

ENTITLED LOVE NOVELLAS: FOUR

UNWANTED

romcoms in the modern aristocracy

*They hate each
other ... to
distraction.*



RACHEL ROWAN

Unwanted

Rachel Rowan

Please visit www.rachelrowan.com to sign up to Rachel Rowan's newsletter and for more information on her books.

Edited by Libby Patrick, Headlight Fluid Press

Unwanted

Published 2023

1st Edition

Copyright © Rachel Rowan 2023

The right of Rachel Rowan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This book is a work of fiction. The characters and events in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Contents

[Author's note](#)

[Dedication](#)

[1. CHAPTER ONE](#)

[2. CHAPTER TWO](#)

[3. CHAPTER THREE](#)

[4. CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[5. CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[6. CHAPTER SIX](#)

[7. CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[8. CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[9. CHAPTER NINE](#)

[10. CHAPTER TEN](#)

[11. CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[12. CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[13. CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[14. CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[15. CHAPTER FIFTEEN](#)

[Free bonus content](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

Author's note

This book uses British English spellings, e.g. “realised” instead of “realized” and “travelled” instead of “traveled”. I promise they are not typos.

For fairy tales and happy ever afters.

Chapter One

Laura

LAURA USMAN, PINK-HAIRED DEMI-PUNK and impoverished artist, hesitated on the pavement outside the large white Mayfair townhouse and felt something she didn't normally admit to feeling.

Inferior.

It wasn't that she thought the rich people attending the party inside were better than her. They were probably actually far worse, morally speaking. Or at least, that's what her experience of the trust fund kids at university had led her to conclude.

It was just a bit like that feeling of standing next to someone much taller and suddenly feeling small in comparison. And the big white house, with its black iron railings and the bright globe lights on either side of the porch—the house that was owned by a real live *duke*—well, that made her shabby little flat above a kebab shop seem...shabby. And Laura herself couldn't help but feel shabby too, and underdressed, even though, as someone of punk-grunge inclinations, underdressing was basically her core aesthetic.

She shivered as she stood on the dark pavement still eyeing the house. The chill October wind blew sharply through the short, black velvet jacket she was wearing. It was the smartest jacket she owned and had ironically—or perhaps fittingly—been bought from a charity shop for a fancy dress party.

Laura had no dresses even close to suitable for tonight, so she had done what she normally felt most comfortable doing and defied convention. She wore men's black trousers, belted at her waist, with a white silk shirt that her best friend and ex-flatmate Natalie had left behind tucked in, though it fitted very differently on Laura's shorter, curvier frame.

The party going on in the house was the Marchioness Banberry's twenty-eighth birthday party. Laura knew this because, strange as it was, she had been invited.

And she had been invited because, even more strangely, the birthday girl, the new Marchioness Banberry, was Laura's ex-flatmate and best friend Natalie McClaire.



The man who opened the door to Laura was clearly staff, but looked much smarter than she did in a black suit and narrow tie.

He looked Laura up and down and sighed irritably. "Staff to the *back* door. Didn't you read the agency's instructions? Honestly, I hate working private residences. No one ever knows where to go."

"Erm, no...that's—"

But the man was already leading her down a corridor to the back of the house. Laura blushed—which wasn't like her—and felt too embarrassed to correct him—which also wasn't like her. But she was totally out of her comfort zone here, and the glimpse she got through a wide open doorway of the glittering room beyond, and all the glittering laughing people inside it, made her quite glad to be heading *away* from it.

She was deposited in a hot, heaving kitchen where sweating white-aproned chefs worked furiously and a half-dozen black-trouserred, white-shirted waiting staff poured or carried champagne.

There was a woman, about Laura's age, dressed in a skirt suit with a black headpiece in her ear. She looked Laura up and down and rolled her eyes. "For the love of god, piercings? *Pink hair?* I am having words with this agency. Never mind. Take a tray and get to the ballroom. They're drinking like fish out there."

So Laura found herself back in the corridor outside the kitchen, now with a tray of champagne glasses in her hands.

What. The. Fuck.

She wanted to laugh. Or rather, she wanted to *want* to laugh. What she really felt like doing was crying and running away because this was beyond mortifying.

She was thankfully alone in the corridor as she stood there panicking, a hot, horrible rushing feeling in her head. She had to get rid of the champagne. She couldn't walk in there carrying it. What if Nat saw...? She knew her friend would

laugh it off with her, but what if there was, just for an instant, a flicker of pity in Nat's eyes?

Laura turned abruptly in the other direction, away from the ballroom, and walked down corridor after corridor into a darker, quieter part of the house.

She could dump the champagne, go to the party, see Nat for ten minutes and leave.

Go home. Have a scalding hot bath. Try to scrub the shame of the last ten minutes from her flesh.

She spotted a half-open door and shouldered her way through it, glasses clinking precariously on the tray.

It was a study of some kind, dimly lit by an old-fashioned desk lamp on a large leather-topped desk. Laura walked over to the desk and put the tray of glasses down.

“Hello. I didn't know they did room service.”

She spun around at the voice, but her foot got caught on the rucked edge of an antique rug. She stumbled on her unfamiliar heels and somehow managed to trip over her own feet, landing on her arse with absolutely not a single shred of dignity.

A tall, male figure unfolded himself from where he'd been sitting on a window seat and came over. The streetlamp outside the window showed nothing more than a silhouette until he moved into the orange light of the desk lamp. Laura saw a young man, broad-shouldered and narrow-hipped, with straight blond hair just long enough to flop into his eyes. He was wearing a royal blue tux. The bow tie and first few

buttons of his shirt were undone, and, like his tux, his waistcoat wasn't the standard black but a burgundy paisley silk.

He looked down at her and laughed.

He laughed so much he bent double, then he tried to get himself under control, still chuckling as he straightened up and tossed his hair from his eyes with a practised movement.

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m stoned out of my nut. It’s not funny really.” Then he started laughing again, but more quietly this time. He held out his hand.

She found herself staring at it, her heart still pounding from the shock of his voice, from the fall, from his sudden appearance. From everything.

Slowly, she reached out to take his hand, then realised he wasn't giving her a hand up, but was holding something out for her to take. The stubby end of a joint.

She looked from his hand to his face, finding that he was studying her with a mixture of confusion and curiosity. His eyes were swimming-pool blue and his face was so incredibly well-sculpted that Laura felt slightly embarrassed just existing in her own flawed state.

She looked back at his equally well-sculpted hand and the joint he was offering her.

“Take it,” he insisted. His voice was smooth and deep, carrying the musical hint of a foreign accent. “You look like you need it.”

She took the joint wordlessly, feeling dazed, feeling like she ought to at least say something if she could only get her brain to start working again.

The man crossed to the desk. He snagged two glasses of champagne then sat down cross-legged next to her on the floor as though they were here for a casual picnic.

“What are you doing?” she said.

“Joining you,” he said, passing her a glass. He touched his to hers as though to say ‘cheers.’ “Sorrow loves company.”

“How do you...? Never mind.”

“How do I know you’re unhappy? One—”

He held up a long, tanned finger as he spoke, and somehow just the sight of it gave Laura instantaneously inappropriate thoughts.

“—Because you’re at work. Two—”

Another finger. He had strong, lean fingers. Probably very skilful. He looked strong in general. Fit. Tanned. Healthy. Incredible body... Her eyes trailed along the line of his arm, to his broad shoulders, the angled jaw... She took a gulp of champagne.

“—Because you’re clearly lost. Three—”

She really wished he would stop it with the fingers. Her insides clenched involuntarily. And it wasn’t as though she was desperate or anything. Her boyfriend had only dumped

her a couple of weeks ago. She shouldn't be feeling quite this...responsive.

“—You just got laughed at by a complete idiot. And four—”

One last finger, all of them now except the thumb... His hand tanned and lean, and beyond it, his eyes, so brilliantly blue...

“—Because when you came in here you looked... abandoned. Alone.”

He watched her face for a while, his head tilted, his eyes searching, while her heart raced and she hoped the heat flooding her body wasn't showing in her cheeks.

“Am I speaking in French again?” he said. “Is that why you're just staring at me? *Est-ce que je parle à nouveau en français? C'est pour ça que tu me regardes avec ces beaux yeux?*”

Oh God. The accent. That face. Those fingers. Who *was* this man?

“Have we met?” he said. “I feel like we've met.”

“No... We... We definitely haven't.”

“So why do you feel so familiar?”

She felt a little strange inside at that, her heart a quivering, fledgling thing. But she lifted the joint, eyebrow raised. “Maybe because of this?”

He grinned and conceded, “Perhaps.” Then he reached out to take it from her, his warm fingers brushing hers. He

watched her as he took a drag and exhaled out the side of his mouth. “But you came and found me, just when I was feeling lonely. So I think that makes us friends, no?”

Laura felt as though she had fallen down a rabbit hole rather than just tripping over a rug.

“I’m not sure it works like that,” she said.

He smiled slightly. “Maybe it should.”

“I don’t even know who you are.”

“Another reason why I like you.” He passed the joint back.

She put it to her lips. The paper was a tiny bit damp from his mouth.

“I’m the charity case,” he said. “Also known as Tom Brewerly. Would you believe I’m a viscount?” He pointed at her with the hand that held his champagne, his smile teasing. “Don’t let the minor title fool you, I haven’t a penny to my name. Just in case you were planning on wooing me and marrying me for my money.”

Laura just looked at him, because of course he was a viscount. He couldn’t be anything else, except perhaps a fairy tale prince. “Do I look like the sort of person to woo anyone?”

The man, Tom, considered her carefully, as though taking her question seriously. “No,” he concluded. “You look rather more like the kind to take the would-be wooer’s balls and skewer them on a stake as part of a public art installation.”

Laura laughed. “Wooer’s Balls *would* make a good name for a piece.”

Tom chuckled and reached out again for the joint. It was almost burnt to nothing. His fingers lingered against hers for a moment, their gazes locked, and her heart skipped, then started to race, like something falling down a hill and picking up speed. She had no idea what awaited her at the bottom.

“I should get back.” She put her glass down, seeing stars for a moment as she stood up too quickly. Or maybe it was from the night she was having. Maybe it was just the man.

“Wait,” he said, standing too. He left his glass on the floor, dropping the joint in it. He took hold of her hand, and Laura felt a jolt at the contact.

By the flicker of surprise on his face, she thought he felt it too.

“Sorrow really does love company,” he said, voice pitched low. “Don’t leave me alone in mine.”

“I need to get back to the party.”

“You’ve clocked in, signed on, whatever? You’ll get paid for tonight whether you’re in that room serving all those idiots or in this room with just one of them.”

Of course. Because he thought she was a waitress too.

“I don’t want to go out there,” he confessed.

“Why not?”

“Partly, because they’re all deathly boring. And partly because they all pity me.”

“Pity you? Why?”

Tom looked down at her, his blond hair falling forwards but not quite hiding the intensity in his blue eyes. Her pulse pressed against his where their fingers joined.

“Because I have nothing and they have everything, and it makes them uncomfortable.”

“You’re a viscount.”

“Yes, so I remain.”

He smiled as though at some secret, slightly unpalatable joke. And then his eyes moved to her lips and back up, and an urgent, pressing sort of heat pushed the amusement from his eyes. “A kiss at midnight, Cinderella.”

“What?”

“It’s the only thing that can save the evening.”

Her heart pounded. This was ridiculous. Or it would have been, coming from any other man. But the way he said *Cinderella* made it sound as though she was from the filthy, adults-only retelling.

“Midnight?” She found herself saying, her voice seeming far away. “It’s not even nine.”

“Time is an abstract concept.” He gave a very Gallic shrug, making a dismissive gesture with the hand that wasn’t holding hers. “Midnight is the most romantic of hours, and I say that

right now...here...in this space between our lips... It is midnight. Can't you feel it?"

He brought his free hand up and gently touched her lower lip.

What the hell was happening? But her whole body leapt at the touch, at the thought of it... Kissing this strange and beautiful man, those sensual lips, that exquisite jaw... She'd met him five minutes ago, how could she possibly be about to kiss him?

His thumb lingered on her lower lip, pulling it down slightly as a thrill of anticipation rushed through her.

"Say no," he murmured.

She didn't. So he bent his head to hers.

Her heart hammered as though she was running for her life, and her body sank against his, feeling the hard line of his groin pressing against her stomach, as he groaned into her mouth. He tasted of weed and booze. Absolutely, beautifully filthy, and his tongue did filthy things to hers.

She pushed her fingers into his hair, ran them down the strong line of his neck, gripped his broad shoulders and stroked her way down the hard planes on his chest, luxuriating in the feel of the stiff, thick fabric of his expensive tux and the warm, firm body underneath it. He pulled her against him, his hands on her back, her waist, cupping her arse, pressing her against his erection as he ground his hips into her with a low growl. And her body blossomed eagerly in response. Tom

lifted her thigh around his hip, running his hand along it, holding her there as his other hand found its way under her top to her breast.

Fuck, this was wild. So fast. So fucking hot. She'd never wanted a guy so badly in her life. It was like every cell in her body cried out to every cell in his. Nothing, nothing, should keep any part of her from touching any part of him—

Her phone rang.

No, no—

Tom pulled back, breathing hard.

Her phone kept ringing, buzzing in her pocket. He met her eyes, a question under the haze of lust.

Ring, ring. Ring, ring.

She muttered a swear word and pulled her phone out, then swore again at the name on the screen.

Nat. The Marchioness Banberry. Her best friend, whose birthday it was, and who was clearly wondering where she was.

“I have to go,” she said, not meeting Tom's eyes.

He took a step back from her. “Maybe that's just as well,” he said, his light tone at odds with the huskiness lingering in his voice. “Because I don't think a quick fuck has quite the same romantic sound as a midnight kiss. Though I think we both would have enjoyed it.”

She glanced up and found him smiling slightly, his hair dishevelled, lips swollen. His slightly shaken look made her think the heat of their kiss had taken him by surprise too.

She had no idea how to say goodbye after something like this. So she just walked to the door—running away.

“*Au revoir*, Cinderella. Will we find each other again one day, I wonder?”

Laura hoped not. For the sake of her sanity...and her heart.

Chapter Two

Laura

A MONTH LATER, ON a bitterly cold November afternoon, Laura stepped off a train from London and onto the platform at Aberdeen Station in Scotland. She had been travelling since six that morning, and she still wasn't at her destination.

She had a rucksack on her back, a canvas hold-all hanging awkwardly from her already burdened shoulder, and a wheeled suitcase with a broken wheel that didn't turn and instead scraped across the floor as she made her way off the platform and out into the main concourse. It seemed like a lot of luggage, but given the items inside were everything she currently possessed in the whole world, it didn't really feel like much at all.

Tucking herself against a wall out of the passing flow of commuters, she pulled her phone from her coat pocket to recheck the instructions from Nat.

It looks like two buses, I'm afraid! The 201 to Banchory then another to the village of Midmure. The caretaker, Greaves, will pick you up there. I'd ask him to drive all the way to Aberdeen, but I think he's about eighty, and it might just finish him off. Are you sure you don't want me to get a car to drive you up from London? It will be so much easier for you!

Laura checked the location of the bus stop then shoved her phone back in her pocket before pulling her gloves on. Her fingers were already tingling with the cold, and she was still

inside the station. At least it would be warmer on the bus. She hoped.

Of course, she could have been sitting in perfect comfort in a chauffeur-driven car. Nat would have arranged it all happily. Nat would have *paid* for it all happily. Nat would do anything at all to make her best friend happy—except the one thing she couldn't, which was make everything go back to how it used to be when they were just two friends and flatmates barely dodging the poverty line, living day-to-day on crappy jobs and supermarket wine and the shared dream of one day *making it*.

And then, seemingly overnight, Natalie *had* made it. She'd got her big acting break, inherited a fortune and a title to go with it, and met the love of her life. And Laura...

Laura hadn't.

Laura had stayed behind in the crappy flat they had shared and found a new and terrible flatmate and failed to sell any artwork or get a single commission, and her boyfriend dumped her and—

Well. Everything just *sucked*.

And there was no Natalie to laugh about it with and drown her sorrows with, because Natalie was busy up in Glasgow filming the drama series she was starring in, and Natalie was busy learning how to be a marchioness, and Natalie was busy being madly in love, and Natalie was just...not there anymore. Natalie was in a whole new world where you didn't need to visit the supermarket late at night to find the reduced deals, or work nights in bars where customers—always men—told you

to smile more, or have your boyfriend who you didn't like that much in the first place dump you because they needed to be free to "express themselves physically as well as artistically," which Laura knew full well was code for "shagging the new undergrads at Goldsmiths."

So Laura cried a little when Natalie offered her a paid job: six months as artist-in-residence at Castle Deveron, the Marchioness's main Scottish residence, with all food and accommodation paid for and nothing to do but create new textile and wallpaper designs for the castle's planned refurbishment.

A well-paid job. No rent, no bills. A celebrity client on her CV. And six months living in what looked—from the photo Nat had sent her—to be a literal fairy-tale castle in beautiful rural Scotland.

I'm not just offering it to you because you're a friend, Lo. But because you're also the best bloody artist and textile designer I know. I don't want anyone else designing the curtains and wallpaper and everything else I'm going to be looking at for the next however many years of my life. Edward and I plan to split our time between Deveron and Lansbury once the refurb work is done. We might raise our children there (Shut up! No, we haven't discussed it!), and I want you to be a part of it. Say yes. Pleeeeeease.

The subtext being: this is not charity. So Laura said yes. Of course she said yes. She gave her notice on her London flat, got rid of all her stuff because she couldn't afford to store it,

and used the last of her money to buy a ticket to Aberdeen. Because it was *not charity*. It was work, and she would make her own way there.

Like a stubborn idiot.

And now, as she sat at the tiny bus shelter in the tiny village of Midmure, three hours after leaving Aberdeen, she was also a very, very cold idiot. A shivering idiot who was bitterly regretting every decision she'd ever made in life, not least the decision to get rid of her pink faux-fur leopard-print coat and replace it with a boringly respectable black one, because the faux fur had been not only warm but also brightly unmissable.

Greaves was not here. No one was here. She had been waiting for forty minutes and hadn't seen a single car or passerby. No one had answered the number she had for the castle. Pulling one glove off her painfully cold hand, Laura took out her phone again and tried to load a map. The signal was bad, and Laura kept an eye on her dwindling battery as the map slowly appeared, block by block.

It was maybe...three miles? A three-mile walk down country lanes in freezing drizzle with darkness falling... Brilliant. Fucking brilliant.

Laura set off, suitcase dragging behind her. Maybe she'd meet Greaves on the way.

Are you sure you don't want me to get a car to drive you up from London...?

Screw you, pride. Screw you, hindsight.

The drizzle turned into pelting rain.



Laura had been walking for about thirty minutes when she heard a car engine approaching. It was the first sign of life she had seen anywhere. And she was so cold and wet and sore from carrying her luggage that she was determined to flag it down, even if the driver might quite possibly be a psychopathic axe murderer. Because who else would choose to live in a place like this?

The car approached with a rattling engine noise that Laura tentatively identified as a) old and b) unhealthy. Its headlamps were feeble orange discs, barely strong enough to force their light through the sluicing rain.

Laura stepped out from the hedge, waving her arms, ready to jump back if the driver seemed unlikely to stop. But the car slammed on its brakes, or what was left of them, and came to a shuddering stop, steam hissing from a worrying number of places.

Laura walked forwards, and in the fading evening light and the weak glow from the headlights, made out the unmistakable lines of a Rolls Royce Silver Wraith—her dad was a car enthusiast and had a model of one on the mantelpiece at home.

The driver wound down their window, and for the second time in her life, Laura came face-to-face with Viscount Thomas Brewerly.

Chapter Three

Laura

“IT’S YOU!” TOM EXCLAIMED, looking extremely shocked.

Laura, on the other hand, wasn’t particularly shocked to see Tom, though she hadn’t quite been expecting to meet him here, like this, in the freezing rain, looking like a drowned rat, nose red, teeth chattering.

She had known Tom was now living at Deveron. And though it hadn’t at all played any part in her reasoning for accepting Natalie’s job, it had seemed like a potentially interesting...perk.

Just the chance to see him again, really. Because she hadn’t expected that they would socialise—her, being staff, and him being... Well, basically Lord of the Manor.

She had discovered, via some surreptitious questioning after that fateful birthday party, that Tom was Natalie’s very distant cousin and had been appointed Guardian of Deveron until the Marchioness decided to make her home there.

All Laura had expected—dreamed of, fantasised about—was seeing Tom around the estate from time to time—from a distance. Perhaps he might glance her way and frown, wondering why she looked familiar. Because he wouldn’t remember some waitress he kissed once while drunk and *‘stoned off his nut.’* He probably kissed people like that all the time. Just went around talking of midnight and romance and

touching people's lips and then kissing them in a way that ruined them for life and kept them up at night reliving it for weeks.

He probably kissed every girl like that, and forgot them five minutes later.

Except he was staring at her like she was a mirage. "It's you," he repeated.

He wasn't any less attractive than he had been the last time they met, unfortunately. Despite half-expecting to see him soon, his appearance still knocked her sideways. If anything, his beauty seemed slightly wilder. His cheekbones more pronounced, the light in his blue eyes bordering on otherworldly. That's what he reminded her of. A fae prince. Scarcely even human.

"Um...are you driving to the castle?"

"Yes. I was. I am. I mean, I was meant to pick someone up from the village, but they never showed."

"From Midmure?"

"No, Birloch."

"Oh."

She wiped rain from her eyes. It was dripping off her nose. Nothing about her right now was attractive.

"Do you think I could get a lift?"

"God! Yes! Of course. Sorry, I—" he cut himself off in a flurry of unbuckling his seatbelt and getting out and then

remembering to open the other door and half-getting back in again to reach the handle.

“I have some luggage,” she said.

Tom caught sight of it a few steps up the lane and went to get it, picking it up as though it weighed nothing—of course—and slinging it into the back of the car along with her sodden backpack.

Laura climbed gratefully into the front passenger seat, though it was no warmer inside the car than out.

“Sorry, I’m getting the seat all wet.” She blushed, even though that barely sounded like an innuendo, but there was clearly only one place her mind went in Tom Brewerly’s presence.

“Don’t worry. I found this old hulk in the barn. It had sheep living in it.”

Tom did various complicated things with levers on the ancient car’s dashboard and steering wheel, reaching down for a gearstick that was somewhere near his feet. The car groaned and creaked. Laura prayed to the car gods—her dad assured her they existed—because there was no way she had the strength to get out and push, not without crying, and there was no way she was going to cry in front of Tom Brewerly.

But the car began to move, grudgingly but inexorably forwards.

Tom. He had haunted her for weeks. And now he was here.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, as though narrating her thoughts, although there was a note of derision in his voice that had been absent from the rather reverent timbre of her internal monologue. “Why has the witch had you sent up here? You must have really pissed her off at the party.”

“What?” said Laura, her mind skidding like a scratched record.

“The Murderous Marchioness, Miss Hoity-Toity herself. Why has she sent some poor, unfortunate waitress up to this hellhole?”

“Are you... Are you talking about Natalie?”

“First-name terms, is it? Don’t tell me you’re one of those fangirls, read about her in *Grazia* or *Tatler* or *Heat* or whatever magazine she’s been draped over recently and now you think she’s your bestie. *Ooh, she’s like a princess in a fairy tale. Ooh, her boyfriend’s sooo handsome.*”

Laura stared at the side of Tom’s face in dawning horror. This couldn’t be the same man? The one who had lived in her heart and dreams? “Who even *are* you?” she found herself saying.

Tom took his eyes from the road to flash her a look of consternation. “You don’t remember? The party? Oh...”

He trailed off, frowning at the road, fingers tapping agitatedly on the thin steering wheel.

“I just assumed... Sorry. I’m Tom. Tom Brewerly. I’m sort of working at the castle.”

“I know.”

“Right. Sure. They filled you in, I suppose.”

He frowned some more at the road. Then, just as Laura was about to explain that she did, in fact, remember the most scorching moment of her entire existence, he shook his head, took a breath, and launched into an explanation of what she could expect at the castle.

“Rats. Bloody everywhere. And damp. Mould. Rot. The place is a death trap. Did they warn you about that? What are they even sending you up here for, anyway? It’s going to be years before the place is up to taking guests, so I’ve no idea why they need a waitress. Or are you going to help Greaves in the kitchen? Female Greaves, I mean. There’s two of them. Greaves and Greaves. I assume they’re married, but who knows? Could be brother and sister. Could be brother and sister *and* married for all I know. Wouldn’t surprise me around here. Have you ever watched *Star Wars*? If there’s a bright spot in the galaxy, Castle Deveron is the place furthest from it. It is, quite honestly, a grade-A shit tip. And I’m supposed to get it all ship-shape for Little Miss Fortune Hunter, because I don’t have any other bloody options—thanks to her—and so I can’t say no. I have nowhere else to live, so I’m stuck in this rat-infested ruin, probably forever, because she’s too tight-arsed to release a single penny in funds and too bloody stuck-up and important to pick up the bloody phone!”

He pushed a hand wildly through his floppy hair.

“Sorry, sorry!” He flashed her an apologetic grin. “This is not the way to welcome you to your new job. But you do need to know what you’re getting into. Honestly, if I was you, I’d get back on the train first thing tomorrow and go home. I’d gladly join you, but Natalie has my balls in a vice. I’m utterly dependent on her every cruel whim. And if you can’t tell, I fucking hate her for it.”

“You hate Natalie?” Laura repeated pointlessly, because it was quite clear that he did. She knew his story, the salient part of it anyway—that he was a distant relative of Natalie’s and had been the old Marquess’s heir, until the will was changed and the illegitimate Natalie named instead. Did he really hate her just for that? Natalie had done her best to make amends, to give him a position, to include him in Castle Deveron’s future given he had always expected to live there. And this was how he repaid her? With petty, jealous sulking?

“You’ll hate her too,” said Tom. “When you realise what she’s like.”

Laura didn’t reply. She looked miserably through the rain-spattered window at the dark shapes of trees and fields. She was so disappointed she felt physically sick. He had called her Cinderella. But he was the one who had turned into a pumpkin.

Chapter Four

Tom

TOM DROVE, COAXING THE ancient car onwards through the pouring rain. The woman at his side had lapsed into pensive silence. Maybe he had been a little too honest. He had a habit of saying whatever came into his head. No one thought it was a good thing—except him. He liked being honest. Couldn't stand tiptoeing around.

Anyway, for the moment he was happy to leave the woman to her thoughts, because it let him dwell miserably on his.

She didn't fucking remember him.

How... How could she not? *He* was the one who had been stoned off his face. She had been sober, working. Or did men launch themselves at her so often that his kiss was just another in a long line of unwanted advances? The thought made him cringe so hard he wanted to fall right through the sagging upholstery of the driver's seat and under the car wheels. Leave him crushed and bleeding in the road if *that's* what it had been to her.

But he had *never* forced himself on anyone, and hazy though his memories were, he was entirely, wonderfully certain she had kissed him back just as hard as he had found himself kissing her. Because what he had intended to be a mere brush of lips had swiftly descended—or perhaps *ascended* was the better word—into something that even weeks later had him gasping awake in the night needing her like oxygen.

He hadn't stopped thinking about her, awake or asleep. He had cursed himself for being a dazed and drunken fool and letting her walk away without getting her name. The next day he had debased himself low enough to beg Natalie for the name of the catering company she had used. He had thought—if such nebulous desperation could be called thought—that he might be able to walk past wherever it was she was working, that she might pass him, and that if she turned, looked at him, smiled...then that would be perfect, it would be wonderful...

Until he lost his inheritance, Tom had always believed in fate. He had always felt it was best to swim with it, be carried along, rather than fight against it. For the sake of meeting the girl again though, he would have been happy to give it a nudge.

So he had called the catering company, said a waitress had left a bag behind, and they had told him they had no pink-haired and pierced angel on their books. That, in fact, company policy dictated they would never hire someone matching her description at all.

She had disappeared just like Cinderella. And then Natalie, fucking Natalie, had dispatched him off to Scotland, and any chance he'd had at all of bumping into her had been stolen from him. Yet another reason to hate the Marchioness.

He had wondered briefly if he'd dreamt her, his perfect woman. But no. He could still fucking taste her. His imagination wasn't that good.

And she didn't remember him.

Talk about wounded male pride. Wounded? This felt more like having a piece of his soul torn out and stamped on.

Tom turned the car off the road and through the lodge gates of Castle Deveron. The old Rolls Royce had no power steering, and he had to haul hard on the steering wheel, feeding it hand over hand to turn the shuddering, noisy old car onto the pitted driveway.

He drove slowly, trying to avoid the worst of the potholes but wincing a little every time the car pitched and swayed, springs groaning. The woman at his side said nothing, her arms folded across her chest, hunched with cold, her gaze fixed on the black, wet nothingness outside.

“I wish there was a warmer welcome waiting for you,” said Tom as the car’s feeble headlights finally revealed the stone archway that led into the courtyard at the back of the castle. It did look rather like a gaping black mouth.

“The Greaves people aren’t friendly?”

“Not much. But I meant it literally—the castle is freezing. Natalie won’t give us enough money for the bills, so we have to ration the power we use.”

He stopped in the courtyard and turned the car off. The sudden silence seemed to ring loud after the noisy, old engine. The woman was frowning, her full lips pressed flat. Tom sighed internally, wishing... Well. Wishing that many things were different. But wishing at least that he could offer the woman more hospitality than she was about to endure.

He got out of the car, ducking his head against the pouring rain, and ran around to open her door. She murmured a surprised thank you and got out, jumping as he put his coat around her shoulders.

“I already have a coat,” she said.

He just gave a sort of shrug, which she probably couldn't see anyway in the dark, and took her by the elbow, guiding her to one of the side doors, icy rain slicing through his thin shirt. The door opened as they approached, male Greaves standing in the doorway, a storm lantern in his gnarled hand.

“Found a stray,” Tom told the old man, handing her in through the door, then running back out to get her bags. He returned to find the woman and Greaves regarding each other dubiously, the woman clutching his coat one handed at her neck, Greaves with his perpetual frown even deeper than usual.

Tom dropped the bags on the floor and suppressed a shiver, pushing his dripping hair from his eyes. “Did our dear Lady Banberry mention she was sending more staff?” he asked Greaves.

“She did not.”

“Well, there was no one waiting at Birloch. So I've no idea what happened to that artist. Total cock-up, like everything Banberry touches.”

The woman took his coat from her shoulders and held it out to him. She lifted her chin, and he was caught for a moment in

the grip of those beautiful hazel eyes.

“I think there has been some misunderstanding,” she said. “I am not staff. I’m not a waitress. I’m an artist and textile designer. My name is Laura Usman, and Natalie—Marchioness Banberry—is my friend.”

Tom just stared. Something far colder than the icy rain outside slid down his back. She wasn’t his Cinderella at all.

She was the enemy.

Somewhere, Fate was laughing.

Chapter Five

Laura

THE VISCOUNT AND THE old man exchanged a grim look that made Laura uneasy. This might be Natalie's house, but she was clearly unwelcome.

The old man eventually dredged up his manners. He smiled at Laura, his mouth strained as though smiling wasn't something he did very often.

"A friend of Lady Banberry! Let's get you settled in with all the attention you deserve." He flashed a look at Tom. "The Red Suite, don't you think, Lord Brewerly?"

Tom was still looking very grim, and it took a moment for Greaves's question to penetrate. He seemed to give himself a mental shake. Frowning, he said, "The West Tower?"

"It will be most fitting, don't you think, my Lord, for someone of Miss Usman's status?"

"Ah," said Tom, flashing Laura a small cat-like smile. "Yes. You're quite right. Perfectly fitting. I'll leave you to get our guest settled in then. Miss Usman, good night." He gave Laura a nod that was almost a short bow and strode away down a dark stone corridor.

Laura watched his tall, broad-shouldered frame disappear into the shadows, his blond hair the last thing to fade from her sight. She turned back to Greaves, finding the craggy old man studying her curiously. He snapped his smile back into place

and handed her the lantern so his hands were free to pick up her bags.

“Let me take one,” protested Laura.

“Not at all, Miss Usman. I couldn’t hear of it. I’d ask Mrs Greaves to help, but she has arthritic knees. My rheumatism isn’t too bad at the moment,” he added nobly. “So don’t you fret about me.”

And though she protested again, he wouldn’t relinquish a single bag, so she was forced to follow the heavily-laden old man, doing nothing but feebly lighting their way with the dull orange glow of the old-fashioned paraffin storm lantern.

Greaves led the way down a bare, stone corridor, in the opposite direction to the way Tom had gone. There was a musty, damp smell in the air, and it was, as Tom had said, absolutely freezing. She could see streaks of damp on the old stone walls, fuzzy patches of mould and leached minerals.

Things didn’t improve much even as they entered a grander, more-furnished corridor. It was much wider, and the lantern light barely touched the walls. Laura could make out hints of finery —chandeliers on the ceiling, embossed panels, fancy little tables—but she could also see peeling wallpaper and scattered old leaves and debris on the floor, as though the wind often howled through here, bringing the outside in. And it was still freezing, and still smelt damp and musty.

“Why are there no lights?” she asked.

Greaves answered without pausing or looking back at her, his shoulders bowed under the weight of her luggage. “Can’t afford it, mainly. And the wiring’s bad. Even when it’s on it cuts out, or you might get a shock, or even start a fire.”

“But it can be fixed? I mean...that’s what Natalie is trying to do. Get this place fixed up. That’s why Tom—Lord Brewerly, I mean—is here...”

“Aye,” agreed Greaves easily, without any conviction. “Of course, miss.”

And then he was huffing his way up a long flight of stairs and didn’t seem to have the breath for further conversation.

There were more steps after that, a long spiraling stone staircase up what Laura guessed to be one of the castle’s towers. The West Tower, Tom had said.

It had probably looked beautiful at one time. There was a thick, velvet rope for a handrail. Each landing had a little wooden floor that glistened the colour of treacle in the lantern light. The curving walls were fitted at intervals with narrow lancet windows, the thickness of the stone walls giving each a deep window ledge, some of which still contained vases or statues, others held nothing but dust. There were missing panes of glass in a few of the windows and the freezing air stabbed viciously through the gaps, reminding Natalie of just how wet she was.

She shivered with cold despite the effort of the climb.

Eventually, at one of the wooden-floored landings, Greaves turned away from the staircase and down a short hall with only one door at the end. But it was a double door, huge and ornately carved. Greaves shouldered it open, the hinges creaking a little, then stepped through, putting down her bags. He turned back to the door and flung both sides open, welcoming her with a stiff, shallow bow.

“The Red Suite, Miss Usman. Sleep well.”

And then he left, taking the lantern with him.

Laura blinked at the dark before hurrying after him. “Wait! Greaves!”

There was no answer, no sound. She walked cautiously down the corridor, feeling her way, because it was pitch black. “Greaves? Hello?”

There was no light ahead, no sound of feet descending the stairs. It was as though the man had disappeared. Laura dug in her coat pocket for her phone and used its light to find her way back to the bedroom.

She glanced around, spying what she could in her phone’s torchlight, mindful that her battery was low. She had an impression of an opulent, old-fashioned space, a draped four-poster bed, heavy oak furniture. She scanned the walls and found a light switch. She flipped it several times, but of course, nothing happened.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, the mattress sagging beneath her, sending up a wave of musty, damp-fabric smell.

The cold and the dark pressed heavily around her. She shivered and shivered again.

She was hungry.

She was cold.

She didn't even know where the bathroom was.

Her phone beeped in her hand, making her jump.

Natalie: Did you arrive OK? I hope they're making you welcome!

Laura laughed bitterly to herself, the threat of tears prickling her cold nose. But she sniffed them back, because she was made of sterner stuff. She was a member of The London Feminist Forum. She had thrown rape alarms at police, staged a naked occupation of her university's offices to protest unequal pay, had once been handcuffed to a railing in Trafalgar Square... One petty, disgruntled viscount wasn't going to get in her way.

Laura: Send me Tom Brewerly's phone number. I have some things I need to say to him.

Chapter Six

Tom

TOM HAD A HOT shower and got changed into dry clothes—old jogging bottoms and a t-shirt, pulling on a thick jumper too because it was cold, even down here in the annexe where they had electricity.

He sat cross-legged in the faded chintz armchair that took up about a third of the space in the tiny bedroom and opened his laptop. Still no email from Dylan, the private investigator he had hired.

He pushed a hand through his hair with a sigh, then sat thinking for a moment, tapping one long finger against his lips. Should he explore the legal route again? But the type of lawyer he could afford would get eaten alive by the Marchioness Banberry's legal team. They had barely even let him look at the old Marquess's will. No doubt because they knew how sketchy it looked, that tiny, hastily inserted codicil, a few brief sentences that took away the inheritance he'd been guaranteed for twenty-eight years. Had it even been witnessed properly? He'd been too shocked to examine it in detail. He'd been on the back-foot ever since he'd limped out of a Monaco hotel room one hot summer afternoon, still half-drunk, to find a team of black-suited lawyers waiting for him in the foyer.

“Lord Brewerly, we have an urgent matter to discuss...”

Lord Brewerly, please take a seat while we strip you of your every asset and push you deep into the shit...

Tom banged his head against the back of the armchair, one, two, three times, then dragged his hands down his face.

Merde!

Et la femme... The one bright spark in all of this had blown back to burn him.

Not a waitress. Natalie's friend.

So why was she carrying fucking champagne around? He didn't understand any of it. Or did Natalie just put everyone she knew to work, make slaves out of everyone? She was clearly fucking *born* to be an aristo.

Across the room, his phone beeped. He put the laptop down and got tiredly to his feet. What time was it? Not even ten. But the nights dragged on forever up here in the freezing wastelands. The days dragged on too, *misérable et ennuyeux...*

He picked up his phone. His heart lurched with a stab of adrenaline.

This is Laura. I think I'm in the main entrance hall. Can you meet me there?

Tom stared down at the phone, his grip tightening around it.

He wasn't normally an angry man. He generally showed little more than a certain wry contempt. But he had been seething with a sort of burning, incandescent rage ever since he'd found out who Laura really was.

He was self-aware enough to know that some of it was the tantrummy anger of a toddler deprived of candy. He wanted

that woman, dammit. And now he couldn't have her. But it was more than that. It was also a sick sort of betrayal. Because...had she known? Had Laura known who he was when he kissed her? She must have done. He had told her his name. And surely she knew about the man her best friend had disinherited. Or maybe Natalie didn't even bother to tell that story. Maybe he wasn't even worth a footnote in her fairy-tale ascent from the gutter.

Either way, he felt like a fucking idiot. And his heart *hurt*.

He never wanted to see Laura again. But he pulled on his coat and stomped off to the entrance hall.



Laura

Laura waited shivering in the cavernous space that she assumed was the entrance hall, given the huge oak doors at one end and the sweeping staircase at the other that the feeble light of her phone had revealed. There was also a large fireplace that could probably comfortably fit a Ford Fiesta inside it, but sadly, it was unlit.

She had pulled the musty old velvet bedspread from her bed and wrapped it around her shoulders. She knew her face was pinched and pale and her hair a disaster of pink frizz, but she no longer cared what his noble arseness Little Lord Fauntleroy thought of her appearance.

She didn't even know if he would come at all, and if he didn't, she would haunt the fucking castle like an angry ghost until she tracked him down.

A noise in the distance made her jump. She heard the creak of a door. Footsteps. Then the glow of a light appeared around the edges of a badly fitted door. Tom Brewerly stepped through, a modern electric lantern in his hand.

He paused a few metres from her and looked her up and down, his face hard and contemptuous. He should have looked terrible, lit from below by the electric lantern's harsh white light, but it only highlighted the strong angle of his jaw, the perfect lines of his face. Laura's fingers itched to sketch him, to capture the merciless look that glittered in his eyes.

“Why have you dragged me here?” he said.

“I had no idea how to find anyone in this place. I’ve been wandering around for ages.”

“So? What do you want?”

“I want to not freeze to death tonight. That room is ridiculous, you must have known that. There’s no heating, no light—”

“It’s the best room in the castle, except for the King’s Suite, which is supposed to be reserved for visiting royalty, but I’m sure I can ask Greaves to air it out for you if you’re finding the Red Suite beneath you.”

“Don’t be an idiot. There must be some rooms with electricity in this place.”

“Very few, thanks to your friend.”

“Natalie has never even been here! She’s too busy filming —”

Tom cut her off with a bitter laugh. “Exactly. Too busy to check her emails. Too busy to give a shit. Too fucking *greedy* to release even a quarter of the funds needed to keep this place going, let alone begin refurbishment—”

“All you need to do is ask her—”

Tom laughed again, even more harshly than before. “Ask? I’ve asked her until I’m blue in the face and she still won’t lift a damn finger. She’ll let us all freeze to death this winter and

expect us to be grateful. And now she's sent you into the middle of this shitstorm too. Some friend!"

"You don't even know her."

"And do you? Do you know the kind of woman who suddenly appears from out of nowhere, calling herself Banberry mere months after the Marquess's will was changed, and mere days after he suddenly died?"

Laura stared at him, no longer feeling cold, but far too hot. "Are you seriously saying what I think you're saying?"

"I'm saying it's suspicious. That's all."

"You're insane. You're absolutely insane."

He just scoffed a laugh, shaking his head as he turned to go. She ought to let him. He clearly *was* mad, eaten up with bitter jealousy and resentment.

"I can't stay in that room," she said.

He paused, his back to her.

"I don't believe you and the Greaveses are living here without any heat or light."

He gave a careless Gallic shrug, those broad shoulders lifting, taking her back briefly to the moment in that quiet room at the party, just before he'd told her that midnight was the most romantic of hours. Just before he had touched her lips.

"Believe what you want," his voice sounded tired now, all the heat gone. "*Je m'en fous. Bonne soirée.*"

Once more, Laura watched someone walk away and leave her in the dark.

Chapter Seven

Tom

TOM HADN'T GONE FAR before he realised someone was right behind him. He turned and glared at Laura, her face pale in the harsh lantern light, her mouth set in a hard line. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Following you," she said. "You're going somewhere warm. And I'm going with you."

"*Mon dieu,*" he muttered, rubbing a hand down his face. "*Aidez moi.*"

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Talk in French."

He hadn't realised he was. "I lived there. Since I was three. Near Marseille."

"Why?"

He sighed and started walking. Maybe he could lose her in the labyrinthine castle. But she stuck close to him, right by his shoulder, half a step behind. He was irritatingly aware of her.

"Why?" she asked again.

"Because that's where my grandparents lived."

"And your parents?"

"Died when I was three."

“Oh.” Her step faltered. He could possibly have chosen that moment to duck through a side door and attempt to leave her stranded in the music room they were passing through. But he couldn’t quite summon the energy.

“I’m sorry,” she said, stuck to his shoulder again.

“Murder-suicide,” said Tom, before she could ask, and because he knew she would hate the story. “My father was the Marquess’s heir back then. He was about to leave my mother for another woman. She didn’t want someone else to be the Marchioness. So she killed them, and then herself. Which always seemed to me a little like cutting off your own nose to spite your face, but as you’ve so aptly deduced, the Brewerlys are a mad bunch.”

A hand closed gently around his arm, just above the elbow. Tom shut his eyes, then opened them, adopting a bland expression as he turned and looked down at Laura’s stricken face.

Christ, those eyes...

“Tom...” she said, or breathed it really, just his name on the exhale of her breath. His eyes fell to her lips, because he was a fool and he still wanted to kiss her. All he had ever wanted to do since the moment he first saw her was kiss her, and even now that she was the enemy and loathed him and had the worst taste in friends, he still wanted to kiss her...

“Tom, Natalie is not your mother.”

He shrugged his arm from her hand and carried on walking.

Imbécile. Oublie la... Get over the girl.

Laura followed hard at his elbow. “The inheritance, everything that happened, it was just chance. I mean, she knew about her father, but he had always disowned her. She never expected a penny from him. And she used that name at the party because it was the first one that came into her head. She was nervous. She just blurted it out. None of it was by design. There’s no conspiracy.”

Tom just snorted, and Laura, thankfully, fell silent.

But she kept following him, and even though he couldn’t see her, she seemed to glow at his side like a siren.



Laura

Laura thought the corridor looked familiar, although there were so many of them that it was impossible to tell for sure. They were all musty and damp and neglected. She bit her lip, worrying about what Natalie would make of it all.

But mostly her brain was full of the tall and silent man she followed—of him...and what he had told her.

His parents... God. She couldn't even imagine. She just kept seeing a small blond boy arriving in France, understanding nothing.

Of course, it didn't make it right for him to accuse Natalie of conspiring to steal his fortune, but it did, perhaps, explain his reasoning a little.

The corridor was narrow here, and they had to walk in single file. They passed through a door, and the bare stone walls were exchanged for white painted ones, the paint bubbling a little with damp.

At the end of that corridor was a plain wooden door, painted green. Tom paused then let out a resigned breath as he opened it and revealed a wonderland beyond.

OK, not quite a wonderland. But a place with working lights! And a gust of warmish air and cooking smells that wafted towards her as Tom ducked his head to pass through the doorway.

Blinking at the light, Laura followed him through, stepping aside as he turned back to close the door, his body brushing close up against hers. He said nothing, but walked to a little sideboard in the hallway they were now in and turned off the lantern, putting it down.

Laura looked around. The walls seemed to be painted brick, the white paint one of many layers, so thick they almost obscured the pattern of bricks below. The floor was a grey-black stone, so worn it dipped slightly in the middle.

“Living room,” said Tom, pointing through a door. Laura looked in and saw a very small room with a very small sofa and an old-fashioned TV on a wooden stand. All the decor looked straight out of the 1960s.

“Kitchen.” Tom pointed to the end of the corridor. “Office.” He nodded to a door next to the living room, then turned and pointed to two doors on the other side of the hallway. “The Greaveses’s room. My room.” He met her look with a flat challenge. “So, tell me, where are you going to stay?”

Laura took another look at the living room, eyeing the tiny sofa dubiously. She unwound the musty, old bed throw from her shoulders gratefully and folded it over the back of the sofa. “I don’t mind. Here, on the floor. Anything is better than freezing to death.”

She looked up to find Tom’s eyes on her, and that was enough to make her look away.

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance of a hot bath?” she asked.

“There’s no bath here.”

“Is there a shower?”

“Yes,” he admitted reluctantly. “There’s a shower.”

“Thank fuck. Show me the way.”



Tom

Tom showed Laura to the bathroom then went back to his bedroom, sat back on his armchair, and picked up his laptop again, exactly how he had been before she messaged him.

He snickered to himself as he heard her yelp with pain from across the hallway as she first scalded and then froze herself under the ancient shower. Just as he did most mornings.

He checked his email yet again. Dylan, the investigator he had hired, was supposed to be watching Natalie while doing a deep-dive on her bank accounts, emails, messages—anything that might show her involvement in the Marquess's death, or in getting the will changed.

Any news? Tom emailed in irritation.

He kept hearing Laura's voice, her explanation of how it was all a big coincidence. Yeah, right. Life simply didn't work like that.

Although, he had to admit, his own story perhaps went to show that life did whatever it wanted, whether it made any sense or not.

A new email appeared. Dylan's reply.

Still nothing. Maybe there's nothing to find.

Tom typed back, fingers hard on the keys. *Is that your professional opinion?*

I'll look for as long as you pay me to look, came Dylan's reply. But if I don't find anything in the next week, then yes, that will be my professional opinion.

Tom swore and slammed the laptop shut. He barely had enough money to pay Dylan. The man hadn't been cheap. He was supposed to be the best in the business. How could he afford another investigator?

There was a tap on his door. "What?" he barked.

A muffled voice, Laura's. He couldn't hear what she was saying. Still annoyed, he got up, strode the two short steps across his room and wrenched open his door.

To find Laura there, dressed in nothing but a towel.

"So, funny story," she said, cheeks flushed. "Totally forgot all my bags are still in my room. Think my brain was addled by the lure of hot water."

Tom pulled his eyes up from the damp, dewy skin of her bare shoulders to the pink flush of her face, her wet hair clinging to the curve of her neck. A water droplet ran down her throat, across her collarbone, and down to the faint swelling curve just visible above the tightly wound towel.

Mon dieu.

He shifted his fingers where they gripped the door. "Your bags?" he said, dredging the words from somewhere. From the way they sounded in his throat, it was a deep place, filled with gravel.

"Yes, they're still in my room, and I don't know the way..."

He nodded, he didn't really know why, just that it seemed easier than speaking. Then he turned to the single chest of drawers in his room, pulled out a jumper and sweatpants and handed them to her. She took them gingerly, one hand clutching the towel at her chest.

“Put those on. I will get your bags.”

He hurried away, his mind nothing but a carousel of ridiculous images—lips and bare shoulders, thighs and his fingers... He felt a little calmer by the time he had carried three heavy bags down several flights of stairs. His bedroom door was closed. He tapped lightly, but there was no answer. He looked inside. Laura was in his armchair, in his clothes, and fast asleep.

Chapter Eight

Laura

LAURA WOKE UP COLD, stiff, and disorientated in a completely dark room. She was sitting in an armchair, an unfortunately familiar musty smell in her nose. The velvet bedspread was on her knees, and she pushed it off, despite the cold. She got cautiously to her feet, but still managed to bump immediately into a piece of furniture.

Something stirred in the darkness. A sleepy, deep, male voice said, “Laura?”

She stiffened. Tom. She was in Tom’s room.

“Sorry. I fell asleep in the chair...”

“It’s OK.”

She took a step with her arms out, trying to feel for the door. She had no sense of direction in the dark. Her knee bumped into something soft. The edge of the bed. “Sorry!”

“Here,” said Tom, and a large, strong hand found hers. She inhaled sharply at the sudden contact, that tingle she remembered from the party coursing up her arm, straight into her heart.

“You’re freezing,” said Tom, the edges of his voice soft with sleep, his French accent more pronounced. He pulled gently on her hand as she heard him shift position on the bed. “Get in. It’s warm.”

“Erm, no thanks.”

He exhaled a slight laugh. “Just body heat, *ma chère*. The heating goes off at night. Believe me, you don’t want to be in the living room with nothing but that mouldy, old blanket.”

“That might be preferable.”

“To me?” He let out a very male sort of grunt, dry and unamused. “Well, suit yourself.” He yawned, his voice stretched and heavy with sleep. “But I’m going to snuggle under this feather duvet and go back to sleep.” He squeezed her hand and let go. “*Bonsoir, ma chérie*. Sleep well.”

Laura shivered when he let go of her hand, once more totally lost in the dark. She shifted her knee forwards until it met the side of the bed again. And then she hesitated, heart pounding, with the cold night sending chill tendrils along all the bare parts of her skin—her throat, her wrists, her ankles—chasing away the blush of heat that Tom’s words and touch had caused.

But not quite all the heat. Not the low pulse of it that tightened in her belly, or that grew in trembling waves and rushed down her thighs as she lifted the knee that touched the edge of his bed and placed it on his mattress.

She felt the way Tom tensed as her weight made the mattress move. She heard the way his breath stilled as she climbed onto the bed. Heart beating so hard she felt it vibrate in her bones, she lay down, and for a moment she stopped breathing as Tom lifted the duvet, warm from his body, and brought it over her, cocooning them together in the dark.

They were both very still. And then Laura shifted over a little, chasing his heat, and Tom's arm came to wrap around her waist and drag her all the way to him. He was on his side, and she was on her back, her arm against his hard chest, her thigh against his. He breathed out a little shakily and she felt it on her hair.

“Warmer?” he said, leaving his arm across her waist.

“Warmer,” she agreed.

She felt his head come down on the pillow, knew his lips and chin were pressed to the top of her hair. His thigh came over hers a little, heavy and strong, the muscle of it obvious even through the fabric of the borrowed jogging bottoms she wore, just as obvious as the muscle of the arm that lay across her stomach. Firm male strength, snug against some of her softest places.

She shut her eyes, though it made no difference to the darkness. And of course, she did not fall asleep, did not relax in the slightest. How could she?

That wasn't why she had climbed into this bed.

She turned her head slightly on the pillow—towards Tom. The arm across her stomach tensed and the unmistakable hardness pressing into her hip dug in a little more.

She opened her eyes—though it made no difference in the dark—and shifted slightly on her side as the breath caught in Tom's throat. She put her hand on his chest, stroked her fingertips across the muscle there. And it was as though the

dark heightened her other senses, because just that touch seemed to sear her nerves, her fingertips tingling.

Tom's head moved, she felt the scrape of the stubble on his chin as his lips now pressed into her hair. She heard the breath he took and felt the exhale of it. She lifted her hand from his chest and found his jaw in the dark, his cheek, his ear, the thick softness of his hair. She ran her fingers up the nape of his neck, ran them deep into his hair and pulled his face down as she tipped hers up.

He breathed against her lips for a moment, hesitant, questioning, but he made the decision before she needed to persuade him further. His lips moved against hers, at first seeking, then suddenly demanding. And the arm that had been across her stomach was now under her borrowed jumper, Tom's fingers trailing across her ribs, his broad chest expanding with the ragged breath he took at finding her bra-less. His hand closed over her breast, and she moaned. Tom swore in French, kissing her neck, then leaning up to tug her jumper up and over her head.

She surrendered herself to his touch, to his mouth. There was nothing but feeling and sound in the darkness, and maybe it was the dreamlike quality of this sightless moment that allowed it to happen.

Strong hands palmed her breasts as Tom lowered his face, stubble scraping over her collarbone as he kissed his way down, lips closing around her nipple and sucking, licking, with a torturous intensity. She moaned, and Tom swore in French

again, as though that sound was more than he could stand. Laura wrapped her fingers in his hair, her eyes open to the night, the air on her face cold, though her whole body burned.

This was the fairytale prince she remembered from Natalie's party. There was magic in his touch. And as he kissed his way down her body, the scrape of his stubble of her stomach followed by the softness of his hair, she felt as though this was just the other half of the conversation their bodies had started that night they kissed. This... Them... It was inevitable.

Tom dragged down the jogging bottoms he had lent her. They were far too big for her and they slipped down her thighs with ease and were tossed aside. He murmured something in French as he kissed her thigh, and Laura found herself smiling slightly even as his fingers explored ahead of his mouth, stroking their way up her inside leg to the hot wetness between them.

She thought she heard the French word for honey, or sweet, or something, and she smiled even as she gasped and his tongue traced her folds. Because this man was fucking magic, and he was going down on her like it was a divine experience, his breath hot and saying filthy things against her pussy, her hands wrapped around the hard muscle of his shoulders, her fingers combing over the shifting muscles of his back as he brought her closer and closer—

“Tom,” she gasped, “Tom, I want you—” and she reached down between them to find the thick, heavy length of him.

He was so hot, his shaft throbbing under her fingers. He gave a tortured groan so full of need that she couldn't help but smile again. And of course she couldn't help but torture him the way his tongue had just tortured her, rubbing her hand up and down him as he rifled blindly through his bedside table until she heard that unmistakable rustle as his fingers closed around a foil square.

She took it and put it on him, fumbling slightly in the dark, in her eagerness, and because he had his mouth bent to her breasts and was kissing her into delirium.

He knelt between her legs for a moment, his hands wrapped around her thighs as he spread her further open. Then he moved up and held himself over her, nudging her opening, nothing but weight and heat in the dark. He kissed her mouth, then said, "You do remember me from the party, don't you?" His voice was a husky ruin, breathless not just with need but with something deeper, and for a moment she wished she could see his eyes.

"Of course I do."

He exhaled, something like relief, gratitude, but she didn't have time to think about it, because he entered her then, with a domineering movement of his powerful hips that had her head sinking deep into the pillow, her mouth a wordless cry.

Fuck, fuck, it had it never felt so good, and then he slipped one hand under her hips and held her at a helpless angle just so bloody perfect that she shattered, and shattered again.

Afterwards, they lay as they had before, Laura pressed into his side, his lips on her hair, his thigh over hers as though he was not planning to let her go. And this time she did relax. This time, she slept.

Chapter Nine

Laura

TOM WAS GONE WHEN Laura woke up in the morning, thin, grey light filtering in through old-fashioned faded floral curtains. She looked around at the small, slightly shabby room with its mismatched furniture and couldn't help but think it really wasn't the sort of place you'd expect a viscount to be living.

She found the jogging bottoms she had borrowed from Tom and pulled them on. She couldn't find the jumper, so she rummaged through the bag he had brought and dug out a top. With a proper change of clothes bundled in her arms, she hurried from Tom's room to the bathroom, hearing his voice coming from the kitchen at the end of the hall, and a woman with a Scottish accent answering him. Mrs Greaves, she presumed.

Clean, changed, and looking by far the most presentable she had done since stepping off the bus yesterday, Laura went tentatively to the kitchen. How would Tom look at her? How would he act? Everything that had felt natural and magical in last night's dark now felt a little awkward.

But Tom wasn't there, just a short, stockily-built woman with dyed auburn hair and grey roots, an apron around her, cooking at an ancient-looking gas hob. The woman turned, raised an eyebrow at Laura, gave her a dismissive grunt, then went back to her pan of bacon.

“Hello,” said Laura, far more politely than she felt she ought to be, given the woman’s attitude. But she *really* wanted some bacon. She hadn’t eaten except for a sandwich on the train yesterday and felt a bit lightheaded at the smell of the sizzling pan.

“Make yourself useful,” said Mrs Greaves, without turning around. “Fetch the men from the yard.”

There was little Laura wouldn’t do for a bacon sandwich, so she bit her tongue and went out through the old wooden stable door that Mrs Greaves indicated with a terse nod.

It led into a large courtyard, a huge archway in a wall at one end, single-story buildings like the one she had just emerged from along both sides, and the looming height of the castle at the other end. She got her first proper look at it in the daylight, and her heart sank.

This was the back of the castle, she knew from the research she had done. The walls were a buff pink, covered in a rough sort of plaster called harling, which, together with the sharply conical grey turreted roofs gave it the look of a fairy-tale castle. Or maybe, in Deveron’s case, a bleak, dark fairy tale with a witch and a curse and monsters lurking in the dungeons.

Green-grey damp streaked the castle’s walls, the harling fallen away in places to reveal the stone underneath. There was at least one hole visible in the roof, pigeons flying in and out, and tiles missing in other places. The courtyard was choked with weeds, the outbuildings sagging, crooked doors

leaning on their hinges, algae creeping up the walls, dead leaves and litter blown into every corner.

Laura sighed, wondering what Natalie would make of it all. Could this place ever be a home? And just what had Tom been doing all this time? He had been here a month, and Laura could see no sign of any work being done at all.

She could also see no sign of any men in the yard, so, crossing her arms against the cold breeze, she walked over to a larger building that looked like an old stable. The door was wide open, and she could see a glimpse of a familiar headlight and elegant bonnet inside. The Rolls Royce Silver Wraith.

She heard voices as she approached and paused at the door. It was all shadows inside and from her angle, she could see nothing of the two men.

“...Of course she’s gonna go tittle-tattling to her friend,” Greaves was saying. “And who’s going to get the blame?”

“But that’s ridiculous,” came Tom’s reply. “Natalie can’t blame me when she’s the one making any work impossible.”

“You think she’ll see it that way? We all know being reasonable ain’t her strong suit. You’ll be taken off the job, turfed out, and then where will you go?”

“Back to France, and gladly.”

“You’ve got debts in France.”

Laura heard Tom sigh, a long exasperated sound. “Only because I thought I’d just come into money. A few days of celebrating and I’m ruined for life.”

The older man chuckled. “Must have been some celebration.”

Tom, rueful, “It was.”

“And she could clear all that with the click of her fingers, couldn’t she? And instead, she holds you here, working for a pittance.”

Another exhale from Tom. Laura could imagine the exact way he would push his hair back with his fingers, the irritated set of his jaw.

“Get rid of the girl,” said Greaves, his voice lower, insistent. “Before she turns that upstart actress even further against you.”

“And how do you propose I do that?” said Tom, making Laura’s stomach give a sickening twist. “She’s here to work, and she seems as stubborn as hell.”

“So we make it impossible for her to work. And we make her *life* hell.”

Laura backed away and returned to the kitchen, her appetite gone.



Tom

Laura wasn't in his room when he returned to the annexe. She wasn't in the kitchen or the bathroom or the living room either.

"Have you seen Laura?" he asked Mrs Greaves, who was at the kitchen sink, scrubbing a frying pan with lemon washing-up liquid.

"Nope."

"Not at all? Did she have breakfast?"

"Nope. Dunno."

Tom let out a sigh. He was doing that a lot recently. He used to be a happy-go-lucky, care-free sort of person, which, he was beginning to realise, was a demeanour much easier to maintain when you had a multi-billion pound fortune in your future, like a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Strangely, he had been struggling to sustain that same pleasant laissez-faire attitude since losing everything, especially in this freezing ruin of a castle, sandwiched between Mrs Greaves's taciturn apathy and Mr Greaves's wheedling paranoia.

Get rid of the girl.

Not a chance. The girl was staying. Even if he'd much rather see her settled in better accommodation. And even if Greaves had a point about how Laura might present the state of Deveron to its newly minted mistress. He didn't care. The girl was everything. But he had nodded along with Greaves's rambling as he always did, because he wasn't entirely

convinced the pair wouldn't murder him in his bed if he dissented.

Tom went back to his room. The bag he had fetched for Laura was gone, and he frowned. Then, like a sap, he lifted the sleeve of the jumper he was wearing to his face and breathed in the faint scent that clung to it from the few hours she'd worn it—before he had undressed her.

Last night...when she had reached for him, brought his head down to hers, and his heart had damn near skimmed itself off the edge of the world...

He set off to find her.

She wasn't in the Red Suite, though she must have been there, because her bag was sitting in the middle of the bed. He frowned, looking around the room, seeing how drab and shabby it was in the daylight. There was dust everywhere, the corners thick with cobwebs; the wallpaper was peeling, and everything stank of mildew. No, she couldn't stay here. And he had been petty to let Greaves put her here last night.

He *much* preferred where she had ended up.

He went back down from the tower and wandered, a little aimlessly, around the castle's many decrepit rooms until a bright splash of pink made his heart skip.

She was in the library, looking up at the painted ceiling, a large tablet in one hand, a camera around her neck. She was dressed all in black—chunky black boots, skinny black jeans, an absurdly large black jumper, and black fingerless gloves.

“Good morning,” he said, hearing the pathetically gooey smile in his voice but unable to switch it off. She had no such problems, making his smile disappear entirely merely by uttering a curt, “Morning,” without so much as a glance at him.

Tom stopped walking, pausing by a red Chesterfield armchair, one hand absently fiddling with the leather pleats while he looked at the girl in front of him.

She had a stylus in one hand and was writing or drawing on the tablet. Then she tucked the stylus into the pink hair behind her ear and lifted the camera to her eye, taking some quick shots of the mural on the library ceiling.

“What are you doing?” he asked stupidly but in what he hoped was a pleasantly inquisitive tone.

“Working.”

Tom fiddled some more with the leather armchair, dried leather flaking off under his short fingernails. He mentally reviewed their last few interactions. Mind-blowing sex, falling asleep in each other’s arms... He wasn’t quite sure where he had gone wrong.

“Is...everything OK?”

Laura glanced at him, eyes snagging on the jumper he was wearing as though she recognised it as the one from the night before. Heat crawled up his neck. He might as well have been wearing an *I heart Laura* t-shirt. But she looked quickly away,

moving to study one of the ornate bookcases with their mouldering rows of neglected tomes.

“Don’t suppose you know where my art supplies are? They should have been delivered here last week.”

Tom frowned. “No. I don’t think we’ve had any deliveries for you. I can ask Greaves—”

She snorted. “Right, yeah.”

“What?”

“Nothing, Fauntleroy.”

“Laura—”

“Look, just go and viscount somewhere else. I have work to do. And I’m pretty sure you do too, unless you’re expecting some magical elves to come and fix this place overnight.”

“Right,” he muttered, trying to steady his reeling brain. “Right. Anyway. I didn’t know if you’d had breakfast, so I brought you this.”

He put the wrapped bacon sandwich down on a table and left the room, though it felt like he left half his heart snagged behind him, as crumbling and cracked as that Chesterfield chair.

Chapter Ten

Laura

THERE REALLY WEREN'T MANY things Laura wouldn't do for a bacon sandwich, especially when she hadn't eaten in nearly twenty-four hours. But she wasn't sure that thanking the viscount who had slept with her and then pledged to get rid of her was one of them.

So she let him walk away before picking the sandwich up and sitting with her knees curled in one of the library's creaking leather wingback chairs, the chill, damp air pressing her from all sides.

She ate the sandwich with gratitude and regret and anger. And she missed him while she ate it. Even though she didn't really know him. She missed the sight of him and the touch of him and the way his body had claimed hers in the dark as though it had been made specifically to do so.

She missed what could have been—if he had been the prince her imagination kept conjuring, instead of who he really was: someone either merely lazy and stupid, or maliciously deceptive. Someone who hated Natalie. Who was living here, in Natalie's house, existing entirely on her largesse, and as far as Laura could see from the state of the place, had done nothing towards starting the required renovations. The place should be teeming with builders, but there was nothing but pigeons and dead leaves.

She needed to call Natalie and find out what was going on. But her phone was missing. She was sure she had left it in the

annexe's bathroom when she showered last night, but it wasn't there. And she hadn't managed to find it in Tom's room. She knew she had it with her when she left the Red Suite last night, because she had texted Tom from the entrance hall. Could it have fallen out of her pocket as she followed him to the annexe?

She groaned out loud to the empty library then set off to retrace her steps from last night.



That was easier said than done of course. The inside layout of the castle followed no rhyme or reason. Rooms led onto rooms that led onto rooms, and corridors seemed to loop around themselves and deposit her back where she started. There were servant's stairways and hidden doorways and little flights of steps that seemed to lead up but, when Laura checked out of a window, had actually taken her to a lower floor.

There were genuine suits of armour standing in corners, and every time Laura passed one she tensed, half-expecting it to move. There were so many age-blackened oil paintings and dusty old tapestries and crossed axes and stuffed deer-heads hanging on the walls that they served no use as landmarks at all but merely merged into one long gothic procession.

She eventually found herself in a wide corridor hung with what looked like old flags or banners. It seemed like the sort of corridor that might lead somewhere important, so Laura followed it, hoping it would take her to the entrance hall.

She hadn't taken more than a few steps along it before she heard a banging sound—a sort of *thwack*, followed by hard thuds. Was someone hammering? Actually doing some building work? She followed the sound down the corridor to a set of large double-doors at the end.

They were ornately decorated, though the gilt on their paneling was flaking and dull, and the white paint was grey with dust and mildew. They were slightly ajar, and Laura poked her head through into what she discovered was an enormous ballroom just as another *thwack-thud!* sounded, and something small and hard blasted into the wall nearby. She jumped and swore in shock. And so did someone else.

“Shit! Laura—”

Viscount Tom Brewerly. He started forwards from the other end of the ballroom, a look of concern on his face, a tennis racket in his hand. Laura took in the scene—Tom's shorts and t-shirt, the dozen or so yellow tennis balls rolling, scattered around the floor, and the dirty dented marks on the wall.

“What the fuck?” she said. Tom stopped walking. “You're playing tennis in Natalie's ballroom? Look at the wall! You're destroying the place!”

Tom surveyed her with his head tilted, his look irritated. He twisted the handle of his tennis racket in his hand. “It's already

destroyed. The plaster on that wall is totally rotten. It all needs to be replaced.”

“So what? You can’t play tennis in the ballroom!”

He twisted the handle of the racket some more, spinning it in his grip with sharp flicks of his fingers. “Well, it’s cold outside.”

She stared at him, anger buzzing in her throat. “Natalie trusted you to fix this place up for her and you’re treating it with total disrespect—”

Tom scoffed before she had even finished speaking. He batted at one of the tennis balls on the floor with his racket, making it bounce up, then just stood there bouncing it off the floor with his racket, like one of the professionals at Wimbledon just before they served. He was annoyingly good at it. He wasn’t even looking at the ball, but at her, his smile contemptuous, the ball going *bounce-bounce-bounce* while the golden muscles in his forearm flexed.

He tossed his hair back with a dismissive jerk and said, “Respect? What does Natalie know about respect?” He caught the ball with the same careless ease that he had bounced it with, tossed it in the air and served it with an overarm smash, all the lean, strong muscles of his body working together in sinuous perfection.

Not that Laura was looking. It was just... He was in shorts and t-shirt, arms and legs bare, the muscles she had only felt the night before now visible to see, his skin tanned a deep gold... He was sweating slightly from the exercise, and as she

watched, he lifted the bottom of his t-shirt and used it to wipe his face, revealing an extremely sculpted six-pack and a line of dark blond hair heading down to the low waistband of his shorts, past a sharp V of muscle...

She dragged her eyes back to his face and found him regarding her with a smug, very male sort of look.

Damn the man.

He pushed his hair back, then picked up the ball he had just served as it rolled back along the wooden floor of the ballroom towards him, a fresh dent in the crumbling plaster wall.

“I can teach you,” he said, balancing the ball on the racket then bouncing it lightly in the air. “That’s what I do.”

“You teach tennis?”

“Back in France. I was semi-pro until a couple of years ago. Now I just coach.”

Well. That explained all the muscles.

“So that’s why one arm is bigger than the other,” she said. “I just thought you were a massive wanker.”

Tom laughed, then threw the ball in the air and served it again with another sinuous, powerful overarm smash. “Probably I’m both.”

“I didn’t think you worked,” she said, realising it sounded stupid even as she said it.

“Because I’m a viscount? As I told you at the party, I’m not rich.” He picked up another ball. Smashed it into the wall.

Thwack-thud! “And now I have debts. Stupid gambling debts.” He smiled ruefully at her decidedly unimpressed expression. “I know, I know. I don’t deserve any pity. But I thought I was playing with several billion pounds in my pocket. It was only one night of fun. Not something I make a habit of. Clearly, or I might have been better at it.” He hit another ball, backhand this time, then muttered, “I blame Jay Orton anyway.”

“Who?”

“Oh, some crazy guy I met in Monaco. Very bad influence. Anyway, if you have a tiny violin to bring to this pity party, I’ll tell you the thing that really stings, and that I absolutely loathe myself for—see, it’s not just Natalie I dislike, I have plenty of loathing to go around. That night, at the casino, I lost all the savings I had put aside, and without my inheritance, I have no way to start over. And all my financial backers have pulled out. So now, yes, *now* I am poor, and the thing I have been working towards for years is gone, and I suppose I could crawl back to France and start over but even ten years’ more work wouldn’t bring me back to where I was, and so—”

Thwack-thud! “—all I really feel like doing right now is hitting balls against this wall.”

Laura looked at him for a moment, seeing the brittle tension in his lean frame, the way he pushed his hair back with more force than usual. The way he was not meeting her eyes.

“What was it?” she asked. “The thing you were working towards?”

He picked up another ball and started bouncing it off the floor with his racket, all his attention seemingly focused on that. “An academy,” he said. “A youth tennis academy, to try and get more kids into the game, the ones who don’t normally get a chance. You know, disadvantaged kids, whatever the politically correct term is.”

He served the ball, but more softly this time, then shot Laura a self-deprecating smile. “I’m terribly noble, don’t you see?”

She did see. Or her heart saw. Her heart quite wanted to climb out of her chest and wrap itself around him. But she said, “Does Natalie know?”

Tom winced, then huffed a scornful laugh and said, “She doesn’t even care about fixing her own house. I doubt my problems will interest her.”

“Of course she cares. She’s sent you up here to start renovations, and she’s sent me up here to design a whole range of fabrics and soft furnishings and wallpapers—”

“Don’t you get it? We’re the charity cases.” Tom walked over to the side of the ballroom, close to where she was standing near the door. She became aware all over again of his height, his very physical presence, the heat that was radiating off him. He dropped his racket on top of a sports bag and picked up a water bottle. “She’s sent us up here so she doesn’t have to feel bad about us. The guy she disinherited, the friend she... I don’t know...left behind?”

Laura flinched, heat flooding her face. “Excuse me?”

“You know what I mean. Your lives are...” he made a splitting gesture, moving his hands apart.

Laura looked up at him in fury, knowing full well that much of her anger was because he was right and happened to be prodding a very tender spot. “She’s not like that. You’re talking about her as though all this money—”

“And fame, and success—”

“Yes, fine, all that... But you’re talking about her as though she’s suddenly a different person, like it’s going to completely change her. And it won’t. It hasn’t. I’ve known her for six years, and you’ve met her, what? Once?”

“Twice,” said Tom, twisting the cap on his water bottle. “If you count a very tense two minutes in a lawyer’s office.”

“Exactly!”

Tom shrugged. “I can only judge by her actions.” He waved a hand around at the dilapidated room. “Actions speak louder than words.”

“What, exactly, is it that she’s done that’s so bad? Because even you can’t be stupid enough to hold her own father’s will against her.”

“You really want a list? Well, she hasn’t paid me, for a start. I’m meant to get a stipend, as Deveron’s guardian, and I’ve had nothing. She won’t answer my phone calls. She ignores my voicemails. She ignores about ninety percent of the emails I send her, and even when she does reply, it’s two weeks’ late and it’s only ever to disagree with me, and in the most rude

fucking way imaginable... Honestly, is this woman really your friend? Is she Jekyll and Hyde? Because I have no idea what you see in her. Not when you're so..." He paused, his eyes travelling over her, then looked away, putting his water bottle down and picking up a navy blue hooded sweatshirt. "I just mean, you seem nice."

"Nice."

He gave her a crooked grin. "Sometimes." And then he pulled on the sweatshirt, which gave Laura two seconds to gather her wobbly thoughts without the sight of his annoyingly attractive face.

"I'm going to call her," said Laura. "And get all this sorted out. Just as soon as I find my phone. You haven't seen it, have you?"

"No," said Tom, shouldering his sports bag. "You've lost it? Did you check my room?"

And there it was, last night, hanging unspoken in the air between them. "No," said Laura, trying to tuck her hair behind her ears although it was already tied back. "I mean, yes, I did. It's not there."

"Hm," said Tom, an amused light playing in his eyes. "Fancy checking in there again? We could have a really thorough look. A really *good, hard* look. Explore every avenue..."

"Shut up."

He laughed lightly, then took his phone from his sports bag. “Try calling her on mine. I bet you a marquessate she doesn’t answer.”

Laura raised an eyebrow. “Now I see why you got into trouble in Monaco.”

Tom laughed again as he unlocked his phone and held it out to her. His fingers grazed hers as she took the phone, and she felt that bloody tingle again, her mind still conjuring images of just what a *good, hard look* in Tom’s room might involve.

Damn. The. Man. She couldn’t look at him without thinking that sex was an extremely good idea when it clearly wasn’t. And even worse was the fact she felt herself starting to like him. To use his own phrase: He seemed *nice*.

Sometimes. When he wasn’t hating on her best friend.

She scrolled through his contacts, finding lots of French names. *Amélie, Benoît, Helene, Pierre*. Lots of women’s names too, she couldn’t help but notice, just lots of names in general, hundreds of them. But no Natalie.

“Oh,” said Tom, seeing her confusion. “She’s saved under ‘Ding Dong Witch.’ You know. Wizard of Oz.”

“Ding dong, the witch is dead?” said Laura flatly.

“That’s the one.”

“Nice. Mature.”

Tom just grinned as Laura dialled the number, holding the phone to her ear as it rang. And rang. And rang.

“Let me guess. No answer?”

“She’s busy, probably filming,” said Laura as the phone went to voicemail. It was a generic pre-recorded one, not Natalie’s usual breezy, “Hey, this is Nat.” Maybe she had changed it, now she was in the public eye.

“Hi Nat,” said Laura. “It’s me. I lost my phone so I’m using Tom’s. Could you call me on this number as soon as you get a minute? Thanks. Bye.”

She handed Tom’s phone back.

“I won’t hold my breath,” he said.

But Laura knew he was wrong. Natalie would phone her as soon as she could.

Of course she would.

Chapter Eleven

Tom

“THANK YOU FOR THE bacon sandwich,” said Laura as they walked back to the annexe together from the ballroom.

“No problem,” said Tom, and they lapsed back into what might have been called a companionable silence if at least one of the participants—i.e., him—wasn’t burning with sexual tension and the weight of a hundred unsaid things.

He needed a shower—a cold one—and a long, hard look at himself. Because what he really wanted was for Laura to like him, and for that to happen, he ought to be pretending he thought Natalie was amazing, and he definitely ought to stop whinging about losing his future in a Monaco casino like an idiot.

Honesty was not doing him any favours. But he couldn’t help it. It was a lifelong habit, and besides, Laura had a way of just completely decimating whatever social graces he sometimes bothered to hide behind and simply reaching deep inside him and pulling right at his heart. Every moment with her was like that night at the party again, when he lost all sense and reason and kissed a girl he’d only just met simply because he absolutely had to.

When they got to the annexe, Mrs Greaves was in the kitchen—she was seldom anywhere else—stirring a vast pot of unusual smelling soup.

“Ox tongue,” she said, without turning to look at them.

“Are you sure?” Tom couldn’t help but ask.

He found Laura biting her lip, trying to suppress a laugh, then she took his breath away by going up on tiptoes, her hand on his shoulder and whispering against his ear, “Rat’s tongue.” She dropped back down with a wink, and Tom gripped the back of a kitchen chair to stop his knees from buckling as he shot her a grin.

“Can I help you with anything, Mrs Greaves?” Laura asked in a naively suicidal manner.

“Nope. Unless it’s by going away.”

Laura blinked at Mrs Greaves’s stolid back before turning to Tom, eyes wide. He laughed silently and shrugged, then gestured over his shoulder with his thumb. They retreated together from the kitchen and ended up outside Tom’s room. He opened the door to dump his sports bag inside and said, “We really could look for your phone.”

“I’ll check the bathroom again. That’s where I thought I left it.”

So Tom went alone into his room and stood for a moment with his eyes closed as he drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Then he searched everywhere he could—the chair where she had fallen asleep, the old blanket he had tucked around her, the jogging bottoms he had lent her and then pulled off her, and which she had returned, neatly folded, the bed where they—

“Any luck?” Laura said from the doorway.

“No. You?”

“No. I’ll ask Mrs Greaves.”

Tom sat on the edge of his bed, wincing as he heard Mrs Greaves’s sharp, “Ain’t touched nothing of yours,” and gave Laura a sympathetic look as she appeared again in his doorway. Her eyes briefly flickered past him to the bed, then she tucked a loose strand of pink hair behind her ear and said, “Are you going to brave that soup? I mean, I will if you do, but if there are any other lunch options...”

He smiled. “There’s a pub about a mile away. I’ll drive.”



Laura

They got back into the Rolls Royce Silver Wraith. It looked even more derelict in the day, the chrome pitted and rusted, the wheel arches dented, the upholstery splitting.

“Was this working when you found it in the barn, or did you get it going?” Laura asked as Tom hauled on the steering wheel to turn the car out of the old stable and towards the archway at the back of the courtyard. She had driven old cars without power steering, and she knew just how much effort was sometimes involved.

“She wouldn’t start, but she didn’t need too much doing, fortunately. Greaves said the old Marquess was using the car up until recently.”

“My dad restores cars. Mostly Volkswagens—that’s how he got started, on an old VW camper he bought for us to go on holidays in. But he would love to have a go at a Rolls.”

“My granddad was a Jag man. He had a Jaguar Roadster, XK140 in emerald green. He loved it like a baby. I used to help him work on it—when he thought I was old enough to be trusted, anyway... When I was, like, twenty-one.”

“That’s how you knew how to get this one up and running?”

“Yes. That, and he bought me a Jaguar XJS when I was sixteen. You know, from the eighties? Told me I could have it if I could get it running again. I didn’t even want to at first. I was *sixteen*. I wanted a modern Ferrari or something *cool*. Left

it sitting in the garage for months until I figured out how much easier it would be to sneak out to parties and things if I could drive myself.”

Laura chuckled. “Motivation.”

“Exactly. Booze and girls.”

That wiped the smile off her face, which was ridiculous. She hid her bizarre flash of jealousy with an eye roll and looked out of the window as they drove along the winding driveway through the estate. The view was of flat, winter-dull grass and a few very large trees, their branches dark and bare. She saw what looked like some outbuildings in the distance, maybe an old farm. Then they passed through a grand stone gate that had an abandoned-looking gatehouse at one side.

“What about here?” she found herself saying.

“Hm?”

“Your tennis academy. There’s so much space. Land. Buildings. We’re not too far from Aberdeen.”

Tom shot her a glance as the car bumped and creaked its way down the narrow country lane. “Well, apart from the fact that I hate the weather and every other aspect of being here, this isn’t my estate.”

“I know it’s not quite the south of France, but people play tennis in Scotland. Andy Murray is Scottish.”

Tom just smiled slightly.

“I know Natalie would support you,” Laura persisted, not quite sure why she was bothering. Tom Brewerly’s life was not her business.

“Really? I don’t hear my phone ringing yet.”

“It’s not even been an hour.”

Tom just gave one of his annoyingly emphatic shrugs. The car splashed through a puddle and Laura looked at some distant sheep on a low purple hill.

“You’re her cousin, aren’t you?” she said. “It seems a pity for you not to get along.” And she didn’t add, “When you have so little family left.”

“We’re extremely distantly related. I’m probably more closely related to you. Though, I mean, I very much hope we’re not at all related.”

“We’re not. Believe me, there isn’t even the hint of a viscount in my family tree.”

“You could marry one.”

Laura shot him a startled look, but he was just watching the road as though he hadn’t said anything at all. And as if to underline how little thought he had been giving the conversation, he started a new one: “How’s your work going?”

“You mean the two hours of it I managed to do this morning? I’m just...trying to get a feel for the place. Work out Deveron’s personality, so to speak.”

“Cold? Crabby? Cantankerous?”

“That sounds like Mrs Greaves.”

Tom laughed. “Maybe she’s the spiritual embodiment of Deveron. She *has* been at the castle forever. Greaves too. I think for the last ten years or more it’s just been those two and the old Marquess. Seems he was a bit of a loner, an eccentric. They basically had the run of the place.”

“Do you think they resent us being here?”

Tom frowned thoughtfully as he drove. “Maybe. Though they didn’t seem to mind me turning up too much. But they don’t seem too happy you’re there, if I’m being honest.”

“Mm. I know.”

He flashed her a questioning look.

“I heard Greaves talking to you,” said Laura, embarrassed, although she knew Tom and Greaves were the ones who ought to be embarrassed. “Greaves said he was planning to make my life hell. You agreed.”

Tom jerked in his seat, making the car swerve slightly before righting it. “Shit. No. I just pretended to go along with it. Greaves is... He’s basically obsessed by hatred for Natalie. If you think I’m bad, he’s like...a whole other level. I think that’s why they don’t want you here, because you’re on her side, so to speak.”

“And they like you because you’re not?”

“And because I’m old blood. I know it’s ridiculous. But some people care about stuff like that. Natalie’s mother was...”

“A common pleb, like me?”

“Come on, you know I don’t think like that.”

Laura just grunted, annoyed by the size of the chip on her shoulder, annoyed that she had one at all when she knew it was ridiculous.

“Most people don’t get given Jaguars for their sixteenth birthday,” she said before she could stop herself.

“A crappy old Jaguar that didn’t even work.” He looked at her, then returned his eyes to the road. “Are we really doing this, Laura? Because I could point out that most people don’t have mothers who murder their father. If you really want to compare tragic back stories, I reckon my tiny violin is much smaller than yours.”

Laura cringed in her seat. “Sorry.”

“Come on, I’m teasing. But I’ve had people waving the viscount thing in my face my whole life—kids at school, players on tour. Women. People can get weird about it. I don’t want you to be one of them.”

“But still...” Laura wasn’t sure why she was still speaking. Her mouth seemed to be operating independently. “You are a viscount. And Natalie is a marchioness. And I just... I feel so ordinary.”

Tom frowned thoughtfully at the little narrow road ahead. “And what would the alternative to ordinary be? Extraordinary? How would that feel?”

Now it was Laura's turn to frown in thought. Extraordinary. What would that mean? Fame? Notoriety? Lack of privacy? Natalie's kind of wealth, Laura knew from things Natalie had told her, required countless meetings with lawyers and advisers, and private security...

"I just..." Laura said slowly, feeling her way through the thought, "I want to feel like I've *made it*. The thing about being an artist... It sounds like such a dreamy sort of relaxing job, but actually, it's a constant hustle. It's competitive. I'm always having to scout for work, put myself out there. And of course, I'm always comparing myself to others. Wondering why they got the job or the grant or the exhibition and I didn't. It's honestly not great, self-esteem-wise."

"Sounds a bit like competitive tennis."

"Maybe. But you have a rank, right? A number. With art you never know if you're actually any *good*. Or if you're just delusional. If you should just give up and get a real job. And it used to be the same for Nat, with her acting. We were together in it, constant auditions for her, portfolio submissions for me. We used to collect our rejections and pin them to a board. Now she has her big break. And I'm still waiting for mine."

They had reached the pub. *The Shepherd's Rest*. Tom pulled into a small carpark and turned the engine off. But they both sat for a moment, making no move to get out of the car.

"Could this be it?" he asked. "Your job at Deveron? That could be your break."

“No. Because it’s just nepotism. She wouldn’t have chosen me if I hadn’t been her friend. There are a thousand better artists.”

“But you know her well. Tell me, would she have chosen you if she thought you were terrible?”

“Well... No...”

“So to her, you are the right person for the job. You earned it. In tennis, a player’s rank is constantly changing. We have good seasons, good tournaments, good days, and sometimes we have really bad ones. The thing you learn is to only compare yourself to yourself. *Am I making progress? Am I a better player than I was this time last year?* Even Natalie, when this show she’s working on is over, will have to find the next one. When it airs, she’ll be subjected to reviews, and I can guarantee they won’t all be good. Everyone’s opinion differs. And no position is ever secure.” He smiled ruefully at that, no doubt reflecting on just how insecure his position as heir had been. He unbuckled his seatbelt. “Live for the day. Don’t regret tomorrow before it’s even happened. Now, let’s go and sit in a warm pub and eat until we can’t move.”

Chapter Twelve

Laura

THUS, ESTEEM BOLSTERED BY the clear-sighted wisdom of a highly attractive viscount, Laura walked into the pub feeling a little dizzy.

It was a wonderfully old building, with a fire burning brightly in a large stone fireplace, the ancient wooden bar the colour of amber. Tom had to stoop to get through the door and then strode, smiling, across the small room to the bar, where a middle-aged woman with short, platinum-dyed hair greeted him with an enthusiastic, “*Bonjour, Tom!*”

“*Salut, Monique!*”

They descended into a rapid and ebullient conversation in French while Laura hung back, awkward and surprised. It seemed that Tom was a regular here. And a popular one at that, judging by the way Monique was smiling at him, and by the way a couple of old men at the end of the bar lifted their pints in greeting. Another man came out from the back of the pub behind the bar and also started talking to Tom, in English, though with such a strong Scottish accent it was almost as incomprehensible to Laura as the French.

Tom glanced over his shoulder at Laura and smiled. “Drink?”

She walked a bit closer and smiled tentatively at Monique. “Erm, a Guinness? If that won’t get me lynched in this part of the world. Or whatever stout you have.”

Drinks poured, Tom snagged two menus from the bar and led the way to a table by the window, across from the fireplace.

“I didn’t expect to find another French-speaker here,” said Laura as they sat down.

Tom smiled slightly and said in a low voice, “Don’t tell anyone I told you, but Monica can’t really speak French. I just let her think she can. It makes her happy, which makes me happy because she gives me free drinks sometimes.”

Laura didn’t know whether to laugh or frown at that, so she ended up awkwardly doing both. “You’re a flirt, then.”

Tom sipped his pint, mouth quirking as he put it down. “I think the phrase you’re looking for is *effortlessly charming*. Or maybe just financially-challenged. Needs must, and all.”

His smile faded at that last part, and then, as though thinking of money inevitably led his thoughts in one direction, he took his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen before putting it down on the table between them. “Still nothing.”

“She’s busy.”

“Yeah,” he said quietly, then picked up his menu. Laura stole a look at him as he studied it, her eyes skimming the line of his jaw, his cheekbones, the hair across his forehead. She looked at his fingers wrapped around the edge of his menu, and something inside her yearned—not for his touch—or not just for that—but for something she couldn’t quite name,

something that felt a little like the splash of sunshine on a distant hillside, before it got chased away by the clouds.

They couldn't both be right about Natalie. But how could Tom be so wrong, when time and time again, he kept seeming to prove that he wasn't an idiot, that he was an insightful man, even a kind man, a good man...

He looked up from the menu and found her eyes on him. And for once, there was nothing combative or teasing or scornful or flirtatious in his eyes. Instead, for a moment, they seemed to mirror what she herself felt. A sort of sorrow, a regret, the type of pain that came with endings and goodbyes, of leaving a holiday place, and all the half-dreamt *what ifs*.

"I didn't even realise it was Sunday," he said, dropping his eyes and reaching for his pint. "But I'm going to get a roast. Nothing more British than roast *boeuf*."



They both got roasts, and pudding too—a warm chocolate brownie for Tom—who revealed himself to be something of a chocoholic—and steamed jam sponge for Laura, who had always had a perverse preference for anything that sounded like boarding school dinner food.

They lingered in the warmth of the pub, neither of them keen to return to the cold clutches of Deveron castle. But Tom was driving, and Laura took pity on him, nursing his single pint. And she, at least, had work to do.

She took her purse out to pay, her expression neutral, but inwardly wincing at the thought of what this meal would do to her overdraft.

“It’s on me,” said Tom, flipping through what seemed to be a dozen different cards in his wallet. He frowned at one then tossed it on the table with a shrug. “Might still work.”

Laura put her rather woe-begone debit card down on top of his flashy foreign-looking plastic. “Halves.”

Tom gave her a look, eyebrow raised, then sat back in his chair, arms folded, and continued looking at her, for no other reason Laura could think of other than he knew the effect his blue-eyed stare was having on her. He shrugged, arms still folded and said, “Well, I suppose as I’m only half French, I can let you pay half.”

She rolled her eyes and said “*Merci*,” in her best, sarcastic attempt at an accent.

Tom grinned slowly, his expression a little wicked, and said something in French.

“That’s just unfair,” she said. “And you know it.”

He said something else in French, still smiling, still pinning her with those blue eyes.

She groaned in exasperation and reached for her bag and coat. He knew exactly how hot he looked. He knew exactly how his accent made him sound. And Laura... Well, she might have pink hair and ears full of piercings and have been commissioned by a marchioness, but in that exact moment, she felt more ordinary than ever. And though part of her wanted to laugh along with Tom, another part of her wanted to hide and run, because even if Tom wasn't a viscount, he would always be extraordinary.

And his phone, that was still on the table between them, was silent.

And the longer it stayed silent, the more she started to wonder if, possibly, just possibly, he might be right about Natalie.

Not about all of it, of course. But about the being left behind part. The becoming insignificant part. She remembered Tom's gesture from the ballroom. *You and Natalie, your lives are...* The way he had brought his hands apart. Two people diverging.

Laura stood and buttoned up her coat.



Tom

“I’m sorry,” said Tom, as he pulled out of the pub car park and turned onto the little road back to Deveron.

Laura had been quiet since they finished lunch, and Tom suspected he had fucked up somehow, though he wasn’t quite sure what he’d done. Just being himself, probably. Acting on impulse as he always seemed to do around Laura, not thinking anything through, just throwing himself at her like a puppy rolling on its back hoping to get its belly rubbed, idiotic and defenseless and transparently optimistic.

“What for?” said Laura.

“Whatever’s made you look so sad.”

He heard the breath she took. With the attention he could spare from the road he saw her turn her face away and look out of the passenger window.

“I’m just tired,” she said. “Too much Guinness. Too many roast potatoes.”

Tom tried a smile. “No such thing.”

She didn’t reply, and neither of them said much except to comment on the weather until he had pulled the car back into the garage at Deveron. The afternoon was cold and grey, the clouds the colour of slate, and it was gloomier still here, in the shadows of the garage. But the lack of light made things easier too—at least, he suspected it did for Laura.

“Should we talk about last night?” he said as the cooling engine hissed slightly and Laura undid her seatbelt. “Or is it one of those ‘what happened in the dark, stays in the dark’ things?”

Laura went still beside him. “I think that might be best,” she said at last.

“I don’t,” he said. “I really don’t.”

She hesitated, staring out through the windscreen into the shadows, never once looking at him. “You hate Natalie. And I love her. You’re going back to France. I’m going back to London. I don’t really see what there is to talk about.”

He turned in his seat so he could look at her properly. She kept her eyes fixed forwards. The things she said sounded completely reasonable, but when he looked at her, it felt anything but.

“I was a coward in the pub when I spoke in French. Shall I tell you what I said?”

She shook her head slightly, sadly, but he spoke anyway.

“I said, ‘You’re beautiful when you’re angry. You’re beautiful all the time.’”

She shook her head again as though denying this, denying his feelings—denying the possibility of *them*. He took hold of her hand and she jumped slightly, drawing in a breath, but didn’t pull away. Her gaze fell on their hands as he twined his fingers through hers.

“I like you,” he said, his heart pounding, though he somehow managed to keep the fear from his voice. Just how much trouble would his honesty get him into this time? It was too much, too soon, he knew that. And yet, like the idiot he was, he kept going. Because this truth was burning a hole in his chest.

“I like you. And I know this thing with Natalie is...not ideal. But I do like you. I have since the moment I first saw you. You’re not ordinary to me. You never could be.”

She finally looked at him. Her eyes were still sad, and he felt it like a kick to the stomach. He felt it like a directive from the universe: *you will make this woman happy.*

“I don’t want to scare you off,” he said. “But if I thought that we... If there might be an *us*... Then I would stay—in Scotland, or London, or wherever you are. What I see, when I imagine us, it deserves that kind of chance.”

“Tom...you hardly know me.”

He smiled a little crookedly, “I know, and isn’t that a terrible shame?”

She shook her head again, but smiled despite herself. What she said though was, “Tom...you barely seem real.”

He didn’t quite know what to say to that, but he felt it like a sharp little pain between his ribs. He hid the pain with a grin and reached out with his free hand to cup her cheek. “I’m very much flesh and blood,” he said with unmistakable meaning.

She flushed slightly but smiled, fighting it less this time.

He moved his hand to tilt her chin, his thumb stroking over her full bottom lip. Her breath caught. So did his. He could feel his pulse everywhere. Gently, with both fear and hunger, he pulled her towards him, with the hand on her cheek and the hand that he held. And she let herself be drawn in, she let him kiss her, and it was—

Fuck. So good. This woman was magic. And if the furious way his body needed her was a little scary, it was also exhilarating.

He kissed her harder, tongue meeting hers, and pulled her across the seat and onto his lap. She straddled him, her hands in his hair, rubbing against his erection as she lowered herself to rest on his thighs. He groaned, his hands pulling her down harder against him, then finding their way up, under her jumper, to the warmth of her skin.

With the part of his brain that was still working, he was calculating distances, to his bed, to any bed, to anywhere warm, because this was the sort of kiss that didn't end until someone came, and he was sincerely hoping it would be both of them, him inside her, above her, behind her, beneath her, he didn't care, so long as he got to have her. Then he reached her breasts and she moaned a little, rocking in his lap, and his other brain took over and insisted that here, here was good, he would have her right here, right now—

Something buzzed and beeped. His phone, trapped in his pocket, between his hip and Laura's inner leg. She felt it too of

course, and broke away, a little breathless. He reached for her, tried to kiss her again, but the phone buzzed again. And again.

“It might be Natalie,” said Laura, her voice a little shaky, her lips red and swollen. Her face was just centimetres from his, and all he wanted was to bury himself there, but she pulled back a little further, her eyes insistent.

Tom groaned with frustration and managed to free his phone from his pocket as Laura wriggled backwards on his lap—away, alas, very much *away* from his raging hard-on.

He unlocked the phone with his thumb as he flipped it around to read the messages. There was a whole series of them. And yes, they were from Natalie, and they said... They said...

LAURA! DO NOT TRUST TOM!

He is a liar and manipulator

He will try to turn you against me

DO NOT TRUST HIM!

KEEP YOUR DISTANCE!!

What the fucking actual *fuck*?

He looked up in horror and found Laura staring wide eyed at his phone.

“Laura—”

But she was scrambling off his lap, onto her seat, opening the door, rushing to get out of the car, to get away from him—

“Laura!”

He flung his door open and stumbled out after her.

“Wait, Laura—”

She was at the door, silhouetted against the light, and then another figure appeared, blocking her way. It was Greaves, and Tom said a silent thank you to the old man for actually being useful for once, giving Tom time to catch up to Laura, to take hold of her arm and turn her to him, so that he could explain...

“Laura, I don’t know what is going on, but I swear I am not lying to you, I—”

“Sorry to interrupt, Lord Brewerly,” said Greaves, “but your private investigator is here. The one you hired to follow Natalie Banberry.”

Laura went completely white. Tom saw her literally turn the colour of death. Then she wrenched her arm free from his grip and fled across the courtyard.

Chapter Thirteen

Laura

LAURA STAGGERED INTO THE annexe kitchen, the door slamming back, making Mrs Greaves jump and mutter dark things. Laura hardly heard her, she hurried out of the kitchen, down the corridor and into the castle itself, not knowing where she was going, but that it had to be away.

She kept expecting to see blood; she felt as though she had literally been stabbed, as though there should be a knife handle protruding from her gut. And it would make sense in this setting as she stumbled her way down the dark gothic corridors, past the suits of armour and grim-faced portraits that all must surely be laughing at her.

How could she have been so *stupid*? She wasn't some teenager, she was twenty-seven years old, she had dated her share of arseholes, she had waited tables and worked behind bars, and she would have sworn she knew how to spot a scumbag a mile off.

But this was some next level *wanker* shit. This was a viscount, handsome as sin, speaking French and packed with muscle and telling her she could never be ordinary, not to him...

And she had known it was all too good to be true. She had *known*. Because men like that didn't exist, and they certainly didn't want nobody girls like her—totally boring, nothing people like her, from a three-bed semi in Surrey, living on

pasta and cheap bread and ridiculous dreams, nothing but insecurities hiding behind pink hair.

Fuck, fuck! She had kissed him. She had *slept* with him... But the thing that made her feel really sick was that she had started to believe he might be right about Natalie. She had given up on her friend, and all it had taken was those blue eyes and that face...

She had to leave. She had to find a way to get home— Not home. She had no home. Had given up her flat in London to be here. But her parents' house—she could go there. And even in the depths of everything she found herself thinking that Tom didn't have that luxury, he had no parents to take him in when life went to utter shit, or had that been another lie? Had any of it been real? If she could only get to Surrey somehow, though she had no money for a train...

“Laura!”

She froze at the sound of Tom's voice. He was looking for her, shouting her name, but he wasn't close.

She took another turn, away from the direction she thought his voice had come from.

But he knew this castle better than her... And she couldn't run forever. She needed to go to the Red Suite and get her camera and bag.

“Laura?” His voice came again, further away this time. “Please, let me talk to you...”

She took another turn and kept on walking.



Tom

Tom kicked the wall, which was a stupid idea for many reasons, not least of which being that it was made of stone. But also because he wasn't really the aggressive type and it made him feel a bit daft.

“Ouch,” he said. But seriously, *fuck* this fucking castle.

Laura could hide from him forever in this place. And maybe it would be a good idea to give her some space, but he couldn't stand the thought of her being out there hating him and alone, and probably cold. Maybe lost. Maybe even scared.

Fuck this fucking castle.

And fuck Natalie Banberry.

What had he ever done to that woman to deserve all this? What had he ever done, full stop, to deserve the shit that life kept throwing at him?

He gave one last lingering look up the hallway, into the gloomy depths of the castle, then turned and headed for the kitchen. At least if Dylan was here, Tom might finally get some answers about Natalie.

Only Mrs Greaves was there when Tom arrived. “Where's Dylan, the PI? Greaves said he was here to see me.”

“Gone,” grunted Mrs Greaves, stacking some large metal roasting trays into a cupboard with a harsh metal banging sound that made Tom's ears hurt.

“Gone? Why? He only just got here.”

“Didn’t want to wait around for you.”

“Why would he come all the way out to Deveron then not bother to hang around?”

Mrs Greaves just shrugged and clattered some more trays around.

Fighting back some unsavoury words of both Gallic and Germanic origin, Tom left the kitchen and crossed the yard back to the old Rolls Royce. He had dropped his phone in the car in his hurry to reach Laura. But when he got to the car, he couldn’t see it anywhere.

He searched the seats, the footwall, the back seats. He looked under the car and on the floor all around. He retraced his steps to the garage door, frantically scanning the ground. It wasn’t there. And it wasn’t in the yard. And it wasn’t in the annex.

Shit. *Merde*. Fuckity fuck.

He went back into the kitchen where Mrs Greaves was now using an ancient electric grinder, apparently to pulverise gravel judging by the sound it was making.

“Have you—?”

The grinding noise cut him off.

“Mrs Greaves! Have you seen my—”

Whirrr-crunch-grrrrnnnh...

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

Tom sagged back against the wall and hit his head on it, one, two, three times. He'd had enough of this place. He would go back to France, dodge the debt collectors there. Just as soon as he had put things right with Laura. He would take her with him. He couldn't leave her here in this rotting place, at the mercy of the Greaveses.

The grinding noise finally stopped.

"Want something?" grunted Mrs Greaves.

"My phone," muttered Tom, already turning to his room. "But never mind. I'll use my laptop."

He went to his room and sat on the edge of his bed, laptop on his knee. He quickly typed an email to Dylan, hoping the man would see it before he went too much further.

Dylan, urgent, meet me at The Shepherd's Rest pub.

He hit send just as Mrs Greaves surprised him by appearing in his room with a cup of tea. "Looked like you could use it," she said, so uncharacteristically caring that Tom could only sit there speechless as she crossed the room with the steaming mug in her hand.

But just before she reached him, she somehow managed to stumble. She threw her arms out for balance and the whole cup of tea landed on Tom's laptop. He leapt up, swearing, both at the mess and the hot liquid scalding his thighs, then reached out to steady Mrs Greaves.

"I'm so sorry, Lord Brewerly!"

“That’s OK,” he said, though really, it wasn’t. His laptop—his last means of communication with the outside world—was ruined.

He eventually managed to banish the apologetic woman from his room—really, she had chosen the worst possible moment to become talkative—then changed his trousers before running back to the garage and into the Silver Wraith.

He set off for *The Shepherd’s Rest*, hoping against hope that Dylan had got his message.



Malachi Dylan was sitting in a quiet corner of the pub, somehow managing to look completely inconspicuous, which was quite a talent, Tom mused as he crossed the room towards him, given the dark-haired man was six foot tall and looked like a young Gregory Peck. A very serious, unsmiling Gregory Peck.

Dylan nodded briefly in greeting as Tom took a seat opposite him.

“Why didn’t you wait? One of the Greaveses said you left straightaway.”

“They told me you weren’t there.”

“What? Why—”

“And I didn’t want to tip them off, so I pretended to go along with it.”

Tom had the urge to scream, but instead dragged a hand down his face. “From the beginning, Malachi. Please.”

“We’ve been looking in the wrong place. I don’t believe Natalie Banberry is the issue.”

“Believe me, based on her last text messages, she is very much an issue.”

“That’s just it,” said Dylan. “They weren’t her text messages. Her electronic communications have been compromised. So have yours. That’s why I came to see you in person.” He fixed Tom with a dark-eyed look. “The person you’ve been communicating with isn’t Natalie Banberry.”

Chapter Fourteen

Laura

IT WAS ONLY AN hour or two until nightfall. The sky was grey, it was starting to drizzle, and Laura was, once again, trudging down a narrow, puddle-rutted lane carrying a heavy bag. Though only one this time. She had only bothered to save the essentials.

There must be a phone she could use in that pub, and she knew the way, it was only a mile's walk. She could phone her parents, swallow her pride, and ask them to transfer her enough money to get home—back to Surrey, anyway, to her childhood bedroom, where she could hide and cry over a boy, just like the idiot girl she clearly was.

The familiar sound of an old rattling engine alerted her. She stopped and stared in horror as the old Silver Wraith came into view around a bend. She nearly ran, tried to find a hedge to hide behind, but she wouldn't give Tom the satisfaction of seeing her cower in a muddy field. Instead, she stepped to the side of the road, kept her head up and carried on walking.

As before, the Wraith came to a screeching halt. Tom leapt out. "Laura! Thank god! But where are you going?"

"Away," she said.

He looked down at her, his face all blond and golden and chiselled, the breeze tugging his hair across his forehead. She predicted the exact moment he would toss it back out of his eyes, and she felt a pang, something raw and tender that

burrowed down from her throat right into the centre of her chest. She kept her hands by her side and fought the urge to touch him as he looked at her, something raw and tender in his eyes too.

“It’s not what you think,” he said. “The messages from Natalie. They weren’t real. None of it is.”

She laughed, and it felt so bitter she almost cried. “Exactly. None of it was real. I don’t understand what your game was but—”

Belatedly she became aware of another car stopped behind the Wraith, a navy blue sedan. A tall, dark-haired man got out of it and regarded her impassively.

Tom glanced over his shoulder at the man then told her, “This is Malachi Dylan. He’s a private investigator I hired to look into Natalie—”

Laura made a sound, something halfway between a hiss and a laugh. “You’re insane! Who even does that? Why am I even still standing here, talking to someone who thinks my best friend somehow conspired to steal her father’s fortune? Do you have any idea how crazy that is?”

She tried to walk past, but Tom took her by the arm, gently but firmly. “I know, OK? I know. It was the timing of the will and her appearance in society that made me suspicious. Forgive me, I was desperate and clutching at straws. All I wanted was to ensure the codicil to the will was made fairly and not under any...duress, or manipulated in any way. So yes, I hired Dylan to look into your friend, to find out what sort of

person she was, if she'd had any dealings with her father. And he found nothing. Natalie is completely clean. But Laura, he found something else. There *is* a conspiracy, only it's not Natalie who's behind it. It's the Greaveses."

Laura stared up at him, feeling totally unmoored. His blue eyes were clear and serious and held her firm, and she wanted to believe him, she really did, but... "I don't know what's real anymore, Tom."

The other man, Malachi Dylan, came over.

"I have been monitoring your friend Natalie's correspondence, Miss Usman. I should have spotted it sooner, but my attention was on her dealings with other people, not with Tom."

"She didn't get a single email from me," explained Tom in a rush. "Everything I sent her was going to a different, almost identical email address. My phone calls and messages too. It was the wrong number."

"I traced the location of the computer used to email Tom under Natalie's name, and it is here. At Deveron, or close by. The phone too, appears to have been used in this location. I suspect they got access to Tom's phone and laptop shortly after he arrived here. They changed Natalie's contact details to their fake ones and blocked her real number and email."

Laura kept looking from Tom to Dylan and back again. Blue eyes and dark brown, both serious, both entirely earnest. "The Greaveses?" she questioned, wanting to believe, wanting for it

all to make sense—hoping for a world in which both Natalie and Tom were blameless.

“They’re the most likely suspects,” said Dylan.

“But why?”

“They don’t want Natalie here,” said Tom. “By keeping the refurbishments from happening, by delaying everything, by making Natalie think this place is a lost cause, I’m guessing they thought they could keep her away indefinitely, keep the place to themselves. They’ve had the run of it these past few years, with only the old Marquess around, and him mostly keeping to his rooms as far as I can work out. I suspect they see Deveron as theirs.”

“And by making me think that you... By driving me away and taking my phone so I couldn’t find out from Natalie what was going on...”

“Exactly,” said Tom. “You were a link to Natalie, someone who could bridge the miscommunication they had set up between me and her, so they needed you gone.”

And she nearly had gone. They had been so close to succeeding. She met Dylan’s eyes briefly, and he acknowledged her realisation, her embarrassment at how easily she had been led, her gratitude to him for figuring it out. He saw it all and acknowledged it with a minute nod.

Tom was looking down at her, and now something fragile was in his look—hope?

Yes. Hope.

“I didn’t believe you,” she said.

“Well...” he smiled crookedly. “You hardly know me.”

Her smile was as fragile as the look in his eyes. “And isn’t that a terrible shame?” she softly repeated his words from earlier back to him.

He took hold of her hand, and even though their skin was cold, she felt the spark she always did around him.

A noise, quickly growing louder, made everyone look up. A dark speck was moving against the clouds, rapidly coming closer. A helicopter, heading, it seemed, for Deveron.

“I believe that will be Lady Banberry,” said Dylan. And then, across the fields and lanes, they heard the sound of sirens. “And that, I believe, will be the police.”

Chapter Fifteen

Tom

TOM AND DYLAN GOT back in their cars and headed once more for Deveron, but this time Laura was at Tom's side. He glanced at her, and then again, fighting to keep the smile off his face and look at least vaguely dignified, even if all he wanted to do was sink to his knees in relief and cling to her legs.

She didn't hate him. And she might, eventually, forgive him for briefly suspecting her best friend of being a callous fortune hunter. OK, so they had a long way to go. But at least, for now, she was here, and they might, finally, get a chance to get to know each other.

Although in his heart, and his soul, he felt as though he already did.

Tom stopped the car before reaching the courtyard of Deveron. The helicopter was coming in to land on the grounds outside, its rotors flattening the grass, sending fallen leaves flying. He and Laura got out of the car and came to stand by Dylan.

They watched it land, no one even trying to speak over the noise it was making, though Tom noticed Dylan look back at the castle with a frown. Perhaps he had come to the same conclusion as Tom: that on hearing the helicopter approach, the Greaveses would run.

Tom didn't really care. They would be found eventually and brought to whatever amounted to justice. It was impossible really, to stay angry with two old people who had already failed. He knew how it felt to lose everything. And, anyway, right there and then, Tom felt as though it would be impossible to hate anyone or anything, so long as Laura was at his side.

He turned to smile down at her as the helicopter rotors slowed, and a large man, clearly a bodyguard, jumped down from the helicopter, assessing the lie of the land before beckoning back to its occupants. Tom watched with great curiosity as his faux-nemesis, a slender blonde woman, stepped elegantly down from the helicopter.

He looked back at Laura, who was taking in the sight of her former flatmate with wide eyes: the helicopter, the bodyguard, the glamorous marchioness in the designer coat and the handsome man—The Earl of Lansbury—stepping out behind her. Tom couldn't help but grin. He leant down and spoke into Laura's ear. "See, she's not changed a bit!"

Laura laughed and looked up at him. His heart skipped a beat at the light in her eyes. "She hasn't, not in anything fundamental. You'll see."

They stepped forwards to greet the mistress of Deveron.



Laura

“It’s so cold!” said Natalie, aka Marchioness Banberry, after they had hugged and both tried to say too many things all at the same time, before trooping into the entrance hall. They were waiting there while the police—and Dylan, unofficially—looked for the Greaveses. Laura watched Natalie look around the gloomy space, her brow furrowed. She was seeing it all for the first time...and it wasn’t good.

Tom and Natalie’s partner Edward Ashley—aka Lord Lansbury—stood off to one side, talking in low voices. Tom had his arms crossed against the cold and Laura kept feeling his eyes on her. He shifted his attention to Natalie and came over.

“Tom,” said Natalie before he could speak. “I’m so sorry about all this. I can only imagine what you must have thought of me.”

He smiled slightly. “I doubt that, but it’s probably for the best.”

Laura bit her lip, then couldn’t help it, she started laughing. “He basically thought you were a murderer, Nat. He was sure you’d bumped off the old Marquess.”

Tom had the grace to blush. Edward regarded him with raised eyebrows, though there was humour in his green eyes. Natalie’s face echoed it as they shared a look. “I’m afraid I’m really not that interesting.”

She looked around the hall again, her humour shifting to something more forlorn. “I suspect it was this place that killed the old man. The damp. The cold. It’s worse than our flat, Lo.”

Laura laughed. “I’d say it’s the same, just on a grander scale.”

“There are some rooms in the east wing that are in better repair, with heating, no damp,” said Tom. “That’s where the old Marquess—your father, sorry—used to live.”

“He was never my father, not really,” said Natalie quietly. Edward came over and took hold of her hand. “Lead the way, Tom,” he said. “We may as well wait in what passes for comfort around here.”

Tom turned to head out of the hall. Laura hurried to his side and smacked him lightly on the ribs. “And you made me stay in the Red Suite!”

He chuckled. “Sorry. But that was Greaves’s idea, remember?”

Laura tried to glare at him, but she was smiling too much for it to be effectual. She glanced behind her to check the others were at a safe distance then whispered. “And then you acted like your room was the only warm place.”

He grinned. “You didn’t seem to mind.”

She smacked his arm again, and he laughed and took hold of her hand as they walked together out of the great hall.

Laura glanced back, and yes, Natalie had noticed her hand in Tom’s. Laura met her friend’s amused look with one of her

own. They knew each other well enough that it was all that was needed. Natalie would get the full story later, but for now, she knew enough.



The Marquess's old rooms were very much in the style of "care home, circa 1990", but they were, as promised, warm—at least, once they worked out how to turn on the heating. Tom borrowed Edward's phone and started calling electricians and other trades at Natalie's behest, while Natalie called her bank and released all the funds required.

"I was planning to host a Christmas party here," Natalie told Laura, handing her phone to Edward, who called someone—his secretary, fixer, general right-hand-man—and said simply, "We need food for four and catering at Castle Deveron within the hour. Clothes too," then hung up, as though life was that simple. Maybe it was, if you had the money.

"My big entrance into society, host of Deveron," continued Natalie, taking her phone back from Edward with a smile of thanks.

"You still could," Edward said. "Concentrate on fixing up one wing."

“But the state of the place! It’ll be so much work. And I’m filming until Christmas.”

“I’ll help,” said Laura. She glanced at Tom who had just finished on the phone.

“I’ll help too, of course,” he said, moving to stand beside her. “It’s my job, after all.”

Natalie smiled at him. “Tell me, how much did you hate me for taking you from the south coast of France and sending you to freeze up here?”

“Well,” demurred Tom, “hate is a strong word...”

Laura laughed. And then Tom said, “And hate is the wrong word anyway, given what I found here.” He smiled at Laura in a way that made her heart stop. “I should be thanking you, really.”

“Excellent!” said Edward, clapping his hands together with a grin. “So you won’t mind getting this place fixed up by Christmas.”

Natalie chuckled. “One wing,” she said, coming to a decision. “Just habitable. We get every builder and trade we need and pay through the nose... And we cut the guest list, only invite our real friends. Though I suppose we have to invite Biffy Shilstone, given he leant us his helicopter.”

“Uncle’s helicopter,” objected Edward just as there was a knock at the door—Natalie’s bodyguard. “The police would like to speak to you all and take statements. But it seems the Greaveses have gone.”



Later, much later, Laura sat down on the edge of a bed in what would be her new bedroom for the rest of her stay. It was much different than the Red Suite. It was warm, for one thing. Almost too warm, every radiator in this part of the castle now having been turned up to full to chase away the damp. And it was on the first floor, not up a winding spiral staircase, and smaller, though still large enough to fit a double bed, canopied with an ugly nineties pleated valence in shades of yellow and blue.

For once though, Laura hardly noticed the textile design. Her attention was entirely focused on the man who had just stepped into her room.

He was tall and broad-shouldered. His blond hair was long enough to fall almost to his eyes. He pushed it back as he looked at her and smiled, something almost shy in his eyes, as though he wasn't quite sure what she would make of him being here.

“Is it midnight?” she said.

“Past midnight. Nearly two.”

She smiled. “Time is an abstract concept. And midnight is the most romantic of hours. So...I say it's midnight.”

Tom laughed and came closer. “Did I say that? I did, didn’t I? I remember it all. But in my defence, I was—”

“Stoned out of your nut?”

He laughed again. “Yes.”

“Would you have kissed me if you weren’t?”

His expression turned serious. He stood before where she sat on the bed and took both of her hands in his. “Yes. In every situation, in every possible world, I would have kissed you.”

She looked up at him, a smile on her lips, though her heart was trembling. “How are you even real?”

He pulled gently on her hands and drew her to her feet so she was standing flush against him, the backs of her knees pressing into the mattress, his hard chest against her front. “Am I allowed to say that you make me real?”

He raised his hand and touched her hair where it curled against her neck. He tucked it behind her ear, then his fingers, as she had known they would—as though they could take no other path—stroked their way to her lips.

“Yes,” she breathed as her skin tingled beneath his touch. “You’re allowed to say that.”

His gaze lingered on her mouth before meeting her eyes. He murmured something in French.

“What does that mean?” she asked, because she couldn’t miss a moment of this.

“My dream. My truth.”

He kissed her.

And all around Castle Deveron, in the gloom of the Scottish night, the lights blazed on.

Did you enjoy Laura and Tom's story? I would be so grateful if you could leave a review on Amazon!

If you haven't already, please check out the rest of the Entitled Love series: Uncommon, Unspoken, and Untouched.

There will be more stories in this universe coming soon!

Thank you so much for reading.

Stay in touch

Get free bonus content, including Undressing Doctor Lucas, a steamy story set at Lansbury Hall, when you join my mailing list. I promise not to send you a million emails – just updates every now and then with book-related news, content, and freebies! Sign up at www.rachelrowan.com.



Dear Reader

Dear Reader

I am half agony, half hope... Did you enjoy my little book?

If you did, I'd be enormously grateful if you could [leave a review on Amazon](#). I'm a tiny indie author in a very big pond and your support is more helpful than you could imagine.

If you would like to stay in touch and find out when my next books are released (and also get some free bonus content!) [please join my newsletter](#).

I can't wait to share more stories with you.

Yours,

Rachel

x

Acknowledgments

When I started writing this novella series, I had no idea if I would make it to the fourth one. (Don't worry, I have more planned!) I definitely wouldn't have made it this far without the support of all the fellow writers and amazing readers I've met along the way.

Thank you to everyone who has encouraged, read, reviewed, or listened to me moan! You are all champions. It's been both humbling and heart-warming to learn just how un-solitary writing really is. The first draft might get written alone in a room—if the kids allow—but everything that comes afterwards is dependent on other people—and of course, the readers. After all, if a story never gets read, is it really a story?!

Thank you to all my beta readers, to my marvellous editor, to my fellow writers who are all carving their own way in this confusing but exciting authorial world. Thank you to the characters who live inside my head and don't let me sleep until their story is told. And thank you, thank you, thank you, to my

husband and my children, who give my world its reason. To quote the brilliant Johnny Flynn: “*The story without ending is: I love you.*”