



THE
Roommate
DEAL

USA Today Best Selling Author

ASHLEY ZAKRZEWSKI

The Roommate Deal

Ashley Zakrzewski

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Also by Ashley Zakrzewski](#)

Chapter One

Chloé Laurent is one unhappy girl. How her best friend and ex-roommate could do this to her is beyond her understanding! To move out is one thing. She found her hearts other half in Devin Wilson. To move in with him is right and proper. But to insist his nephew takes her place! *No!* This makes her so upset.

“He is a good guy. Sweet and respectable.” Iris reminds her.

She doesn't get it. Chloe doesn't want a new roommate. She is happy with the one she has, and learning to cohabit with someone new is too much stress. *Ugh!*

“I don't want a man as a roommate!” She reminds her through clenched teeth.

Iris knows the issues I have with men, and it's despicable that she already told this Michael guy that he can move in and take her room. Chloe have seen the movies and she doesn't want to be part of a low-budget romcom.

“I know. I'm sorry Chloé. He has his own classes. Different times than you. You will hardly see each other.”

She would move out but the apartment is too affordable. It's also in Iris's name, so she gets to choose the other occupant. So, unless she wants to pay more than she can afford as she finishes her medical training, she must bear it. *Damn it!* The only reason he is moving in here is because he is currently living with her boyfriend, and would be a third wheel. So now apparently, he's Chloe's problem.

Iris, rosy with new love ignores her friend's mood and finishes packing. Michael will be there soon. Chloé helps her. She is happy that she found the man that makes her flow, but every box filled means he is closer to being here. She isn't ready for that. "I will miss you despite what you're doing to me."

Okay, so maybe she shouldn't hold a grudge against her best friend, well her only friend, because of this...

"Chloé, he's a hunk. You'll be thanking me."

"I doubt it." She mumbles under her breath.

She doesn't want some guy staring at her. There goes walking around in her underwear. This sucks. Why can't he find somewhere else to live? The location of the apartment is one that everyone on campus wants, and Chloe wouldn't have an issue finding a female roommate. Iris didn't even give me a choice in the matter.

"I will miss you too, but we'll still see each other at college and will get together." The last box is taped up when the bell rings. "Oh, Devin is here!" her face goes from lovely to ethereal at his name. Chloé can't help the joy that fills her heart at this, even with her discomfort with the other guy with him.

They are rung up. Devin enters first. She falls into his arms, leaving Chloé to introduce herself to his nephew. "Hello. I'm Chloe." She puts her hand out to him.

"Michael." He was a hunk, as Iris said. But Chloé was not in the market for hunks. Not after...

"Nice to meet you. I'm sure you're a very nice guy. An adequate roommate. Just understand, I'm not, nor will I be looking for more. Understood?"

She wants to make certain he knows that she isn't interested in extra benefits. He just needs to pay his share of the rent on time and clean up after himself. Nothing else.

"Wow. Someone thinks highly of herself. I've got a girlfriend. Thank you. Iris, show me where to put these and I'll

help Devin carry your stuff down.” She does before scolding Chloé.

“Well, you made a strong first impression.”

“I wanted things clear.”

”Oh, they’re clear. You know you can’t live your life thinking all guys are going to be...”

“Don’t!”

“I beg you, Chloé, get help. Talk to someone. This isn’t healthy.”

She doesn’t want help. Just a few friends, her studies, and her apartment.

They are alone with the last of Iris’ things in the boot of Devin’s car. Michael comes back up to find Chloé sitting on the couch, her knees to her chest.

“Well, that is it? They’re off. How long do you think until we’re invited to the wedding?” she looks up at him with her honey eyes darkened to molasses.

“If she is smart, never. Moving in with him is bad enough. She loves him.” A deep sigh as she drops her eyes again, resting her head on her knees. “Love just leads to pain and heartache.”

“Voice of experience?” She doesn’t answer, keeping her head down and mouth shut. “Okay then. I’m going to go look around. Okay?” A shrug that he takes as consent and slips out.

The apartment is very clean. Decorated by a hand that knows what it is doing, he hopes it was partly Iris, as his uncle’s can use the same. He walks back in to find Chloé in the same position he left her in.

“It’s quite girly.” He comments, hoping to get her to laugh. Instead, her head jerks up and fire comes out of those unique eyes.

“Two girls lived here, after all.”

“Yes, true. I didn’t mean to offend. I just was ah - saying. I won’t disturb what you’ve done. It’s very well decorated. I won’t mess with that. Just my own room.”

“It’s your room.” She says with unconcern. “If Iris wanted it to stay the same, she wouldn’t have moved.”

“Chloé, I know you don’t want me here. I’m sorry.” Her head is back down and she is back to ignoring him. He sighs and heads to his own room.

This is going to be more difficult if she won’t even speak to him. There is no need to make it more awkward. Michael isn’t excited about living with a woman either, and his girlfriend, well she is on the fence.

With that attitude, she has nothing to worry about, that’s for sure.

Chapter Two

In a small part of her injured heart, she feels bad for the disdain she is showing her new roommate. She knows it isn't his fault. She just can't help that her distrust of men rubs off on him. She shudders under the memories she can't keep out.

Going to college at age eighteen where she met her first lover. She thought herself finally free only to be trapped in a different type of nightmare. Justin, call me Malcolm, seemed perfect, at first. A university professor. Steady, old enough to help her deal with her daddy issues (as her therapist later explained) but completely different than him.

The first time he hit her, for going to class too provocatively, she knew she deserved it. It was followed by pets and kisses, gentle loving. A pattern developed. It might have still been going on if he hadn't have raped her. It pushed hidden memories to the surface.

She had left, just wrapped in a sheet, to arrive at Iris door. She told her all about Malcolm. She has been here since. But even Iris doesn't know about her dad. Only her mom and therapist. If she did maybe she wouldn't. No, she would still say she needs to understand not all men are like Caelan and Malcolm.

She tells herself over and over that not every man is like her father or Malcolm. So many times that it's become a mantra, but no matter what, it doesn't stick.

She sighs and stands to go make tea. The polite thing to do would be to see if Michael wished some also. She turns towards his door and knocks.

Michael opens and looks at her. Chloe sees he has started putting away his things. Already she can feel Iris's presence disappearing. She sighs.

“Yes?”

“Right. I was going to make some tea. You want some?”

He started to ask if it was a peace offering or something equally snarky but, she seems to be trying. Michael settles for, “Yes thank you.” He follows her out and feels and sees her tighten as he gets close. He stops and lets her get a few steps ahead before slowly following. Who had hurt her?

She sits a quite lovely tea set on the kitchen table before starting the kettle. “Beautiful. It's old.”

“Yes, a gift from my uncle.” She gathers up tea bags, sugar, milk, and crisps before the kettle whistles. The hot water is transferred to the tea pot. Chloe pours. She wasn't speaking and he decides it is up to him to get the conversation going.

“Your uncle, he must be a special man?”

“He tries.” He frowns at this answer and look that runs across her face. “Look Michael, family is off limits, okay?”

“Yes. Alright Chloé. You're studying medicine, right?”

“I am.” She takes a sip of her tea, a bite off a crisp.

“I want to help, you see, where I can.”

Her eyebrows go up. Good, he has her attention. “I'm studying psychology. Want to be a therapist.”

She stares at him before her whole demeanor changes. “Does Iris know?”

“My field of study?”

“God damn her straight to hell! I stopped going so she brings a therapist here!” She stands with jerky movements, hurrying away.

“Wait Chloé! What?” He hears her bedroom door slam. *Shit! This will not do.* He gets up and fetches his phone and rings his uncle. How does she already Michael so much?

Chapter Three

It rings and rings. Finally his Uncle Devin answers, a bit breathless. “This best be life or death important nephew!” He swallows hard. It isn’t yet dark. He didn’t think...

“Ah sorry for interrupting. It’s Chloé. She....” he hears a rustling and the phone is handed off to Iris.

“What is wrong with her?”

“That is just it, I don’t know. We were having tea and talking. She wasn’t perfectly relaxed but better. We talked about college and I told her my field of study. She reacted quite intensively. Stormed into her room and then slammed the door. It would have been nice to know I was moving in with a girl who despises therapists!”

“Not therapist, well not all therapists. Just one but...”

“I need some idea of what I’m dealing with here.” He pleads. He doesn’t wish Iris to break her friend’s confidence but...

He hears a deep sigh on the other end. “Alright. She had a bad relationship. Real bad. I think there’s more she hasn’t shared. Her last therapist was a madman. Told her to just get back on the horse. No way would she be able to start dating again. She quit. I couldn’t convince her all therapists are not alike. All guys are not alike. She’s hurting badly. I didn’t know how to reach her...”

“So, you sent me here to...”

“Be a trustworthy man. Just someone to help her get used to the opposite sex again. I imagine she thinks it more.”

“Oh. She wished you straight to hell.” He doesn’t hear her come out. Until she is at his side. She is quick, jerking the phone out of his hand before he has a chance to react.

“Damn right I did! You had no right! What did you tell him? How could you...” She throws the phone back to him and slams back into her room. He lifts the phone back up to his ear. They are both silent for a moment.

“Shit!”

“What now Iris?”

“Let her be. I’ll come by tomorrow. Try to explain.” He agrees and rings off.

Now what?

He cleans up from their interrupted tea. He needs a non-threatening way to reach out to her. Something to show he is here for her as a roommate and a friend without making her more uncomfortable. A note. A note slipped under her door. That may do.

He carefully washes the last of the China, placing it in the drainer and goes to find paper and a pen. Sitting down on his own bed, he begins.

Hi roomie,

I apologize for ringing Iris and seeming to get in your business. I wasn’t trying to make an already uncomfortable situation worse. I was just attempting to see what I could do to help.

She didn’t tell me much. Just your ex was a huge jerk. I’m sorry about that. Look, I’m here to get through school, the same as you. I do have a girlfriend, Rose. I’m not wanting to be your therapist or lover, just a roommate.

This is my schedule. Rose and I also have a standing date night every Thursday. We can be at her flat if that makes you more comfortable. You do what you need to be okay with this. My schedule allows you to avoid me if that is your wish.

Again, I'm sorry for overstepping.

Michael.

He slides it under her door and waits.

She lays curled up on the bed, sobbing out her anger and hurt. She is thankful her new flat mate isn't the type to try to not give her space. It was something. It really wasn't him. It was Iris. To tell him anything! She just wants to forget. How can she when people keep bringing it up? She hears him at the door and braces for a knock. Instead, a paper is slipped under her door.

She slips up, wiping her eyes to retrieve it. A note. She perches on the edge of her bed and reads it. When done, she breathes a sigh of relief. He really is given her space. She gets her own stationery and pens him back.

Thanks roomie,

It isn't you specifically. It is Iris and all males. He was more than a jerk but not talking about him. Thank you for your schedule. And the info on you and Rose. Her place would be better for a bit. Thanks.

I need to stay alone now. I will come out when ready or when I need to go to class. Don't worry about me. I've had worse betrayals.

Thank again.

Chloé.

She slips it under her door. A few seconds later it is retrieved. She climbs back on her bed.

Chapter Four

She arrives quite early the next morning hoping to catch Chloé before she heads on to class. Michael opens the door for her. “How is she?”

“Well, I haven’t seen her. I heard her, up and about, after I went to bed.”

“So, you haven’t talked with her at all?” He shakes his head as he leads her into the kitchen for coffee.

“Didn’t say that. We’ve been passing notes under her door. Seems a bit kid-like but it works. She’s still mightily upset and hurt. I needed to make sure she was alright while respecting her need for silent solitude. This works for that. Well, I’m off. Have an early class.” She sees he has coffee set-up for Chloé with a note.

“Thank you. You handled the situation better than I did.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. You were trying to help your friend.” He lifts up his backpack and leaves. Iris goes over to Chloé’s door.

A knock. “I know you’re heading to class Michael. Thank you.” Her voice is rough from crying. Iris feels like doing some crying herself.

“Michael has left. He made you some coffee and left a note.”

“Iris? What’re you doing here?”

“We need to talk.” She waits, hearing her move around behind the door. It opens showing a tear stained face. She is

still in pajamas and wrapped in a robe. “Oh my dear.” She reaches for her.

“Don’t! I will listen to you but don’t touch me.” She moves towards the kitchen with a chastened Iris following. Chloé takes a seat and lifts up the folded note.

Chloé,

I pray this day allows you to find some peace. Call if you need me.

Michael

It brings a ghost of a smile to her face. That smile is replaced by a frown when Iris asks, “What did he say?” Seeing her reaction, she holds up her hands, calling for a truce. “Sorry. Sorry for everything. It wasn’t my intention to make you think or feel that I chose Michael because of what he’s studying.”

“Wasn’t it though? You’ve been begging me for months to see a new therapist. Then the guy you move in with me is studying to be one?” She glares at her as she picks up the coffee cup, taking a sip as she awaits her answer.

“No. Look his field of study helps. But not,” Her hand goes back up as Chloé is ready to explode again. “For the reasons you think. It shows he’s a sweet, compassionate, kind hearted, man. Someone the polar opposite of...”

“Don’t!” her face turns pale and the hand holding the cup shakes. Iris starts to reach for her and stops. She places the cup down and holds her hands tight together on the table.

“He needed a place he could afford and Devin and I needed privacy. That is truly all. I should have told you but you were so adverse to the idea...”

“I was and am. He’s better than expected but still a man.”

“A man that has been dating the same girl for over a year. He won’t try to be more than your friend. You think I didn’t vet the guy moving in with my best friend!”

“Devin is your best friend now.”

“Best female friend then. I love you like a sister. I would never do anything to deliberately harm you. I’m so sorry.”

“I know you wouldn’t. I forgive you. I just assumed...”

“You know what they say about assumptions?” This gets a full smile.

“Yes, and I was an ass. I didn’t let you explain. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. Are you going to class today?”

“Yup. Oh, the time!” She quickly stands.

“Go get ready. I’ll clean up here.”

“Thanks.” She hugs her and Iris returns it.

He returns from class to find her already home. To his surprise, she sits on the couch, books stacked in front of her. She looks up at his entrance.

“Hi Chloé.”

“Hey, thanks for the coffee this morning.”

“You’re welcome. I thought a note was best.” He sits his backpack down and eases his shoes off, placing them by hers at the door.

“Thanks for that too. I know I was...”

“Who you needed to be.” He takes a seat across from her. “Don’t worry.” She gives him a small smile.

“I don’t know where you study but, you may join me here, if you wish. The table is big enough. I don’t want you to think this isn’t your apartment too.”

He knows what that cost her. “Thank you, Chloé.” He pulls his backpack up and they are both soon engulfed in their studies.

Chapter Five

A *n hour later*

“I need a break.” She stretches and stands. “Can I get you anything from the kitchen?”

“Thank you. A water.”

She returns with two. They drink in silence. “Chloé?” She meets his eyes for a split second before focusing on his forehead. He notices.

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to reiterate that I wish to be your roommate, nothing more. This is comfortable. If we can stay at this level of- ah...”

“I get it. Agree. Now there may be times I’m withdrawn and unreachable. If you could...”

“Yes?”

“Slip me a note. This could work. I will be honest and say I am still not completely comfortable with a male flat mate but...”

“I will do all I can to see you’re as comfortable as you can be.”

“Thanks.”

“If there is something that makes you uncomfortable, just let me know.”

“I will. You do the same. I don’t want it all on me. As I said, this is your apartment too.”

“Deal.” They return to their books. It feels a bit easier between them. A start.

“Chloé,” he knocks on her door.

“One moment.”

“No rush. I just want you to meet someone.” She opens the door a minute later. A wisp of a girl stands by Michael. Beautiful with big brown eyes and chestnut hair, she leans against him. His arm is around her. *The girlfriend then.*

“Hello, I’m Chloé.”

“Rose.” Chloé puts her hand out and Rose takes it.

“It’s nice to meet you. He hasn’t told me much about you yet.”

“No?” she looks up at him and he shakes his head. No Rose doesn’t know of their rocky beginning, of Chloé’s issues. A relief.

“It was really nice to meet you Rose but, I must be off.”

“You have no classes this evening. Can you spare an hour so she may get to know you?” She gets it. She lives with her man. She needs to show she isn’t a threat.

“Sure.” They all head into the living room. The couple take the couch while Chloé sits across from them.

“You’re studying medicine, like Michael?” she asks.

“I’m focused on the body while Michael is the mind.”

“Yes. It can be quite tiring always being analyzed.” Her tone shows she is teasing. Michael playfully scowls down at her then drops his head for a kiss. Chloé looks away. She will get used to that. Couples in love. She must.

“It is.” She agrees, playing with the throw pillow. “So Rose, do you get even? Analyzing all he eats?” She knows she

is studying to be a nutritionist.

“Yes. It’s quite enjoyable.”

“For you.” Michael replies.

“But it must be easier having you both studying the same field, or close to it?”

“We do help each other as roommate’s do. It’s more having another person near, don’t you think Michael?”

“Yes. It is why I study in the library, even if studying alone. We are meant to be social.”

“Oh no, Chloé! Look what we have done. Woke the therapist to be.”

“A horrible thing but I believe it was me.”

“Oh, you too.” He shakes his head at both.

“In all seriousness, you don’t need to worry Rose. I’m not after Michael, in anyway. Or anyone. My last relationship was, well off-putting. When or if I’m ready to try again, it will not be with another girl’s man.”

“Thank you. I trust him I just...”

“Didn’t know me. Completely understandable.”

They end up talking for hours, about politics, sports, movies. Nothing heavy. Nothing personal. Just a trio becoming friends. Though Chloé is still more comfortable with Rose. They head to her house after. She heads to bed.

Chapter Six

“Do you think she’s alright?” he frets. He lies beside as the sweat of their exertion dries on their skins.

“Who?” She turns to him.

“Chloé. I don’t believe she is used to being alone.” Rose sighs, stymied. His compassion and good heart is one of the things that attracted him to her. She knows Chloé has been badly hurt. But still, to be thinking of someone else now?

“I’m sure she’s alright and, if she isn’t, she can call her mate, Iris.”

“True, or me.”

“What?”

“Come Rose. We are flat mates. She needs my number.” Another sigh.

“Do you have hers?”

“No.” inside he adds, or I would call her. “No, she needs to trust me. I believe there is more to her story than just a horrid ex.” She nods, agreeing. She sensed the same. “So don’t wish to push.”

“No, I agree. So, she has at least two people she can call, if needed.” He nods. “So don’t fret. I’m sure she’s fine.”

But she isn’t.

She sits wide awake, assaulted by memories she can’t escape. It wasn’t their fault. It was Rose’s size. So tiny next to her huge roommate. Both adults it wasn’t the same. But, her

blasted memories don't distinguish that. They insist on making them into her and her dad.

So, she sits, paralyzed in horror as the worse memories of her life play in a loop in her head. It is a long night.

He slips in as quiet as he can. It is quite early. In the pre-dawn, he eases the door open and closes it, without making a sound. He is heading to his room when he sees her out of the corner off his eye.

“Chloé?” she jumps and he understands she hadn't heard him come in. “Sorry. What are you doing up so early?” She doesn't respond and he reverses course and comes up to her. “Chloé what?” he was right. She wasn't okay. He courses himself for ignoring his own intuition. He takes a seat beside her.

He sits in the silence with her until she adjusts to his presence, slowly coming back from wherever she had been. “I need...” He waits. Whatever it was, he would see she had it. “To tell you something. For it isn't your fault or hers, Rose's. She can't help...” He wants to ask what about Rose but knows better to interrupt.

“No, she can't help being so tiny or you so large. But, it brought them back. The memories. I try to bury them deep. I succeed, enough to get on. But seeing you two... Sorry, I know I'm making very little sense.” Her eyes are far away, unfocused, when he can see them in the dawn light, slipping through the windows.

“Tell me however is easier.” She nods but doesn't look at him. Her hands are fisted in her lap. He wants to try to ease her but understands the best way is just to listen.

“I was just a small child. It's my first memory. I was spanked by my mom for going out without my pants. But I didn't remove them. When I was twelve, he left and I was able to tell my mom. We moved in with my uncle, his brother. Nothing like him. A sweet kind man. But resembled him. I couldn't get close to him. Because of that.”

Michael is in a rage. He knew, of course, that such things happened. But to have a girl he knew, and liked. A roommate. To have her gone through so much... He knows he will have to work his rage out away from her. She was traumatized enough.

“He died, a year ago. I never got closure. He never apologized to me. My step-mom tells me he found religion and told her of the horrible things he did to me. But never did he tell me this.”

“Your mom?”

“She believed me. Saw me out and to therapy. Tried and I love her and appreciate her. But she was a victim too. He beat her.”

“Oh! Fuck!” they slip out before he can stop them.

“Sound like curse words and I agree. We tried getting on. One must. But, that is why I chose Malcolm, I think. They say a girl looks for a man she sees her father in. He was... Sorry, I can't. Not now. Seeing you and Rose together. Looking like an adult and child. I know you aren't but... My mind pulled up the memories. I couldn't turn them off. I have just sat here.”

“All night?” Christ! He needs to listen to his intuition!

“Yes. I couldn't.”

“Can you now? I will be here.”

“You have class as do I.”

“You need rest and none of my classes are so pressing I can't take off.”

“Here. I will need to sleep here.”

“Lay down Chloé. Rest your head. I won't leave you. If bad dreams come, I'll be here.” He knows that is one reason she hadn't yet slept.

“No one outside my family and last therapist knows what I told you. Not even Iris.”

“She won't hear it from me.” He covers her, and takes a seat right beside her. She finally sleeps.

Chapter Seven

She is there. Back in that house, that room. The kitten and puppy posters on the wall highlighted by her nightlight.

“No! Stop it!” She thrashes about, holding on to the bottom of her shirt. Michael, studying beside her, drops his book and slips down by her.

“It’s okay Chloé. Come on. Wake up.” She hits at him. He secures her arms and she kicks at him. He wraps his legs around her, holding her on his lap. He holds her tightly as she battles her demons.

“Michael?”

“You were having a horrid nightmare. This position protects us both.” He explains as he loosens his grip. She quickly moves back to the couch, holding tight to her knees.

“Thanks I...”

“Was dreaming of the horrid bastard.” His anger for her soothes some of her hurt and fear.

“Yes. I knew from telling. It is one reason I don’t speak of it much.”

“That I understand. But it’s like a deep infected wound, eh. It must be lanced, though the cutting brings pain, so the healing can start.”

“A good way to put it. You’re right. It’s just...”

“You want to talk about it?” she looks at him. Her grip tightens on her knees. He notices and moves back to his chair.

“You aren’t supposed to be my therapist.”

“I can’t be anyone’s yet. Not legally. But your roommate, that I am, right?” She nods her head. “If you wish to speak of it, I’ll listen as your roommate.”

“I’m not that scared little girl anymore. He’s dead. He can’t hurt me.” She whispers to herself as she awaits the tea.

“Tell me about yourself.” She half sits, half lies on the couch. He sits on the floor by it. She is pleasantly buzzed due to the amount of whisky he mixed in her tea. Relaxed, he is happy to see.

“Myself, my family, Rose, school?” he looks up at her.

“Oh, that is a lot. Start with your parents.”

“Okay,” he leans his head back and his hair tickles her thigh. She moves farther up. He doesn’t notice, lost in the beginning of his tale. “My dad, Gerry, is a farmer. He does everything from balancing the books to delivering coos. My mom, Olivia, helps him but has a life in her own right. She writes children’s books. Started telling us kids stories and, as we got older, my sister Janet, called Ginny, and I, urged her to write them down.”

“Olivia Franklin, I have heard of her.” He smiles and she can’t help returning it. “Ginny. What does she do?”

“She’s a proud mom. Her husband, Lennox and her have three with twins on the way.”

“Oh wow. She must be older.”

“Yes,” he laughs, “by five years. Her and Lennox got married young. She was nineteen. They had been in love since childhood. A good match and she is an excellent mama.”

“What does Lennox do?”

“He’s an accountant. Keeps the books, among other things. There’s plenty of room for more kids.”

“So,” she starts to play with the fringe of the throw pillow she holds, “will you and Rose give them more?”

He shrugs “Maybe. I don’t know. We’ve agreed not to discuss that far ahead until she finishes school and she has one more year.”

“Logical. You seem a steady logical person, Michael. Any wild past?”

“Lennox and I were and are best friends. Even with him being older. I recall once we got our asses strapped for climbing on the lower roof. We had just seen Superman, you know, and thought we could fly. I was but five. Lennox ten, almost eleven.”

She laughs and it transforms her, bringing out the beauty hidden by sorrow and fear. He decides to keep her laughing. He tells several other self-deprecating tales.

“So, you really thought to find Nessie in a pound in your back garden?”

“I was four. I didn’t understand why my mom was screaming so loud about a bit of mud. Not understanding it was my cousin’s Christening and I had fucked up my only suit.” They laugh together. Over the process of that day, as the focus on him allows her time to relax, they become friends. The only male friend she has ever had.

“And Ginny?”

“Oh, she was rightly furious. The nerve of her baby brother to disrupt her first make-out session. I just wanted to play with my buddy.”

“I must meet her. And Lennox. I think I would like them.”

“Yes, we’ll arrange it.”

“Michael, thanks for the day. It was exactly what I needed.”

Chapter Eight

She arranges for some time with Iris early the next week. She needs to apologize to her for being such a grump about Michael. To talk to her about all that is going through her mind.

They meet for coffee after classes one day. She smiles when she sees the peace and joy on her friend's face. "Going well then?"

"Yes, very well. What about you?" She slips in the table across from her.

"I need to apologize to you. I tend to judge all men as one. Michael, he has become a true friend."

"I'm glad." The waitress comes out to take their order and then slips away. "So, you trust him then?"

How to answer that? She does in a lot of ways but not fully. The part she's holding back, she doesn't need to trust him with anyway. He isn't a candidate for more than a friend. Iris watches her closely patiently awaiting her answer as the emotions play across her face.

"I trust him as a friend. He has been there when I needed him, in that capacity. I had a bad night. A real bad night. He took off classes the next day to help me work it out."

"That's wonderful. Not the bad night but..."

"I know. You're right. It is. He definitely has the qualities to be a good therapist." She gives Iris a stern look across the table.

“I’m so sorry about that. I should have told you. It really wasn’t the reason. It was just to give Devin and I, privacy. The guy needed a safe place he could afford. You needed a roomie to help with the bills. That is all.”

“I know that now Iris. But you must understand why I reacted that way.”

“I do. It was a bull headed move not to be completely honest with you.” The waitress delivers their orders. After they thank her, Iris continues, “But it all worked out. He has been great.”

“He is. Not that I still don’t miss you. I know you’re much happier rooming with Devin.”

“I am. I miss you too and am glad you called for us to get together. I thought I might have really messed up and we wouldn’t be friends anymore.”

“Never. I might get angry. Scream a bit. But we will always be best friends. Now tell me about Devin.”

For the next hour, she does.

“Can I discuss something with you?” They sit in their usual study place at their coffee table. She looks up and nods.

“Of course. You listen to me enough.”

“Right. Well, it’s about Rose.” She continues to give him her attention as he flushes and fiddles with the pen he still holds. She prays it isn’t about sex. She is no good at it. Or talking about it. “I think she is or is planning on cheating on me.”

“What makes you think that?” She moves a bit closer. Her hand lays just inches away from his.

“She is talking to a guy named Tavish. Supposedly someone she goes to college with. But her voice... I know her flirting voice. Even just talking about assignments, she has that giggly quality.” Her hand covers his for just a second, giving a quick squeeze before lifting.

“You must confront her. Be firm. She owes you honesty.” He nods. She watches him swallow. “I know it’s hard. I have had only one relationship and it was, well toxic seems not strong enough. I guess I learned more what not to do then do. But I know honesty is important. Without trust, you have nothing.”

“I know. You’re right. I guess I just needed to hear someone say it.”

“That is what friends are for.”

“We have a date tonight. I may be home early.”

“I will have ice cream and whiskey waiting.”

“Thanks.”

He picks her up and takes her to a nice restaurant. She chatters away about her week as he listens for any talk of Tavish. She eventually notices his quiet.

“What is wrong Michael?”

“That is what I meant to ask you? Will you be honest with me?”

“Of course.” She reaches for his hand and he moves it. No, he doesn’t want her touch, not yet. She frowns as she withdraws it.

“Do you like Tavish?”

“He is my friend.” But her head drops.

“Honesty.” He insists as his heart drops.

“I didn’t mean to. You know I love you. I do, it’s just... It was like a bolt of lightning. I tried to fight it. I did but, our hearts were drawn together.”

“Have you slept with him?” his hands are clinched tight on his lap.

“No! No, I would never while...”

“But you want to.” He shakes his head,” Christ, you could’ve just told me.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you.” Whispered as her head drops again.

“I would be less hurt if I didn’t have to drag it out of you. You weren’t a prisoner to this relationship. If you want this Tavish...”

“Radcliff,” she softly says.

“This Tavish Radcliff you could’ve just told me. I won’t hold you to a relationship you want free of.”

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out for us. You’ll find her. The girl you can’t live without.”

“I thought I had.” Mumbled as he rises. “There is still a reservation time. Call this Tavish. You two have dinner together. I’m going home.”

“Michael, I’m really sorry.”

“I know.” He walks out the door and text his flat mate,” Heading home. Ice cream and whiskey still available?”

A few seconds later. “Yes. I’m sorry.”

Chapter Nine

She opens the door before he can. At the look of grief and anger on his face, she just draws him to her. He falls in her arms like a very big rag doll, and weeps. Holding him, she leads him in, shutting the door with her foot, as not to give the neighbors a show.

They fall onto the couch together. Her hands sooth his back as his tears wet her neck. After he had cried long enough for the sobs to be broken up by hiccups, he looks up at her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

“Be human. It’s alright to cry. It’s healing to do so.”

“Yes but... Oh, I’ve soaked your shirt.”

“It’s just an old t-shirt I sleep in and tears are washable. Don’t worry.” He, realizing how close they are, moves to put some distance between them. “I will go change, eh, and then we’ll have a drink and you can tell me all about it.” He nods. She slips into her room and he gets up and heads to the bathroom. He stares at his haunted eyes in the mirror as he wipes his face.

When he comes out, she is back on the couch, in a fresh shirt, and has whisky poured. Chocolate ice cream is in bowls by the drinks.

“You meant it.”

“I did. I know when a guy is hurt, he drinks, most of the time. When a lady is, she gets with a friends, fuss about him and eats ice cream. So...”

“So, combine them. Thank you.” He takes a fortifying drink. He shivers as the alcohol reaches his empty stomach a reminder of the missed dinner. The ice cream is suddenly a truly grand idea. He takes a bite. She watches, patiently, sipping her own.

“I straight up asked her. At first, she said he was just a friend but couldn’t meet my eyes. So, I asked her for honesty. She gave it to me. She didn’t mean to. She does love me... but she wants him. She didn’t wish to hurt me by telling me. But they hadn’t slept together.”

“I’m so sorry.” He takes a bigger swallow. A bigger bite. A second as the hot and cold make their way. A minute to see if it will accept them. It does.

“Thank you. Not hurt me! I was true to her. Fully. I wanted to marry her. Was going to ask at her graduation.” Chloé reaches out, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Now she’s probably shagging this Tavish. Screwing this Radcliff.” Her hand tightens on his shoulder as otherwise she goes completely still. “At least she waited to tell me. To end it before... Chloé, are you alright?”

“No,” she is up, sprinting towards the bathroom, her hand over her mouth. She just makes it. He hurries after her. “I’m sorry. You didn’t need to eat ice cream with whiskey if it makes you ill.”

“It isn’t that. It is...” and the thought of him has her back over the commode. He stands helpless until she is able to lift up. He washes her face off, flushes, and leads her out. “What is it?”

“Radcliff,” her stomach starts to rebel but decides not to. The fact it is empty has something to do with that. “My ex’s last name was... Oh God Michael, was he an evil man. I know it will be hard, but you must ask Rose if Tavish is related to a Justin, called Malcolm. He is the bloody devil’s spawn.”

He just stares at her before picking up his phone and sending her a message. “I think it is time you discussed him, if you can.”

“I don’t know.” Moaned out as she sits, knees up to her chest, haunted eyes peeking out at him. He moves closer, sitting at her feet. He places one hand on her foot, giving her the strength he can. “Oh God!”

“If you can.” He repeats.

“I must. For Rose. If this Tavish is anything like him...” he feels her shudder. “Yes.”

“Take your time.”

She pulls in several deep breaths before starting. “My uncle had just died. I was just ten. I thought myself a grown up. He taught me well. The basics: to keep a bank account, to read contracts, do taxes, fill out job applications, cook and do laundry. But, he didn’t, maybe he thought he would have more time, he didn’t teach me how to recognize a bad man, a cunning devil.

I was working, waiting to start my first semester at college. A waitress. Malcolm came in and he swept me off my feet. Charming, dignified, older man. We went out that night and a month later we were living together. A month later engaged. All that time he was his same charming self. Gave me no call to doubt his love or sincerity.

Then, I came home late from class. We stopped to have a burger, my friends and I. It was the first time he hit me. I wasn’t surprised. After all, my dad had taught me it was a part of love. I apologized to him when he broke my rib, when he bruised my kidneys, when he shattered my arm. I accepted I deserved it. I deserved being beat and controlled. He put me on a strict schedule I dare not miss. I allowed him to go through my backpack, phone, and computer. Hell, one time he went as far as inspecting my body.

I would still be allowing it had he not raped me. I was tired. Had a long day of punishing classes. He didn’t take no. Simply pressed my ass against him and took what he wanted.

After, as he slept, I put a blanket around me and went to Iris'. Never returned. Devin went and got my things."

"I'm glad you left." His voice is hoarse with suppressed emotion. He longs to hold and comfort her. He longs to find this bastard and choke him with his own dick. He instead tightens his grip on her foot. "You survived. He might've killed you."

"If I would've stayed, he would have. But you see, if Tavish is related and anything like him..."

"I see." Rose, he was so hurt by her, angry with her but not enough not to warn her. He checks his phone and gasps.

"Yes. Why?" she text back. Chloé reaches for it then, without seeking approval or permission, calls her. She starts to talk as soon as she answers.

Chapter Ten

Rose listens in silence as Chloé quickly explains her association with the Radcliff's. When she is done, she asks to speak to Michael. Chloé hands over the phone.

“Yes, Tavish is related to Malcolm. They're brothers.”

“Christ!” he runs his hand through his curls, causing them to stand up. “Rose, you must stay away from him.”

“No. Look Michael, I appreciate you and Chloé's concern, really. But Tavish is the opposite of Malcolm. Kind and sweet.”

“Seems Malcolm was too, at first.”

“He warned me about him. Told me to stay away. That he was the only one capable of handling him. He knows how bad he is.”

“He's a monster!”

“Agree. I'm so sorry about what Chloé went through at his hands. Tavish has wept over some of what his brother did and does. They're not the same.”

“I truly hope so, for your sake. It cost her, you know? To tell me. To tell you. A lot. She did that to protect you. So, I do pray the costs is worth it.”

“Please put Chloé back on.” He does, but sits within arm reach, should she need him.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you for sharing all that. I can’t imagine the courage it took. As I told Michael, they are brothers, but Tavish is nothing like him. He told me about him, warned me. Wept over what he has done. I didn’t know you were one of his victims...”

“Survivor.” Chloé corrected.

“You are. I’m sorry for all he has put you and others through. I wish I could fix it. I also appreciate, more than you know, you finding the courage to warn me. It means a lot. But, I’m alright. Tavish is the polar opposite of Malcolm.”

“Rose, Malcolm was sweet and kind at the beginning too. Please, keep your eyes open.”

“I will.” They ring off and Chloé seems to deflate on the couch. The courage and strength that was holding her up, gone.

“We did as we could.” Michael softly says.

“Yes. No one was around to warn me away. We at least did that. But, she still thinks him a good guy.”

“He may be,” She just gives him a look from where she lies, legs up. “It is possible. Look, you trust Iris?”

“You know I do.”

“Okay. I will see if she and Devin will check him out for us. Maybe a dinner with him and Rose.”

“That would be good. I’m sorry with all that happened, that she left you. That you’re hurting.”

“Thanks Chloé. It does but, I know it could be worse.”

“If he is anything like his brother, it is.” Michael nods and rings his uncle.

“They will have dinner with them sometime this week. Uncle Devin was right shocked to hear of our breakup.”

“Oh God Michael! I-I didn’t mean to add my trauma to your heartbreak.”

“Hush Chloé. You cannot control reacting to that type of...” his hands clench into fists. He makes himself unclench them. She doesn’t need that. He will work this out in a run later. “Bastard.”

“Bastard what?”

“Sorry. Bloody bastard.”

“Yes, and you’re right. But I was to be comforting you.”

“How about we comfort each other?”

“Okay.”

“Are you, okay?”

“I’m not sure,” She adjusts, sitting up some. “Reliving that was like returning to my worst nightmare. No one outside Iris and my old therapist knew. But, it was also a bit of a relief. A bit of painful lancing.”

“Christ! I’m sorry for it all. I thank you for seeking to protect Rose.”

“I couldn’t let anyone else suffer like that. I pray he’s the nice guy she thinks he is.” Her eyes get wide and her hand lands on her mouth. Michael quickly pulls himself off the floor and joins her.

“What is it, Chloé?” He takes her hand, enfolding it securely between his own.

“I’m sorry. I just... do you want him to be bad so she will return to you?”

“No,” he rubs the warmth back into the hand he holds. “No, how could I wish her miserable? I love her too much to do that.” He takes her other hand, doing the same. “I do wish she had never met him but, now that she has, well, I can do naught but wish her well.”

“You’re an amazing man, Michael Franklin.”

He twists his mouth up, his hands continue the tender massage of hers. “You’re an amazing courage woman, Chloé Laurent. Courage is no small thing.”

“I guess it isn’t. Is surviving courage? I feel I should’ve pressed charges on him.”

“You did as you could. Yes. It is. Huge courage.” She sighs and relaxes as he massages up her wrist and lower arms. “You don’t mind?” Should have asks sooner, he thinks.

“No. It feels wonderful. I’ve not had a man touch me for such a long time.” He swallows hard. Christ lad. You just had your girlfriend leave you and she is beyond fragile. Her friend.

He massaged back up, getting her back and neck. She melts into it. Her soft sounds of pleasure are driving him a bit crazy but he doesn’t stop. This is what she, his friend, needs. She falls asleep and he moves away, covers her with a throw, and cleans up from their interrupted whisky and ice cream party. He then heads out for a run, locking the door behind him.

Chapter Eleven

It is the best way to clear his mind, to clear his head. Usually.

The slap of his shoes as they eat up the ground under him, the sound of his own breathing, the wind cooling his skin, are all calming things. Usually.

Rose. Is she really safe with a relative of such an evil man? He wanted to marry her. But now... He picks up the pace trying to outrun the heartache.

Chloé. She created a whole other type of feeling to outrun. Lust. It couldn't be more. But it was powerful. Scary in its intensity.

"You were meant to be with Rose this night. Your body expected sex. She is beautiful and oh so soft under your hands. That is all it is. All it could possibly be." He tells himself.

Vulnerable. So bloody vulnerable. Hell he had never know a girl so. That had been through so much and is still fighting. Courageous. Trusting.

"She trusts me. To lay healing hands on her and not try to take it farther. Trust is no small thing for her. You will not abuse it." He firmly orders himself as he heads back home.

Quietly enters. Toeing his shoes off, he slips into the room. She still sleeps. He smiles as he walks past heading towards his room and the shower.

He hadn't outrun the desire. He takes himself in hand and thinks of Rose. But he can't hold her face in his head. It

morphs into Chloé as he dives himself over the edge.

He leans against the shower wall after, waiting his frantic heart to slow down. What the hell is this?

She wakes on the couch with a throw over her. Sitting slowly up, she tries to recall how she ended up sleeping there. There was drinking and tears. Radcliff! Tavish is a...

“Okay Chloé, enough!” she orders herself. “There will be no farther hysterics. He has taken quite enough. Your friend...” Where is Michael? She must have fallen asleep as he massaged her. That will not do. He needs her. He is the one heartbroken.

She stands, stretches, and goes in search of him. He cleaned up, she notes. Nice. Their bowls, spoons, and shot glasses are placed neatly in the drainer. But he isn't in the kitchen.

She heads towards his room. The door is partly open and she sees him lying across the bed. He lies on his back, the covers kicked down to his feet. His arms are crossed over his chest. She hesitates but she fears he may watch a chill.

Pushing the door open farther, she walks in. The kitchen was sorted but his room has clothes scattered across the floor. The bedside table, seen from the full moon lightening the window, has a book, his wallet, loose change, and keys, on it.

She pulls the covers back over him. She then just stands a moment and watches him. He is a good man. A truly good man. He put his own heartache aside to help her through her own trauma. No small thing. He has given her a listening ear and space. Been the mate she so desperately needs. A man she can trust.

Her hand brushes a fallen curl of his face and he smiles in his sleep. Happy, is he happy even with Rose or is it an involuntary response? As an experiment, she does it again. Again that smile. She has to return it.

“Ah Michael,” she whispers, “what am I to do with you?” For now, she leaves him to sleep, slipping back out of his

room and into her own.

She crawls into her own bed where she dreams of smiles,
of happiness.

Chapter Twelve

“You smile in your sleep.” She greets him the next morning where she stands cooking breakfast and sipping coffee. He reaches blindly for a cup. She hands it to him. He grunts and she grins returning to cooking. Let him have coffee before they talk.

He takes a few restoring sips after preparing a cup. His eyes are able to focus on her, moving fluidly around the kitchen, preparing eggs and sausage.

“I what now?”

“Good morning. Welcome back to the land of the living. You smile in your sleep.”

“Really?” He knows he had, as a kid but...

“Yes. I woke and went to find you. To make sure you were alright.” She hands him a plate, takes one herself, and heads to the table. He joins her. “I found you sleeping soundly but uncovered. So, I came in to cover you. Don’t want you catching a chill. Nothing worse than a sick man.” He rolls his eyes. She chuckles and continues. “So, when I did, you smiled. I touched your face to see if it was just a reflex. You did it again. So... I assumed you were happy.” She shrugs and turns to her food.

“I guess I was. My mom said I always did that as a kid when happy.”

They eat and he thinks. How was he happy. Has no cause to be. With Rose. Is it the girl across from him? But it can’t be. A mate. Off limits for more. He recalls the frantic

masturbation in the shower. Her face at the end. Okay a mate he wants. Physically wants. But that is all.

“You alright? With Rose and all?”

“It hurts. I won’t deny it. I wish to marry her. She wishes another. So, aye, it hurts. I will be. To see her happy. As soon as we discover what type of man he is...”

“Iris rang. They’re going out with them tonight.”

“Good. Sooner the better. Easier to get over if I know she is with a good man.”

“If she isn’t, will you try to take her back?”

The yes is instinctual but he bites it back. For there is his reaction to her. It seems he isn’t as loyal as he thought he was either. “No. Trust once broken is hard to repair.”

“Get that.”

“You have a class earlier than me. I’ll clean up.”

“Thank you, Michael. For everything. Listening, the massage, covering me, and the smiles.”

“Thank you for being there, your concern, and breakfast.”

She smiles and goes to grab her knapsack and head out. He gathers dishes and thinks. He bloody smiled at her touch. Bloody hell!

They all meet at the restaurant. It is strange for Devin to see Rose with a lad that is not his nephew. He greets him with a outstretched hand nevertheless.

“It is nice to meet you.” He holds his hand a bit tighter than necessary. Michael might not be with Rose but the girl had been family for over a year. He will not see her hurt.

“You too. I won’t hurt her.” Tavish gets his not so subtle message.

“Good. I’ll be watching.”

“Devin.” Both women echo. They take their seats across from each other. Iris lays a soothing hand over Devin’s. He

smiles down at her.

“It was very nice for you to invite us out.” Rose says as she takes Tavish’s hand.

“Yes. We wished to meet your new friend.” Iris answers.

“And Michael too.”

“Yes girl. His last name gave him and Chloé some concern.” He looks over at Tavish again.

“I know I carry the sting of the Radcliff name because of Malcolm. But I swear I’m nothing like him.” The waitress interrupts them. After she takes their orders, Tavish continues, “I understand their concern. He is a horrid individual. Family honor doesn’t hide that truth from my eyes.”

“Do you know Chloé?” Iris asks.

“I’m afraid not. My brother never introduced us. He thinks if I don’t meet his victims, I won’t know. I do.” He sighs, running his hands through his hair. “when our parents were alive, they tried therapy, counseling, even medication, to curb his urges. Nothing helped. In truth, I think my brother is a psychopath. I’m relieved your friend is free of him. Rose will never be near him. I love her. Deeply. I would kill him myself were he to harm her.”

“That helps.” Iris says.

“You know you hurt Michael, badly.” Devin’s stern glance meets both their eyes.

“It wasn’t my intent. Not ever. Michael has the sweetest soul. I adore him. I always will. What is between Tavish and I is just so strong. We couldn’t fight it.”

“She did tell me about Michael. He was never a secret. We did fight this.” The waitress brings their orders out. They all nod at her. She lays them down and leaves.

“I believe you.” Iris says.

“As do I. I just hate to see my nephew hurt.”

“I pray Michael finds someone who he can love as much as I do Tavish. He deserves that. It isn’t me. If it was, Tavish

and I wouldn't be in love.”

“She's right.” Iris agrees.

“Yes. You're a good girl Rose. I'm glad to see you happy. We will see about finding Michael his soul mate.”

“Pardon Devin, but you can't find her. She will find him or more accurately, they will find each other.”

“Well spoken.” The rest of the dinner, they talk of other things. Getting to know each other. Devin and Iris leave, satisfied that Rose was in safe hands.

Chapter Thirteen

“Michael?” He comes in and sees her standing in their kitchen. She is clearly displeased about something. “May I ask what you think doing up the dishes means?”

“Ah, washing them and placing them in the drainer to dry.” He can’t figure out what has her upset.

“That is partially true. But, it also means seeing the counters and stove clean, wiping down the table, taking the trash out.”

“So,” he stands against the wall with his arms crossed. “to you, doing the dishes means sorting the whole kitchen then?”

“No, because sorting the whole kitchen would also mean seeing to the floor and refrigerator.”

“Wow. You do have high standards.” He uncrosses his arms and joins her. He picks up a rag and starts to wipe down the table.

“No just normal ones, I believe. I’m used to living with a woman who held the same standards.”

“Oh, poor Devin.” He says under his breath but she hears.

“Why poor Devin? I would say Iris will have a civilizing effect on him if he taught you how to do dishes.”

“I know how to clean a kitchen Chloé. My mom taught me well. I also know how to get under your skin. Now, let me finish.”

“Sorting or getting under my skin?” Oh, Saints help him! She gives as good as she gets.

“Sorting. I will work on getting under your skin more later.”

They both stop. Neither really mad just... but the playing has given rise to something else, something that has been hovering just under their interactions for awhile now. Both their breathing speed up. Fingertips and lips tingle. Eyes drift shut. He lowers his head and she lifts up. Then the phone rings.

She drops back down and into a chair, breathless. He turns to answer it.

“Yes. Is he. Truly. That is excellent news. Yes. No, I’m fine. Just sorting out the kitchen. Yes, I will tell her. Thank you. Talk later. Goodbye.” He rings off and turns to let her know all is alright with Tavish. He is alone. Crap!

He goes to her closed bedroom door. Knocks.

“Not now Michael. I need some time.” God, has she been crying?

“Yah I just...That was Devin. He assures us that Tavish is a fine lad. Nothing like... Yah and Iris will ring you tomorrow.”

“That is good. Thanks.”

“I will - ah, go finish the kitchen then. Talk later?”

“Later.” With nothing else to do, he heads back to finish the kitchen. His mind and heart in turmoil.

He doesn’t know whether to approach her. Should he slip her a note like he did when they were first starting out as flat mates, as mates? It feels like going backwards but what else is there to do?

Chloé,

I am sorry. I don’t know came over me. I know we needn’t be anything but mates. Please don’t shut me completely out.

We need each other as mates.

Michael.

He slipped it under her door and waited.

She read it through tears. Mates. It is logical. Right. Responsible. He has just recently had his heart broken. She, well her history with the male race is beyond complex. So, mates is appropriate. But if so, why does it feel like her heart is being ripped in two?

“Stop it Laurent. This is the way it is. Will be. Hell, should be. So buck up girl.” She whispered fiercely to herself.

Michael,

Thank you. You are right, of course, mates is best. Whatever that was, needn't be repeated. We do need each other and that would just complicate it. Would complicate our relationship. I will see you in the morning. We are okay.

Chloé.

Good. She agrees and is okay. That is what matters. This is all good. So, he told himself even as his heart aches.

Why does it? He paces around his room. Mates only was decided from the beginning. With her history. With Rose. Well, it makes even more sense. They are still mates, that is all that should matter. That is all that does matter.

Firmly telling himself that, he climbs into bed where he tosses and turns all night. Chloé, across the hall, is doing the same.

Chapter Fourteen

She wakes with her eyes matted shut. She understands it was from the tears she had cried. He mustn't know. A quick glance out the door shows he isn't in the hall. She also finds the loo empty. A wet cloth to her face fully opens her eyes. There is little she can do about the bags under her eyes. With a sigh, she heads towards the kitchen.

He sits at the table, twisting his coffee cup around. She avoids his eyes as she pours her own. Taking a seat across from him, she keeps her eyes down. Neither talk as their sip their coffee. When he gets up to get a refill, he breaks the silence.

"I'm sorry Chloé. I don't wish us to return to the awkwardness of before."

"We- no we won't. It was just a misunderstanding, right. A moment in time that has now passed. I just can't."

"I understand. I shouldn't." He shakes his head and clears his throat. "that is to say, I don't want. It's too soon after Rose. You are my roommate Chloé. I wouldn't use you that way. As a rebound girl. Especially with all you have been through." He finally meets her eyes. "Lord girl, did you sleep at all last night?"

"Did you?" the same dark circles rest under his eyes too.

"Not much. A grand thing it is Saturday. I'm sorry if my actions kept you awake."

"Ditto. This is smart, right?" she re drops her head as Michael returns to the table. "friends only. Of course it is. Just

ignore may rambling. Lack of sleep. What are your plans for the day?"

"I've a bit of course work to catch up on." And will spend a considerable amount of time going over your withdrawn question. He adds in his head. "You?"

"Iris is coming by, recall? Go out and do some girl things."

"Right. That will be fun. Are you hungry?"

"No, my stomach is...."

"Get that. We are alright?"

"Yes, we are. I am going to get dressed." She rinses out her coffee cup and slips out. He sits and ponders. What the hell did she mean by that question?

"Hello Michael."

"Hi Iris." He answers the door for her. Chloé is still in her room getting dressed.

"She alright? She sounded strange on the phone."

"She and I..." she exits then and he stops, shrugs. She nods. She will find out.

"Hi. Ready to have some girl time?"

"Yes very. Michael see you. Have fun studying."

He laughs. "I think you're getting the better end of the deal." They smile.

Iris eyes go up with what is in the air. Chloé and I what...?

They seat across from each other at the little restaurant. Iris patiently waits until they get their orders taken.

"Chloé, what in heaven's name is going on between you and Michael?"

"Ah," she opens her mouth and then shuts it. Plays with the straw in her drink. Drops her eyes then lifts them. Iris watches all this. She waits on her. "Oh God! We almost kissed. I freaked. Locked myself in my room. Cried. He wants to just

be roommates. That's right. It's all we can be. He apologized. But Iris, I fear we are already more than roommates."

"Do you want to be?"

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't." She shakes her head.

"Christ Chloé, I got turned on by the vibes coming off you both. Both. He is telling you what he thinks is proper, what he thinks you want to hear. So, I ask again, do you want to just be roommates?"

"I'm scared." Whispered as a tear falls down her eyes.

"Because of your ex?" She takes her hand from across the table.

"Partly and my dad. He... no this isn't the place. Just say he was just as bad." Iris tightens her hand over hers.

"Chloé I'm so sorry. So bloody sorry."

"Michael knows. I told him. So, yes, I want to be more than roommates. But I can't. I just can't. There is too much. Too much fear and grief. I can't risk being hurt or hurting him."

"Chloé, will you try therapy again? For yourself. For him." She nods. "You can take it slow. You needn't jump right into bed. You shouldn't. But, for the love of all that is holy, don't shut yourself off from love. They win if you do. Don't allow that."

"I'll try."

"Good. I will be here available for panicked calls, middle of the night ice cream runs, whatever you need."

"You're the best friend Iris. Thank you. Change of subject, how are you and Devin?"

A few hours later, she enters her flat. Michael is still in the same place. He just had a different book in front of him. "How was girl time?"

"Enlightening. Michael, do you have a minute? I need to talk to you."

Chapter Fifteen

He closes his book, marking the page with the paper he had been working on. Placing the pencil down beside it and stretching his legs out fully under the coffee table, he gives her his full attention. She kicks off her shoes and takes a seat on the oversized chair across from him. She crosses her legs, Indian style, and rests her hands on them.

“I- she noticed there was something between us. Something going on.” His patient blue eyes never leave her face although she drops her eyes several times. “I- told her about the almost kiss. About my reaction to it. How friends was right and proper. Just roommates but-,” his eyes laser focus on her as he awaits what comes after that but, “she asks me if just friends was what I wanted.”

“And?” He can’t keep silent.

“And at first I said it didn’t matter that is what you want.” She catches his eyes drifting shut and the sigh. Was Iris right? “but she pushed, as Iris is wont to do. I told her it was safer basically. That more was scary, for me. She asked if it was because of my ex. I told her what I could of my father in that public place. That you knew so I guess I did trust you, that it was already more. But it still came back to you don’t want more. Iris,” she stops, blushing. It took all that was in Michael, not to go over to her but he knows how hard this is for her and that she needs her space.

“She said that she was turned on by the vibes flowing between us. That she thinks you were just saying what you thought I wanted and needed to hear. Is she right?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, so you are... We are. Michael, I am so scared, bloody terrified. If we do this, it must be slow. Maybe slower than you can handle, used to having sex with Rose. That won't...” It is all he can take. He is to her side, kneeling by her, in a few smooth moves. He rests his hand over hers.

“Chloé, I get it. Why you think that love, or the parody of it, you have experienced all your life, and sex co-exist. Why you believe one leads to the other and they can't exist separately. I really do. But, trust me, you can have a relationship with a man and not sleep with him. We'll take it slow. Talking, holding hands, small things until you're comfortable with more. It doesn't matter how long that takes.”

“So, you do wish to be more than roommates?” she asks, looking down at their hands.

“We already are. We can try to go back to just being such, if that is your wish or see where this goes.”

“Oh god! I want to see where it goes I'm just so scared.” He lifts one of her hands up, linking it to his.

“I swear I will not let you down, let you fall without catching you. I will not push anything you're not ready for. I will listen to your words, actions, and silence. Will be your roommate first. I know this is scary but you're not alone. You will always have my hand to hold.”

She lays her head on their clasped hands for a second. “You will be alright with being celibate for awhile?”

“Not to be crude, my love, but I've got my hands. It will be the only way I cheat on you.” Her eyes drift shut then.

“You're really something Michael. Thank you. I'm still very scared and nervous about this but I want to try. I also want to return to therapy. To work things out so I can have a healthy relationship. I want a healthy relationship with you. I promise to try not to shut down, pull into myself too much.”

“I promise to follow you into the darkness and pull you into the light.”

Her eyes fill with tears and she slipped off the chair and against his kneeling legs. “Will you hold me, Michael?”

“With pleasure.”

“We’re dating?” she declares from the safety of his arms.

“We are. Slowly carefully, at your pace but dating aye.”

“Iris will be so pleased.” They laugh together.

They walk slowly, breathing in the fresh air that comes off the lake. Her hand is securely in his. It feels nice. Safe.

“Happy?” he asks her. She looks up with a smile. It speeds his heart.

“Very. I never expected to feel so safe alone in a man’s presence.”

“I’m glad.” A walk along the lake seemed the perfect first date. Outside in the open. Other people about but not so close that they can’t have a bit of privacy. He is happy he was right.

“You were unexpected in a lot of ways. Truly I didn’t expect you to be so alright with taken this slow. Going from an established sexual relationship.”

“Chloé,” he stops them and takes her other hand, turning her to fully face him. “I care deeply for you. I enjoy spending time with you. Sex is to be more than just the joining of bodies. If it is just that it means less than this, spending time with the girl I care deeply for. So, we will take our time. Because the first time we come together, we will be making love.”

“Oh,” she feels a bit weak. No one had ever talked to her this way. She saw the truth of his words in his eyes.

“So don’t worry about it. Okay. We are taking this day by day, minute by minute.”

“Okay.” She tightens her hands over his and leans forward to lay her head on his chest for a moment. They both sigh. She lifts up and they start walking again.

They talk about the future. She discusses what she wishes to do with her medical degree.

“I want to work as an Ob/Gyn. I love the idea of being there at the beginning of life, seeing that first breath.” She tells them as they stop and sit. He lay on the ground by the lapping water.

“I love the way you put that,” he says as he lies back on his elbows, “a lovely way to us your gift.”

“Thanks,” she rests beside him, lying on her side facing him, “do you know where you want to go?”

“Yes,” he turns to her, “with children. To try to catch them before the bad things done to them or their own messed up brain chemistry is to set in.” She smiles broadly.

“You will be so good at that.” She lays her hand for a second on his chest, “You have such a big heart.”

“Thank you. I hope you know I wasn’t putting you down as damaged?”

“But I am. I own that. It isn’t my fault but I am. I pray to get better. I vow to but I am affected by the terrible things done during my childhood. I know exactly what you were saying. You wish to rescue children like I was before patterns are set in that allows them to choice morons like my ex.”

“Exactly.”

They watch the water for a while. The silence wasn’t uncomfortable. They lay beside each other, not touching, not speaking, but communicating just the same.

She longs to rest her head on his chest. He longs to draw her close. But they don’t move. It is too soon. As the wind starts to cool, they move. He helps her up, takes her hand with relief, and they walk back towards the car.

Chapter Sixteen

She should have known, but riding on the high of a successful first date, it blindsides her.

They came home and had a very normal evening. Shared folding clothes, tidying the flat and a dinner they made together. He washed after as she wiped all down. He took at the rubbish and she bathed. He did then joined her on the couch where they watched an hour of TV before her heavy eyes had her telling him goodnight and heading towards bed. He stays up a bit later.

It comes like a flood. The memories. They transform the sweet dream of walking with Michael into a nightmare. Malcolm telling her she is only worth what is between her legs as he takes by force. Screaming helpless to stop him. 'worthless, slut, whore, unlovable.' The words hurt more than the rape does.

He jerks awake where he had fallen asleep in front of the TV. Chloé! He is propelled up and running towards her room. He almost takes the door off the hinges opening it. She lays, on her back, paralysis freezing her muscles except her throat, where a scream, wordless, pure terror, still emits from. He hurries over to her, saying her name. She continues to scream. He must touch her.

He climbs on the bed with her. Drawing her stiff body to him, he wraps his arms and legs around her, holding her close with as much of his body as he can.

“You’re safe my darling. He isn’t here.” He repeats it as before until her body softens against him. Her fingers cling to his shirt as the shakes start. He starts to rock her as his reassurances turn rapid as he prays words she doesn’t understand.

“Oh god. Oh Jesus.” She moans against him.

“How bad?”

“They were both there. Rape, molestation, horrible names. I felt them inside me. Felt myself being tore in two.”

“Jesus wept.” He whispers as he holds her tighter.

“I couldn’t get past the pain to move. Could only scream.”

“You were stiff as a board when I got to you.”

“Thank god, you did. Oh Michael, will they ever let me be?”

He wishes to tell her yes but knows she will probably have dreams like that the rest of her life.

“I will be here to wake you.” He offers what he can.

“Come into the darkness. You did. Thank you.”

“I keep my promises. Whatever they told you is a lie straight from hell.” He lifts her head meeting her eyes. “a lie.”

“I know that now. But then...” She shivers and reburies her head in his chest.

“Yes.”

“Will you hold me Michael until I fall back to sleep?”

“Yes.” He lays then down but keeps his arms and legs around her. Her head stays tucked against his chest. He softly says a prayer over her as she drifts off. He joins her in the middle.

He wakes before her the next morning and would have moved but she is still so firmly wrapped around him, he can’t do so without waking her. Besides he secretly enjoys having her enfolded around him. So, he lays still, and watches her

sleep. The tension and stress is drained out of her in respite and her beauty is enhanced in peace. It takes his breath.

She starts to stir slowly, those eyelashes that lay like feathers near her cheek, move. He watches as consciousness reenters her mind.

He is prepared for whatever her reaction will be. He tightens his grip, not to imprison her but to protect himself.

Her eyes jerk open. He is expecting it and it still startles him. Those huge eyes stare directly into his. “You are here?”

“Yes. Seems I fell asleep seeing you so. Sorry.”

“No it is- I thought I dreamed you. Dreamed the safety I found in your arms.”

“No,” he is stunned. He had expected a completely different reaction.

“Thank god.” She re-buries her head in his chest. He strokes her hair. They lay like that a few minutes. Time enough for him to realize that he is deeply in love with her. Oh god indeed.

“It is better?” He softly asks.

“Yes. It is still there, hovering, wanting to get through the barriers we have erected. But they are holding them off so far.”

“An excellent analogy. Let’s make sure they stay gone. Starting with a mental health day. You are to do whatever you want and I will be here to support you. Then, we need to find you a therapist.”

“A woman.” She quickly says.

“Yes, a woman. So, what would you like to do?” she meets his eyes. Oh boy. His cock, nestled against her, jumps. No! Oh he wants her. But he knows that she is responding to the nightmare and the safety he bought. No, their first time won’t be like this.

“No Chloé. You aren’t ready yet. I do want you,” a situation he knows she can feel. “but not this way. It is too important.”

“Right I just...” Oh no. She thinks... damn her bloody father and Malcolm Radcliff to the depths of hell!

“You’re beautiful. Christ you are stunning. Your courage, strength, tenacity, God they attract me more than your incredible beauty. I say no not because you aren’t desirable but because I care for you way too much for our first time to be a response to them. It will happen and be incredible. I will make love to you. I will show you that everything they said about you is a lie.” Her tears fall on his hand where he holds her face up. He gently kisses her wet cheeks then her forehead. “Now, how about a nice soaking bath?” She nods. He slips out of the bed and goes to draw it. It is at that moment she understands that she is in love with him.

A hot soaking bath and her most comfy nightgown. Breakfast prepared while she soaked. A list of available therapists, all female, all specialist in rape and incest. He is a wonder.

“Her. She looks like a grandma. I never had one.” She tells him after looking over them.

Mrs. Robinson, call me Mrs. Robin, does seem perfect. “Would you like me to make the appointment?” he offers.

“Thank you. You have done so much already. I will.” But she does reach for his hand. He happily holds it as she rings her.

“Yes ma’am I need an appointment. No new. Ah yes I have experienced both of what she deals with. Just now ready to face it. Thanks. Yes that is perfect. Yes see you then.” She rings off. “A week from today.”

“Excellent.”

“Yes. Would you like to binge some trashy TV shows with me?”

He happily does.

Chapter Seventeen

He kneels beside her and tightens the laces in her boots. He wants to make sure her ankles are protected. They are going hiking today.

“Ready Chloé?”

“Am I?” He looks her up and down. She is dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and a pull-over. Her boots, over thick socks, are now tight. She is ready.

“Yes.” He picks up the knapsack full of drinks, food, and a bit of medical supplies. He takes her hand and they walk out.

He loves his country, especially as they exit the city. As the rural area replaces the concrete and buildings, he lets down the window and the sweet scent of the moors and bogs enters. He sees and feels (as she sits leaning against him) Chloé’s tension flee too. It is what they both need.

He pulls up into the car park and they both look up at the mountain towering over them.

“Oh God!”

“We are only aiming for about a fourth of the way up. I won’t let you fall.” He reminds her.

“Right. I know I can trust you. Let’s do this.” She sounds more confident than she looks but he takes it. They climb out and places the knapsack on, tightening it. He re-checks her boots. She gently touches his head as it lowered by her. He looks up and the urge to kiss her is so strong that he shakes with it. No, not quite yet.

The climb is deceptive. It seems easy. It isn't until your shins and thighs start to burn that you realize it is steeper than it looks. Chloé gets to this point fifteen minutes after starting out.

“Owe! Damn my legs!” He slows and keeps her walking a few more minutes. They reach the first point he wanted her to see. She forgets the burning in her legs. “Wow! How did they get here?”

“Legend is there was a house here,” he says as he eases her down on the stairs that seem to grow out of the ground. “Someone who wished to get away from it all built his house here to keep all those bar those who really wished to see him, away.” He continues as he hands her a bottle of water.

“Get that.” She says as she opens it. A good long drink. “There were times when all I wanted was to find a place to be where no one else was. Isolation. But I would never be completely alone. My ghost would follow me.”

“Yes. I hate that you are right about that.”

“Do you think therapy will help keep them away?” She leans back and looks at the canopy of trees as she awaits his answer.

“I think it will help you get some control over it. Take some of the power they hold over you, away.”

“Good.”

“Come love. If you sit too long, you will cramp.” She groans but allows him to lift her up. They walk farther up, holding tight to each other's hands. She finds it a bit easier. The incline had gotten better or her legs are adjusting. An hour later.

“Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Trust me. I've you.” She does as she feels his hands go around her waist. He guides her up a fairly steep incline. “Now open.”

“Oh wow!” It echoes back at her. Below her lays a valley so green it seems unreal. A ribbon of blue cuts it as a small loch flows. “So beautiful.”

“Yes. It is the purpose of this hike. I wanted to show you.” She leans back against him as his hands tighten.

“Sweet man.” She never expected to feel this level of peace. Of security. Not ever but never ever alone with a man. This between them is a miracle.

He eases them down and she sits against them as they watch the eternal beauty of Scotland under them.

“Thank you. This is just what I needed.”

“I thought so. You’re welcome.” He rests his head on her shoulder. After a few minutes, he turns and kisses where her neck and shoulder meet.

“Oh!” Her exclamation is just a whisper but the valley repeats it back. “Oh, oh, oh.”

“I really wish to kiss you, Chloé. May I?”

“Yes.” She turns in his arms.

She holds her breath as his lips descend. “Breath Chloé.” He whispers. She does in a rush that he swallows up as his lips finally lay claim to hers. Claim is what he does.

Gently and tenderly, without force. Ever the gentleman, he waits for her to deepen it if she wills. But he claims her just the same for she knows there is no one else she ever wishes to kiss. Her hands cling to his shirt, fisting as she opens up, inviting him in.

One of them moaned. Or both. She tastes the Highland air on his breath as their essence combine. The taste of her perfume is on his tongue as hers touches the tip of it. It throws her right over the edge.

Michael holds her tight as he backs them up, anchoring himself against a rock as the kiss deepens past the point he expected it to. His hands work down, pressing against her

back. His want reflects her own. Her hungry hands are everywhere. His hair, down his back, pulling at his on erect nipples.

He has to stop. He pulls away causing them both to groan. “Please Michael.” She presses frantic kisses across his neck.

“I want,” he can’t resist and pulls her face up for another scorching kiss. “God I want but not here and not yet.”

“But...?”

“Sorry. God am I sorry. I let that get way out of control. It wasn’t my intention.” He turns them so she is against the rock and moves away from her. It is bloody hard. It felt like he was being stretched like a rubber band. Ready to snap back against her at anytime. Compelled to. He steps back farther.

“I know. I didn’t think I would or could want someone the way I do you. It took me over.”

“Yes. A good thing but...”

“Right.” She slips down onto the ground pulling her legs up. “right. We need to slow down. Logical and right.”

“It is difficult, eh?” He still stands and walks over to get a couple water bottles. He hands her one.

“Yes. Thanks. Is it alright to say I am scared of the intensity?”

“Very okay. Not just because of what you have been through but also because well, it scares me too.”

“Good.” He gives her a strange look.” I meant because I am not alone.”

“No never.” He also slips to the ground. “You are not alone in this.”

“Michael I want to get better, for me, for you and us. I think this could be real.” Confessed as she sits with her head on her knees.

“I agree but I don’t think, I know. I want you healthy not so I won’t feel guilty about wanting you but because I care deeply for you.” She smiles at him.

“Do you feel guilty?”

“Only as far as knowing you aren’t ready yet. I know this isn’t just lust so I don’t feel guilty for craving you.”

“Oh God.” Even a yard away, the heat built back between them.

“We need to get back down.” He huskily says.

“Yes.” She stands on unsteady feet. He lifts the knapsack back on. They start back down.

Chapter Eighteen

“Nervous?” Her hand is playing the drums on the partition between their seats as he drives her towards her first therapy appointment.

“Yes. God knows I want to do this, need to. It is just...” He covers her bouncing hand with one of his own.

“I can’t say I understand. But, I will be here. Waiting with open arms, a shoulder to cry on, a listening ear.”

“You are the best.” She links their fingers.

He leads her into the building then leaves her to speak to the receptionist. He knows she has to do it herself. She joins him after. He re-takes her hand after as she waits.

“Chloé Laurent?” She jumps. He tightens his hand, kisses her forehead.

“I will be right here.” She nods and stands. She follows the lady back. She leads her into a room that looks like a living room. She is offered a seat.

“Mrs. Robin will be right in.” She is told. Okay then. She slips into the recliner. A few minutes later, Mrs. Robin arrives.

“So sorry I am late. Bad form not meet my clients when they first come in. Had an emergency.”

“It is alright. Things happen.”

“Chloé, I am Mrs. Robin. I will help you find your strength. Recover from the evil done to you. Now, what specifically do you wish to get out of therapy?” She looks lost

so she adds, "I know you want a lot. We will attempt to do it all but, if you could sum it all up in one sentence..."

"That they would leave me be." Softly said.

"Nightmares?"

"Yes. I recently started dating. He is sweet, kind, patient, strong, and so bloody courageous. They don't like him." She looks down at the intake form she had filled out.

"Your dad and ex?"

"Yah. God to trust him! It is a day to day, moment by moment thing."

"You have yet to be intimate?"

"Yes. I want to be free of them. Or freer. I don't want any part of my past to intrude on my future."

"Quite self aware."

"I went into therapy after my ex raped me. She encouraged me to get right back on the horse." Mrs. Robin t'sked. "Exactly. I thought I could deal with it on my own. But I can't. Michael he is going to school to be a therapist himself. But to have him be the only one who hears me. Well it seems unwise."

"To right. I am glad you have support outside this office but you are right. You need more. I am glad you came to me and sorry you had to deal with a bad therapist."

"Yah she was... so do I just tell you my story or...?"

"What do you want to talk about?"

"I choose my ex because he was like my dad. I should have had some therapy earlier."

"Your father is he still around?"

"No he is dead. I was both relieved and grieved at hearing he passed."

"Not uncommon."

"I didn't have closure. So Malcolm. God he was a bastard! Cruel abusive controlling. I thought I deserved it. That I

wasn't worth more. It wasn't until he raped me that I woke up."

"You did. Lot's don't."

"Yes. I did. Helped. I stayed wrapped up in myself. Michael got through. I am scared Mrs. Robin."

"That he will hurt you?"

"No. That I will hurt him. That I will freak and run. I am not used to being treated well."

"Do you feel you deserve it?"

"Some days. Some days I wonder what he sees in a lady like me."

"That is what we will work on. Building up your self esteem. For as we do, their power over you fades. You are deserving of love."

Twenty minutes later, she comes out. He stands with open arms. She walks into them.

"Okay?"

"I really like her. It was hard but good."

"I am glad."

"Will be back next week. Take me home."

"Yes ma'am."

It was Mrs. Robin's idea. To have her journal every day. To write something uplifting about herself. To also write whatever else she wanted.

"Of your day. The past. Whatever you want. But I want you writing good things about yourself too. Even if it is just something simple as 'my hair looks good.' We need to be about getting you to see yourself as the worthy girl you are."

So she sits and does the morning after seeing her. Not even close to ready to write of the past, she first writes of the day.

“Michael stopped and got take-a-way after therapy. Said he knew neither of us was up for cooking or cleaning. A very considerate man is Michael. We just cuddled on the couch after and watched trashy TV. Exactly what I needed.

I need to write something good about myself. Michael says I am brave. Does it count if it comes from someone else? Well, it will do for today.”

She closes it with a sigh. She jumps for a moment when she feels hands on her shoulder. Relaxing when she realizes it is Michael, she sinks into the massage he is offering. Her sighs of contentment fill the room.

“You looked tense.”

“Yah. Was doing the homework Mrs. Robin assigned.”

“Hum,” he presses lower and she gasp as the knot there unlocked. “what did she assign you?” She explains.

“I can’t yet do the past. Present is easy. I am just having trouble finding positive things to say about myself. Kind of the point of the exercise.”

“Yes it is. I have a whole list of your positive traits.”

“I used one today but can’t keep doing that.” She confesses.

“Which one?” asks as he works up to the back of her neck. She sighs, letting her head drop to give him full access.

“Bravery.” Said from out from under the curtain of her hair.

“Good one. You don’t see yourself as brave?”

“Some days. I guess it took bravery to get away from Malcolm.”

“Yes, and to stay gone. To start to trust us. To tell me of your father. To see Mrs. Robin.” He catalogues as he pulls all the tension out of her neck.

“Okay. I see your point.”

“Good. I propose.” She stiffens under his hands. “not that idiot. No, we make a list. No several lists, of the stuff about you that you find. One in your room, by the bathroom mirror, on the fridge. Add to them daily. Validation. Daily self esteem boasting.”

“It would feel like bragging.”

“Why shouldn’t we?” He moves so he can see her face. “I long to brag about you. Your strength, courage, sweetness. You won’t permit me outside this house so, by God, I will in.” He walks out of the room. She swallows hard. She so doesn’t deserve him.

He returns with three sheets of college ruled paper. He takes a seat at the table beside her. Picking up a pen, he writes on the top of each, ‘ Chloé is:’ Under that he writes brave. He then places them. The one in her room he tacks in the center of the cork board she has there.

“We will add to them daily.”

“We?”

“Yes. Something I see in you and something you do.”

“God Michael.” Tears drip down her eyes. He wordlessly wraps her in his arms.

Chapter Nineteen

She invites Iris over on a day that she is off school and Michael isn't. She needs to talk to her and would prefer to do it alone.

"Hi hen." She enfolds her in her arms as soon as she steps through. "Well what is this then?" Chloé isn't usually a touchy feely girl.

"So much. It is good just scary." Confessed against her shoulder.

"Come Chloé and tell me about it." They take seats. Iris watches her fiddle with her hands. "Talk to me."

"I started back with therapy."

"How wonderful!"

"It is. She is great. Really wonderful. As is Michael. We kissed."

"What is this now?" her eyes get huge. "Well this is news."

"Yes. It was so good. So very good. I want... oh how I want. But I am terrified."

"Of course you are love. Completely understandable."

"He is so sweet. God! So bloody patient. Mrs. Robin, my therapist asks me to journal. One thing I am to do there is write something positive about myself each day."

"Good for her."

“Yes but I struggle with it. He doesn’t.” She explains about the lists. “He adds more than I do.”

“He love you.” She softly says.

“I know. I fear I feel the same.”

“Yes you do. You know he isn’t like he who shall not be named. Or your father. He is a gentleman who adores you.”

“I know. I do. I don’t fear him. I fear myself. I fear that I will freak and hurt him. That is one thing we are working on in therapy. Self esteem.”

“Good.”

“But will it be enough?”

“Is it enough today? You have to take it day by day. You can trust yourself today. Right?”

“Yes.”

“It will get stronger every day. As you work out the past in therapy, I promise girl. It will get better day by day.”

“God. That is exactly what I needed to hear.”

“Always available to assist. I have news too.”

“Yes?”

“Are you ready to be Auntie Chloé? I am pregnant!”

Chloé squeals and hugs her tight. “How extraordinary! Such wonderful news. You are so going to rock motherhood.”

“It is going to be grand! Devin is over the moon.”

“Does Michael know? I would love to tell him.”

“Not yet. Tell him. Just tell us of his reaction.”

“I promise.” They spend a few hours discussing names and other things.

She is bouncing with excitement when he walks in. The frantic excitement in her eyes has him a bit worried for a

moment.

“Chloé? What is it?” He places his knapsack in his room. She has made him neater. He then joins her. She sits on the edge of the seat, her legs bouncing. “What has you so excited?”

“I saw Iris today.”

“Had good girl time did you?”

“Yes. I spoke to her about therapy.”

“I imagine she was excited to hear you had restarted?” he is still trying to figure out what has that maniacal gleam in her eyes.

“Oh she was. I also told her we kissed.”

“Oh!” was that it then. “What did she say?”

“She was right shocked. I told her I was scared. Scared of hurting you.” He came over and knelt beside her. He took her hands in his.

“Why love?”

“That I will freak. It will get to be too much and I will run away from it.”

“What if I won’t let you? If your own heart won’t?”

“Oh god!” She rests her head on their clasped hands. “Oh Jesus. I need to tell you Iris’ news before we finish this part of this conversation.”

“Yes?” She lifts her head. Her smile is back.

“They are expecting. Her and Devin are to be parents.”

“Oh wow! That is incredible news!. Just incredible.”

“I thought the same. Iris is going to be an awesome mum.”

“As Devin will be a dad. Oh man! I am so happy for them.”

“Yes. I am already planning the baby shower.” He laughed. “Do you think me silly?”

“No, because I am already thinking of all the stuff I want to teach him or her.” They laugh together.

“Ready to talk about us?” He asks when the giggles die down.

“Yes. We need to. I told her of the lists. How you add more than I do. She said that you love me.”

“I do.” A soft confession.

“Oh god! I fear I do too.”

“Yaeh get the fear. Really. But I promise, I swear, I will not hurt you.”

“As I said earlier, I fear hurting you. You are so bloody sweet. So caring and giving. I couldn’t bear to hurt you.” It is all he can take. He lifts himself up and takes her lips.

A kiss of reassurance. Of gentle passion. Of strength held in check. Her whole body shudders at the feelings her is rousing in her, both emotional and physical.

She slips off the chair and joins him, her body leaning into him. He presses against her lower body, moving her closer. Her hands are in his hair, all tangled up in his curls.

He needs to stop them. They don’t have the excuse of being out in the open. In public. As much as their bodies want it, he knows her mind isn’t ready. He slowly pulls away.

They stare at each other, catching their breathes. He matches his breathes to hers instinctively. When they are both calm, he says, “This is real. You can’t hurt me as long as that stays true. I can’t believe it won’t. Can you?”

“No. I can’t.”

“Give me a second.” He stands up and heads into his room. He returns with a knife. “A dirk. It is what my ancestors swore loyalty on.” He explains. “My dad taught me the oath when I was three and ten.” He sits her back on the chair so he can kneel at her feet. “Chloé, I swear on the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ and by this holy iron I hold,” he holds the shaft out to her and turns the blade towards himself, “to give you my feality and pledge you my loyalty. I promise to walk

through the darkness with you and bring you into the light. That your past will not be just yours to carry. I will always be your side as long as you will have me. I do swear.”

“Oh Michael.” He drops the knife on the table and hugs her close.

“Okay now?”

“How can I not be? Jesus Michael, I have had anyone treat me this way.”

“It is what you deserve, what you have always deserved.” She begins to cry happy tears against his chest.

Chapter Twenty

“Michael, I’ve a confession.” She says a bit later. She still lays across his lap and the reassuring beat of his heartbeat gives her courage.

“Yes?” his hands cradle her, one against her head with the other against her back.

“Iris’ news has me thinking. I don’t know that I ever wish to bear a child.”

“Fear of labor because w...err you can always adopt.”

“No. Fear of parenthood. I don’t know how to love a child. How to care for one. How to bloody hell not to screw it up.”

“Your mamma?”

“Did the best she could. Really. But I always felt I messed up her marriage. I know it isn’t true but the deep feelings of childhood aren’t easy to get past. He told me, you see, that if I ever told that I would be responsible for him leaving and mum’s unhappiness. It was easily internalized. She wept all the time.”

“Oh, you know she wept for you?”

“Yes and herself. I know now, but Michael, how I am I to fully rid myself of that guilt? Beyond that, how to get past the knowledge that one parent did the unthinkable and the other shut down from it. I never doubted her love, don’t get me wrong. Not her love. I just saw constant sorrow in her eyes. We never were as close as we were before. I don’t wish to ever treat a child like that. To fear, every day, that I am doing

something wrong that is going to send him or her to therapy later. I can't handle that. Seems easier just not to have any."

"Have you spoke to Mrs. Robin about this?"

"No. I will. But I doubt it will change anything. Parenting is just too scary."

He doesn't know what to say. To have children has always been a wish of his. He knew he would meet the other half of his heart and, he expected to have kids with her. To see them combined in them. He knew the girl he held in his arms was her. If she felt this strongly about it?

"Well, you've time."

"No. Because I feel it too. This drawing between us. I also know you wish to have children. As that is the case, I had to tell you now, in case you wish to get away, find someone else, while there is still time."

"That time was passed when I meet your eyes." He lifted her head up. The tears in her eyes brought the same to him. "I love you. As you are. I can't see my life without you. If you can't handle kids, well, we will spoil our nieces and nephews horribly. Okay?"

"Michael I can't ask you that."

"You are not asking. I am telling you that you are my future. None else will do. Ever. So whatever your future holds, mine does."

She shakes her head. He stops it with his hand and then his lips. She can do nothing but cling to him as the room sprung around them.

Feeling faint, she holds tight as he presses her closer. She shivers when she feels what she, and the kiss, are doing to him. It is a mixture of fear and bone deep excitement. Never having felt desire like this, it overwhelms her. It has always been what the man wanted, needed from her. Never had she gave a thought to herself. She does now.

Meowing, she pushes against the length of him.

“Chloé,” his voice is as deep as she has ever heard it. “We can’t. Your heart and mind aren’t ready.” The words, whispered against her neck, increase the pressure building between her legs.

“But my body is.” She almost whines.

“Oh God. You are killing me girl.”

“We needn’t, all the way if you don’t want, but please help me!” she moves urgently against him. “I have never felt.... I feel so full and hot.”

“I will fix it, okay?”

“Please.” She needs to cum. Badly. He started it and needs to finish it.

He turns her so her ass is against him. This doesn’t help his situation but this is about her. His hands flow down hardening her nipples farther. He slips a hand inside, playing with them. His other hand works under her pants and knickers. Gently stroking, pressing, opening. She feels incredible, so bloody soft and wet. God she is as slick as a water lily. His groans blend into hers as he runs one thumb over her nipple, the other over her clit.

“Oh, just there. Yes please!” she holds tight to his wrist as he moves his hand a bit faster. She falls back against him, moving with him. Her bum is now grinding against his erection. Bloody hell! He is as needy as a boy having his first wet dream.

“Oh Jesus! I am!” She jerks and shivers under his hand, pressing fully against him before collapsing. Her bottom continues to jerk as intense aftershocks run through her.

He so wants to turn her around and guide her on to him. She is gone enough to let him and even welcome it. It isn’t what she needs though. So with true reluctance, he lifts her onto the couch, kisses her softly, and says, “I will be right back.” She simply nods, still dazed.

He goes to the bathroom and takes himself in hand. He is so close it only takes a minute. It is intense and buckles his knees. To do it inside her! But not yet. He cleans himself off and returns to her.

“Okay?” she turns to him, her eyes shiny.

“God yes. I never felt that good. I didn’t know I could.”

“That was just a taste. When you are ready...”

“I can’t wait. Are you alright? I knew you were...” she looks down. “Oh that is why you...”

“Yes. I had to. In time but as much as I want you...”

“And I you...”

“Yes. It isn’t the right time. You are way more important than a shag.”

“Oh Michael, how I love you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Mrs. Robin watches her carefully. Something was on her mind. She will tell her once she makes up her mind to.

“I love Michael. I am in love with him and he me.”

“That is good, right?”

“Yes but for... I am scared. He says he understands. But I fear he won't as time goes by.”

“About your past? Do your fears have to do with sex?”

“No. We are waiting. He insisted. Said I wasn't ready. My body but not my mind...”

“Good.”

“It is- I don't wish to have children or raise them. I fear messing a child up like my parents did me. I just feel on the verge of a panic attack whenever I think of it.”

“Okay. Deep breath Chloé. It isn't required, you know. Women don't have to be mothers. A lot of people with past abuse decide not to be parents.”

“Michael wants them though. I know he does. He says it is okay. We are enough. But I saw the disappointment in his eyes. I don't want him regretting us. Regretting choosing me.”

“Do you trust what he is telling you? Trust that he really feels you are enough?”

“Yes. But the disappointment?”

“People can make decisions, decisions that they really know are for the best and still feel a spot of disappointment in what could have been. Without regretting the decision they made. Chloé, I have seen how he looks at you. He adores you. You are enough. Truly. He would never pressure you into a life changing decision that you are this uncomfortable with. If you don’t change your mind, he will still want you. Still love you. I can’t see him regretting nothing.”

“Then I shouldn’t feel guilty?”

“Not at all. You are allowed to say, I simply cannot handle parenthood. Allowed to set boundaries that allow you to live your life in relative peace.”

“Thank you. Oh God. I don’t know how to just be Chloé. Not my dad’s or my exes, or even Michael’s. I am always trying to be who everyone else expects me to be. I just want to be me. If I can even find her.”

“You are. By telling him and me, yourself, that you can’t parent, going against societal expectations, you are finding her. You will find her more with every such declaration.”

She feels a weight being lifted. The weight of being anyone other than herself. Cleansing tears start to fall.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“Michael, can we go out?” He looks up from his textbook.

“Out as in?”

“I don’t know. Dinner drinks. Dancing maybe.”

“A date?” his eyebrows lift. She squirms a bit.

“I am feeling good. Emotionally and physically. I wanted to celebrate that. But if you don’t...”

He slammed the book close. “Let’s do it. Celebrate.”

“Okay. Let me change.” He looks her over. In jeans and a t-shirt that hugs her curves just right, she seemed perfect to him. She blushes under his glance. “For dancing you need a dress.”

“Oh aye.” He goes to clean up some himself.

He takes her to a place where they can do all three. They take an Uber so they can both drink. She wishes to celebrate. He will show her how the Scots do it.

“To feeling healthy in every way.” They click their glasses together. “Cheers.”

She repeats the word as best she can and he laughs. She giggles with him. It feels so good to feel good. Food is ordered, typical pub stuff of greasy cheeseburgers and chips. They eat and drink.

“I was thinking.” He grins at her.

“Dangerous past time. She slaps at him.

“I think I want justice. I left. Thought it enough to just get away. But, I am learning I am worth more.”

“Against your ex?”

“Yes. I know it will be hard. I long ago washed the evidence away. But Iris was a witness to my state of undress and being. Worth a shot, right?”

“Absolutely. I am quite proud.” He dips his glass to her. She touches his and they take a drink again.

“Let’s dance.” She wears a dress that ends at her knees and flares. It will be amazing to see her dance in it . She takes his hand.

It is fast at first. She is so bloody free. Twirling about wild and inhabited. Her curls flow free behind her. The dress shows quite a bit of her upper legs. Michael wills his body not to react.

Then the music turns slow. He swallows hard as she steps into his arms. Her head fits perfectly on his chest. His hand naturally finds the small of her back. Hers the hair on the nape of his neck. His other hand cradles her head. They sway.

He can no more stop his body’s reaction than stop the sun from raising. She makes a soft sound when she feels it but doesn’t pull away. She burrows closer.

“Chloé,” a whispered plea.

“I know. I just... It is nice to feel comfortable being so close to... It feels very good and you feel safe.”

“I love you.” He confesses as they continue to sway.

“Yes Michael. I love you too.” She lifts her head. “May we?”

“You mean?”

“Yes. I am ready. Will you take me home Michael. To bed.”

“Yes.” He takes her lips.

They hold each other's hands tight in the back of the Uber. Their other hands explore, running over faces, arms, her bared legs. The desire is thick enough to cut and Michael is glad they aren't far from home.

When they pull up, he pays him and helps her out. They hold tight to each other as they head in. The door is quickly relocked and he re-takes her lips.

Slow and gentle he reminds himself. What she is offering him is huge. It must be treated like the precious gift it is. He leads them to the couch and they sit down still kissing. Hands get busy again. One of his rubs on the soft skin of her inner thigh while the other tangles in her hair. Hers works under his shirt, craving the feel of bare skin.

He pulls it off and returns to her lips. Now free to explore, she brushes across his chest hair and nipples.

"Oh God!" He groans into her mouth. Emboldened by his response, she takes one between her thumb and finger and pulls. "Hell baby!" He pants against her cheek.

"Do you like that?" Shyly asks. He recalls. She was used to this act just being about pleasing the man. Time to change that.

"Very much but you will like it more." He slips her dress up and off. Then loses his breath. A bit of lace and silk cover her. Barely cover her.

"I wanted. That is, I hoped we would get here. So my fanciest underwear."

"You are amazing. Simply stunning." His hand traces down her face, neck, arm, and across her chest. "Bed?"

"Please." She is breathless at his touch and needs more. He surprises her by lifting her into his arms and carrying her into her room. Laying her on the bed, he joins her and continues his careful exploring.

He is soon focused on her nipples poking up through the silk. Placing his thumbs there, he starts to stroke.

“Oh yes! God yes!” he plays for a bit before pulling her bra down. She is more beautiful than he imagined. Soft white skin ending in huge pink nipples.

He takes them in hand, cupping, rubbing, and gently pulling. She groans, arches, and cries out. Then he takes her in his mouth.

“Shit! Hell, that feels so bloody good. Yes baby!” He grins as he licks and sucks while playing with the other one. He simply adores her breasts and is glad she enjoys breast play so much. He changes sides after a bit, suckling on her as his hand works down, ghosting across her damp knickers. “Michael! Oh God!”

His touch is feather light as he starts to tease her over her knickers. His mouth still works that sweet nipple. When she moves under him, then he pulls them off and really settles in.

“Oh God Michael! I am going to...” her hand clamps on his head, holding tight to his hair as it starts to pull her under. She cries out again as the sweetest pleasure runs through her. She hasn't ever orgasmed as an adult. It completely takes her over. She lays stunned and breathless as the wave relaxes every nerve in her body. He then moves his thumb and tongue again.

“Holy Fuck!” she gets out as it raises all the tiny hairs on her skin. He is well pleased and so very turned on. “Come to me please.” He lifts off her breast and finds her lips. As they kiss, she tries to work his pants off. He stops long enough to help her.

“God how I want you Chloé.” He confesses against the pulse in her neck.

“As I do you. Please come to me Michael. Fill me.” He is huge, as she discovers now that his pants are off. Huge and extremely ready.

“Protection?” His lust afflicted brain remembers to ask.

“He had me get the implant.” A shadow, a small one, enters the room at the mention of him. He feels it and retakes her lips as his hand, once again, finds her wonderful breast.

When she is groaning and arching into him again, then he took himself in hand and eased into her.

She is so bloody tight. So hot and welcoming. It feels like a home coming. Like he was made to be buried in her.

She has never felt anything like him. Never had such a big lover. He fills her in a way no one else ever had. But it is more than just physical, she is safe in his arms. Safe joined as one flesh with him.

His slides are slow, a mere rocking in and out. Her hands, one fisted in his hair, the other clawing his back, tell him he is doing right. That and her noises, the soft breathy yes, the moans that end in his name, the keens that are getting louder.

He speeds up a little and is rewarded with a nip on his shoulder. He lifts that gorgeous bum up, placing himself deeper in her. She shudders as her legs come up to lock him in place. She starts to rock with him. They go higher with each thrust.

“Oh Chloé! Oh my love!” he calls out.

“Michael!” he feels her as she climaxes. Her muscles tighten around him. It is all he can stand. He presses in once more and shudders as he releases.

Chapter Twenty-Three

They fall asleep tangled together. He wakes before her. Watching, he sees the peace that covers her face. Peace long absent. To keep her looking thus becomes his mission that moment. Starting with...

He moves until he lays by her relaxed legs. A smile as he gently opens them with his hands then his lips. Kissing his way up those sweet thighs. Breathing in the smell of them. God was it a turn on! But this is about her. Teaching her to take pleasure.

He licks across the sweetness drying on her thigh. Now she starts to stir. Grinning he moves up, barely touching her soft hairs. A soft ah from Chloé. He licks more purposely, parting her and getting a better taste. The blood speeds up under his ear, resting against her thigh. His fingers part her farther as his tongue moves in and out of her.

“Oh!” she is fully awake now. Her hands fist in his hair as she half sits up to see what he is doing.

She is awake so he really gets to work, pressing his lips over her clit and softly sucking. Her breath stills before exiting in a rush.

“Holy hell! Don’t stop. Oh God!” her hands are steel claws in his hair. Huge eyes focus on him as he looks up to meet her.

Fingers work in and out as his mouth keeps sucking. Her hips buck, riding his face as she gets close. He keeps his eyes on her, wanting to see as she cums.

“Oh, oh God!” he sucks a bit harder and she falls of the edge. “Ah!” Her legs clamp around him as she shakes. His tongue tips out to taste her. The resulting moan has her groaning again as aftershocks run through her. When her legs relax, he grins before pulling her back over. She arches half way off the bed.

He moves up then to lay breathless beside her. “Good morning.” He says after a moment or two.

“Indeed. That was quite nice. No, it was spectacular. Would you like me to serve you?” They both look down at his erection.

“No. This was about you.”

“Use. About us.” She moves to mount him. He takes her waist as she eases down on him.

“Use. Yes. Now and forever baby.” Her rhythm is slow and easy. They cum together a bit later and fall back to sleep for awhile, with her draped over his chest.

They must join the rest of the world. Classes and their mates and family await.

Iris takes one look at her and drags her to the side of the huge auditorium. “Okay hen. What have you and Michael been about?”

“Ah we... oh Iris, we made love and it was everything.” Her eyes light at the telling.

“Chloé that is wonderful. Truly. You both wished?”

“He didn’t pressure me. I kind of pressured him.”

Iris bumps her shoulder. “You go girl. An important step. No, just the loving. The taking control back. You deciding what happens with your body.”

“Yes. A lot of wonderful things happened with it. Every time and several times.” She admits with a shy smile.

“Good for Michael.”

“I never knew it was possible to feel like this. I also made another decision. I will need your help.”

“Yes.”

“I am going to try, no, I am going to file charges against my bloody ex.”

“Hallelujah! I am quite proud of you Chloé and will do whatever I can to help.”

Michael meet up with his Uncle Devin. “How is impending fatherhood?” he asks him over pints at the local tavern.

“Wonderful. A bit frightening. How is your flat mate?”

“She is my heart. Uncle Devin, I am so gone in love with her.” His Uncle’s eyes get huge.

“Well, I knew you wanted her. I didn’t know it extended past that.”

“Oh, I always want her. We’ve well and it was so earth shaken. I’ve ne’ felt so connected to another person. I get it now, two becoming one.”

“Oh boy nephew, you’ve got it bad. The girl, Chloé, does she feel the same?”

“That is the miracle. She does. It isn’t easy. With her history. Trust is difficult. But, we are working on it together. She in therapy and making huge steps.”

“I am very glad to hear it. You know I loved Rose but it seems you were meant to meet Chloé.”

“I was. She is exactly who I am meant to be with. Like Iris is for you.” Devin slaps him on the back and they lift their glasses up, toasting the glory of love.

Chapter Twenty-Four

She holds tight to both Michael and Iris' hand as they await the arrival of the detective that is coming to interview her and Iris about the bastard who raped her. Devin is waiting to let her in.

A knock has her jumping. "Relax." Michael says as Devin lets the lady in.

"Good morning. I am Detective Ruth Turner. I serve exclusively in the sex crimes unit. There is nothing you can tell me that would shock me." She says as way of introduction.

"Hello Detective Turner. I am Chloé Laurent, my love Michael Franklin, his uncle Devin Wilson, and his uncle's love and my best mate Iris Duran. She is also a witness, after the fact."

"You have a lot of support. That is wonderful. Hello all. Chloé, I know this happened awhile ago and I imagine you feel bad about not reporting it sooner. Don't. I have worked with women and lads who didn't disclose until years later when they felt save."

"Did you make cases against them?"

"Michael right?" He nods, "About half the time. I will not say it will be easy. But just being able to say, 'you did this to me but I survived it. You didn't break me.' Is a major achievement. We will do all in our power to get him."

"Thank you."

"Chloé, who do you wish in the room?"

“Everyone. It is okay. As you said, they are my support system.”

“Alright. I am going to record this so I can focus on you instead of taken notes.” She nods. “Whenever you are ready.”

She swallows hard, takes a few deep breathes, and tightens her hand in Michael’s before beginning.

“I meet him when I was most vulnerable. My uncle had just died. He and my mum were my parents after my dad,” she waves the rest off. “So I was grieving hard. Just turned eighteen. He seemed perfect. Older, stable, handsome enough. He hid the psycho under old world manners. He quickly removed the mask as soon as I was living with him. Hit me for the first time within a week. I told Iris here I tripped over one of the unpacked boxes. It continued. Getting worse. But after, he would be so sweet. Buying presents, making gentle love to me. A fool in love,” she looks to Michael, “ or thought I was. But the incident that brings you here was almost two years later. I was in bed, recovering from one of his ‘ object lessons’ as he called it. He came in and wanted sex. I had bruises on my breasts,” a soft curse from Michael and a louder one from Devin. “ and all over my legs. I didn’t want, couldn’t bear to.... Well, you just don’t say no to Justin Radcliff. He jerked my legs open and squeezed and pulled at my breasts as he pounded into me. I screamed, no and just screamed. It bloody hurt. But he ignored all, in fact, my screams made him harder and made him go harder. Finally he finishes. He then had the nerve to say, “See all better. My loving fixes all.” Loving! Christ! I lay like a statue until he was asleep. I then wrapped a sheet around me and drove to Iris.”

“She was a sight. Banging on the door in the middle of the night. Her curls standing all about her head. The sheet about her. I drew her in. I figured it was the bloody bastard Radcliff. I urged her, over and over, to get away from him. She came in and told me what happened. I believe I told her I would beat her myself if she went back.”

“You did but I already knew I wouldn’t. The beatings were bad enough, but the rape. And I knew, you see, just like with the hitting, he would get worse. It would get worse.”

“I asked her if she wanted you called. She just wished for a hot bath and a sleep. I saw she had both. I sat by her bed that first night.”

“You never told me that.”

“I wanted to be there if bad dreams came. They didn’t that night. But did the next. She screamed out ‘ no Malcolm. It hurts.’ Over and over. I woke her and held her. Eventually they went from nightly, to weekly, to monthly.”

“She still has them occasionally.” Michael adds. His body vibrates with rage. He feels the steadying hand of Devin on his shoulder.

“Is it enough to go after him?”

“Yes Chloé. I will swear out a warrant for his arrest. I warn you that is the easy part. You will have to face him in open court. Say what he did. His barrister will question your sexual history. It will be brutal.”

“The rape was. I deserve justice. He deserves to pay for his crimes.”

“Agree. You are a brave woman. Let’s see about getting you justice.” She says the date, time, and the participants of the interview and turns off the recorder. She then addresses Michael.

“I know. He is a bloody sadistic bastard. But she needs you. Will need you more. Let us handle it.”

“My face give me away?”

“Yes. Focus on Chloé.” She returns her attention to her. “I need his full name, last known address, and what he drives.” She gives her all that. “I will ring you as soon as he is picked up.”

“Thank you.”

“Rose, did Michael tell you what Justin did to Chloé?” He had received a call from Detective Turner.

“No. I really haven’t spoken to Michael in awhile. Is it bad?” She had learned that Justin was a horrible person that Tavish wanted her to stay away from. But the details he hadn’t shared. She hadn’t asks. The shadow that covers her lovers face whenever she spoke of him was enough.

“The worst. He raped her. She finally got the courage to tell. If she can, I can.”

“Oh God.” She comes over and places her arms around him. “That poor girl.” It then hits her what else he had said. “What did he do to you?”

“Let’s just say Chloé wasn’t his first rape victim.” He whispers. She tightens her grip as waves of nausea run through her. “I need to tell this Detective Turner and Chloé. It may help make her case against him and Chloé needs to know she isn’t alone.”

“Yes. Who first?”

“Chloé. Will you come with me?”

“You have to ask? I am your partner. Of course I will.”

“The details are...”

“If you are strong enough to tell, I am strong enough to hear.”

Michael sits rubbing Chloé’ feet when there is a knock on the door. He gets up to answer it with a sigh. “Rose Tavish, this is unexpected.”

“Sorry we didn’t call ahead. I have something I must share with Chloé. Is she here?”

“Yes. Come in.” They follow him in. “Chloé, we have visitors.” She sits fully up as they enter.

“Rose. Tavish. Hello.”

“Hello.” Rose replies.

“Chloé, Detective Turner called me.” She jerks. She had forgotten that he was that bastard’ brother. They are so different. “She asks if I have any information on my brother to

collaborate what you told her. I do. You need to hear it first. You are not alone in this Chloé.”

“Oh Jesus.” She turns as pale as a corpse. Michael is immediately by her side.

“You don’t have to hear. He can just tell Detective Turner.” He takes her hands, checking her pulse.

“No, thank you my love but I need to hear. He needs to tell. Please Rose and Tavish have a seat. Michael I think this conversation is going to need something stronger than tea.”

“Oh aye.” He gets up as the others sit across from her. Whisky is served.

“Thank you. I have never told anyone this. Burying it was all I could do at the time.” He stops to take a drink of the whisky. Rose rests her head against him as Chloé does with Michael. “He raped a girl in front of me when I was fourteen. Beat me to a bloody pulp and told me that if I told anyone he would kill me.”

The room is filled with stunned silence after he finishes. Finally the sobs of Chloé break it. Michael pulls her into his arms.

“I’m so sorry. If I would have told someone, you might not have also been his victim.”

“You were just a child.” Rose tries to soothe. She feels like being sick and quickly takes another drink.

Chloé weeps for her and Tavish, the lost hidden victims. The children unseen by the adults that don’t want to face the ugly truth. She cries for all those still unseen.

“Yes we were. You must tell Detective Turner.”

“I will. I’m so sorry. “

“Not your fault.” Chloé manages to say. Only Michael knows why his story is so devastating.

“It isn’t. We thank you Tavish for sharing.” He looks down at his lady. She nods. Yes, he may tell them. “Chloé’s father also sexually abused her. That is what makes your tale so

much harder to hear. What made her so vulnerable to your brother's evil."

"Oh god!" Rose utters.

"Hell, I didn't... I'm doubly sorry then for..."

"Don't be. I am not alone. I knew that but... It hurts to hear what he did. A gut punch. But it is healing to talk about. Healing to hear others stories. We both survived. We are not victims but survivors. My father is dead but if we can get justice for myself and that other young girl, it will help."

"Yes. Yes it will." He rings Detective Turner and sets up a time to come in and talk the next day. "Shall we toast surviving?"

They do.

Chapter Twenty-Five

They sit in silence for a bit after they leave. The horror of what Tavish had went through still lingers. After a bit of quiet, he covers the small space between them and places his arm around her. She relaxes into him.

“I know what you need.”

“Thanks Michael. But I can’t right now.”

“Oh not that. I couldn’t either, truly. No, I meant a distraction. A mate from class has a cat that had kittens eight weeks ago. I was thinking we could go pick one out.”

“You want to get a kitten?” he can’t see her face and can’t tell from her tone if she is happy or not.

“If that pleases you.”

“Oh yes Michael! I’ve always wanted... My Uncle Loren was allergic. Then well...” she doesn’t want to discuss him anymore. “So yes please.”

“Awesome. Come love.” He slips her shoes and jacket on and they walk out. His friend lives close so they walk to remove the alcohol haze and to try to shake off some of the horror.

They are lead back to a basket full of grey fluffiness. Chloé cries out in joy and falls down beside them. “Oh the darlings!” she calls out as she softly strokes them. Michael kneels beside her and takes a picture of her joy filled face. Followed by the kittens.

One seems particularly attached to her hand. It keeps coming up as she strokes them. Rubbing up against her.

“I think that one choice you.” Michael says with a smile. She smiles back and lifts the little thing up. They both hear the purrs.

“Yes. Is it a boy or girl?” Michael gently spreads it’s legs. It meows, protesting such an intrusion.

“Sorry little man.”

“A boy. What shall we name him?”

“Butterfly.” He promptly says.

“Oh perfect. Would you like to come home with us Butterfly?” In reply, the cat curls up against her chest and closes his eyes in contentment.

“I take that as a yes.” Michael helps her up. She tucks Butterfly into her jacket, they thank his mate, and leave.

The stop at a shop on the way home and shop for supplies for the kitten as he sleeps contently against her chest. He was right. It was just what she needed.

It hits her later, in the shower. She stops letting the bath mat hit the floor as her heart pounds and she breaks into a cold sweat. Her head lands on the shower wall as waves of nausea wash through her.

“They’re not here.” She whispers to herself. It doesn’t help as the panic attack has already began.

He doesn’t notice at first. Playing with the kitten and a string toy. It was only when Butterfly curls up in exhaustion that he realizes the shower has been running way to long. He stands. “Chloé!”

The thoughts running through her mind are unable to be tamed. They are interchangeable between the two bastards. She sees them both, hears them both screaming in her head. She isn’t even able to cry out frozen in terror.

“Chloé honey, you okay?” He waits a second. Only the sound of the running water answers. He opens the door and walks over to the shower. “Chloé?” He sees the outline of her but she doesn’t move or answer him. He pulls the shower door open. The chill from the now cold water, greets him. “God Chloé. You must be freezing.” He gets the water off. She still stands motionless except for her body’s reaction to the chill. The shivers and goose bumps tell him she is alive. With a muttered oath, he wraps a towel around her and lifts her out. He dries her unresisting body and wraps her in her thick robe. “Chloé, you are safe. I am here and he isn’t.”

She still is stiff so he leads her into her room and gets her laid down, joining her, holding her tight. “You are safe.” He repeats. Butterfly comes in search of his people. Michael calls him up on the bed and places him against her chest. He curls up and starts purring. She cracks then, shaking and crying.

“You are home. No one is here but us.” He softly says.

“Oh God Michael. They were in my head. Both of them. Screaming. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t do anything.”

“Panic attack.”

“Yes. First in years. God.”

“Tavish’s story. I am sorry baby.”

“Not your fault. Glad you were here”

“Me too or you might have froze to death in the shower.”

“That is why I am so cold.”

“Yes.” He wraps more of his hot body around her.

“I pray Tavish isn’t going through the same thing.” She worries as she sinks against him.

“Me too but Rose is a kind girl. She will see to him.” She gets quiet as she strokes Butterfly. He is quiet with her, just holding her.

“Rose. You would have been better off with her.” She says as she watches the sun set out of her window.

“Chloé, do you really believe that because I sure don’t. I love you. Adore you. All of you. I wish you hadn’t went through what you went through but only because it is hurting you so much not because your panic attacks are an inconvenience. Christ girl, I would take them if I could. You are everything to me. Bloody everything.”

“But Michael...”

“Everything. There is no other girl I could possibly want now that you hold my heart. No one. We will get you through this. A team eh? Always.”

“She will have children.”

“So. I have you. A million kids couldn’t take your place.”

“Michael!” Her tears land on his hand. “God I do love you.”

“ Convenient that as I can’t imagine one moment of my future without you in it. I love you Chloé. So bloody much.” He holds her the rest of that night.

Chapter Twenty-Six

He has an idea to really show he means forever. Maybe a bit crazy, a bit premature but her insecurities drive him. That and a love deeper than words. They sleep, Butterfly and her. He leaves them there and calls his mamma outside the room.

“Mama. Not bad. I need a favor. Can you send Granny’s ring here. Chloé aye. Yes, I know mamma but she is it. I know but it would have ne’ worked as she isn’t Chloé. Yes she and Tavish are well. Perfect together. Thank you. Yes I love you too. Yes I will. We will. Thank you I knew you would. Perfect. Talk later. Good bye.”

He knows her concerns are valid. He had talked of marrying Rose but he now knows that it would have never worked. It was soon but he will never want anyone else. They will go down to see his family after this case with the bastard Radcliff is settled. His mamma understands. She is sending the ring down with his brother-in-law, Lennox. He has to come this way for business. That settled, he starts breakfast and coffee.

She comes out just as he is finishing. Her eyes are blood shoot and cloudy with sleep and pain. It is all he can stand. He draws her close.

“My love, how do you feel?”

“Hollow.” Confessed against his chest. “Emptied out.”

“Can you eat?”

“I need to. Will try.” He hates to let her go but does. Seeing her sat down, he serves her breakfast and coffee. She picks at it but gets some down.

“What do you need? The therapist?”

“No but thanks. Just you. Can we skip classes and just hang out?”

“Absolutely.” He sees the dishes into the dish washer and they retire into the living room. He places her on his lap and for awhile they just cuddle.

“Would you find out from Rose if Tavish is okay?”

“Yes.” He adjusts her to reach his phone. Ringing Rose, he holds her close with the other hand. “Rose, we were wondering if Tavish was alright after last night? Oh he did. I am sorry, we are. Chloé too. Yah, it is but... Yes it will. Please tell him we asked after him and will be praying for him. Thanks I will. Good bye.”

“He had a bad night too.”

“Yes. Nightmares. Hard but if it places that monster behind bars, we agree it will be worth it.”

“It will.”

“Rose wanted you to know she is praying for you.”

“Thanks. She is a good woman.”

“Yes. She is. You are. Tavish is a good lad. We have lots of really good people’s support.”

“Yes. It helps. Not being alone.”

“Never again. Promise.”

She sighs and snuggles closer.

“You, I, and Butterfly, forever eh?” The kitten, cleaning himself on the floor, looks up at the mention of his name.

“As long as we live.” He planned on waiting until the ring arrives but the opportunity was just to perfect. “Chloé Laurent, will you marry me?”

He holds his breath after he asks. A risk to have asked now. She is so bloody fragile. But he could do nothing else.

“I wasn’t expecting...”

“Nor was I. I meant to wait until Lennox brought my grandma’s old engagement ring. But it just seemed the perfect time. I will never want anyone else, will never love another girl as I love you. That I swear. I will be here to sooth the past, to secure the future, to make the present as joyful as I can. I also swear that.”

“Michael, are you sure? I won’t suddenly get better. If they convict him, it will be a relief but won’t take away what he did. They did. We will be living with it a long time, maybe the rest of our lives. Butterfly and other pets will be the only children we have. That will not change.”

“I know all that. Yes, I am very sure. It will always be we. We will handle all together.”

“I want that. To marry you. Yes. Yes Michael. Lord I pray you don’t grow to regret it.”

“Never. Not for one second.” He is smiling and the joy bubbling up comes out in giggles. “Oh my love.”

“My love. Forever”

“Yes forever.” He takes her lips and they are soon making noises that have Butterfly hiding under their bed.

He slips her shirt off before retaken her lips. She groans, frustrated, as she tries to get his off. He moves away and helps her, slipping her bra off at the same time. They come back together and the feel of his chest hair against her erect nipples has her mewling into his mouth. His hand holds her bum tight, pressing her jeans against his.

Lips trail down, sucking and kissing the tender skin of her neck. She keens and his cock tightens more. “That is it, give you all your small noises.”

Its a huge turn on. So it is no trouble to give into him. Especially when he starts to love on the curve of her breasts.

Deep groans, as her hand holds tight to his head, as her other hand explores his arm. The muscles there jump under her attention. Then his mouth reaches her first nipple.

“Michael!” She calls out as her head drops back. His hand moves to the center of her back to hold her up. His other plays with the nipple his mouth doesn’t have. “Oh lord, does that feel good!” He grins around her nipple as he keeps his eyes on her. He starts to suck deeper. Her hand tightens on his hair and arm. Their pelvis start to move together as they both get more turned on.

“Need you. Need you now!” He maneuvers them around to get their jeans off. He then places her back on his lap, holding himself up so she can sink onto him. “Holy hell! Oh Jesus! So fantastic!”

“Come back here.” She leans back against him. He takes her other nipple as she starts to slide up and down him. He growls low against it as he feels her tighten against him.

“Yes!” she cries out as the pleasure floods through her. He pulls off her breast to kiss her. Their tongues dance as her body continues to grip him. When it loosens up, he lifts up.

“I love you Chloé.” He declares as he places his hands on her hips. He helps guide her back up and over before joining her.

“ “I only knew the last thing you said. I love you too. So bloody much.” She says as she curls against him after.

“Yes, I must Chloé for, when joined with you, I tend to lose my English. I called you my future wife and lover”

“I am proud to be both.” She lifts her head, kissing his neck. “My sweet lover and future husband.”

“God I can get used to that. Mrs. Franklin.”

“Oh I like that!” They eventually move to the bed where Butterfly rejoins them.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

She is heading out to go see Mrs. Robin for therapy. The soft meow catches her attention. Looking down, she sees the big eyes of the tabby kitten looking up at her. “Oh you poor thing.” She scopes to pick him up. Tiny, he fits in the center of her palm. His ears are snug against his skull. Shielding him from the cold Scottish air, she turns and goes back in the flat.

“Chloé, what are you doing back? Forget something?”

“No found something. Or someone.” He rises with a frown and comes up to her. She opens her hand.

“Oh my. How darling is...”

“He. The runt, I believe. Found outside in the bushes out front. You think Butterfly would like a playmate?”

“I image he would.” She hands the tiny kitten to him. He holds the little fluff of fur close.

“I must go. Think of a name for our new son. I love you.”

“I love you.” They kiss and she slips back out. “So what are we to name you?”

She makes it just in time. Lead back, she takes her normal seat on the love seat. Mrs. Robin joins her.

“Hello Chloé, how has your week been?”

“Very interesting. I pressed charges against my rapist, his brother also told me and the police what he did to him. Throw

me into a panic attack. Michael rescued me from it. He then proposed. Oh and we got a new kitten.”

“Well, that is a load. Let’s start to unpack that.”

You look like an Elmer. That do?” a loud purr. “ Okay then.” Elmer it is. Want to meet Butterfly?”

Butterfly is asleep in the center of their bed. Michael smiles as he lays Elmer beside him. He is amazed at how fast the kitten responds. Raising along with every strand of grey fur on his body, he stands, back arched, tail out, hissing at this intruder.

“Now Butterfly, none of that. Elmer here will be your brother.” Michael says in the most severe voice he can. He really wants to laugh.

Elmer sits staring at the other cat. He doesn’t arch his own fur or hiss back. Michael stands ready to move the new cat if Butterfly decides to get aggressive. But the kitten, seeing he wasn’t intimidating the interloper, settles back down and lays back down. He settles for given Elmer an evil look. Elmer, missing the comfort and companionship of his litter, lays up against him, curling his tail around his. Michael stands, with baited breath, to see how Butterfly handles this. He lets it out when he sees Butterfly accepting this new arrangement. He, in fact, relaxes farther and the combined purrs soon feel the air.

The phone rings in the middle of the night, badly startling the sleeping kittens and their parents. A lot has happened since Elmer joined their family three months previously.

The bastard Malcolm was attacked in prison. The inmates sparred Chloé and Tavish from testifying. He was killed in his cell. He isn’t mourned. With that weight off her, Chloé asks Michael to make her his wife. A prospect he happily accepts. They are married a month later, a small ceremony with Iris and Devin as witnesses. They settle into married life with their feline children.

“Who?” Chloé grumbles as Michael reaches out to answer it.

“Hello, seriously. Of course. We will meet you there. Tell Iris to hold on. You take some of those deep breathes too.” His wife has fallen back to sleep. He smiles as his heart lurches as it always does at the sight of her. “Chloé, wake up hun.” She mumbles and tries to bury her head farther in. “Iris is in labor. She is asking for you.” Her head pops out then.

They arrive at the hospital twenty minutes later. Rushing up to the OB floor, Chloé tries to calm her own nerves. To see her best female mate in such distress! Michael’s hand is warm and solid in hers. It helps a lot as they enter the lift and press the button for the third floor.

They hear her as soon as they exit. Michael winces when he hears her and a shudder goes through Chloé. They hurry towards the piercing sound.

“I can’t bloody do this! You blasted try!” Chloé is at her side.

“I am here Iris. I am here.” Her huge eyes turn towards Chloé.

“Chloé, I can’t do this. They don’t believe me but I really can’t.”

“Michael, take Devin down to get coffee.” He looks at her with concern. “It is okay. Just don’t stay gone long.” He nods and leads his anxious uncle out.

She picks up her chart as Iris reaches for her hand. Reading over it, she sees she is doing it. She is almost 6 cm’s.

“Iris, my darling, you are doing this. I will be here so you can draw on my strength.”

“Oh God Chloé, you are so smart not to... Holy hell! Here we go again!”

“Breath with me Iris. Come your baby needs the oxygen. Look at me. Match my breaths.” They breathe through the biting pulling of the pre-transition contraction. Then another. Michael and Devin return.

Transition is pure hell. She clings to Michael and Devin’s hands, as Michael sees how much pain it is causing Chloé to

have her hold hers. The curses as her uterus is forced open the last few centimeters Finally.

“Okay Mrs. Wilson, you can push.” The way to cheery midwife says. Devin gets behind her. Michael keeps a hold of her hand and Chloé stands to her side and offers encouragement.

“Good Iris. Very good. Grab a breath and another, just like that.”

“Tired. I can’t.” She sighs out.

“You can and are. I see hair. A bit more.” The midwife replies. A few more curses.

“Save your breath. Use it for pushing.” Chloé advises. A grunt and with Devin’s assistance, she pushes again.

Twenty minutes and an eternity later.

“Blow as I clear the mouth and nose.” Chloé blows and pants with her. “Good. Now one more push.” A deep grunt and the child slips out. A second of pure silence then the ‘eh eh’ cries of a newborn fill the room. “Congratulations Mr. and Mrs. Wilson on your big healthy son.”

“A boy.” Devin breathes.

“He is alright?”

“Very.” She lifts the baby on to his mamma’s chest and they all cry.

Hamish is a chunk. Almost ten pounds and 22 inches. As his mamma sleeps and his daddy makes phone calls, Chloé sits and holds him. Michael kneels beside her.

“He is so wonderful. Look at those tiny finger nails Michael.”

“He is. They are very cute.”

“I am so glad we were here to see him be born. We will be here for all his big moments as his aunt and uncle.”

“I am technically his cousin.” He says with a smile as he stokes the baby’s small hand.

“True but married to his aunt.”

“Yes. Besides uncle makes more sense. Either way, yes we will be here for him.”

“Michael as beautiful as he is. As amazing as all these was and is, it doesn’t change my mind. I will be a grand Aunt Chloé to Hamish but I still can’t be a mamma.”

“I know my love. Truly after seeing Iris go through that and Devin having to witness it... Look I can bare pain myself,” he stretches out the hand Iris had clinched on to. “But I am not sure I could handle witnessing yours. We will spoil Hamish, Small Michael, Maggie, and any other nieces and nephews our wonderful family provides us with. It is enough.”

“God, I love you so much.”

“As I love you Mrs. Franklin. Forever.”

Also by Ashley Zakrzewski

Go check out the Rough Edges (Small Town Firefighter series)

[Rough Edges Series](#)

You can also find out more on her website

www.ashleyzakrzewski.com