.

‘What’s that, sir?’ says Gordons, the tinny shit on his headphones buzzing in my ears.

I’m about to say something when the radio crackles again. ‘Move on, Gordons,’ says my CO. ‘That’s an order.’

I grab for the handset but it’s too late, he’s following his orders, and the Hummer lurches forward. My eyes flick back to the boy and he’s fiddling in his pocket. He’s still watching me, but there’s something wrong with his expression, and then I hear something that sounds like interference coming from Gordons’ headphones, but before I can react to either I *feel* two Black Hawks pounding in overhead, too goddamn low - and the kid’s gone.

And everything burns white.

I watch in confusion as the world turns upside down, my stomach lurching as I feel the heat of the blast. As the roof of the vehicle slams down onto the dirt I drop like a stone, my helmet slamming into the metal. I feel something crack in my chest, and I don’t understand how I’ve managed to spill my goddamn water all over the inside of my kevlar, but I groan all the same, and then I smell kerosene and flames.

I look left toward Gordons but I don’t need to check his pulse to know that he’s dead. He took the brunt of the explosion and it shows, the twisted remains of the door blending with his torso as his uniform catches fire.

I hear gunfire - *thwut-thwut-thwut* - from all around me and then a second explosion, even louder than the first and the ground around me shakes as another lick of flame burns my skin, and the entire Humvee spins as a rotor blade slams into the engine.

Fuck.

The Black Hawk.

Those assholes were flying so goddamn low that they must have caught shrapnel and hit dirt.

I look out from the shattered remains of the front window, wondering for a moment how the fuck I’m still alive, and for a few seconds I don’t understand what I’m seeing, and then I

realise my vehicle has spun one-hundred-eighty degrees and I'm staring back down the street at a column of our vehicles, half of which are on fire.

All I can see is smoke and dust, the sand kicking up a storm as I wince into the chaos. Then I see Marlie running at me through it all in slow motion like a goddamned cyborg, tracer fire flashing over her shoulder toward the rooftops as whoever's left on our side starts to fire back.

'Boss,' she yells, reaching in through the remains of the door, and I grab her hand as she yanks me out on my back, the flaming corpse of Gordons the last thing I see inside the metal shell. I'm dimly aware that my water bottle is still leaking when Alex slams down beside me, his skin pale and his eyes wild, but there's a grin on his face too like this fucking psycho is having the time of his life.

'Goddamn Temple, you're fucking *invincible*,' he cries. 'You took a goddamn IED to the *face*, and you didn't lose a whisker, motherfucker.'

'Sure that wasn't you?' I grumble, but then Marlie pulls me forward sharply.

'Shit, boss,' she says, looking down. 'You're bleeding out.'

I shake my head. 'No, that's my water bottle. It split.'

'Did you bring cranberry juice with you?' she points.

I look down and realise that everything below my kevlar is stained blood-red and only then does the pain kick in, both then and *now*.

'Ah, fuck,' I groan, rolling onto my side, and then I see the kid, the one who had his hand in his pocket, and in slow motion I raise my sidearm.

I know I'm on the George Washington Bridge. I know I'm in Marlie's Humvee. But none of it seems real, only the pain... and then the images start to hit me one by one like polaroids frozen in time, dead friends, charred, burnt, crushed, broken, more than half my unit... and the kid, and I fall back to the only weapon I have left.

Kate.

*

Kate

A decorative flourish consisting of a central swirl with two long, wavy lines extending outwards to the left and right.

Jack's tongue swirls around my nipple as he comes alive. There's an energy to him, something animalistic, as if I've not only brought him back from the brink, but I've awoken some long-forgotten beast inside of him. He keeps going, round and round, faster and faster; and then his lips clamp down around me and *suck*, and the sensation is so intense that I feel like I'm falling.

'Oh, Jack,' I whisper, squeezing him tighter and tighter against me, smothering him against my breast as he rumbles.

One big hand grips my hip over the thick material of my short shorts as he thrums, his fingers digging into me with a passion that burns like a flame. Then he rolls me onto my back and sets his knee between my thighs and his free hand cups and squeezes my tit as he bites me softly with his teeth.

'Goddamn, Kate,' he whispers, licking his lips and tasting me as he looks up, my fingers still clasped around his neck, my bare breast wet and glistening with his kiss.

'Don't stop,' I beg, and he grins and drops back, sucking hard before switching sides and sending an electric pulse through every vein in my body like a flash of lightning.

'Yes,' I moan, throwing my head back into the sand and rolling it back and forth.

'You got the voice of a goddamn angel, Kate,' he says as he kisses the freckled valley between my tits, touring the shape of each one as he teases me and sends me wild.

'Shut up and kiss me,' I whisper as I pull him up, and the moment his lips meet mine the world around us flares with

light and sound as another round of fireworks burst, but this time Jack isn't afraid, this time he doesn't flinch, this time he pulls back and finds my eye and grins.

'There,' he says. 'I kissed you. Now what?'

And then the words I've been wanting to say all night tumble from my lips.

'Do whatever you want with me,' I gush, my tummy trembling with taboo. 'Every inch of me is yours.'

Jack nods and grins, with mischief in his eyes. His hands sweep down to my shorts in a flash and before I can even lift my ass into the air he's unbuttoned and unzipped me, tugging them fiercely down my thighs, my wet panties inverting, only staying in place by virtue of how wet they are.

As he pulls my shorts off over my socks he pauses to admire me, his eyes following the curve of my legs up and over my thighs, my neat little pussy bare and exposed, only my glistening lips still partially hidden.

'Fuck, Kate,' he whispers.

Then up his gaze sweeps, over my tingling tummy button and higher still, my breasts both bare, my shirt bunched up around my neck. Onward toward my cheeks he travels, pausing on my lips before his eyes catch mine, and he smiles as I quiver. Then he pulls down my panties the rest of the way, tugging them all the way to my ankles and off before he pulls me up and over and on top of him.

I feel myself *drip* as he takes me in, my excitement running down my inner thigh, sending goosebumps spreading in every direction as I buck and twist astride him. I reach for his shirt, unbuttoning him as fast as I can, my palm sliding across his chest, my fingers running through his dark hair and feeling the shape of his abs.

At the same time his big hand sweeps down my back, cradling me easily, curving over every notch of my spine, his thumb trailing his palm until he reaches my ass, and there he pauses and squeezes my cheeks before he parts me gently.

As I reach the bottom button I throw the two sides apart and marvel at the sight beneath me, biting my lip with desire.

Despite being on top, I still somehow feel small and vulnerable, his powerful form dwarfing mine. He's so big and I'm so small I feel like I'm riding a horse. He could throw me around, overpower me, tie me up and have his wicked way with me if he wanted to - then again, he wouldn't have to.

I reach for his belt and unbuckle him, sliding down his zipper as I rock back and forth on his concealed cock, and then I kneel up just a little, and reach inside his jeans, my little hand barely wrapping around his thick member.

I gasp for air as he teases me, his other hand now repeating his prior gesture, his thumb sliding down from the base of my spine so slowly that I thrust forwards, and then inch by inch he gets closer and closer.

I know where he's going, and I *want* him to, and my body tingles with taboo until at last, he touches me *there*, in my most untouched place, and my whole body sings with deviant pleasure.

Ever so gently, Jack swirls against me, his powerful hand teasing and testing my tight little hole, and all the time I can feel myself puckering and flowering for him. Every movement he makes elicits a moan from my lips, every soft push a gasp until after just a few seconds I'm a quivering wreck, desperate for more, desperate for his cock. But then his other hand finds my clit, and all thought is lost.

For a few moments, I drift, lost in a cloud of wild ecstasy, high above the fireworks, and then Jack's powerful member twitches and grows in my palm and I *crash* back down to the beach, my chest flushing with guilt.

Anna.

Alex.

Shit.

'Jack,' I whisper. 'I'm sorry. I don't think I can do this.'

He stops, frowns and then laughs, his head crashing back into the sand, breathing out hard.

He slides his hand away from my clit and my asshole, gently placing his palms on my bare thighs, and then after a few seconds he props himself up and looks down at my hands, still stroking his cock, with puzzlement.

‘Sorry,’ I laugh, letting go. He twitches hard, his shaft hitting my belly, and I flinch.

‘It’s okay,’ he nods.

‘I’m *really* sorry.’

‘Don’t be,’ he says, shaking his head.

‘It’s just Anna has this huge crush on you,’ I say, looking down, my fingers circling the end of his cock again and sliding them up and down gently. ‘And Alex-‘

‘You don’t need to explain,’ he says, his voice strained as he moans. ‘I er- I understand, *urgh*.’

‘If things were different I’d-‘

‘Are you going to stop explaining?’ he asks, reaching for my hand and gripping it, preventing me from pumping. ‘Or am I going to have to make you?’

I blush, withdrawing my fingers altogether and taking his. ‘I’m sorry,’ I say, closing my eyes as the tears start to well up. ‘*Fuck*.’

‘Hey,’ he says, as one big palm cups my cheek. ‘I get it.’

‘I like you, and I like Alex,’ I whisper, deflating as I start to feel silly. ‘I had this stupid fantasy, before we left tonight, that the three of us would go dancing together, and afterwards, we’d come down to the beach and we- we... we would make love.’

Jack laughs, shaking his head. ‘I mean, I like Al,’ he says, his voice dripping with sarcasm. ‘He’s saved my life more than once, but-‘

‘Not *you two*,’ I say giggling. ‘I meant that you’d both, you know... fuck *me*.’

Jack stays silent, a wide grin on his face, and then he tilts his head to one side.

‘I ain’t in the headspace to make good decisions right now, Kate,’ he says. ‘I’ve got the prettiest pussy I’ve ever seen almost wrapped around my dick, and I can still taste your tits on my lips.’

I blush as he looks down, and I feel even worse, my chest and my heart burning inside me like a fire.

‘You’re not so bad yourself,’ I laugh, taking hold of his cock again and feeling him twitch.

He really is beautiful, and my pussy is practically rebelling against me as I circle him again, rippling my fingers up and down his head. He’s leaking pre-cum and I roll his glistening love across my thumb and then duck down and take him into my mouth - just a little way.

‘Kate,’ he says, half groaning as he grimaces, and I sit back up blushing hard.

‘*Sorry*,’ I say again, licking my lips as I swallow my guilt. Then I pull him close to me, pressing his length against my belly and marvelling as the tip of his glans comes to rest between my tits. ‘Jesus, Jack,’ I laugh. ‘Where would it even *go*?’

‘Kate,’ he rumbles, and I feel the resonance of his voice in my pussy.

‘I mean,’ I size it up again. ‘I don’t know if you would even *fit*.’

‘*Kate*,’ he groans, gripping my thigh, his thumb sliding dangerously toward my clit again.

‘I mean...’ I trail off, and then before I can stop myself I’m angling him toward me, rising up onto my knees, straddling him, and lowering myself down. ‘Maybe just-‘

The moment the tip of his thick cock slips between my lips I know I’ve lost. This isn’t a game anymore. I’m no longer playing. Every inch of Jack’s thick cock stretches me as he

slides inside, and it's like the whole of me is being cocooned in a warm shroud.

I breathe in, hold it, slide down a little further, moan, buck, gasp, and push down further still, gulping and reaching for his chest to steady myself as he goes deeper and deeper, and *deeper*.

Oh shit.

He's thick too, so thick that all my other senses have given up. I have no concept of time, space, the cold, nothing. There is no guilt here. All I can feel is Jack's cock, making me *whole*, and all I want is his seed.

I drop forward and open my eyes, finding him looking up at me, wild and desperate, an expression of pure panic on his face as he tries to hold back, and I smile.

'Kate?' he gasps.

'Jack,' I whisper, and then I rock my hips and *squeeze*, and I feel him teeter on the edge, holding back, trying not to come, and I whisper. '*It's okay.*'

And his eyes glaze over, and he lets go.

Yes.

Thick, warm love fills my insides, overflowing as I keep going, riding his powerful member slowly and steadily as he comes.

His eyes are closed, his mouth is open, every muscle in his body is strained, and then he moans hard, and it's the most perfect, most satisfied sound I've ever heard, and I laugh and smile, and rock... and then I drop forward and roll my hips, and I let go too.

And I *come*...

... and the world glows bright and warm as one final flare shoots up behind us, and sparkles in the sky above.

*



‘I’m so sorry,’ says Kate, her voice barely a whisper now. ‘I knew how much you liked him, I just-‘

‘You didn’t do anything wrong,’ I say, holding her. ‘You took care of him when he needed you most.’

‘I don’t know if that’s true,’ she says. ‘I think I needed him too.’

‘Maybe,’ I say.

‘When you said you were leaving with him at the wedding I-‘

‘Please,’ I say. ‘You don’t need to explain. It was a long time ago.’

Kate’s face twitches, and she looks down again, then she sags before screwing up her eyes. ‘Anna... we didn’t stop. That wasn’t the last time.’

Silence.

I blink and then I open my mouth, but nothing comes out - I don’t know what to say.

‘Alex knew,’ she continues after a while. ‘Whenever Jack would come back from deployment, he and I would...’

She flicks her eyes at me, folds her bottom lip, and then breathes out softly, and I can feel her pain.

‘Heal,’ I say.

She looks up again, wiping her eyes, before sniffing and nodding. ‘Heal.’

I smile. 'He still needed you.'

Kate nods. 'I think him being with me soothed him,' she says. 'I'd-' she laughs, then she shakes her head and blushes a little.

'What?' I ask.

She looks away, embarrassed. 'I used to-', she starts. 'I used to sing for him.'

'You would sing?'

She nods, her fingers picking at a loose strand of carpet, plucking at it and twirling it as she speaks. 'Old songs,' she says. 'Jazz stuff, that kind of thing.'

'I haven't heard you sing in twenty years,' I say.

'I hate my voice,' she says.

'You have a beautiful voice.'

She looks down again. 'When he retired,' she says, her expression changing as fresh tears roll down her cheeks, her voice cracking with pain. 'He stopped coming.'

I nod. 'Because of Liz.'

Kate nods. 'He didn't call me,' she says. 'He didn't text. He didn't write. Don't get me wrong, I know he didn't owe me anything, and I love Alex. We're happy together. At that point, I didn't need him, but I thought... maybe he still needed me.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh fuck, Anna,' she says, cringing and shaking her head. 'You shouldn't be apologising to me.'

I smile and laugh. 'No, but I understand. I just wish you'd told me the truth from the start.'

'I didn't think he'd come to the wedding at all,' she says suddenly. 'And then when you left with him I panicked.'

'It's okay.'

'I didn't know what to do,' she says urgently. 'I wanted to say something, but it all just happened so fast, one minute you were having fun and the next you were going to *Sicily*.'

I nod. 'I know.'

'And then on the morning you left,' she says. 'Jack called me.'

'He did?' I ask, frowning.

'Just after you called,' she says. 'And he told me he wanted to tell you everything. That he didn't want to lie to you, and that he wanted everything out in the open... but he was afraid of losing you.'

'He was?'

'I panicked,' Kate nods. 'And so, he said that if I wasn't prepared to be open, then he wanted us to bury it forever... and I stupidly agreed.'

'Why?'

'Because I was scared that I'd lose you too.'

'Oh, Kate,' I whisper. 'You'll always have me-'

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG.

The pair of us jump, and I'm so startled at the sharp racket that at first, I don't know what it is, and then the doorbell buzzes and I hear a voice that I recognise but-

'Anna?' calls Marlie, and then when neither of us moves she hisses. '*Fuck.*'

'Who is that?' breathes Kate.

'I erm,' I start, still frozen to the spot as dad appears behind us.

'Is everything okay?' he says.

'*General Walker?*' calls Marlie from outside.

'What the fuck?' says Kate, reaching for me as I step toward the door. 'Is that Marlie?'

'It's okay,' I say, and I turn the latch and there she is, but the moment I see her face I know something is wrong, and then she sees Kate and blinks.

'Kate?' she says in shock. 'It's Jack.'

‘What’s wrong?’ I say, my heart burning as my gut twists.

‘It’s bad,’ she says ignoring me and nodding toward the Humvee now parked diagonally across the lawn. ‘He needs you.’

I look back and forth between them - Jack’s closest friend and my sister - and the unspoken communication occurring between them right now, and then Kate shakes her head and looks at me.

‘No,’ she says. ‘He needs Anna.’

*

Jack



From the darkest pit of hell, I hear the voice of an angel calling.

My angel.

There's a tiny piece of me that's still me, there always is - like the operator of an out-of-control wrecking ball - small and insignificant, powerless and trapped, desperate to escape. But I'm only able to watch, impotently, as everyone and everything around me is destroyed.

I'm conscious but asleep. Now, but then. Here, but *there*... and it's terrifying.

Yet my angel sings.

Her voice calls to me, and at first, she's so far away that I don't know if I have the strength to reach her, but it doesn't matter because with every perfect note the dark pit I'm lost within seems to shrink, and somehow I grow stronger.

Up and up I flow, following her siren song toward her rocky shore. I drop my gun, unclip my Kevlar, and take off my helmet. My arms loosen, my neck clicks, my legs shake, and I *breathe*.

Now, not then.

I open my eyes, and there she is - my angel.

'Anna,' I whisper.

'Hey,' she says, her hand holding my cheek.

'Were you singing?' I rumble.

‘Maybe,’ she says, her lips tight. The inside of the vehicle is dark, but I can see that she’s blushing. I move to sit up, but Anna places her palm in the centre of my chest and pushes me back.

‘Kate told me everything,’ she says.

‘Shit,’ I groan.

‘Asshole,’ she laughs, and the sound is music to my ears. ‘I can’t believe you slept with my sister.’

I shake my head and exhale. ‘Guess *I’m* the one in trouble now,’ I say.

‘Oh, this is definitely *one*,’ she says, holding up a finger, her tongue firmly in her cheek.

‘I feel like I’m getting off lightly,’ I say.

‘Are you questioning me, Jack?’ she says as she raises another finger. ‘That’s *two*.’

I laugh, hard. ‘Goddamn, Anna,’ I say. ‘I thought I’d lost you.’

She blushes again and looks down before taking hold of my hand.

‘You broke a promise,’ she says and my heart aches, then her eyes flicker and she looks back up. ‘So that you could keep another.’

I take a hard breath as I try to answer. ‘It wasn’t just my secret to tell,’ I say. ‘Kate has her own life. She has the right to hold her own truths.’

Anna nods and then exhales. ‘How are you feeling?’

‘Like an IED blew up in my face - again,’ I say, then I look around.

‘Was it bad?’

‘It wasn’t great,’ I say.

‘Does it feel real? When it happens?’

I wince and nod. ‘It can do. Sometimes it’s just noises, sensations, pain,’ I say. ‘Other times it’s like a memory,

playing back.’

‘I’m sorry,’ she says.

‘Don’t-

‘*Apologise,*’ she finishes with a wry grin. ‘I know. I just wish you’d told me sooner.’

‘I thought I had it under control,’ I say, sitting up again. ‘Where’s Marlie?’

‘Here, boss,’ she says as she steps into view. Then I see Kate behind her, and I smile and laugh. ‘Jeez, quite the party we crashed.’

‘Well, it is my birthday,’ says Anna.

‘Shit,’ I say, closing my eyes and wincing. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘That’s three,’ she says and when I look up she’s holding up three fingers, her head tilted as Kate looks on, puzzled.

‘Happy birthday?’ I say.

‘Fuck you,’ laughs Anna.

Then a voice that I haven’t heard in a decade fills me with dread. ‘Ten years on and still causing trouble with my girls eh, Jack?’

Instinct forces me upright and I damn near salute before getting myself under control. ‘General Walker,’ I say, with a nod.

‘I should’ve court marshalled you when I had the chance,’ he says, his eyes narrowing as he looks at me. ‘Cake?’

I blink. ‘Sorry, sir?’

‘Cake.’

‘I don’t follow, sir,’ I say, and somehow I feel like I’m a green recruit again, being told to go find the headlight fluid.

‘Would you like some cake, Major Temple?’ he clarifies.

‘Sir, yes sir,’ I say, trying not to grin as Anna’s eyes pop and her cheeks glow.

‘You were a Major?’ she asks.

‘Kate informs me that you and I need to have a talk,’ says Walker. ‘And that there’s something you need to ask me - a matter of permission for an assignment that I’ve yet to grant - and until such time as that conversation takes place, all prior agreements are null and void.’

Oh my god, Anna mouths as she blushes even harder, almost choking with laughter and biting down on her lip with guilt as her eyes pop.

‘Sir, yes sir,’ I say. ‘I can only apologise, sir.’

‘Why don’t you give it a few weeks and then try again?’

‘Absolutely, sir,’ I say.

‘I wanted to say *years*,’ he continues. ‘But Kate said - firmly I might add - that I could only use the term *weeks*.’

‘Understood, General,’ I say.

‘Shut the fuck up, Temple,’ he laughs, and I find myself feeling a mixture of relief and anxiety as the old man spins on his heel and walks away with a wink.

‘I can’t *believe* you didn’t ask first,’ says Anna, her tongue firmly in her cheek. ‘In this day and age, Major Temple.’

‘Ten-four,’ I groan, throwing her a half-hearted salute.

Marlie’s hand reaches up into the Humvee a moment later and I grab for it as she hauls my ass up. ‘Jeez boss, rocking fifty and still pissing off the General?’ she says. ‘You’ve still got it.’

‘I don’t want it,’ I say. ‘Whatever it is.’

‘So what now?’

I squint. ‘Was the cake really an option?’ I ask. ‘I’m goddamn starving.’

Anna laughs. ‘Actually, I think he was being serious.’

‘Then cake it is,’ I say.

I take a deep breath and then hop down from the Humvee, grateful for Marlie’s help as my unsteady knees recover, but enjoying the feeling of Anna’s small hand pressing into my

back as I alight. Then I turn around and lift her down by her hips and she glows. I want to kiss her, but I know this isn't the time and I have to hold back, and then Kate appears from behind the hood and our eyes meet and I falter.

Anna notices and takes my hand squeezing it tight as she smiles. 'I'll give you two a minute.'

She walks toward the door, pausing briefly to squeeze her sister's arm as Marlie follows, and for a few seconds Kate and I just look at one another, and I don't know what to say.

My dumb ass nearly lost me the love of my life and damn dear drove a wedge into a family that might have never recovered. The one thing that saved us all is Anna's perfect soul, and for a moment I feel dizzy with how goddamn undeserving I am. Kate's eyes flit back and forth between mine and I know she's thinking what I'm thinking.

'She's too good for us,' she says at last, and all I can do is nod.

'She's a goddamn angel,' I say after a while.


'I'm sorry,' she says, her eyes still shiny with tears as she folds her bottom lip with guilt. 'And don't say-'

'I'm sorry too,' I say, taking hold of her hand and squeezing it gently.

For a few seconds, she doesn't respond, and then she pulls me in for a hug and I hold her tight and fight back tears for the first time in far too long.

*

Anna



Marlie unlocks the door to the bar as Jack holds me tight, although I'm not sure if he's holding me for support, or because he's afraid to let me go. He seems a little weakened by what he's been through, and I don't blame him.

It's dark already, the short days of winter passing in what seems like a heartbeat as the nights grow long. The street is quiet this evening, but for some reason, I feel uneasy, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end as I look around, and as the door opens I feel relieved as we step inside.

'You sure you're going to be okay?' asks Marlie.

'I'll be fine,' Jack rumbles.

'I wasn't talking to you,' she laughs, flicking her eyes in my direction.

'Thank you, Marlie,' I say. 'For everything you've done.'

'I'll leave you two alone then,' she says, winking. 'Take it easy, boss. One day at a time, right?'

'One day at a time, Marl.'

'Semper Fi.'

'Oorah.'

Marlie pulls the door closed as she steps back out into the street and Jack takes a deep breath, reaching into his pocket for the keys and locking up.

For a moment I look nervously out through the frosted glass, searching the darkness, still unsettled, but then Jack

turns around and his eyes find mine and my worries melt away.

I look down, blushing and then I peer slowly around the bar. My suitcase is still abandoned where I left it, alongside Jack's, the memories of our trip to Sicily as fresh as they are distant.

Somehow everything that happened over the last week now feels like it occurred a month ago, as though a chasm of time opened up in a single day and stole something from us both, and yet here we are, right back where we started, as though nothing ever happened.

There's Jack's phone too, not far from where I dropped it. I laugh to myself, thinking that had it been a smartphone I'd be on the hook to buy him a new one - *or pay him off with my ass* - but the age of his old cell means it's built like a brick and tougher than a tank and I imagine I'd be hard pushed to find any evidence of a dent.

I sigh as I look up at the smashed optics again, and another piercing stab of guilt rips through me, and again the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end and-

I leap out of my skin as Jack touches the small of my back. 'Holy shit,' I say, breathing hard.

'It's late,' laughs Jack.

I tingle as I calm down, blushing a little, not wanting to let Jack know that all he has to do to make me horny is scare me and then hint at the possibility of bedtime, but a girl can't help what she likes.

'We still haven't unpacked,' I breathe. He takes my hips and spins me around.

'We can do that in the morning,' he says, leaning in for a kiss, but my hand rises up and stops him and he blinks with incredulity.

'It would be worth your while,' I say, biting my lip and widening my eyes.

He narrows his, and I can tell he's weighing up whether to punish me for my insolence and then he nods slowly.

'Take your time.'

I love Jack's dominance, but having a modicum of control over him, even if it's been earned through guilt over a past I've already forgiven, is *dizzying*, and tonight, I'm running with it.

'I will,' I say, raising one eyebrow. Then I turn around and lead him by the hand, before pointing to the suitcases and grinning with pure cheek as I raise my eyebrows.

'With pleasure, ma'am,' he says, begrudgingly.

*

Jack



Anna needs to be put back in her place, but for tonight I'll let her have her fun. She's more than earned it, and I can tell she knows she's pushing her luck. Either way, I'm game, and I owe her.

God knows I do.

I lift our suitcases up the stairs with ease, watching her slowly swing her sweet hips all the way to the top, teasing me as I grit my teeth with impatience.

All I want to do is drop both cases, pick her up, throw her down on my bed, flip her over, and pull her tiny panties aside as I fuck her so hard that she comes on my dick and blacks out.

Goddamn.

I rumble, trying to get a grip as the thought runs through me, my pants stretching as I reach the top, but as we step into what constitutes my living room, Anna does a little spin, her tiny skirt fluttering in the air, giving me a glimpse of her bare and freckled skin above the top of her holdups, and I damn near lose control.

'Leave mine here,' she says. 'You go lie down. I'll be through soon.'

I growl, squeezing the handle of my own suitcase so tight that I hear it crack, and then I place hers down gently on the sofa and step away before my libido gets the better of me.

I don't like surprises, but I guess for one night I could acquiesce.

It is her birthday after all.

I take one last look at her, drinking her in as she bobs up and down on her stockinged feet, and then I breathe out hard and step into my bedroom, closing the door with one loud click.

The floor creaks as I walk across it, the floorboards old and battered, and I breathe it all in. The stars and stripes hung loosely from the wall, my old medals pinned to a corkboard I found in the trash, a few photos of Marlie and Al and me from back in Kandahar, and then I remember the photo of Kate from this morning, and I laugh as I remember that Anna was the one who took it.

Shit.

I am such an asshole.

Anna is incredible. This place isn't right for her. She deserves better. I need to *do* better. She deserves a place in Ridgewood, or some other upstate New York residence - with a garden, a fence all the way around, a pool for her to swim in, and six bedrooms, one for all the kids.

Kids.


I laugh. Close my eyes. Shake my head.

Goddamn.

I know it's wrong, but all I want to do is fill her little pussy up with my seed until her belly bursts, and I'm about to turn around and tear open my door and pick her up in my arms and do exactly that when it opens up all by itself, and in she walks...and my heart damn near stops dead right there.

*

Anna

A decorative flourish consisting of a central swirl with two long, wavy lines extending outwards to the left and right.

Jack's reaction is everything I'd been hoping for. His jaw drops slack as his eyes grow wide, and his gaze tours my body like he's parched. I tingle with satisfaction as he inches his way over me, taking in every curve like he's never seen me before - and he hasn't... at least, not like this.

Not whilst I've been wearing a crotchless body stocking that stretches from my thighs to my neck, detailed with intricate and delicate black embroidery, revealing patches of my pale skin between long runs of interwoven lace, all held in place above a pair of fishnet black holdups and matching panties that barely cover my soaking pussy as I stand in the doorway and blush.

Jack grunts and I flutter, and then he shakes his head and bows it slightly as if he's a bull, staring down a matador, and he's just seen red.

Then he takes a deep breath and before I can blink I'm in the air, and the room is spinning, and he *slams* me down on his bed, and I hear myself *giggle* with giddiness and lust.

'Oh, Jack,' I moan, and then he's kissing my neck and running his powerful fingers through my hair as his huge form dwarves me.

I part my thighs, letting him slide between them and I grin as I feel how hard he is. He grinds himself against me as he finds my lips and I wrap my legs around him and moan.

'Goddamn, Anna,' he rumbles. 'This ain't a fair fight. You're gonna end me before I've even started.'

‘Uh-uh,’ I say, shaking my head. ‘You’ve got some making up to do.’

He looks down upon me, running his eyes around the frame of my face, across my freckled nose and tracing the line of my lips and then he shakes his head and exhales, before darting forward and wrapping his mouth around the shape of my nipple, the hard tip almost poking through the lace.

I buck and writhe as he swirls and sucks on me, my hands clasping around the back of his head as I throw myself from side to side, giggling and moaning in ecstatic delight and then he lets me go, and rolls onto his back, pulling me up on top of him as I sit up straight.

His big hands rest on my small hips as I writhe, rocking back and forth against his rock-hard member, feeling the shape of him through his jeans as I almost lose my resolve.

I’ve got plans for Jack, and they don’t involve me immediately getting carried away, intoxicated by everything that he is. I *have* to resist, and I bite down hard on my own lip as I do.

I run my fingers over my own breasts, feeling the shape of them, the texture of the lace electrifying against my skin, and I squeeze them both softly as he watches.

With his eye following my fingers, I pinch my own nipple and then sweep away, down my own tummy, circling my belly button, before cruising over my lips, already so wet that my panties are clinging to the shape of them.

Up and down I tease myself, pressing gently against the silk, soaking my fingers until they’re almost dripping and then I lean forward and run them over Jack’s lips and blush as he eagerly sucks from each one.

I quiver with delight as I shuffle back, just a few inches, running my hand over his abs and down, down until I meet his belt, where I make quick work of the buckle and snap the two halves apart.

Slowly I draw the leather through each loophole, flicking my eyes up, watching him as I pull, and then I drop it beside

us where it clatters to the floor.

Next, I unbutton his jeans, feeling how tight his abdomen feels, and marvelling at how incredible the v-shape of muscles that curve beneath his pants look.

Finally, I unzip him, reach inside and beam as I find his thick, hard cock, waiting for me within.

Slowly I withdraw him, teasing him out inch by slow inch until at last his manhood is stood proud before me, and for a few seconds, I play with him, circling him with my forefinger and thumb, running my palm up and down as he twitches and groans.

Then I slide back a little further, lean forward, collect my hair to one side so he can watch, and slip him smoothly into my mouth.

*

Jack



‘Oh fuck,’ I moan as Anna’s sweet lips wrap softly around my cock, her tongue brushing against me as she rolls me back. I twitch hard as I enter her, and for a brief moment I almost lose control, my stomach muscles tightening and bucking me up. Then I fall back, my mouth open wide and my eyes closed as she starts to bob and swirl, using her hand at the same time to gently and expertly pump me.

I gaze down at her, watching in awe as her slick pink lips swallow me up, inch by slow inch, taking me deeper with every pass. Her mouth feels like *Heaven* - tight, hot, wet, and perfect - and I have to grit my teeth not to thrust up and explode into her.

Fuck yes.

Her eyes find mine, wide and pure and full of love as she keeps going, and somehow I can feel her smile.

‘Goddamn, Anna,’ I whisper. ‘You’re so fucking good at this. Your pretty little mouth looks so perfect wrapped around my cock.’

She grins and takes me deeper again, and I feel the head of my cock squeeze into the back of her throat, my tip bulging as she takes me. Then I see her eyes water as she forces me deeper still, slipping me out a moment later and gasping for air as her lips glisten and sparkle, then down she goes again.

‘Fuck, baby,’ I whisper, watching as her skin tingles with goosebumps. ‘You’re such a good girl.’

I reach down and stroke her cheek and then run my fingers through her long dark hair as she bobs, feeling myself getting

closer and closer, but wanting to last, wanting to enjoy every possible second of this as if it might never happen again. Then Anna slides back up and swirls her tongue around my tip and I buck forward as my knees thrust up.

‘Slow down, angel,’ I whisper. ‘I ain’t gonna last if you keep going like this.’

She shrugs and *pops* me out, her lips puckering.

‘I don’t mind,’ she says, and then she licks me with mischief in her eyes, all the way from the base of my shaft to my tip without breaking eye contact and I groan and lie back.

Goddamn.

Up and down she bobs, one free hand running through my chest hair as the other handles my shaft, squeezing me gently, every thrust of her palm complimenting her lips, and then back into her throat I go, deep down, and I hear her choke and gag and it’s like music to my ears.

There she holds me for a long moment, looking up at me with her perfect bright blue eyes, each one as round and as big as a planet, and then she closes them both, and I watch in awe as my entire length slips deep inside her throat.

Oh. Fuck.

‘I’m going to come, baby girl,’ I say as she looks up at me, my voice desperate. ‘I’m going come right in your mouth. Are you ready for me?’

She grins and slides me down deep again, her eagerness almost taking me over the edge there and then. Then she bobs me up and down and *squeezes* me and the sensation is overwhelming, all-encompassing, and I feel myself start to pulse *and-*

Fuck.

She pulls me out, and wraps her whole hand around my tip, palming me as I quiver and throb, my dick rebounding as if it’s been slapped.

‘No. Not yet,’ she says, shaking her head as she blushes, and I damn near cry out in rage.


‘What the *fuck?*’ I breathe.

Anna holds up a single finger and says. ‘Count for me, Jack,’ then she smiles. ‘That’s *one.*’

‘God-‘

*

Anna



‘-dammit.’

I try not to laugh as Jack fumes between my thighs, his cock twitching so hard in my palm that I’m half expecting him to come anyway, but he doesn’t. The look on his face though is pure gold. I’m going to be paying for this for weeks, but I’m far from done.

‘Good boy,’ I say, and then I lean down and kiss his glans and almost tip him over the edge all over again.

‘Ah fuck,’ he moans as he throbs and thrums, and then I let go altogether and watch with glee as his cock vibrates like a steel rod.

‘Disciplined,’ I whisper, nodding with approval.

‘What the fuck, Anna?’ he rumbles.

‘You only get to come,’ I say, as I shuffle forward. ‘When I say you can come.’

Jack stares at me for a long moment, and then he starts to laugh. ‘Fuck.’

I slide up his thighs until the warmth of my pussy radiates around his shaft, pressing him against my wet panties and holding him there with my palm. I look down and marvel for a moment at his length and how he almost reaches my breasts. Then I kneel up, arch my hips and hook my panties to one side as I slip him deep inside me.

‘Oh, fuck,’ I gush, almost losing my resolve in an instant as he enters me.

That moment when Jack's thick cock pushes inside me for the first time never gets old. How he stretches me, how he seems to *pop* inside, and how *whole* he makes me feel - it drives me *wild*. I throw my head back in pure satisfaction as his shaft slowly fills me until almost every inch of him is tucked perfectly within. Then I drop forward onto my hands and start to slowly rock as I remember my intentions.

'Ah, shit,' he groans, taking hold of my hips. 'I ain't gonna last thirty seconds, baby girl.'

'Yes, you are,' I whisper, biting my lip with mischief. 'You don't have a choice.'

*

Jack



Every ounce of my soul is focused on not exploding right now. My sweet angel is riding my cock like she's *trying* to make me come, her tight warm pussy gripping me as she rolls back and forth. She's so wet that the base of my dick feels slick and I look down to see that I'm glistening with her excitement.

Goddamn.

Anna's going to pay hard for this. Her ass is going to be red raw by the time I'm finished with her. She won't be able to sit down for a goddamn week, but I can't think about that right now. In fact, I can barely open my eyes, because if I look directly at her, then I know I'll lose control. She's the most beautiful creature I've ever seen and somehow, despite everything, she still wants me... but I'm being punished first.

I close my eyes as she rocks, but somehow that makes it worse, focusing on the sensation of her tight little pussy as she squeezes me, and after a few seconds my eyes fly open and she grins.

She reaches out and takes hold of my hand, easing it away from her hip and guiding me to her clit, and I eagerly circle her, watching as her cheeks, neck, and chest flush and bloom red before me.

I grin, thrusting up a little harder as she comes down, and she moans with delight, and the second time she quivers and I goddamn *beam*.

Fuck it.

If I'm going down, then I'm taking her with me.

My dick throbs and thrums as I start to match her rhythm and the mischievous grin that's been plastered all over her face for the last ten minutes disappears as I sit up, shifting her back. I guess she likes this new position because her breathing changes in an instant and her arms wrap tight around me.

Up I thrust, her breasts pressing into my face, the tight lace material of her body stocking barely containing her nipples. I find one and slip it into my mouth and *suck*, swirling my tongue around and around as she moans.

'Oh, Jack,' she cries, her whole body shaking in response. 'Yes, *yes*.'

My free hand, the one not trapped between us, still circling her, slips down every notch of her spine and sweeps between her cheeks, and then Anna arches her back and gasps, her sweet little asshole quivering with delight as I tease her.

'That's it, baby girl,' I whisper. 'I want to feel you come on my dick.'

'*Yes*,' she moans, nodding fast.

I can tell she's close. She gets tighter the closer she gets. This is going to take every morsel of self-control I have left in this world if I'm going to last another round, but for Anna, I'll try.

My thumb swirls steadily around her clit as my finger pushes inside her asshole. At the same time, my dick thrums with energy within her, like a resonating metronome, and somehow I've never felt so hard in my life. My cock is like a steel rod, and I'm so close to the edge that all she'd have to whisper is *Come inside m-*

Shit. Fuck.

No. I can't. Not yet.

'*Don't stop*,' she cries as if she knows what I'm thinking. '*Oh fuck, Jack. Keep going, keep going.*'

Up and down she thrusts, faster and faster, her whole body thrumming and writhing as she starts to lose control.

‘You like that, angel?’ I growl. ‘You like my cock deep inside you?’

‘Yes,’ she cries. ‘*Yes.*’

Then half a second later her breathing stops altogether as every muscle in her body tightens... and *releases*, and I feel my angel shake and shudder as she grips me tight, and then her asshole puckers and her pussy *squeezes* me and she moans so hard that I can’t take it anymore and-

‘Fuck, Anna,’ I whisper. ‘I’m going t-‘

I’ve lost.

I’m passing the point of no return and there’s nothing I can do to *sto-*

‘No. Not yet,’ she whispers, and immediately she slips me out, pushing me flat with the palm of her hand as my cock thrusts up into nothing but *air*.


Fuck.

For a moment I feel disoriented, every inch of me twitching and pulsing with confusion and *loss*, and then her hand takes hold of me again and palms me, clamping around me once more, and I buck forward filled with rage.

‘Goddamn, mother-‘

*

Anna



‘-fucker.’

‘Count for me, Jack,’ I gush, still gasping for breath as the ground-shaking orgasm I’ve just experienced continues to resonate in my core. ‘What number are we on?’

‘*Fuck,*’ he says through gritted teeth. For a few seconds he just breathes and then he shakes his head and whispers. ‘Two.’

‘Good boy,’ I say, and I pat his chest.

I love this, but I am *so* dead.

My punishment for this evening is going to last for *hours*. I know I won’t be able to sit down for a week, so I may as well take full advantage whilst I have the chance.

I lean forward again and take Jack deep into my mouth, edging him closer as I suck him hard, tasting myself and licking my lips as I come back up. Then I crawl forward, all the way up his powerful body until my thighs are straddling his chest, and my swollen, bare pussy lips are an inch from his mouth.

‘Make me come again,’ I whisper.

He rumbles and he grabs for my thighs, hooking them both and pulling me forward so fast that I fall onto my hands.

‘I love how sweet you taste, baby girl,’ he says, then his tongue sweeps up between my lips, circles my clit, and slides back down as he dips inside my pussy - and my body curls with pleasure as the room *spins*.

‘Oh, yes,’ I gush, sitting up again, riding his face as I balance, one hand leaning back and resting on his abdomen,

the other reaching out and taking a fistful of his hair. ‘Yes, right there.’

After I’ve come once it’s like a rollercoaster, I can just keep coming, and I know this won’t take long.

Jack knows my pussy better than anyone, and the deep rumble of his chest is sending tingles of delight all the way through my tummy and up to my chest, adding to the warm pleasure that’s already coursing through my veins.

‘Fuck, Anna,’ Jack says, his voice like a vibrator. ‘You taste like goddamn nectar.’

And then somehow he shifts his arm, and brings his hand up and slips two fingers into me as his tongue works my clit, and he curls them both and taps against my g-spot and I cry out in pure ecstasy as I come instantly.

I hear myself gush - *splooosh* - as Jack rumbles, his tongue working overtime as his fingers keep tapping, and I lose control of my limbs as I start to shake and shudder, every part of my body succumbing to him as he holds me tight.

Then somehow *another* orgasm hits me, rolling together into the last, and my voice catches in my throat as my mouth goes wide and I buck and quiver - out of control as the world goes dark... and I *scream*.

‘Yes, Jack, yes-yes-yes.’

And then I feel myself falling forward, rolling sideways, curling into a ball and shaking hard, every muscle in my thighs quivering like a leaf as this sensation keeps going, my heart pounding.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, I say over and over in my head, or maybe out loud - I don’t even know anymore.

Then Jack is pulling me up onto all fours, and I can barely support myself, and then I feel his strong hands *rip* my panties, and his thick cock slides back into me as I damn near blackout with pleasure.

Yes.

Jack



Anna's slick little pussy is awash with her excitement as my cock slides back into her with no resistance at all. She feels so fucking tight as I take her, her last orgasm still thrumming through her like an echo, her walls contracting over and over as my thick cock warms itself inside of her.

I don't know how the hell I've lasted this long. It's a goddamn miracle that I haven't exploded already.

'*Fuck,*' I rumble. 'Your tight little pussy was made for me, Anna.'

'Yes,' she moans, nodding into my mattress, her fingers gripping the sheets so tight that her knuckles have turned white.

'After this, after tonight,' I say, leaning closer to her as I fuck her deep and hard in long powerful strokes. 'You're mine. I fuck you when I want, how I want, and you come when I want.'

'Yes,' she cries louder, nodding again. 'Yes. *I'm all yours.*'

'This pussy is mine,' I say, throbbing inside her.

'Yes.'

'This asshole is mine,' I say, swirling her with my thumb.

'*Yes.*'

'And your pretty little mouth is mine.'

'*All of me,*' she gushes, her voice muffled by moans of pleasure.

‘Come for me again, Anna,’ I say. ‘Come all over my dick.’

‘Yes,’ she moans, and I push my thumb inside her tight little asshole and she quivers and bucks and shakes and thrusts her ass back and forth and *comes*.

And I lean back, my dick singing with relief as my balls squeeze and contract and-

Anna drops away from me, rolling onto her back and reaching for me again, her hands clasping around my dick as she gasps and moans, holding me closed, cupping my shaft and squeezing my glans but it’s too late, I can already feel mys-

‘No,’ she says, shaking her head. ‘Count for me.’

‘Fuck,’ I cry out, my dick quivering and pulsing along its entire length as I shudder and buck, and for a moment my vision blurs and I feel dizzy, and then I start to breathe again. ‘Are you fuck-‘

‘Count,’ she snaps, laughing.

‘Three,’ I growl, through gritted teeth.

‘Good boy,’ she whispers.

‘You’re going to pay for this,’ I say. ‘Your sweet little ass is mine.’


‘Is that a promise?’ she says, blushing.

‘It’s more than a promise,’ I say. ‘You have my word.’

‘Good,’ she says, then she bites down on her lip in that way that drives me wild. ‘Do whatever you want with me. I’m yours. Forever.’

*

Anna



Jack grins as he's set free, and I half expect him to flip me over and spank my ass red raw right there and then, but I guess I've driven him so close to the edge that all he wants right now is release.

Without hesitation he parts both of my thighs, thrusting them down and spreading me wide then slides me back and pushes his finger into my naughtiest little hole and *swirls*.

'Mmm,' I moan, nodding as his thumb finds my clit, and then he takes hold of his cock, soaks the tip in my dripping wet pussy, teasing me back and forth, and I grin with taboo as I feel him slide down... and *down* until his thick member is pressed hard against my asshole - and then he *pushes*, and slides right in.

I breathe out long and hard as Jack's thick cock slips into my ass, the first inch squeezing him tight as I accidentally clench and then *pop* he's in, and his entire shaft disappears into me in a heartbeat as he fills me up.

'Oh, fuck,' he growls. 'Your sweet little asshole is so tight, baby girl. I ain't gonna last ten seconds.'

'Yes,' I whisper. 'Come inside my ass, Jack.'

'Ah shit,' he whispers, thrusting harder, his eyes closing as every vein in his neck stands out. 'Oh fuck, baby girl.'

Each thrust feels so fucking good as he takes me. I can feel every inch of his cock as he throbs and pulses. I can feel the shape of him, feel as he trembles, feel as his seed starts to release, his balls tightening, his shaft growing and hardening.


Then he looks down at me, eyes wide, mouth open, and he shakes his head and whispers.

‘You’re so fucking perfect, Anna,’ and I feel him burst; his seed, held back for so long - rushing forth and flooding my insides, filling me up until I’m overflowing, and then he roars, and the world spins, and I close my eyes and come with him one last time, and all I can see is stars.

A rainbow full of stars.

*

Anna



I wake up feeling hazy, a soft smile on my face as I try to focus, but everything is a little blurry and fuzzy around the edges as I gently come alive.

Jack's asleep.

His chest is rising and falling slowly and rhythmically. I watch as my breath flickers over the thick nest of dark hair on his chest, and I wonder for a moment if Kate ever woke up like this, and did the same.

I know that I should feel angry and jealous. I know that I'm supposed to. I'm meant to scream and cry and mope and pout, but I can't, because I'm in love.

Jack and my sister have a past, but Jack and I, have a future.

I touch my belly and smile.

I can hear sirens - the soundtrack of New York City, the *ambiance* as Jack calls it, blaring as they get closer. Soon they'll pass, but they're always there. I close my eyes and listen. A deep horn. Shouting. Someone screaming... and I smile.

Manhattan.

I love it, and I hate it. I don't want to raise a child here, but we could make it work. Home is wherever we are, and this could be my home.

I touch my belly again, imagining for a moment how it will feel filled as Jack's seed, slowly expands it every day,

getting bigger and bigger as I blossom and bloom, and I smile at the thought of making love with a big tummy.

I wonder how it would feel, but I already know the answer.

It would feel incredible.

I feel warm - unnaturally warm as I lie against him, as though his body is an inferno constantly burning with love for me, and then I close my eyes and wonder how much time has passed since we came together. As I drift in and out of consciousness my hands feel something sharp on the bed, the corner of a small card, and I grasp the edges in my fingers and bring it up to my face, reading the text and then reading it again.

Doc Brown - Vasectomy Specialist.

My heart swells three sizes as the meaning washes over me, and my whole body bursts with love and happiness, tears coming to my eyes in an instant as my chest thrums. I look up at Jack's face, my eyes stinging as I focus on the flickering hairs of his beard in the warm red light that's fluttering outside, and I breathe in his scent... and cough.

Hard.

'Oh,' I gasp suddenly as if my lungs are unable to take a full breath and immediately I panic. I try to move but my limbs feel weak. 'Fu-', but all I do is cough harder.

Again I try to breathe and again I cough, my eyes watering this time as I hiss. 'Jack?'

He rumbles as I blink, and I realise my eyes aren't just stinging, they're *burning*. I try to breathe again but it's like my lungs are already half full, and then I start to gasp as I feel dizzy and faint.

'*Jack,*' I say again weakly.

Oh shit.

Something is wrong, deeply wrong.

‘*Jack*,’ I say again, my throat like sandpaper. ‘Please.’

‘What is it?’ he says, his voice hoarse and raspy, and then his eyes burst open and he looks around. ‘Shit.’

Flashing lights fill the room gradually as the sirens blare louder and I try to sit up but it’s like someone’s placed a lead weight on my chest and when I put my foot on the floor it *burns*.

‘Jack? What’s happening?’ I manage to get out between fits of coughing.

‘Fuck,’ he says, and then he’s up and moving and I realise the haze isn’t just the tears in my eyes it’s *smoke*, and then my chest fills with terror as I realise-

‘The bar’s on fire,’ says Jack, as though he doesn’t quite believe it. ‘We need to get out of here.’

I can’t breathe, and it’s not just the smoke, it’s fear now too, gripping my chest like a vice. I suddenly realise that the flickering warmth on the edge of my vision is flames licking the upstairs windows from down below, and there are coils of smoke rising through the floorboards, and everything is creaking and crackling.

Jack coughs, covering his mouth as the smoke builds, thickening faster and faster with every passing second - *too fast* - and then he looks at me, and I see something in him I’ve never seen before.

Fear.

He’s not afraid of what’s happening, he’s not afraid for himself - he’s afraid for me, and for a moment I don’t grasp why, and then it hits me.

He’s afraid he’s going to lose me.

He darts past me, grabbing for the flag hung from the wall, ripping it down before billowing it wide and wrapping it tight around my shoulders. With one free hand, he tears his pillowcase from his pillow and with the other he soaks the material in water from a cup on his side table, and then he

covers my mouth with the wet rag and somehow I can breathe again.

I watch, paralysed with terror as he turns toward the window at the far end, the one above the alleyway that runs behind the bar, and then he smashes it with his fist and beckons me forward. He's bleeding as I take his hand, his blood running through my fingers as he ushers me out onto the metal fire escape, and for a brief moment I look out toward the street and see two red FDNY trucks skewed across the sidewalk, yellow suited fireman running as they unfurl long snake-like hoses, and then Jack is beside me, the old metal staircase creaking and groaning with every step we take.

Down below us long flames lick up through the grill as the building burns, and I step back toward the window, instinct making me back away as I feel the heat. Then Jack's arms wrap around me and hold me tight as another crash comes from within and I turn and see that the bed that only moments ago we were sleeping on is now in flames.

'Jack,' I cry. 'What are we going to do?'

He reaches out and places his palms on either side of my face, and then he holds me tight and he whispers.

'Jump.'

And then he cocoons me in his powerful arms, turns me hard, and the world tilts.

And I feel weightless as we fall.

THE END

Watch out for **Eternal Sin**, the fifth novel in the **Silver Fox Romance - Jack & Anna** series, coming soon.

Keep reading for a sample chapter from **Forbidden Nanny - A Single Dad Age Gap Romance**

FORBIDDEN NANNY - SAMPLE CHAPTER



Mackenzie



I'm nervous.

The kind of nervous you get where an ocean of anxiety swells in your chest every time you breathe and makes your tongue go numb, and then occasionally diverts to your buttole and makes you tingle and *squeeze*. It's not helping that I'm almost an hour late, *and* I'm being held up.

The six-foot tall security guard standing in front of me, whose name badge is declaring he's called *Gud*, eyes my student card with sneering suspicion before he snorts and turns away, rotating it idly between his fingers.

'This all you got?' he says. 'No driver's license?'

‘Do you *see* a car?’ I say, half lying. I’ve got a license but I hate my picture and I’m not showing it to anyone unless I have to.

‘Wait there,’ he sneers before speaking into his radio headset. ‘Gate Four. Run an ID check on a Mackenzie Miller for me. Nineteen years old, red hair, freckles. Card says she goes to UCLA. No driver’s license. Reckons she’s the Ledger’s new nanny.’

Red hair and freckles.

I roll my eyes. If I was ever a fugitive on the run from the law, that’s how the police would describe me. *Suspect is a white Caucasian female, five-foot tall, with flame-red hair, and more freckles than a Lichenstein.*

I take a deep breath.

My tummy is filled with dark butterflies. I haven’t done anything wrong but everything about this situation is terrifying, and it has nothing to do with Mr Grumpy and his surly performance over gate security. I’m just way out of my depth.

‘Yeah, about five foot,’ he says, turning back and eyeing me briefly.

I’m nervous because I’m starting a new job as a live-in nanny to a host family just south of Crestwood Hills. Nannying wasn’t my idea, but right now, whilst I’m studying in my second year at UCLA, I need a job, some time to study, and a place to live, and this ticks all the boxes.

‘Yeah, *really* white,’ says the guard, nodding with a smirk on his face.

This guy is a joke. I had to knock on the window of his booth to get his attention when I arrived. I could’ve just walked straight past and into Hollow Vale without him noticing, but I’m too darn polite and too darn honest.

His shoulders sag as he listens to the response, and I can tell he’s disappointed. I bet he was looking forward to kicking my ass to the curb. Opportunities to exert his authority must be few and far between up here in the hills.

‘Are you done playing gatekeeper?’ I say, raising my eyebrows and cocking my head as he turns back. I can’t help it, my natural reaction to stress is to become a snarky bitch and the words tumble from my mouth even as I try to stop them. ‘Power trip over?’

The guard blinks, his face short-circuiting. I can tell he wants to yell at me, to tell me to fuck off, maybe even smack me around a little. He looks like the kind of guy that gets off on that. But apparently, I check out, and it’s good to know that being a resident nanny carries some weight around here. There is a pecking order, it seems.

He hesitates, and for a moment I feel that thrill in the pit of my stomach as I think he might actually be about to strike me, but then his big hand hits the gate buzzer instead, and after a brief cacophony of mechanical symphony, the token wooden barrier opens up, slowly.

I need to watch my tongue, otherwise, my bratty little mouth is going to get me fired. I highly doubt that my host family would have the tolerance not to sack my ass after one too many snide comebacks.

I flash a smile laced with malice in his direction, then step forward, slipping through the barely open gap impatiently and swinging my little rucksack over my shoulder again as I start down the tree-lined avenue, practically running past houses that cost a thousand times more than I’ll ever earn in my lifetime.

I am way outside of my comfort zone here, but at least I look the part. I even went to the effort of buying myself some new high-waisted jeans, a blue stripy top, a few cardigans that cover up my tats, and some sensible shoes for this job. I don’t know all the details, but getting a solid recommendation from a gated family is like a *six*-star review, so I am pulling out all the stops. I did not, however, pull out my tongue piercing. There are *some* lines that I am *not* prepared to cross.

I lucked out with this job. The family are so desperate they skipped the interview altogether and just went solely on agency advice. I haven’t met them, they haven’t met me, and

that suits me just fine. I don't interview well. The aforementioned tats, tongue piercing and snark do not help.

I slip my phone out of my back pocket and triple check the address. I don't need to, I've memorised it and looked it up on Google sixteen times already, but my anxiety is through the roof and doubt is creeping in around the walls, and I am *so late*. The moment I go to put it back it rings and I panic. It's probably the agency, calling to ask where the hell I've got to - it's not my fault the stupid bus didn't turn up on time - but when I look it's Felicity, and then I remember *why*.

Shit.

I forgot I'd told her to call if I hadn't texted her by now. I hammer the answer button.

'Hey Flick,' I say, out of breath. 'I'm *really* sorry.'

'You're not dead?' she says.

'No, but I'm late.'

'So they *haven't* murdered you yet?' she asks suspiciously.

'I'm talking to you aren't it?' I say.

'That's exactly what a dead body would say. Blink twice if you're in distress.'

'Flick, you can't *see* me.'

'That's *exactly* what a kidnap victim would say,' she laughs.

'You're not helping,' I huff, but she is helping in her own way, and a grin begins to creep in at the corners of my lips.

'Take it easy,' she says, her voice turning genuine. 'You really want to show up looking like you've run a marathon? What if the dad is *super* hot and has a thing for nannies? He's not going to want to sneak into your bedroom and play tickle under the covers if you look like a swamp monster.'

'*Ew*,' I say, my tummy twisting. 'Firstly, *gross*. Secondly, they're married *with kids*.'

‘So?’ says Felicity. ‘I’ve fucked like *two* out of the four dads I’ve au-paired for, and *they* were married. Men have a *major* hard-on for cute nannies.’

‘Again, you’re not helping.’

She gasps. ‘Maybe he’ll *spank* you for being late?’

‘*Stop it,*’ I giggle, my outburst drawing the ire of an old man tending to his garden.

‘Don’t sweat it,’ she says. ‘The first couple of times it hurts, but before you know it, you’ll be *begging* for him to do it again.’

‘You’re sick,’ I say.

‘I’m *manipulative,*’ she pouts, correcting me. ‘And I get *massive* tips. Sometimes, *just* the tip...’

‘*Flick,*’ I snap, but she’s taken the edge off my stress and I’m already feeling better. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly. ‘Thank you,’ I say reluctantly.

‘My pleasure,’ she says. ‘Seriously though, you’ll be fine. No one could *ever* be mad at you for more than like, three seconds, *max*. You’re way too hot.’

I smile. ‘Call me again in an hour?’ I say, cringing.

‘Only if I get to *listen,*’ she says, gasping for breath suddenly. ‘*Ooh, Mr Ledger, hurt me again.*’

‘You need help.’

‘Because I’m so *naughty.*’

‘Goodbye, Felicity.’

‘*Oh Mackenzie,*’ she moans deliriously. ‘I *love* it when you full name me.’

I shake my head, laughing as I end the call, then I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths, slowing down my pace and listening to the sounds that surround me as I walk; a sprinkler bouncing on its spring, a lawn mower buzzing in the distance, the splash of someone diving into a backyard pool. It’s an old trick I used to use when I’d get into a mess on whatever base

we were living on at the time, and it still works, although now I can't get the vision of being spanked by the mystery hands of Mr Ledger out of my head.

Get it together, Mackenzie.

It's highly unlikely that he's hot and even more unlikely that he'd be my type anyway. After all, musclebound bad boys that treat me like dirt and cheat on me are few and far between in neighbourhoods like this, and *this* is all overlooking the fact that he's married with kids. Regardless, I relax a little, but as soon as I do, I'm standing in front of the house and my heart accelerates dangerously.

Shit.

It's even bigger than it looked on street view. Mock Tudor cladding, uneven brickwork, barn doors on the garage, curved walls and a porch with wooden pillars, it looks like somewhere a wizard might live, not a family of four. There's something off about it though, and I can't put my finger on it like something is... I don't know. It's too late to start trusting my instincts, I'm way past that point. An *hour* past.

Deep breath.

The driveway is paved with white bricks and lined by lush green grass and palm trees that sway gently in the breeze as I walk. The agency girl who put me on this job said this place was swanky, and she wasn't lying. It's a damned *mansion*. I never got around to asking why they needed someone so urgently, and it's been bugging me for the last two days, but right now I don't care, because before I know it I'm standing in front of the main entrance, looking up at the security camera and wondering if anyone is looking back.

I adjust my cardigan just in case, check my ponytail, straighten my posture and-

The door opens and I blink, and all the breath leaves my body in an *instant* as my heart thumps and my legs turn to jelly because standing in front of me is *the* most handsome man that I have *ever* seen.

He's more than six feet tall, built like a lumberjack, with a grizzly dark beard that's mottled with splashes of silver and bed hair that'd make a boyband jealous. His steel-blue eyes somehow cut right through my chest and straight to my heart, and the dangerous look on his face as he runs me up and down makes my panties *tremble*. I force out half a smile, and then I bite down on my lower lip, my tummy filling with something that I don't even have a *name* for.

I whimper, *literally whimper*, and then I say, 'Hgng.'

Fuck.

I'm in *so* much trouble.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



BRIANNA SKYLARK IS the pen name of a happily married, utterly insatiable, thirty-something mother of two living in a repressed little village on the south coast of England.

She's the wife of a rugged archeologist and often likes to think she's married to Indiana Jones. Over the years she's experimented with various occupations including filmmaking, video game voiceover artist and climbing instructor, but her favourite job is her most recent one... steamy romance novelist.

She loves bringing sweet, strong, faithful and loving women to life through her books, and then introducing them to strong, kind and endearing alpha males (or sensual females) who satisfy their every desire in the bedroom and beyond.

When she's not writing, she's often found hiking or climbing in the far reaches of Scotland and Wales or exploring the woods and beaches near her home with the man of her dreams, and their two gorgeous children.

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