



# Hello Stranger

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
JADE WEST

# **HELLO STRANGER**

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JADE WEST

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# Dedication

For Jackie.

Thank you for being such an amazing woman.

You inspire me so much.

# 1

## *Logan*

There she was, sitting on the opposite side of the carriage – just a few seats ahead, staring out through the window at the world outside.

The morning sun was harsh on her freckled cheeks. It suited her.

Her hair was bound up high on her head, with messy little strands spiralling down. Mousy, with shimmers of gold. That suited her, too.

There was a faded blue bag on the seat next to her, and a thick, worn paperback clasped tight under her arm.

Nervous.

The girl was nervous.

The girl was pretty, too.

Her fingers twisted in her lap, over and over. I could practically hear her shallow breaths, even over the whistle as the train pulled from the station.

I knew the route by heart, since I'd been travelling it daily for nine years straight. I knew the line of oak trees past the Sunnydale viaduct. I knew the corner shop sign with its fresh newspaper headline every morning on Callow road. I knew the five red doorways along the station at Wenton – even the one with the streak of paint missing.

I knew the people going about their lives like clockwork, just like me. The woman always tapping on her phone as she stepped onboard at Eastworth, ignorant of the passersby. The man with the messy blond beard, always cursing under his breath at Newstone as he tried to find his rail pass. The elderly woman at Churchley, with a permanent scowl and a garish floral scarf that she'd been wearing for years, always tied in the same lopsided bow under the chin.

Not once did I ever say hello to a single person on that train journey. Not a smile, nor a wave, and never so much as a mutter of a *good morning*. I barely even gave them a glance.

Yet still, I couldn't stop looking at her. The girl on the train that morning.

She'd dashed onboard at Eddington station, flushed even though she had a good clear two minutes before the train left. She dropped herself down into

her seat with a huge gasp of breath, and I would've usually pulled my own paperback from my briefcase, but I didn't.

I couldn't pull my eyes away from the girl as she grabbed the book from under her arm and flicked it open to halfway through. Her bookmark was faded pink. She pinched it between her knees and I caught a glimpse of the cover.

*Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell.

Interesting.

It shocked me just how surprised I was to see such a classic novel in young hands. Small-minded and judgmental on my part. Shame on me and my forty-one years of trying to be a better man than that.

I looked at her fresh, searching for signs of her literary tastefulness, but there was nothing that stood out. She was still the freckled girl in her early twenties, tapping her foot with nerves as the train chugged towards London.

I wondered where she was going, heading into the city before eight a.m.

I wondered what was making her so nervous.

I wondered what her name was, and if I'd ever see her again, even though it shouldn't matter in the slightest.

London came closer.

People came and went, station to station. The carriage filled up, people hovering for just a stop or two before heading off for their day. Still, she stayed in her seat, just like me.

Until we came to Harrow.

The train pulled into my usual stop, and the same crowd of people roused from the carriage. I picked up my briefcase and prepared myself to walk right on by her on my way out, just to get a closer look at her. But no. The girl was up faster than the rest of us. She flung her bag over her shoulder and shoved her novel in the side pocket, then was off like a whippet up the carriage aisle, without so much as a glance behind her.

Hence, she didn't notice that she left her battered pink bookmark on the floor behind her.

It was only me, staring at the seat in her wake, that noticed the sad little memento.

I picked it up.

It was leather, old and worn. I turned it in my hands, and saw a name scrawled in gold.

*Chloe.*

Little Miss Tattered Paperback was clearly called Chloe.

I followed her out onto the station, intending to hand it back, but she was already gone, up the main stairwell with enough of a bounce to clear them two at a time. The white rabbit on a run.

*Chloe.*

I slipped the bookmark into my inside pocket and watched her dash out of the platform exit on the other side of the track.

Farewell, Chloe.

I guessed I'd never see her again.

# 2

*Chloe*

*Crap, crap, crap.*

Harrow station came around so quick. Too quick. Too quick to get to my senses, even though they'd been on edge the whole journey.

I was nervous. Just like always. It's a bad combination – being nervous of everything and as disorganised as you can possibly be in your life. Go figure, but I was still battling it.

Twenty-two years old and the solution was nowhere in sight, but I was trying.

I'd looked up the route about fifty times online, but still my heart was thumping like I didn't know where the hell I was going. I dashed up over the platform bridge, then hurried along Harrow's main high street, praying that the universe please be kind to me.

I was desperate to make it to day one of my new job on time.

It was a narrow window. The seven a.m. train was the earliest route I could take without any train changes, so I'd opted for it. Opted and prayed.

Thankfully, Harrow District Hospital was a huge bulk of a building out of West Street. I could see it looming taller with every footprint. I repeated the department name over and over. A mantra along with my footsteps.

*Kingsley Ward, Kingsley Ward, Kingsley Ward.*

*I'm Chloe Sutton for Kingsley Ward.*

The entrance was well posted. I veered off to the right of the main car park and headed right on in through the reception, and there was the sign. Phew. Easy to spot. Kingsley Ward, six doors along the corridor to the left.

*Thank you, universe. Thank you.*

With barely a minute left to go I headed across the corridor and stepped on in. The reception was smaller here. A smiling face greeted me as I raced on up and handed my job confirmation letter across the counter.

*"I'm here to see Wendy Briars, please. I start work today."*

*"Chloe Sutton?"*

*"Yep, that's me," I said with a smile. "Pleased to meet you."*

She leaned forward over the counter to point me along my way.  
“Welcome to the team! Wendy’s expecting you.”

The waiting room was already filling up, but I was well placed to see a woman stepping out from a door at the other side. She was tall. Red hair and a touch of freckles like mine, but she must’ve been at least twenty years older. I was just a gangly little girl up against her.

I guess that’s when it truly hit me that this really was the turning point in my life – seeing my new boss, the head of nursing, there in person heading straight for me to welcome me to her world.

Chloe Sutton, trainee nurse in patient rehabilitation.

Chloe Sutton, full time employee of the National Health Service, with a vocation to help people who really need it.

I’d always been like that. Mum and Dad said I’d been like it since I was barely walking, a little toddler saying owww and rubbing cream on people whenever I thought they’d hurt themselves. I’d wrap my dollies in bandages and cry whenever something bad happened to a character in a story, and I was always on a one-child mission to protect the schoolyard. Always with the desire to help people; to stop their hurting.

And here I was, about to turn that desire into a reality. One drop in the ocean of medical care in Harrow Hospital, and my new work home. Hopefully forever.

“I can’t wait to introduce you to the place,” Wendy said, once she’d introduced herself. “It’s a great team here. Such a lovely group of people. You’ll fit right in.”

I hoped she was right.

My shudder of nerves turned to a shiver of excitement as she began to show me around. Such a lovely group of people.

Lovely patients in beds, waving and smiling. Lovely people needing help with their clothes, or their meals, or their pain management, or even just someone to talk to.

Scared relatives looking for reassurance about the people they love. Happy grins when people reached a point they were well enough to go home.

I felt like I was already making a real difference as I helped Catherine from the day care team with bed changes. I was beaming bright through a lunch break with Vickie, the girl from reception, dressed up fresh in my new blue work blouse.

“Tell me about yourself,” she said over a hospital cafe snack, so I did.

I gave her an overview of my textbook lovely life with a fresh new smile on my face. I told her about my awesome parents I visited every weekend, and our old family dog. I told her about the boyfriend I lived with over in Eddington. How I'd had a great time at Warwick university, studying psychology.

How I was happy, happy, happy. Always so happy.

She seemed pretty happy herself as she told me her life story right back. She had a young daughter, and a wedding ring displayed proudly on her finger. She started studying beauty, but got more interested in the anatomy part of the course and opted to rethink her talents.

I guessed we'd be friends. Maybe really good ones.

I figured that was a huge extra thumbs-up, given that most of my friends had stayed scattered all round the country, post their degree courses.

*Thank you, universe.*

The shift ploughed on, and the day was fast and busy enough to have me an exhausted muddle on the way home. But I was happy. I headed back through the streets to Harrow station with a whole load less race to my steps, but it didn't matter. The train pulled into the platform just one little minute after I stepped onto it.

*Thank you, universe, all over again.*

The glow of satisfaction was burning bright as I headed up the carriage aisle. My very first real day in the world of healthcare, and I'd loved it every bit just as much as I hoped I would.

No. Even *better* than I hoped I would.

My feet were throbbing pretty bad when I dropped down into the nearest empty train seat. I leaned back against the headrest and enjoyed the whistle as we pulled away, looking forward to the comfort of the journey home when I dug into my bag for a fresh read of *Gone with the Wind*.

My fingers scanned instinctively for my bookmark, just like they had done for years on end.

Only it wasn't there.

It wasn't in my book, and it wasn't in my bag, and it wasn't on the floor around my feet.

It wasn't in any of my pockets, and it wasn't anywhere in the carriage aisle.

*Oh crap no.*

*Please no.*

*Please let me find it.*

But it seems the universe had done with its thumbs-ups for the day. My precious bookmark was nowhere to be seen.

I couldn't stop the tears pricking my eyes, but I kept on looking, kept on hoping.

The glass is always half full in my world, even when there's no water left to drink. After all, you still have the glass there ready for some more... Granny Weobley's wise words.

I was still fighting back the tears as Eddington Station pulled up.

My bookmark was really gone.

I remembered Granny Weobley's face as she handed it over along with a library copy of *Watership Down*, just for me. I remembered how pretty it looked in lovely bright pink, with my name in such perfect gold under my fingers as I traced the letters around and around.

*A special gift for my special girl, from her very special grandma,* the scrawl on the other side said.

She was gone a week after, my very special grandma. Her heart gave up so suddenly that I didn't get the chance to say goodbye.

And now I'd lost the most precious gift she'd ever given me.

I headed back home with sore steps from blistered feet. I climbed straight upstairs and let myself into our apartment, and there was Liam, back from his shift and already holed up on the sofa with some gun-ho video game online, just like he had been for months.

"Hey," I said, and he barely even raised me a wave.

I kicked off my shoes and headed through to the kitchen. I made myself a cup of tea and waited for Liam to call me through to catch up on my day, but he didn't bother. He kept on playing his game, oblivious, even when I sat myself down on the sofa right by his side.

I waited for him to speak, imagining all the questions he'd soon be asking me.

*Hey, Chloe. How was your great new workday?*

*Hey, Chloe. Was it every bit as exciting as you hoped?*

*Did you meet some people? Learn some things? Do the things you've wanted to do for a lifetime?*

But nothing.

Just gunshots and voices shouting through headphones, until finally I cleared my throat.

“... Wendy Briars was amazing, and Kingsley Ward is the best, and I learned about crutches and the best way people can use their legs with them. Honestly, Liam, it was super cool. Better than I ever expected it to be, which is good, isn’t it?” I laughed to myself. “I mean for it to be better than *I* hoped it would be, it must be the best place in the whole damn world, mustn’t it?”

Finally, with a curse as his game came to a catastrophic end, he turned to face me and pulled the headphones from his ears.

Then he showed he was barely listening to a word I’d been saying.

“Hey, babe. That’s cool. Just like you thought it would be, then?”

His eyes weren’t warm, they were dull. Bored. More interested in getting back to his shitty games console than hearing about the new phase in the life he was supposedly committed to being a part of.

We’d been together since high school, for eight years straight. I’d travelled back from university right the way through three years of weekends, just to make sure I could see him enough to keep us going.

I’d moved straight into his apartment in Hedley Road when I was done, right next to his favourite local pub, with a tacky beer garden and huge sports screen for everyone to watch the football on. For all his *mates* to watch the football on every Sunday afternoon.

I’d figured we would be a great couple again one day. That we’d pick things back up to just how good they used to be, that time when we couldn’t get enough of each other.

“It was cool,” I told him. “Amazing.”

His smile was nothing more than a token gesture. “Tell me about it, then, babe,” he said, but he didn’t mean it. He was already setting up another war battle tournament in the online league.

I talked.

He nodded.

I told him about my new nurse friends, and the kind of patients I’d be helping in Kingsley Ward.

He nodded some more.

He told me it was *great* and *cool* and that he knew I’d be loving it. The whole while I knew my hopes were draining.

And then, I thought of my bookmark. The treasure I really thought would be with me forever.

I pictured the golden swirl of my name, still slightly metallic against the tattered pink leather. I imagined it between the pages of so many hundreds of

novels over the years, keeping my place just right.

“I lost the bookmark Granny Weobley gave me,” I told Liam, and this time he did flash me a glance.

“No shit, really? The pink thing? Fuck. That’s crap.”

Still, he went back to playing his game.

I wondered how long it would take before I’d give up playing his game of life along with him.

I wondered whether he’d even notice. Whether he truly knew the girl he’d promised to be in love with, even at fourteen years old.

The question came out of my mouth before I realised I’d said it. It was a random question, with no basis whatsoever, just the weirdest urge to ask the guy who claimed to love me with all his heart.

“Hey, Liam. What’s my favourite novel of all time? You remember that, right?”

“Huh?” he asked, twisting his controller in the air for another shot on screen.

“You know it, right? You remember my very favourite novel of all time?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. You read so damn many of them.” He cursed as someone landed a shot at him. “Romeo and Juliet. That Expectations one. That Wind in the Willows one you used to bleat on about. Dunno, babe. What is it? Surprise me.”

Maybe his book ignorance wouldn’t have hurt quite so bad if I hadn’t been pining for my bookmark.

Maybe I wouldn’t have been so unable to look at the man in front of me and convince myself I still wanted to say *I do* one day.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said.

Maybe it didn’t.

Not tonight.

My feet were tired, and my mind was a crazy mix of both happy and sad at once, so I had a bath with enough bubbles to sink right down into them.

I thought about Wendy Briars, and Vickie from reception, and Hayley, and Caroline from the rehabilitation team, and all the things they’d be able to teach me day by day.

I thought about Dr Edwards, and how confident she’d looked when she’d walked around the ward and evaluated dosage of meds for different patients, right in front of me.

Liam was still playing with online friends when I crossed the hallway to

the bedroom, but tonight I didn't care. I settled into bed and gave the biggest thanks ever to the universe for giving me something so amazing to wake up for.

# 3

*Logan*

My days at the hospital were always longer than they should be, but this one had been longer still.

I'd battled a flatline on the ECG well before the patient was prepared to give their final breaths.

I'd tried, and I'd failed.

That's the unfortunate thing about my profession – you often do.

Tonight I'd lost the battle and death had claimed its latest victim. Snatched from the arms of his family before he could even scrape a breath to whisper *I love you*.

Pain. So much pain.

Not so long ago, I'd have felt every scrap of it with them. The shock, and the fear, and the tears. It was always there as I conveyed the unforgivable news. *I'm sorry*. A crippling sear in my ribs, hidden under a professional veneer, right where it should be. But these past few months I was numb.

Numb to them, numb to me, numb to everything.

Luckily, my own state of mind didn't stop me doing my job to the best of my ability. I gave my patients everything I had, just to provide them with a tiny bit more. That's what being a palliative care doctor means – ultimately, you give your all to helping your patients make the most of their fading life in the face of death.

Sometimes I can make it work so well.

Sometimes I can barely do a thing.

This evening had been one of the latter.

The train was quiet on my way back home, nothing but a few scattered people staring at their phone screens as I walked through the carriage. Definitely no paperbacks on display.

Definitely no *Chloe* and *Gone with the Wind*.

I settled down into my seat, exhausted on my feet, having scraped barely ten minutes for a lunch break. My head was thumping and my chest was tight, but my hands still moved on instinct, pulling my book from my

briefcase.

*The Master and Margarita.*

I'd say that was the first time I truly began to realise *Chloe's* inexplicable impact on me.

As I flicked open the pages, I found myself wondering if she'd read the Mikhail Bulgakov masterpiece. I found myself wondering if she'd sunk into the same scenes that I'd sunk into a hundred times over, just as deeply as I'd sunk into them, and if she'd pondered the same thoughts over the same words.

I wondered if she'd have different thoughts to me, about different characters. If she'd surprise me with her observations about plot points, and if she'd enlighten me with her freckle-faced opinions on the huge talking cat.

Then, I wondered if I'd surprise and enlighten her right back with mine.

I stopped myself just as soon as I registered what I was thinking about. I put those thoughts away and settled down for the remainder of the journey, determined not to waste a second more. Reading time was the only time I ever truly allowed myself. The only time I slipped out of my own world into someone else's and left the heaviness of mine behind.

My only escape.

I enjoyed Pontius Pilate, and the devil, and the huge talking cat without another thought to the freckled girl. Yet still, I looked up through the window at Eddington station, casting an eye along the platform. But she wasn't there.

Redwood approached soon after.

I was on the verge of folding down my page corner when I indulged myself a stupid little token of pleasure. I reached into my inside pocket and pulled out the tatty pink bookmark, slipping it between the pages to mark my spot. The page corners would thank me for it.

I stepped from the train and made the same journey along the same streets. My head was still tense, and my chest was still tight, and my feet were heavier with every step as I turned the corner into King Street and put my key in the lock.

The upstairs lamp was on, just like usual.

My mother was propped up in bed in her room, just like usual.

Her oxygen mask was over her face and her eyes were closed tight, and Olivia was sitting in the corner, her attention fixed on her phone. Just like usual.

"Sorry," I said, as I stepped through the doorway. "Patients overran."

Olivia was used to it. Her smile was her regular smile as she picked up her bag from the floor and slung it over her shoulder.

“She ate omelette, but there’s still half of it in the fridge if she gets hungry.”

“Thanks.” I nodded. “How has she been?”

She wobbled a hand in the air. “So-so. Tired.”

Just like usual.

I checked she’d administered the right doses of meds at the right time, and checked the performance of Mum’s morphine driver, just like usual.

Olivia had done everything asked of her. Shower, and dinner, and getting Mum changed for bed.

I didn’t bother to watch her leave. I knew exactly how she would look, bobbing down the staircase and out the front door to the street outside.

Instead, I pulled my seat up to the side of the bed, and leant in to take Mum’s fingers, squeezing tight enough for her to open her eyes.

Her smile was bright, same as usual. She squeezed my fingers right back before she tugged her mask from her face.

“Good day?” she looked at the alarm clock, then flashed me her usual cheeky smile. “A bloody late one as per.”

I shrugged. “Not so bad.”

I loved the way her eyes twinkled, so alive against her pallor. I loved the way her face was so expressive, even when she could barely move a thing.

“Got a couple of crossword clues left for you to help me with,” Mum said, as per.

I grabbed the newspaper from the bedside table and we went through the rest of the crossword, giving each other a congratulatory high five on completion, and she was pleased with us, squeezing my fingers some more.

I made her a cup of tea and talked her through my day as she sipped it down. I played down my lack of work breaks when she quizzed me, promising I was taking care of myself, in the face of the world screaming at me for help.

I knew that she didn’t quite believe me, but she kept her smile bright.

“I heard from little Amy,” she said with a wink. “She wants to come over and visit me next weekend. I told her you’d be around too.”

“Stop it,” I told her. “Stop with the winking, please.”

She laughed. “I’m not going bloody anywhere until you settle yourself down with someone nice, Logan Hall. Mother’s duty.” She winked again.

“Amy is a great fit.”

We’d had this conversation a thousand times. I repeated what I’d said a thousand times.

“If you don’t go anywhere until I settle myself down with someone, you’ll be around a long time yet.” I leaned in to kiss her forehead. “And Amy isn’t a great fit, she’s just a pretty girl.”

“It’s a good place to start,” she laughed, and I managed a chuckle along with her.

I helped her back on with her oxygen mask, making sure it was sound and snug to get her through the night.

“Sweet dreams,” I said, and I truly meant it.

“See you in the morning, sweetheart,” she said with a thumbs-up, and I hoped she meant it too.

Her eyes were already closed when I stood up to leave. She looked a tiny thing in bed, fading just a little every night. The final petals were dropping away from the whitest rose, pale and moonlit as the oxygen kept on chugging into her lungs. Mechanical and persistent.

She was lying about how fine she was feeling, and I knew it. I felt it. Her chest was rasping, and her ankles were swollen, and jabs of morphine kept her comfortable enough to speak but little else.

She still had her bucket list pinned up on the wall, scrawled in her finest handwriting.

I read it through over again and got a fresh pang. Time was running out.

*Meet an elephant.*

*Climb a mountain.*

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.*

*Put my toes in the sea.*

*Get a daughter-in-law.*

One thing’s for sure, it wouldn’t ever be Amy. I shook my head to myself with a smirk as I turned off the light and closed Mum’s bedroom door behind me. The girl should count her blessings on that one. Lucky escape.

My room was quiet when I stepped inside, bed made up neat, just like usual.

I had a shower and went about my bedtime routine, then struggled to sleep. Just like usual.

Mum always enjoyed going to sleep at night. Her dreams were escapes when they came for her. Happy times gone by, or fairy tales of being a kid all

over again, playing sandcastles with her mum and dad on a beach on the south coast.

I wished that sleep state were hereditary – but no. Dreams were never sweet for me, and never had been.

My dreams were about death and having no power over it. They were about spending most of my waking life trying to fend it off for people and watching my closest person alive decay in front of me, one tiny little piece at a time.

Only this time, for once in my life, the dreams that came for me weren't savage.

They were of a freckled face, a mousy-haired shimmer, and a tatty pink bookmark.

# 4

*Chloe*

*Crap, crap, crap.*

Another frantic morning getting to the train station before the train pulled away from the platform. I was tugging shoes onto feet still sore from the day before and scooping my hair up into a pony before dashing off down the street like a sprinter. I was still pulling my sweater on as I ran.

Idiot. Snoozing through the alarm like an idiot.

Stupid on my part, but the universe was feeling kind today.

I bundled myself on the train and flung myself into the nearest seat, catching my breath as the whistle sounded out. Phew. On time. Just.

My novel was still tight under my arm when the train pulled away from Eddington. I was about to flick it open and start reading when the tall figure of a man moved towards me up the aisle.

I dug straight through my bag for my train ticket, assuming him to be a conductor, but no. The figure dropped himself down in the seat opposite me, his knees stretching out towards mine.

It was when I looked across at him and my eyes landed on his that my breath caught in my throat. It couldn't not.

That man was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

For real. There and then, on that train carriage, before eight o'clock on a random work morning, that man was the beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

His shoulders were broad and suited. His tie was neat and burgundy, classic against a bright white shirt. But it was his face – eyes dark and serious, brooding with more depth than I'd ever known. His jaw was steady, and serious to match. His beard was neat and severe. His eyebrows were wise. *Perfect*.

His cheekbones were defined. His hair had a dusting of salt and pepper, just enough to make him look refined.

I couldn't stop staring at him, holding my train ticket outstretched in my hand like some kind of idiot as he pulled out a book from his briefcase – a paperback with a bazillion down folded corners, the biggest pet hate of my

life. But with him it didn't seem to matter. Every single page could have been folded down, I wouldn't have cared.

My breath stayed hitched up tight as the universe pulled a blinder on me. An absolute slammer of a blinder.

Just like that, the man pulled out my pink bookmark from his novel.

"For you," he said, and I swear I almost fainted.

Two simple words that had his voice sounding like velvet. As serious as the rest of him.

I looked from his outstretched hand to his face, over and over on loop as I truly grasped what was happening.

He had Granny Weobley's bookmark, right there in his fingers.

My own fingers were jittery as they took it from him. They were bumbling fools, sending my train ticket fluttering to the floor as they reached for the prize.

That got a smirk from him. Just a slight dab of humour in the very corner of his mouth.

"You'll be losing that thing in the same way, if you aren't careful."

I found my breath and my voice along with it. "I dropped the bookmark? On the floor?"

He nodded. "On the train yesterday. I tried to give it back to you, but you were off like a shot."

I could feel my cheeks burning up, because I could imagine just how off like a shot I was. I must've been bouncing away from the platform in a flurry.

"Sorry," I said. "Sorry, and thanks. Thanks so much."

He flicked open his own book. "You're very welcome, *Chloe*."

I could feel my cheeks burning up brighter as I turned that tattered pink leather over in my hand.

His attention dropped down to his pages, and I should've put mine back to mine. *Gone with the Wind* was calling, and my heart was racing and needing some words to calm it down, but I didn't. Couldn't. I picked my ticket up from the floor and found my words.

"It was from my grandma," I told the stranger. "The bookmark, I mean. She gave it to me when I was seven."

He could have given me a token nod and an *I don't give a shit* smile, but he didn't. His eyes were every bit as dark and serious when they looked back into mine.

"Seven?"

I nodded with a grin. “Yeah. With a copy of Watership Down. Her favourite.”

“Good choice,” he said, and I nodded with my grin still bright.

“I still love the story. Still read it way too often.”

His paperback lay open on his lap, paused. “That’s the curse of the most powerful stories, isn’t it?” he said. “They never let you go.”

“Yes. It is.” My laugh sounded so young. Just like that seven-year-old girl with the book in her greedy fingers every night before bed.

His attention went back to his paperback and I tried to do the same, slotting my bookmark nice and tightly in my front cover before flicking back through to the right page.

But I couldn’t concentrate.

I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

I focused instead on the book in his hands, wondering just what he was reading. It was tattered. Not as tattered as mine, but definitely well read. And I couldn’t help myself, I just had to ask the question.

“What book are you reading?”

He seemed surprised by my question, but he answered it, holding up the book for me to see for myself.

“The Master and Margarita by –”

“Mikhail Bulgakov,” we said in unison, and I was nodding. My grin beaming even brighter.

“You’ve read it?” he asked.

“It’s one of my favourites. I love Behemoth, the big talking cat.”

“So do I,” he said, and his eyes stayed fixed on mine.

I summoned my finest voice and cleared my throat like a theatre star. “*I beg pardon, my queen, he rasped. Would I ever allow myself to offer vodka to a lady?*”

“*This is pure alcohol,*” the stranger finished for me.

His smile flashed for just a second, and it was such a contrast to his usual heaviness that I felt something deep from him, something that made no sense to me, not with the usual zing of a high that I feel every waking minute of the day.

A sadness.

I felt a sadness.

“Is it your favourite novel?” I asked him, and he shook his head.

“Is that yours?” he asked, gesturing to the novel in my hands.

I shook my head and held the cover up. "No."

"Gone with the Wind," he said. "Quite a classic. I saw you reading it yesterday."

I blushed some more. "I like the old ones."

"Me too," he said.

We were both sitting there with open books on our laps, staring hard at each other as the train pulled into Eastworth. The bustle of people getting on made no difference, I couldn't look away from him.

The shuffling passengers eased along, and I felt weird as we pulled away again, wondering how I'd feel if he upped and left right there and then without me even knowing his name.

But it didn't seem like it would make any difference. Not to him. He wasn't even looking in my direction. Not anymore.

He turned his attention to a noisy bunch of lads on the seats across the aisle, then dropped his eyes back to his novel.

*What is your favourite novel?*

That's what I wanted to ask him. The question looped over and over in my head, but I couldn't say it. I couldn't talk over the stupid jeering idiots across the aisle and call his focus back to me.

I pretended to read, but I was crap at it. The words blurred on the pages, making no difference at all as my heart bounced in my chest.

*What is your favourite novel?*

I wanted to ask him. I wanted to spit out the question and tell him all about my favourite just as soon as he'd answered, and how much I loved reading it and how he should read it too.

But I didn't.

I couldn't.

Idiot boys kept jeering, and the stranger kept on staring at his pages, flicking them over and over, and I was all a fluster. All a fluster with no common sense and a strange sickly squiggle of feelings way down deep.

*What is your favourite novel?*

He coughed and cleared his throat at Newstone, glancing up at a guy walking up the aisle who had the messiest blond beard I've ever seen, but still his eyes went back to the pages.

He stared up at an old lady who got on at Churchley, and who scowled at the idiot boys like she wanted to kill them from beneath her crazy bright flowery scarf, but still his eyes went straight back to the pages.

*What is your favourite novel?*

I was going to ask him. I was going to pluck up the courage to ask him. It was right there in my throat, blown out of ridiculous proportion by the fact I'd held it back for so long on the journey when I should've just piped up at the beginning.

*What is your favourite novel, stranger?*

But then the train pulled into Harrow. Just like that. And like a moron I hadn't been prepared for it, or made myself ready for the dash to the hospital.

*Crap, crap, crap.*

My nerves were back on a mission as I leapt up from my seat and gathered myself to go.

Finally, the stranger's eyes met up with mine. But only for one final second. Just long enough for me to blurt out one last thing to him before I zoomed away.

“Thanks again,” I said, and I meant it.

And with that I was gone.

# 5

*Logan*

The white rabbit was off in another flurry, up and out of the station in a flash. Too frazzled to even glance back along the platform.

There was one sunken part of me that regretted the final part of that train journey. One solitary flare down deep, wanting to ask one pointless question that would never make any difference to my life.

*What is your favourite novel, Chloe?*

But no.

The bustle onboard had intervened.

A rowdy bunch of boys causing chaos, a bundle of people boarding at every stop, and no reason to. No reason whatsoever to seek out conversation with Chloe with the shimmer in her hair.

I made my way slowly towards Harrow District Hospital, soaking up the last of my quiet time in easy steps. I needed to. From the very moment I stepped onto Franklin Ward, my day was always an unrelenting blur of focus. An oxymoron at its finest.

Maybe I should have picked up my pace a little, and put my efforts into the walk ahead, just to stop thinking about *Chloe* with *Gone with the Wind*.

At least one of my questions from the night before had found an answer. Yes, she had read *Master and Margarita*. Many times over, it seems.

Extraordinary.

She really was an extraordinary little bookworm with a zing in her step.

Much, much different to mine.

The hospital arrived in front of me and the unrelenting blur of focus swallowed me up.

The ward had its highs and its lows that day. We lost one old guy as he met his end and helped make a few ladies comfortable as they faced up to theirs. I spoke with relatives, and managed pain, and supported the nurses as they did their best to bring light into the darkness for the people finding it so hard to see ahead.

I did my job.

Wendy Briars knocked on my consulting room door at just past lunchtime. The head of hospital nursing had a clipboard in hand, ready to talk to me about Gina Salzaki from my ward, who was about to head off on maternity leave post her trainee placement.

“We’ll assign you a new nursing member,” she told me, and her cheeks were freckled and her hair was bound up loose in a bun with a few strands flowing free.

Only Wendy Briars’ hair was red, not mousy brown with a shimmer of gold.

“Please make sure they are fully prepared for the ward,” I asked her. “This department can be intensely emotionally challenging.”

“That’s your way of saying people can’t handle the upset,” she said. “Don’t worry, Dr Hall. I know. We’ll get it right.”

I flashed her an apologetic smile. “I’m sure you will, Wendy. Thank you.”

But I wasn’t sure. I was never sure.

People professed wholeheartedly that they wanted to work in the palliative care team, only to be a broken sobbing mess just a few days after they started. People felt they could watch others take their last breaths without a fluster, and not lay scared in bed all night in the aftermath.

I’d seen it plenty of times. I doubted Gina Salzaki would be back after her maternity break. I think she too was finally reaching her limits.

“I’ll send you some employee files for you to take a look at,” Wendy said, and I nodded my thanks.

“I appreciate it.”

She was cut short by her nursing alarm bleeping and I was cut short with a shout in my direction from the corridor outside, and the day returned to normal.

I brought someone back from the Reaper’s clutch, so he could spend a few more days with his family. I helped a young lady work through her medication options, and left her with a smile on her face, optimistic she would live for a few more months than she was expecting.

And then, far too late in the evening, just like usual, I made my way back home.

I read *The Master and Margarita*, but didn’t really soak in the pages.

I wondered if Chloe was already long home – wherever her home may be. Eddington, most likely. I didn’t know Eddington all that well.

I wondered if she'd finished Gone with the Wind, and would pick up a fresh old classic before I'd even made my way through another chapter.

I wondered if I'd see her again.

I shouldn't care, but I did. I did care whether I saw Chloe on the Harrow-bound train again.

My mother was struggling when I got through the door that night. Her morphine driver had been misfiring, leaving her chest tightening up with the pain through the evening.

I could feel it. I could feel every wheeze she made. It tightened up my own chest the very moment I stepped into her bedroom.

"Thanks," I said to Olivia, and told her to go home.

"I'm here... If I can help..." she replied, but I shook my head, and mustered a smile.

"I've got this."

And I did have it.

I made sure the morphine was delivering right and made sure her oxygen was fixed up properly. I poured her a fresh, cold juice by her bed, and squeezed hold of her fingers while she wheezed some life back into herself.

Finally, her eyes opened and she was right back there with me, a smile lighting up her face.

She pointed to the folded-up newspaper on the bedside table, before she found any words, and I picked it up, casting my eyes over the crossword.

The pen was right there waiting for me, along with Olivia's scrawled answers in the little boxes.

I smiled at her right back.

"Let's get through these clues."

I talked her through the answers, and she nodded and shook her head without so much as mustering a word, but still she kept smiling, her eyes fixed bright on mine.

When we were done, she gestured to her mask, and I freed it from her face, loose enough for her to suck in a breath and grab my hand in hers.

"Meet... Amy..." she said, but this time her eyes were serious.

Mine were serious back at her as I shook my head.

"Drink some drink, and dream sweet dreams."

She gripped my hand a little tighter.

"Logan... please..." she paused. "Meet Amy. Please don't..." Another breath. "Please don't make me leave you on your own."

I kissed her forehead. “So don’t leave me. Not yet.”

She let go of my hand and drank some juice, then dipped down into her pillows as I fitted the mask back snug for her.

“Amy isn’t right for me,” I told her. “She never would be. She never will be.”

“So find someone... who is...” she rasped, so loud I heard her over the oxygen.

“Maybe one day,” I told her, and her eyes were so full of pain as I stepped away.

She knew I was lying as much as I did.

There was no maybe one day about her prospect of getting a daughter-in-law. There was no maybe one day about me finding someone who would ever be right for me.

I spent enough of my life trying to fix pain, without causing more of it.

I hovered in the doorway, watching Mum’s pale moonlit petals falling right in front of my eyes.

So soft, but so firm.

There were hardly any left, and I knew it.

She knew it, too.

“Sweet dreams,” I said.

# 6

*Chloe*

I couldn't rest easy that night.

My feet were pooped, and my brain was too, and my thoughts were running riot with all the new stuff I was soaking up from Kingsley Ward. But it wasn't just that.

It was something weird. Something that gave me shivery flutters.

Something about the stranger on the train.

I tried to sit in with Liam and chat through his day, but he wasn't interested.

He ate some dinner I made up, with his plate on his lap on the sofa. Then had a couple of beers and sat watching some shit on TV after finishing up his crappy online game.

I had my feet up on the sofa next to him, and my book in my hands while the TV blared away in the background.

This allegedly passed as the pinup of a relationship in your early twenties with the guy you claimed to love at high school, and my optimism was convinced I was loving life.

Except I wasn't.

My mantra of *this is great, I love it*, just wasn't cutting it that night. I was just trying to convince myself it was.

The words on the pages of *Gone with the Wind* were blurring and I couldn't keep my head clear. It was muddled. Really muddled.

Eventually, I gave up.

I rubbed the leather of my bookmark between my fingers and thanked the universe again for bringing it back. But it wasn't the universe I had to thank this time, was it? It was the stranger on the train.

The stranger with the folded corner paperback.

The stranger who was different to anyone else I'd ever met, even though I'd only known him for one random train journey.

Liam didn't notice when I got up from the sofa and headed over to my bookshelf wall at the back of the room. I pushed *Gone with the Wind* back

into its slot and knelt down lower, my finger brushing the spines, until it stopped in place.

*The Master and Margarita.*

There it was.

There was a tingle of a glow as I held that book in my hands. Behemoth and the Devil and Pontius Pilate. Nobody I'd ever met as par for the course in my daily life had ever read it. Nobody ever knew what the hell I was talking about, let alone finished up a quote with me.

I wondered what else he might know quotes to.

I scanned my paperback collection and wondered just how many of the same books were stacked in his.

“Babe, get me another beer while you’re up, will you?”

Liam’s voice cut through my pondering. I shot a glance back his way and saw his hand in the air, so lazy.

I didn’t even bother replying tonight, just headed on through to the kitchen and put the kettle on to boil for myself. I flicked open Master to the title page and slipped my bookmark in ready, and I read.

I read all the while I was making a tea and taking enough sips to finish it. I read propped against the kitchen counter, without caring for how bruised and battered my feet were beneath me.

I sank into the Patriarch’s Pond with Professor Woland, and smiled to myself at hog-sized Behemoth, and I loved it. I loved every word.

“Babe! Where’s my beer?” I heard, but ignored it, just kept turning the pages.

“Fine, I’ll get it myself,” I heard a few minutes later, as Liam came bursting in, but I didn’t care.

“Bloody books,” he groaned as he headed on out.

I didn’t bother sitting back down on the sofa with the guy who’d never met Behemoth or the Devil and would never meet them in his life. I got ready for bed, picking up the book every chance I got between stages. It was at the side of the bathroom sink while I showered, and face down on my bed while I changed. It was it in my grip, being consumed under the covers, until Liam came bursting in there too.

“Still bloody reading?” he asked, and I managed a nod. “Can we get some dark, please?”

I checked the time.

Gone midnight.

I should give him dark, but I didn't want to. Couldn't bear to leave the words.

He knew it and rolled over with a groan.

"Fine, just keep going, then."

He rolled away and pulled the covers up around his head, and I kept going.

I kept on going right the way until I was done. Until I reached *The End*.

My heart was beating happy. My soul was alive. The words were my everything.

My head was full of Russia and the Devil's midnight ball, and I wanted to be there.

I knew I was an absolute idiot when I checked the time on my phone and set the alarm for the morning. Day three of my new job looming and I was awake into the early hours, like a complete moron. But this was it. This was always it. Disorganisation, and lateness, and not getting to sleep on time. I'd been like this since a tiny girl, battling my parents constantly over reading past bedtime, and I'd never stopped.

I'd never stopped but I needed to. Right now, I needed to.

My new job depended on it.

I flicked off the bedside lamp and tried to sleep, but I couldn't. The tumble of Behemoth danced with the stranger's face in my thoughts. Both of them spinning and whirling.

I wondered where he lived and where he was going on the train that morning, and if I'd ever see him again.

I wondered if I'd ever find the courage to ask him the question I hadn't been brave enough to voice out loud.

*What is your favourite novel?*

I didn't know if I could ever summon up the voice to ask him that.

Even the thought gave me tingles in my tummy.

Before I finally got some sleep, I made myself a promise. A real promise that I'd really keep to myself. Cross my heart.

I promised that when I got on the train in the morning I'd walk right the way through from beginning to end, and if I saw him there, the beautiful bookworm stranger, I'd sit by him. As close as I could get.

Then one day, maybe – maybe even that same day, I'd ask him the question.

*What is your favourite novel?*

I realised just how much of an idiot I'd been when the alarm went off the next morning and I pressed snooze one too many times. Liam was already long gone to work when I shot out of bed like a crazy and pulled my clothes on and dashed out of the front door.

But still, I found time for one thing.

One thing I couldn't do without, even if it meant a literal sprint all the way to the train station.

I was still tugging my sweater down over my new blue blouse as I raced through the streets, but I had my next novel gripped tight under my arm, and my bookmark was pride of place within the front cover.

The train was already at the platform when I dashed up the stairs. I darted onto the nearest carriage and the whistle sounded barely seconds after.

My heart was racing. Thumping like a drum roll, and I told myself that was because of the rush and the race and the stupidity of me oversleeping. But it wasn't.

It wasn't just that.

I collected my breath before I started my walk through the carriages. I acted as casually as I could as I made my way up the aisle, checking out every single person who was sitting there. But I wasn't casual. I felt anything but casual. Every step felt tickly and weird.

Just not as tickly and weird as my tummy felt when I saw him sitting there, at the end of the second carriage.

And nowhere near as tickly and weird as my tummy felt when he did a double take and looked up at me with those crazy serious eyes of his.

The seat opposite him was empty. *Thank you, universe.*

I felt like a complete clutz as I dropped myself into it, and I knew my cheeks were on fire as he stared across at me.

It was the moment of truth. The moment I pushed myself past the self-made promise to sit near to him, and actually said something. Even something pathetic. Just *anything*. So I did it. Mustered up the courage and spat it out before he looked away.

"Hello," I said.

I said hello to the stranger.

My heart was racing, and my breaths were fast to match, but I said it.

I said hello to the stranger.

My heart flew to the sky when the stranger smiled.

"Hello," he said right back.

# 7

## *Logan*

She was a burst of energy amongst the morning commuter monotony as she plonked her backside down in the seat opposite me. She blew a stray twist of hair from her forehead, and then she spoke – one simple little word accompanied by one of the brightest smiles I'd ever seen.

“Hello.”

It may have been one simple word, but it was more than that in the making.

I'd seen her approaching along the aisle of the carriage and checking out every seat. I'd seen the halt in her step as she'd seen me sitting there, minding my own business with my book in my hands.

“Hello,” I said.

The contrast was palpable between us. Her smile was brighter than the morning sun and mine was concrete. Cold. Steadfast in its grounding.

Yet, that contrast worked.

It was inexplicable just how her buzz of life gelled with the overall flatness of death in my world, but it did.

It worked. Nonsensical and illogical to the extreme – but it worked.

She pulled a different paperback from under her arm and flicked it open on her lap. Another one well read.

Her bookmark was in the cover, pinned tight. I could still feel the cracked leather, soft between my fingers.

I tried to push my attention back to Master, but it wasn't working. Not with the flicker of her eyes in my direction every time she shifted her knees.

They coincided.

She shifted her knees and flicked a gaze up at me every time they moved, and I felt it.

She was nervous again. A sweet little bag of nerves beginning her day.

I wanted to say something. I wanted to ask her how her evening had gone, and what she was reading today.

I wanted to ask her where she was going, and why she always seemed to

look like the grinning centre of a hurricane, bounding between platforms.

I said nothing. Just kept my gaze steady on my pages and kept them turning.

I kept my gaze steady on my pages past the line of oak trees beyond the Sunnydale viaduct, and the corner shop sign with its fresh newspaper headline on Callow road, and the five red doorways along the station at Wenton.

I kept my gaze steady on my pages while the woman tapping on her phone stepped onboard at Eastworth, and while the man with the messy blond beard at Newstone cursed under his breath as he found his rail pass.

I turned the pages as the elderly woman at Churchley – with the permanent scowl and the floral scarf she'd been wearing for years – stepped on by us in the carriage.

And all the while, Chloe's knees kept on shifting, and her eyes kept on flickering.

Harrow drew nearer.

Her knees shifted wider, her eyes flickered more.

She was struggling. I could feel she was struggling – wrestling with words she wanted to say.

And so was I.

I was struggling too.

She blew her hair away from her forehead as they announced the next stop was Harrow, and her knees shifted fresh, but it was me who finally bridged that gap.

It was me who cleared my throat and asked her the question, picking just the right moment for her eyes to slam into mine.

“What book are you reading?”

Her smile over at me was the absolute world.

She held up the cover, and I was shocked all over again. Genuinely shocked to the pit of me.

“Mythago Wood by Robert Holdstock,” she said.

I nodded, and the accompanying smile was neither cold nor concrete this time.

The metallic blurt of the speaker hit loud. *Harrow. The next station is Harrow.*

“Crap,” she mumbled, and grabbed her bag and checked her zipper was up on her sweater.

She was up on her feet before I spoke again. I was about to put my book in my briefcase, but she didn't hang around long enough to see.

"Lavondyss," I told her, as she stepped away into the aisle. "My favourite Robert Holdstock novel is Lavondyss."

She twisted back to face me, eyes open wide.

"Lavondyss," she repeated. "I love that one too."

I didn't doubt it. It was written all over her face.

"Bye," she said.

And with that she was off like the white rabbit, all over again.

# 8

*Chloe*

I never thought he'd like Lavondyss. He looked anything but a Lavondyss kind of guy.

I was thinking more historical fiction, or political satire. Or maybe even some non-fiction about Saturn's rings. But not Lavondyss. No way Lavondyss.

It just made me tingle all the more as I dashed away when we got to Harrow.

I tried not to think about it. About him with a copy of Lavondyss in his cultured fingers. That's how I thought of them – cultured. Long fingers, but masculine. Intelligent.

*Long, masculine, intelligent, cultured fingers with no wedding band on them.*

They moved carefully. Considered. Skilled.

There was a whole fresh swirl of tingles as I thought about his skilled fingers on my skin.

On my...

No.

No.

I couldn't do that.

I couldn't.

Harrow District came into view, and my sweater was already half off me as I dashed into Kingsley Ward. It was Vickie on reception when I shot on past, and she laughed at me. She actually laughed out loud.

"Easy, tiger. Do you always move everywhere at eight hundred miles per hour?"

She had a point.

I probably did move everywhere at eight hundred miles per hour.

"Morning," I said, and flashed her a wave along with a smile.

I dumped my bag, complete with Mythago Wood, into the staffroom, and started up my workday.

It was a good one. One full of smiles and being helpful and learning how to change bandages the right way. I was learning from Caroline, and she was funny, kind, and making the patients laugh along with her.

I wanted to be like that. I wanted to make them all happy, even though I was nervous as hell with every breath that day.

I thought I was in trouble when Wendy Briars beckoned me into Consulting Room 6 after my lunchbreak – but that was always my natural reaction. *Uh oh, Chloe, you're in trouble. Late nights and no sleep, and too much thinking about Pontius Pilate.*

But no, I wasn't in trouble.

She had some paperwork in her hands and gestured to the seat opposite her.

"I've been noticing you at work," she said, and I felt my cheeks blush.

"You have?"

She nodded. "Indeed, I have, and I've got some early reports to back up my observations."

I was nodding back, even though I didn't know what the hell she was going to say to me.

"You're quite something," she said, and her smile was bright. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone so energetic and bubbly after ten hours on their feet."

My blush burned up brighter, and I looked at the fingers twisting in my lap, embarrassed.

"I have a lot of energy, my mum always said I was a jack-in-a-box, unless I had a book in my hands."

"It's a good thing in this place," she said. "A great thing. Hence, I may see a place that we can put your bubbly nature to good use."

I met her eyes with mine. "A place? Like a place at the hospital?"

She nodded again. "A role has come up. One of our palliative care nurses is about to head off on maternity leave." She paused. "It's a serious position. A challenging one. And it's something I'd want you to consider carefully, because the trainee position is new."

I was nodding along with her, making a jack-in-the-box of my head. "I'll do it. Please."

She looked shocked. Visibly stopped in her tracks.

"Don't you need to know more about it?"

I shook my head. "No. It's something I thought of, all the time I was

thinking about training.”

“Palliative care?”

“Yeah. I watched my uncle pass away when I was twelve. The people were amazing when they helped him. They were kind and cheerful and they listened to every word he said, and they made us feel at home too, even after he was gone.”

She was smiling. “That’s what we hope to do here, too. That’s why I asked you. Victoria said you know how to listen. How to be serious and respectful while still being bubbly and kind.”

“She said that?” I felt a glow in my chest.

“Yes, Chloe. She said that. It would be easy to see for myself if she hadn’t though, you light up the room.”

She flicked through the paperwork, and began to tell me the details, and I was bobbing along, heart racing and happy, because *thank you, universe*, this was really it. A massive place to make a difference in the world, right at the end of people’s journeys.

“The department is headed up by Dr Logan Hall,” she told me. “And believe me, he’s amazing. An incredible man.”

I nodded. “Dr Logan Hall.”

“He’s tireless and giving, and never falters on his care for people, not even for a second. You’ll get on very well with him, on that score. I just know it.”

I knew there was a but coming. I could feel it in the air.

Yep, there was.

“But there are other aspects you’ll have to get used to. We all have.”

“Other aspects?”

She was staring right at me as she spoke. “He’s very... serious. He doesn’t speak much. Not unless it’s technical or work related. Or to a patient or their family. Around that he’s rather... stoic.”

“Stoic,” I repeated, and realised I must sound like an echo.

“Yes. Stoic.” She flashed another grin. “You will find out for yourself.”

I didn’t repeat her this time.

She flicked through the paperwork again.

“You have a few weeks until your training on Franklin Ward starts. You will crossover with Gina seven days before she leaves.”

“A few more weeks at Kingsley?”

“That’s right,” she said. “And between you and me, I’d make the most of

them. Dr Hall is an incredible man, but his standards are high.” She smiled again. “I’m sure you’ll live up to them.”

I wish I were as sure as she was.

She shuffled herself to leave, but I wasn’t ready.

“Dr Hall?” I asked. “You say he’s serious? Does that mean he’s... mean?”

She shook her head. “No, Chloe. I promise you he’s not mean. Just... serious.”

“Serious. Stoic,” I said again.

“That’s right. Serious and stoic.” She carried on gathering bits of paperwork on her clipboard. Serious and stoic, and an incredible doctor. I couldn’t wait to meet him.

I’d heard of Franklin Ward. People said it was the terminal team, and I’d seen it signposted from main reception. It was right on the other side of the hospital. So long to my brilliant forming friendship with Vickie. But there would be more people I’d get on with. I’m sure there would be more.

Maybe not with Dr Hall, not from the sounds of him. But I was sure there would be plenty of others who’d match my grin with their own.

I got to my feet, but paused just a second longer, just to say one last thing I needed to say.

“Thank you, Wendy,” I told her, hoping we really were on first name terms. “For thinking of me, I mean. That means a lot.”

“Thank you, Chloe,” she replied. “For being someone I could think of.”

She gestured me ahead of her, and I stepped back out into the corridor, and I was buzzing. Buzzing with a whole fresh round of life, for something important. Something new.

“You won’t regret it,” I said, as she walked away. “I promise you, you won’t regret choosing me.”

She turned back to face me, and her smile was still right there in place.

“I don’t expect for a single second I will,” she said. “I just hope you won’t regret taking it.”

# 9

*Logan*

I hadn't read Lavondyss in years, but I could remember how much I'd loved it, picking it up as a teenager for the very first time.

I'd loved Robert Holdstock novels. I'd loved the mystery of the etheric, and the energy of the words bursting from the pages. Lavondyss had consumed me. Devoured me and all my dreams.

I wondered just how Chloe had some across those novels. Maybe she had been a teenager seeking the etheric, just like me.

Maybe she would keep her grip on its authenticity a lot longer than I had.

I was tired today. My legs were stiff and heavy before I'd even made it onto the ward.

Christine had been early to care for Mum that morning, and I'd seen how she'd struggled to rouse her from sleep. My mother was slipping. Those petals were drawing thin.

So was I.

I put myself and my own discomfort to the side once I was on my shift, sharpening my brain to perform at its best. The ward was a storm, and I was the centre. I needed to be the calm one.

I met new patients, scared of their road ahead, and helped them find their strength. I met old patients, accepting their roads were reaching the end, and helped them find their peace.

All the while I struggled to find my own.

I left the ward on time that night, for the first time I could remember. I walked down the street towards the train station, and my heart was pounding fast, even though I was slow.

Scared.

For the first time in years, I was scared.

It doesn't matter how long you think you've prepared for saying goodbyes, there's still that gut-thumping shock that comes when you see them truly looming.

I was losing my mum and I knew it. I knew it better than anyone.

The train journey was empty without Chloe in it. The carriages were dull and flat, and the world shot by through the window at lightning speed. I couldn't read Master. For the first time in my life, I didn't want to.

My key was heavy in the lock back at home. My legs were every bit as heavy as they climbed the stairs.

Olivia jumped in her seat to see me in the doorway. She slapped a hand to her chest, and then smiled.

"Wow, Dr Hall. Didn't expect to see you back at this time."

I smiled an empty smile back at her. "It's an unusual occurrence."

I stepped up to Mum, and her breaths were steady, eyes closed but fluttering.

"How has she been today?" I asked the nurse, and she joined me at the bedside.

"Good in herself. Tired, but good. She wanted potato and broccoli for dinner."

I nodded. "Good choice. Thanks for delivering."

She waited, standing still until I spoke again.

"Thanks Olivia, you can go now."

"I can stay," she offered, but I shook my head and smiled another empty smile.

"Enjoy an early finish for once."

I grabbed myself some dinner from downstairs while Mum was still sleeping. I ate it at her bedside, staring at the woman who'd been the strongest thing I'd ever known.

She'd been the strength at my side through my battles and wars. She'd held my hand when I was scared. She'd held me close while I'd sobbed, a little boy lost to everything but her.

Now it was my turn to be the strength at her side – in body if not in spirit. Nothing in this world would ever weaken my mother's spirit.

Her eyes flickered right onto mine when they opened. Her smile lit up her face.

"Wasn't expecting to find you here? Did I sleep late?"

"No, you didn't sleep late," I said, "I got off work on time."

"Bloody hell," she said, "It's about time," she laughed with a wheeze. "You work far too hard."

Her fingers reached out and gripped mine, hard. Her stare was full of fire, in a body of ashes.

"You'd better find life in my death," she told me. "I mean it, Logan. You need to live."

Even the words stabbed my stomach. *Life*. I really didn't know what that word meant anymore.

And it wasn't about Mum, or watching people slip away in front of me through night and day, or having lost my grandparents, and my uncles and aunts, and almost everybody else in my family. It was about me.

Mum's eyes were still Mum's eyes. They looked up at me with all the love in the world.

"I'm going soon," she said. "This time I'm really going."

My impulse was to argue, and tell her to battle on, but I didn't. I choked on the words and stayed silent, just squeezed her hand right back.

She gestured up at the bucket list, and took a deep breath of oxygen.

*Meet an elephant.*

*Climb a mountain.*

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.*

*Put my toes in the sea.*

*Get a daughter-in-law.*

"I want to see the sea," she told me. "I want to hear the waves and taste the salt in the air."

I nodded. "We can do that."

She smiled her devilish smile. "Let's do the bloody crossword first."

I was already picking up the paper.

We worked through the clues and talked about my day, and Mum recounted some family memory of Auntie Jennie down at Weston beach one summer that had her cackling and had me laughing along. She asked me how I was feeling and I shrugged her off with a *good*, even though my legs were still aching and my chest was tight.

I got her meds down from the shelf, and helped her take them. I got her hot water bottle and snuggled her under the duvet, and settled her down for her sleep.

And I watched her.

I watched her suck in breaths through her mask and sink deep into the night, before trying to sink down deep into my own.

I put Master back on the bookshelf and pulled out my copy of Mythago Wood. It'd been a long, long time since I'd read that one. Getting caught up in the words was easier than I expected. The life on the pages made it a

breeze. But there was more to it than the novel, and I knew it. It may have been a woodland fantasy tale, but even Mythago Wood had more rationale about it than the matter darting through my mind.

It was Chloe I was picturing in the labyrinth of trees in Ryhope, and it was myself I pictured running there too.

It captured me.

*She* captured me.

The girl on the train was a splash of brightness in my wilderness. A zany flash of colour in the grey.

It made no sense.

I didn't want it to.

Throughout every aspect of my life I'd always been clear on what I wanted – I craved order, and discipline and the steel of rationale. But there was none there for me tonight.

I fell asleep in my reading chair, under the lamp's warm amber glow, and I slept well.

I slept well and I dreamt of primal woodland, and Stephen Huxley in the trees, and Chloe flicking the pages of Mythago Wood. Just like me.

And then the next morning I took the action that needed taking, for my poor dying mother upstairs.

# 10

*Chloe*

Sweater zipped up high on a cloudy morning. The wind was a shiver and my breaths were hot.

Late.

I was late again.

I launched myself onto Eddington platform, my hair a bounce of a mess in its ponytail, crazy relieved to find the train waiting. Phew.

*Thank you, universe, for saving my ass again.*

Liam hadn't been happy with me last night. He'd cursed about my *stupid books* and said I should suck his dick before bed, but I hadn't done. Liam's dick could go suck itself, I wanted Mythago Wood.

Right now, I wanted something else, though. It wasn't the wind that had me in a shiver as I headed up the carriage.

My heart was pounding, and my mouth was dry, and my stomach was a churn of wanting a man I didn't know.

And there he was.

The stranger.

Sitting there as calmly as ever with a paperback open on his lap. Today he was wearing a grey suit – a really nice one. His tie was navy blue and it suited him, but I suspected every single colour under the sun would.

My breaths were still hot when I sat down opposite him. I was grinning way wider than I should. Awkward. But a nice awkward.

"Hi," I said.

"Hello," he said right back.

*Hello. Hello, stranger. Hello.*

I wondered all over again where he was going and what his name was. I wished I had the confidence to ask. But what would I say and why? And what would I ask him next?

Stupid. The whole thing was stupid.

I felt like a teenager with a crush on a teacher, all giggly and goofy opposite the guy who made me gooey. Because that's what this was, right? A

crush.

I'd been thinking about that man in ways that I shouldn't – not with a pissed off boyfriend in bed next to me. I shouldn't have slipped my hand down under the covers and circled my fingers in just the right spot. I shouldn't have held my breath when I reached that rush, just to stop Liam from waking up and rolling over on top. But I did.

I did think about the stranger last night.

I thought about his salt and pepper hair, and the dark pattern of his beard. I thought about his voice, deep chocolate satin, and the way his eyes had a shimmer of steel.

I thought about his fingers flicking the pages.

I thought about those fingers flicking *me*.

And more. I thought about a whole lot more.

With that, the stranger held his novel up for me to see the cover.

*Mythago Wood*.

My mouth dropped open. For real, it dropped open. He'd picked up the very same novel I'd been reading.

I held up my cover right back.

*Lavondyss*.

The very same novel he'd mentioned.

His mouth didn't drop open, but he was shocked too. I could see it in his eyes.

I smiled, and blushed, and looked down at my lap, and it was stupid. A doofus move on my part, because with that he looked right down at his. And we were done.

There was silence all the way through Wenton and Eastworth and Newstone. My insides were screaming, right the way from my toes to my teeth, including all the bits that shouldn't be screaming. I was ditzy in my seat, not sure how to sit right, and wanting nothing more than to sit next to him.

I nearly did it. Nearly. I nearly summoned up the courage to say something... until an utter loudmouth jumped on board at Churchley and sat down across the aisle. He was on his phone and laughing way too loud for pre-eight a.m., guffawing at everything the other person said like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. He didn't shut up, and in other circumstances I wouldn't have wanted him to – I love it when people laugh like that. Just not today. Today it was a blare of noise I really didn't want to hear.

My stranger didn't look at me. Not at Churchley. He didn't look at me as we chugged on closer to Harrow, not when I looked up at him, or when I shifted myself in my seat. Nothing. Just him devouring Mythago Wood while I devoured him. And then the inevitable happened.

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow.*

Damn it.

I shoved Lavondyss under my arm and grabbed my bag from the seat, resigned to walking away without a word. But no.

He cleared his throat as I stood, and he met my eyes as I looked his way.

"Have a nice day, Chloe."

Hearing his voice was enough to light the whole grey sky outside. My smile back must have blinded him by the force.

"You have a nice day, too," I said.

And then I bounded away.

I guess that's where it started. *Hello, stranger.*

Every morning I'd get a tickle of excitement when I stepped onto that train.

*Hello*, I'd say, and *hello*, he'd say back. Over and over as I sat myself down opposite, both of us in the same seats on every ride.

I'd hold my cover up and he'd hold up his, and we'd smile, and sometimes we'd comment, but that would be it. He'd drop his eyes and I'd pretend to drop mine, sitting with this weird tingly squizzle inside until *Harrow. The next station is Harrow*. And then I'd shove my novel under my arm and jump to my feet ready to leave, and he'd speak next. Always.

*Have a nice day, Chloe.*

I'd smile back. Always. Bright enough that I must've burned the whole entire carriage with the glow.

*You have a nice day, too.*

The first couple of days I thought I'd pluck up the courage to start up some great conversation about the literary brilliance of the novels on our laps. I figured that's all it would be, just a bit of time and enough confidence to find my voice. But it wasn't that.

It was him.

He wasn't speaking, and the quiet was getting quieter. I was feeling it more and more and getting more squiggly inside, and even then, nine days after he first said *hello* back at me, it was still such a nervous thing for me to even think about starting up some random book conversation with him that I

didn't think I ever could.

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow.*

*Have a nice day, Chloe.*

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow*

*Have a nice day, Chloe.*

He was reading *1984* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I was reading *The Scarlet Letter* and *Silas Marner*.

Liam was moaning at me every night, and rolling over with a groan every night, and I was slipping my fingers down between my legs and thinking about salt and pepper hair and cultured fingers and promising myself that tomorrow I'd suddenly find my voice and damn well just say something.

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow*

*Have a nice day, Chloe.*

Every day I raced to work, always worried I wasn't going to make it, and only just turning up on time.

Every day I learned what I could, and got ready for Franklin Ward, crapping myself scared in case I wasn't good enough to work with the best.

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow*

*Have a nice day, Chloe.*

Every single day I kidded myself that maybe that day would be the day I found my voice and said more than *hello* to my stranger.

Every day I kicked myself that I hadn't.

Every day I thought about it way more than I should do.

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow*

*Have a nice day, Chloe.*

I told myself it was ok, that one day we would say more. One day one of us would speak, and maybe I'd be brave and ask him one of the questions I wanted to ask. It was ok... just time, right? Just time and the guts to spit the words out.

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow*

*Have a nice day, Chloe.*

Until it wasn't ok.

Not on the day I'd jumped on that train and my heart stopped pounding, and my squiggles turned into a whole other kind of squiggly and the grey outside stayed grey and shivery.

Because my stranger was gone.

# 11

*Logan*

*Meet an elephant.*

*Climb a mountain.*

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.*

*Put my toes in the sea.*

*Get a daughter-in-law.*

Mum's time was running out, and I knew it. Rachel Edwards could step in for my patients for a few days, and I knew that, too.

I also had a huge amount of annual leave backed up, and having seen my mother in bed that night, scraping breath and lost in herself, I'd known it was time to take action.

Mum didn't know what was going on as I set up her mobile oxygen unit just as soon as she woke. She had a nervous smile on her face when she saw the smile on mine, and held out her hands for me as I told her we were going out that day.

"Beach or mountain?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "Neither."

The carers helped me downstairs with her, making sure she was nice and steady all the way.

I eased her into the passenger seat, and wired up her oxygen, and with that we were off, driving west out from Redwood and into the open countryside. It'd been a long time since I'd ventured out this way.

"Not the beach, then, hey?" Mum asked, and that sparkle was back in her voice.

"Not the beach."

"You aren't about to push me up a mountain in my wheelchair, then?" she asked with a laugh, and I laughed right back at her.

"Not today."

She went quiet once the signs for Pilsner started showing up at the side of the road. I loved how her eyes fixed on them, and her smile grew brighter.

"They have elephants at Pilsner," she said, and I nodded.

“Yes, they do.”

We parked up close to the main entrance, avoiding the drive through, and I helped her into her wheelchair. My mother had never been one for quiet, but she was silent as we headed up to the main reception and I asked to see Jason Wood.

She looked so fragile there in her seat. I felt so fragile alongside her, knowing full well that this was one of those days that would last forever in memories, for all time.

“You’re here to see the elephants,” Jason Wood said, and Mum nodded.

“It’s on my bucket list. Top item.”

“Let’s make it a damn good meeting, then,” he said, and gestured us along the corridor.

It’s strange how those days slow down and speed up both at once. Every second is in high definition, the colours bright and the noises loud, and the smells... the smells embed themselves in your senses. I smelt the elephant enclosure before I saw it. Straw and sweat and that depth of animal presence.

Mum sucked in the deepest breath I’d heard in months when the first of the elephants came into view. He was standing there, towering tall in a sunlit stall. A grand creature, so steady on his feet.

Mum’s eyes welled up and she let out an *oh, oh, ohhhh*. I wheeled her up close to the fence of his enclosure and she reached out her hand for Wellington, the biggest elephant they had there on site.

He approached. Three steps forward and his face was up close, his trunk right there, and getting closer. Closer.

Until she touched him.

Her fingers were shaking, and her lip was trembling. Her eyes were wide and watery, and those petals of hers were glowing bright. A flare in the darkness of her deteriorating body.

Jason Wood was telling her about Wellington, but it was fading into a monotony of nothing, and eventually he saw that, and backed away.

He left us there, me up close to Mum’s wheelchair and reaching out a hand of my own.

“He’s beautiful,” she said in a whisper. “He’s just so bloody beautiful, he’s magic. Thank you.”

I didn’t need thanks. The magic in her voice was more than enough thanks for me.

His skin was like tree bark, his eyes were as alive as my mum’s. So solid

and so royal. That's how he seemed to me, that magnificent beast – royal.

"Does he live up to your expectations?" I asked her, and she shook her head.

"Better. So much better."

That choked up my words in my throat, and I smiled, mute. Smiled with the burn in my chest. Smiled with the urge to break like the little boy she'd held in her arms all those years ago.

Unfortunately, that flare in Mum's deteriorating darkness didn't last all that long. She stroked the beast for a few long minutes until she was spent, exhausted and fading in her seat.

Jason took some pictures on my phone before we left, but we were done shortly afterwards and ready to leave the day behind us.

"Thank you," I said to the keeper. "I appreciate it."

"Glad I could help," he replied, and led me on out of there.

The drive home was a long one. Mum's oxygen kept on pumping, but she was slumped, exhausted, and my brain had time to spin on its axis. Grinding the gears.

I felt strangely alone and strangely vulnerable in that seat behind the steering wheel. Strangely human, in the face of being so cold.

And strangely like I wanted to be sitting back in that train seat with the freckle-faced girl sitting opposite. One day without her, and I was feeling it – void of my one flash of fantasy in the grey.

I needed it.

Needed her.

Needed that flare of light in my own deteriorating reality.

Insanity knows no limits, and it was exceeding all of mine, whirling around the rational and stamping it down.

Chloe was there in my thoughts, blurring with the beauty of Mum's day. I wondered if she would have enjoyed meeting Wellington as much as we had, and if she'd ever seen an elephant before.

Maybe she loved them?

Maybe she had even half of the elephant ornaments my mother had dotted all over her room.

Maybe she liked giraffes instead? Or penguins? Or dolphins?

I wondered if she'd like Pilsner. I wondered if she'd have smiled along with my mum and been just as excited to see the signs on the road.

But it didn't matter. That's what I had to keep telling myself.

It didn't matter because I'd never know.

I roused Mum once we we'd pulled onto the driveway, and Olivia helped me upstairs with her, then settled her down to sleep. I left them to it until Olivia was out of the front door, then headed on through to Mum's bedroom.

She pointed up at the list at the wall as soon as I stepped inside, and cleared her throat before she spoke.

"Put a tick up next to it, please."

"We're ticking them off, are we? Actually ticking them off?"

She nodded with a grin. "Yep, we sure are. We're ticking them off, alright. One down."

"You'd better keep that pulse beating until we get to complete the list, then," I said.

"Better meet up with Amy then, and get that last one ticked off," she winked. "Or you'll have to put up with me for bloody years."

"You'd better buckle up for the long haul." I winked back. "You'll be hanging on a long damn time if you're counting on that last one being ticked."

I looked at that list afresh. One of them down, another load to come.

*Meet an elephant.*

*Climb a mountain.*

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.*

*Put my toes in the sea.*

*Get a daughter-in-law.*

She squeezed my hand, and I knew what was coming. I'd heard it so many times before.

"Why won't you let someone love you?" she asked me. "Please, Logan, just tell me. Why won't you let yourself fall in love?"

But I couldn't tell her.

I didn't want to.

She knew I wouldn't give her an answer and sighed.

"Please," she said again. "I don't want to leave you here alone. Don't make me, please. That's the most important thing of all on my list, that I don't have to leave you alone."

I squeezed her hand back but didn't speak, and she sighed again.

"All those nights it was me holding you, the strength in your storm when you were just a tiny little boy, and now you're the strength in mine. You're doing a damn good job of it, darling."

“It’s my pleasure,” I said, and she looked up at me with enough love to slam my chest.

“It was mine, too,” she said. “Seeing you pull through the storm and being a part of that strength was the greatest pleasure there could ever be.”

I laughed. “Even greater a pleasure than meeting Wellington the elephant?”

She laughed along with me. “Even greater a pleasure than that. It was a bloody good pleasure though.” She paused, and gestured up to the shelf behind her head. “Grab me that elephant picture down, will you?”

I pulled down the postcard and handed it over.

“I never really thought I might meet one. Thought I’d be long dead and gone before I had the chance.”

“Very honoured I could help,” I said.

I was staring at the postcard while she stared at me. I could feel it. That all out beam of love in her eyes.

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispered. “Really, Logan. Just when I think it would be impossible to be more proud of you, there’s another day that makes me even more honoured to be your mum.”

“Stop it,” I said. “Don’t get fatalistic after an elephant meet up, please. I hope there are plenty more days to make you proud.”

“Let me get some sleep, then,” she laughed.

I sorted out the last of her meds and her hot water bottle, and settled her down for the night, just like usual. Only it wasn’t like usual. Not tonight.

Tonight, I was both happy and sad in tandem. Two *people* both in tandem. I was still that scared little boy, caged deep inside the man. So deep I barely felt him, not anymore. Not unless he poked his face right up at me, eyes wide and scared.

Like he did that night – he poked his face right up at me, at my mother’s bedside while she struggled to find her breaths.

But no.

I had no time for the boy inside. I never did.

I cast him aside, just like usual.

I pulled out a pen from my inside pocket and ticked off the item on her list on my way out, and then I left my mum to dreamland, with Wellington the elephant etched onto her heart.

I headed back through to my own bedroom, and pushed the scared little boy even deeper, so deep I could almost believe he was gone. Almost.

Oh, how I wished he was gone.

I needed him to be.

So, I thought about the sweet little whirlwind from the train, of the shimmer of gold in her hair and the cute little smile as she said hello, until I finally fell asleep. That scared little boy banished to the dark, callous pits of my memories.

Just like usual.

# 12

*Chloe*

I'd been trying to give my absolute all to work, learning everything I could before I was due to switch over and shadow Gina Salzaki on Franklin Ward, but one single morning without the stranger on the train was enough to drive me insane.

I was petrified I'd never see him again, and it was crazy how much that scared me, since I didn't even know his name.

My whole life was in its new mad routine, and I'd thought that was safe enough. I was racing to the train every morning and staying up late every night. I was slipping my hand down between my legs in bed, just as soon as Liam had rolled over and gone to sleep.

I just figured the stranger would always be there, on that journey every morning.

I was thinking of him every time I had a spare second. I thought about his dark eyes, and his velvety voice, and his smile, and his bookshelf and how many of the same novels we might have. But that was nothing compared to just how much I was thinking about him on that one scary day he was gone.

Stupid.

I was a stupid, crazy idiot.

I should be thinking about nothing other than work. It was my career. My shot at making a difference and doing what I really wanted. I should be worried about a billion other things at the hospital more than some random guy I didn't know. Franklin Ward was scaring me, and it should be WAY worse than a morning train journey.

People said I'd find it hard in there. Vickie pulled a face every time Dr Hall was mentioned in conversation.

“Amazing, but... serious.”

She always left the same pause between words and always had the same weird half smile on her face.

It was Indy, the nurse I teamed up with on lunchtime shift on that one crazy day, that tried to get me chatting about the Franklin Ward nerves some

more. She pulled me into the corridor between consulting rooms for yet another round of gossip, when all I was thinking about was the train.

*The train.*

*The train.*

*Where was the stranger on the train, universe?*

**WHERE WAS HE?**

“I’ve heard you’re off to replace Gina Salzaki,” she said. “Dr Hall is hot but... weird.”

That same pause, and that same half smile from a different mouth.

“I’ve heard that,” I said. “Everyone says so.”

“You’ve seen him around? You’d probably recognise him, he looks great in a suit, and his eyes are... serious... and his hair is... obvious...”

I’d heard about this. I’d heard plenty, but I was done with it. It was always the same loop of stuff, over and over, about how great he is, and how hot he is, but how weird.

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Always the same. Always.

And I got it. I really got it. I thought it was great. But still, that loop of stuff didn’t mean crap to me that day.

*The train, the train, the traaaaaaaaaaaaaain!*

I was a grouch that night when I got home. I ignored the books on my shelf and sat next to Liam on the sofa, and I tried to feel something. I tried to remember how it felt when I loved him with all of my heart, every little piece of it.

But I couldn’t.

It wasn’t there.

I lay in bed, next to him fast asleep, and I tried to imagine feeling that way about him. I tried to imagine wanting him to touch me, the way I’d always wanted him to touch me.

But I couldn’t.

It wasn’t there.

There was something else.

Something that should never be.

Something that sent my fingers wandering between my legs.

My body was desperate for my own touch. It was too much to ignore. I was gentle, but fierce, both at once. Tight little flicks on just the right spot to quicken my breaths, until they were tight little rasps to match. And it

shouldn't be him. It shouldn't be the stranger on the train I was thinking about. But I couldn't stop.

I tried to be quiet and still. I tried to leave Liam asleep next to me.

It didn't work.

I was lost in my own motion when he rolled to face me. I tried to pull my hand away from myself but he was already there, pressing his fingers on top of mine.

"Kept that quiet, babe," he whispered, and his voice was a dry grunt.

He pushed my fingers away, and his touches were so much rougher. I tried to wriggle into the spot, but he was always just out of place, so I told myself it felt great. That it was driving me wild. That it was a tease... yeah... a tease.

I needed to feel this. I needed to feel the love for Liam that used to give me tingles. I needed to remember that he was the one for me. The one for the rest of my life. Chloe and Liam forever.

I tried.

I rolled into him and held him close when he pressed his mouth to mine. I searched for the passion in his kiss to spur mine on, but it wasn't there to be felt. His attention was all on his dick and grinding it up against me, and in a flash his hand moved away from me and gave up his touches. He climbed up on top, and worked his hips against mine, and again, I tried to wriggle to find the spot, but no sooner had I done that than he wriggled away from mine to find his own.

He thrust inside in one. I tried to be ready.

He stopped kissing me and breathed against my neck. He told me how hot I was, and how good it felt, and I wanted to feel the same.

I raised my legs and wrapped them around him, and found the groove along with him, but I didn't feel it. No matter how hard I tried, I didn't feel it.

Thrusts, and hot breaths, and grunts.

I pictured the old times, when I was back from uni. When I was so desperate to get my hands on him that I'd rush up the moment I saw him and kiss him as hard as I could. And that was enough. That was enough to feel the passion in the physical, even when my own fingers had to work their rhythm along with his.

The passion in the physical was gone, and it was like that moment in *The Labyrinth*, when Sarah says the magic line, and you know then that the Goblin King is done, and even though you want to marry the Goblin King

yourself, you still know that Sarah is done with him and utters the *you have no power over me* statement with that moment of mad realisation on her face. That's what it was for me, right there in bed with Liam.

*You have no power over me.*

I'm sure I had an open mouth with the shock, and my breath caught in my throat. I was glad that I hadn't let him have lights on for years, not wanting to show him my imperfections, because he'd have seen that moment. He'd have seen it and been wide open eyed himself.

Instead he grunted his grunts, and bucked his hips harder, and slammed me against the mattress until he came.

I got this weird choke of sadness in my throat, because it was a horrible feeling – knowing in one striking moment that your dreams of spending the rest of your life with someone have been shrivelling to nothing. You've just been too scared to face it.

He rolled off with a *thanks, babe*, and I knew then that it'd been shrivelling to nothing for him too.

He slept. I didn't. Well, barely anyway. I was caught up in the horror of accepting it – that me and Liam were really through.

I guess he had a lot to do with that – the stranger on the train. Even though I knew nothing about him, it was that tickly rush every time I'd seen his face that had been the trigger. To knowing there was more out there in the world I wanted to feel with someone. So much more than I'd ever felt.

*Thanks, romance novels, for your contributory part in that.*

The next morning I was petrified all over again as I made my way through that train carriage, scared shitless that the stranger wouldn't be there. I was feeling this crazy horrible flutter about how that was it, I was doomed, even though I'm usually the most optimistic person on the planet, and always have been.

I'd been telling myself, as I galloped my way towards the station, that it was okay if he was gone, and if I never saw him again, because my life was busy and full, right?

Right?

It wouldn't matter if I never saw a stranger again that I didn't know, right?

Right?

I was lying to myself. It may have been stupid, and based on nothing at all, but I was lying to myself.

It really would matter if I never saw that stranger again that I didn't know.

So, it was just as well that he was sitting there on the train that morning – a whole day and night after driving myself crazy by stewing it over and over and over.

It floored me, for real. Even after one little day, it knocked me sideways with this crazy rush of relief, like the whole train lit up around me, just to see him sitting there.

*Holy fuck, thank you, universe! Thank you! I'll owe you for the rest of my whole damn life!*

He was sitting in the same spot, and had his grey suit on with a dark burgundy tie, and he looked great – his beard its usual pattern and his salt and pepper hair flicked in just the same spot.

My heart was racing harder than I'd ever felt it, and my fingers wouldn't stay still they were shaking so hard.

“Hello,” I said, and it was stupid. It sounded stupid. A stupid word from a mouth that must have been grinning harder than the Cheshire cat in a catnip shop.

“Hello,” the stranger said, and his voice was the same, but his smile was brighter than before. Just a tiny fraction brighter.

He held up his cover.

*Fahrenheit 451.*

I held up mine. *Black Beauty*.

This time he said something. He really said something.

“Horses owe a serious karmic debt to Anna Sewell.”

My answer was doofus, I could barely get my words out.

“They sure do.”

*God, universe. Why am I such a moron?*

Three stupid words.

All the things I'd imagined saying to that man, in that spot, and I said those three stupid words when I got my first real chance to say something good.

Just like that, the chance was gone. He turned his attention back to his novel and the silence returned.

I didn't know what to do. *Black Beauty* was a blur of words on a blur of pages, and I wanted so much more.

That's when I knew it was crazy, but I couldn't deny it to myself, not

anymore.

Hello stranger just wouldn't cut it. Not when I felt like this.

Eastworth and Newstone and Churchley zoomed past, and I barely even noticed them. There was only him. Sitting there. Flicking the pages of *Fahrenheit 451*.

And then it happened.

*Harrow. The next station is Harrow.*

No.

No.

NO!

I couldn't do it. Not anymore.

I couldn't walk away from that train and risk that pang all over again.

So, I waited. I paused, not knowing what I should do. I needed to rush to work, but I couldn't. I stood up slowly and put Black Beauty under my arm, but I was dithering, stalled on the spot as he closed his novel and looked at me.

"Have a nice day, Chloe."

Still, I waited, dithering. Hovering like a fool.

Until he put *Fahrenheit 451* into his briefcase and got up from his seat, and I could hardly believe it, that this could be his stop too. But it was his stop. I moved down the aisle and he was right behind me, I could practically feel his presence.

I shot a glance at the train door and he gestured me to keep on going, a gentleman with that same polite smile on his face as I stepped off the train and onto the platform. But I couldn't race off, not anymore. I just couldn't do it.

I walked slowly. Every step, I felt like a clutz. And he followed.

He was behind me, and I could feel it, walking down the same streets as I was, only a few steps behind. I kept hanging back, keeping my footsteps so steady when they'd usually be a gallop.

Nothing about that morning felt steady, though. Not one single thing. My breaths were racing and my heart was too, and I so much wanted to turn around and ask him where he was going. *Please, universe, I just want to know where he's going.*

But I didn't need to.

The turning for Harrow District came up ahead, and he was still behind me. I started crossing the car park over to main reception, and he was still

behind me.

Still behind me!

I held back. Finally, I held back, and he kept on walking, getting closer and closer.

I pretended to be fiddling with my bag until he came up next to me, and then I forced myself to take some more clumsy steps, until we reached the big double doors together, side by side.

He was as shocked as I was. I know he was as shocked as I was, I could see it all over his face.

He walked into reception, just as I did, and I knew it then, my heart knew it before my head.

*Please, universe. Please, oh my God.*

And the universe delivered.

I'd always believed in karma, and fate, and destiny, but never like this.  
Never actually like this.

Dita Allen, the main receptionist, looked up as we stepped towards the reception hub, and she smiled. She smiled at him and held up a hand as he stepped on by.

“Good morning, Dr Hall,” she said.

# 13

*Logan*

I was no believer in anything beyond science and logic. I had no time for the fluffy bullshit of fate and destiny. But that moment – standing there in Harrow District reception hub and staring over at Chloe from the train – was enough to give me shivers.

She hovered on the spot, open-mouthed and wide-eyed, staring over at me so intently you could have struck her down with a feather. I felt it, too. You could have struck me down with the same damn one.

I tried to brush it aside – this ridiculous shiver of fate – tried to laugh it off as nothing, right then in my head. But it's hard when you're staring across at the girl who's been driving you insane for weeks, and realising that she's been heading to the same damn building that you have, day after day.

Our eyes were fixed, both of us staring hard across the hub, neither of us moving a muscle. It was me who ended the connection, shifting myself in position and holding up a hand to the girl on reception.

“Good morning, Dita,” I said.

It was like the spell had been broken as soon as I spoke, and I regretted it with a horrible little pang as soon as Chloe found her feet and backed away from me. She was back. The white rabbit, panicking and dashing all the way.

I watched her leave in the opposite direction to mine, down the eastern corridor, staying still on my feet until she was gone.

“Do you have any idea who that was?” I asked the receptionist.

She shrugged. “A nice girl, fresh to Kingsley, I think. Her name might be Chloe... she usually says hi.”

“A nurse?”

“Yeah, a trainee, I think.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

Spell broken, I walked away. Except the spell wasn't broken. My route up to Franklin felt strange with that pounding in my chest. Thump, thump, thump. A flush of some bizarre excitement I couldn't contain.

There was no excitement due here, that's what I told myself. So what if

the girl from the train was a nurse at the same hospital I worked at? Plenty of people worked at the same hospital I did. Plenty of *nurses* worked at the same hospital I did. No huge coincidence.

So, why did it feel like one?

Why did those shivers keep coming?

I settled down into my shift, giving my attention to the people who needed it, supervising meds and advising on patients' options. I summoned Gina and Romi for a consulting room catch up and talked through our outpatients schedule for the week.

So, why did those shivers keep coming?

It was when Wendy Briars arrived at Franklin, early in the afternoon, that those shivers rose up and got the best of me. My throat was dry when I listened to her speak through patients' notes on a few of our most difficult cases. I couldn't hold back the *thump, thump, thump* in my chest as I stared at the notes on her clipboard.

She was smiling, and thanking me for my help, and walking away when the blurt came from my throat.

"Wendy, just a second please."

I stood like a fool as she turned around and headed back.

"Yes, Dr Hall?"

I cleared my throat. "The, um... there's one of the nurses. A trainee, I think. Mousy hair, freckles. Quite a delicate little thing."

Wendy pulled a face, weighing it up.

I cursed myself down deep as I kept on speaking.

"Her name is Chloe, I believe."

With that Wendy grinned at me and swiped her hand in the air.

"Oh, Dr Hall. Of course, her name is Chloe. You're talking about Chloe Sutton. Has someone pointed her out already? I was planning on showing her around the department early next week. I sent her files, for your approval?" She paused when I looked blank. "She's replacing Gina."

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

I must've turned white. As pale as a fucking ghost.

"She's replacing Gina?"

She grinned at me. "Yes. Well, so long as that is ok with you. She's very excited, and very good. I thought she'd be perfect over here." Another pause from her. "I did send you her files through, right?"

I didn't know. Couldn't think.

I couldn't fathom anything other than Chloe would be in my team day after day, working on the same ward, walking the same corridors and sitting at the same bedsides.

"Are you ok, Dr Hall?" Wendy asked. "You look a little... unsteady."

I summoned my most steady smile.

"Fine, Wendy. Thank you."

But I wasn't fine. I backed away from there feeling like the ward was spinning around me, and my breaths were tight in my chest. Fluffy bullshit fate had no place for me, so why was I flying and twisting inside, my belly lurching and wheeling like a fucking fool.

*Chloe Sutton.*

The girl from the train was a nurse. A trainee nurse.

*Chloe Sutton.*

A trainee nurse who was going to be on my ward.

*Chloe Sutton.*

A girl whose smile I'd be staring at every day, right through the day. The shift of those knees, and that flick of hair from her forehead...

*Chloe Sutton.*

I'd find out if she liked elephants.

*Chloe Sutton.*

I'd find out if she'd ever been to Pilsner.

*Chloe Sutton.*

I'd find out everything I wanted. Everything she was.

And I didn't know if I could do it. I didn't know if I could keep it sane.

I headed into Jim Harris, to talk about upping his medication, but I couldn't. I couldn't do it.

I felt sick.

Sick and dizzy, and fucked.

I felt fucked. Truly fucked.

*Chloe Sutton.*

I stumbled into the staff bathroom, stared at myself in the mirror and splashed water all over my face, and I made myself say it. Made myself pull myself together and just fucking handle it.

*"Stop being a fucking idiot, man."*

I stamped it down – the shivers, and the excitement and the ridiculous fucking joy. Because what fucking joy was there to be had here? Because some random girl had a job on my ward?

No joy. Because there never fucking was any – only a pitiful little sliver of life amongst the death. Only a pitiful little sliver of life through the *years* of death, and the pain, and the loss, and everything else I was so fucking keen to save other people from, even when their days were fucking numbered.

The little boy down deep screamed and cried because he wanted to believe. He wanted to feel the light. But he was dead to me. He'd been dead for fucking years.

*Chloe Sutton.*

I wouldn't react to her.

Not a jot.

I'd put a smile on my face and welcome her onto my team, but that would be all. The only thing I'd ever do.

I wiped my face dry and took a deep breath. I stared into that mirror and cursed the joy inside as nothing.

Nothing. It meant nothing.

I only wished I believed that as I straightened my tie and went the hell about my day.

# 14

*Chloe*

*My God, universe, what the hell are you doing to me?*

I was doomed.

My soul was singing to highs that were crazy, and my whole body was on fire, burning up bright. Because I adored that man. I adored that man I didn't know. And it was stupid. STUPID. But I couldn't stop.

My hands were shaking as I helped Vickie on reception in Kingsley. My voice felt thick in my throat.

"Never thought I'd see you late," she laughed, still giggling about my clutter of limbs as I'd crashed on into the ward.

I wished I could talk to her. I wished I could blurt out how I was feeling and what the hell was going on, and how insane it was that I was already in love with the guy I'd be working with in a few days' time, even though I knew it didn't make any damn sense.

I couldn't be though. I couldn't be in love with him.

This was a crush. A stupid crush. It couldn't be more than that.

So why did it feel like it meant so much?

My tummy was screaming, *screaming*. This pang of *something* was so much that I couldn't sit still. A tickle and a rush, and a heart racing so fast I could feel it in my temples.

"You alright, Chloe?" Vickie asked. "You seem a bit... I dunno, weird today."

I nodded. "I'm good, thanks."

She shrugged it off. Gave it a "cool" and carried on with her work.

I stumbled through to my lunch break, smiling through every minute and giving as much as I could to our patients, but that tingle was crazy, right the way to my toes. I don't know what ever possessed me, but I didn't take a lunch break with Caroline, I just couldn't do it. I couldn't take another second of this, not even one.

So I didn't.

I don't know just how I managed it, but I did. I found every scrap of *do*

*this, girl*, I could in my heart and forced my feet one after the other along the corridors.

I don't know how I made it. I don't know how my legs kept on moving, but they did.

I arrived at the double doors to Franklin Ward and I sucked in a breath through my nose and I made myself do it. I made myself walk inside.

And there he was. Dr Hall. Standing there at the ward reception, pointing at a screen with a girl sitting behind it.

He was as beautiful as I'd ever seen him. Beautiful enough to take the breath I'd just sucked in through my nose.

I stood still until he saw me, and then I took another breath and cleared my throat as I stepped on up. And I dunno what I was expecting. Some singsong of angelic fortune and destiny blowing trumpets through the world, making him grab me with open arms or whatever. But no. The whole thing shrivelled in a fart.

"Can I help you?" he said, and his tone was as flat as they come.

We stood. Staring.

The girl on reception sat. Smiling.

And I was a fool. A stupid fool that felt like the biggest fool for ever thinking of coming over here.

"I, um..." I stumbled. "I'm Chloe Sutton, and I'm, um... starting here... soon... on this ward..."

He was cool as a cucumber. "Yes," he said. "Replacing Gina Salzaki." He pointed along the ward. "You'll find her along there if you want to introduce herself. Just please don't distract her from her shift."

"Thanks," I said, and I was a clutz again, a stupid clutz.

I forced myself to keep walking, like he thought for a second I was really there to see her, and like I thought for a second that he thought I thought it. Whatever. Yeah, it was clutzy.

Gina Salzaki was at a bedside, and she looked so kind as she held someone's hand.

I pictured that as me in a few days' time, holding hands and helping people find their peace, but the whole thing felt weird now. Everything about life felt weird.

I hovered outside the room, being sure to keep my attention away from what was unfolding in there, scoping out the rest of the ward and no doubt burning up at the cheeks. I tried to pretend my attention wasn't on him as he

walked up the corridor. I tried to pretend I was the coolest chick in town, who'd barely even noticed he was the guy from the train I was crazy about, but it was a joke, and we both knew it.

He flashed me the tiniest hint of a smile and held a hand up, and it looked strange with his paperwork in his hands and not his paperback. It looked strange with him under hospital lighting, so bright and cold.

And then he stepped on past me, and it was easy to look at him then. So much easier to watch him walk away than meet his eyes. Which is when I realised I'd never seen him from behind before. No once, not ever.

I'd never seen how the flick of his hair at the front turned into a patchwork of a pattern from behind. A dotting of flesh between salt and pepper grey. Skin so pale, and such a contrast against the darkness of his hair.

So striking. So unique.

Alopecia.

Dr Hall had alopecia.

With that, Gina cleared her throat to get my attention, and I turned to face her, as wide-eyed as I'd been all day.

“Can I help you?” she asked, and I nodded.

“I’m, um... Chloe... Chloe Sutton...”

Her smile was amazing. “Chloe! Pleased to meet you!”

She beckoned me along the corridor, in the direction of Dr Hall, and I was edgy every step as she told me about how great the ward is, and how much I’m going to love it, even though it can get really hard.

I nodded. Dumb.

I felt dumb.

“Dr Hall is amazing,” she told me. “Seriously, he’s amazing. Quiet and... intense. But amazing.”

I nodded. Dumb.

“I’ll introduce you,” she told me, and with that she was already pushing into the office, and presenting the man who’d consumed my world, clearly not having a clue of the fact he’d been the one to point me to her just a few minutes previous.

“This is Chloe Sutton,” she said to him. “She’s replacing me.”

“Yes,” he said. “I know.”

We stared.

Awkward. I was awkward.

He was... nothing.

He smiled the most professional smile, with his pen paused over his papers, and Gina grinned away quite happily, seemingly oblivious to the whole thing, until the seconds ticked and tocked and she realised there was something weird going down.

“Well, I’ll, um... show Chloe around, shall I?” she asked him, and he nodded.

“Please do,” he said. “Welcome to the team, Chloe.”

But I didn’t feel welcome. I felt like an idiot. A stupid idiot with a crush I couldn’t contain. Not anymore. And holy fucking shit. Seriously. I opened my mouth and the words came, they just fucking came.

“Thanks for having me.”

*Thanks for having me? That was it? That was actually it?*

He smiled, and I waved. I actually waved. I waved and I backed out of there and Gina came along too, and if embarrassment painted you yellow and not pink, I would have out-burnt the sun.

“Do you know Dr Hall?” Gina asked, as we walked along.

I shrugged. “I get the train with him, in the morning.”

“Cool,” she said. “Looked like you knew each other, that’s all.”

I shouldn’t have said another word, but I needed to. I needed to voice it and make it real.

“We read books,” I told her. “Both of us, I mean. We show each other what we’re reading. On the train.”

She smiled. “Nice. I’ve seen him with books sometimes. He doesn’t talk to me about it though.” She laughed. “He doesn’t talk to me about *anything*. Maybe he’ll be different with you.”

Somehow I doubted it.

Gina pointed out rooms, and staff members and a load of other Franklin stuff, and I thanked her.

I headed back to my own ward after lunch and felt the bubble of familiarity, so kind and safe.

Too kind and safe to ignore.

Wendy Briars met me between patients as my shift drew to an end. She beckoned me up close with a nice professional smile and told me she’d heard I’d scoped things out with Gina.

“What did you think?” she asked. “Are you ready for Franklin? She said you seemed a little... nervous... and that’s ok, Chloe. It’s ok to be nervous and not sure if that’s the ward for you. It really is.”

It was her face, so intense, and her questioning so sincere, and right then in that heartbeat I wasn't sure.

I wasn't sure I could handle it, not being next to that man being so... cold...

I dunno. I didn't even mean cold. I didn't even know what I meant.

I shrugged. "I'm not sure," I told her. "I'm just... I just want to be right for it..."

"I understand that," she said. "And it's a hard one. I know it's a hard one."

I looked around at the ward I was making so much difference in, with the team who'd given me a place I could belong.

"I'm quite happy here," I said to Wendy, and she nodded.

"And everyone is loving you being here," she said, then paused. "How about you have a think about it? We have a few days before training starts with Gina next week. I can assign the role to Rhonda in Leadon Ward if it isn't suited to you."

I know she was being helpful, and I felt it.

I felt so much.

I was a crazy mess of crazy, not quite sure where to go.

"Thank you," I told her. "I'll think about it. Thank you very much."

I felt tingly and sick all the way home to Eddington. I felt dithery on my feet when I made Liam's dinner for his lap on the sofa, and I couldn't take it anymore. Not the excitement, and the fear, and the tingles. Not the insanity for a guy I didn't know.

But there was more than that.

I couldn't take the rest of it, either. I couldn't take the flipside of the very same coin. The flatness, and the disappointment and the nothing.

Because that's what this was now, my life with Liam.

It was nothing.

There were a whole different type of tingles when I sat down next to my boyfriend on the sofa that night and I summoned up the strength to speak his name.

He barely shot me a glance over his game, didn't give a shit what I had to say to him. So why was I so worried about how I said it? I just spat it out and made it real.

"This isn't working, Liam. I'm leaving."

I'm not joking, it took him about ten seconds of playing before he even

began to register what I'd said. He shot me some looks, and then one of them held, big eyes staring at me as he let out a *huh?*

He may have panicked a bit and asked me what the hell I was talking about. He may have followed me around shaking his head while I packed a bag for my folks' place, but honestly, I don't think it hurt him – not truly deep down where it mattered. This was as dead to him as it was to me, he just hadn't given it enough attention to really think about it.

I told him so before I left, and he cursed and told me he loved me, and I was *mental as fuck* and should *get some sense in my head*. But he didn't mean that. He'd be back to his game the second I was out the front door. That's what the *sense in my head* was telling me loud and clear.

I waited for Dad to come get me, and he bundled my stuff into the backseat. I sat in the passenger seat all the way back to theirs, and Mum was waiting there like I'd be some devastated wreck, but I wasn't.

I was more churned up about a man I was too scared to be working with than losing the man I'd said I'd be committed to forever.

I settled down back into my old bedroom with Beano, our collie, wagging his tail at my feet. I called up train times online, and it panged. A scared pang that chewed me up fresh, because Halsey was on a different train line. This was nothing to do with the Redwood line.

And nothing to do with the stranger on it. Not a glimpse, not a glance, not a shiver.

It didn't matter what happened on my commuter mornings from here on in.

Dr Hall wouldn't be there.

# 15

*Logan*

I'd made a mistake.

I'd let my own abject shock recoil me in the opposite direction, and I felt it.

What I'd shown to Chloe Sutton when she'd ventured nervous footsteps onto my ward wasn't professionalism. It was a professional veneer. No warmth or welcome, just clipped and cold.

There was no smile and no *Welcome, Chloe. So nice to meet you.* No *Chloe, welcome to the team here. We've met on the train, hello.*

I'd remedy that.

I'd keep my own inner whirlwind contained and I'd introduce her to the ward just as I would do with any other new member of staff.

I'd even say more of a *hello* on the train that morning, that's what I told myself as I sat down in my usual seat and took the paperback from my briefcase.

*Brave New World.*

I smiled at that. I sensed Chloe Sutton would be a brave new part of mine. A sweet face boarding my daily life in Franklin Ward, as well as on the train.

Only she didn't get on the train at Eddington. The same faces boarded at the platform, but she wasn't there.

The flame of panic was irrational, just like everything was about that girl. My heart started thumping, and my mouth felt dry, and I hated it. I hated how it made me feel.

Maybe she was sick today, or scheduled in at work on a different shift? It could be anything. Anything at all.

But somehow, I knew it wasn't. Somehow, I knew it was more.

Again, it was ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous. Worthy of nothing more than an internal curse at myself.

I reached the ward and sank into my usual routine, and pushed my attention where it should be, far beyond that stupid jangle that jiggled around *Chloe Sutton* in my mind.

Except I couldn't, could I? That stupid jangle just kept on jigging.

Wendy Briars reached my office early afternoon, with her usual clipboard of documents and her usual set of questions about the day, and I should have left it at that – only I didn't. That ridiculous little part of me jumped up and out before I could shut its mouth.

"Chloe Sutton seems a nice girl. When does she move over from Kingsley?" I asked.

Wendy's expression switched in a flash. "Ah yes, about Chloe." There was a pause. A definite pause. "She's a little more... unsteady after yesterday. Not quite sure if she's ready for this ward yet. I think we'll get Rhonda Freeman over from Leadon Ward instead. She's very good."

"Unsteady?" I asked, and I actually felt my blood run cold.

"Yes, unsteady. I'm glad she ventured over here to get a feel for it herself."

It wasn't *unsteadiness* that had shifted Chloe's commitment to the new role, and I knew it.

It was me.

"Don't worry," Wendy said. "Rhonda is excellent too, she'll be fantastic."

But I didn't want Rhonda. I wanted Chloe Sutton.

"Chloe was your first choice," I said. "Why was that?"

Wendy's face lit up. "Oh, Chloe's a bright little star. She really is. You met her, yes? She's such a warm sparkle. Conscientious, and committed, too. I really thought she'd be a gem in here." Another pause. "It's a shame, yes, but she's a great presence in Kingsley. They'll be glad to keep hold of her."

I didn't doubt it.

"Have you told Rhonda yet?" I asked. "Is she aware of the position?"

Wendy shook her head. "Not yet. I had a staff appraisal meeting a few weeks ago where we spoke about potential department shifts, but I haven't told her about this position yet. I'm giving Chloe a few days to decide for definite, but having seen her yesterday, I'm pretty certain she'll be staying where she is."

I pasted on my professional smile and thanked her for her time. I watched Wendy get up to leave, with that ridiculous flame of panic rising up in my chest, and once again it won. Poked its face up and claimed its moment before I had the chance to slam it back down.

"Is Chloe in today?" I asked. "She's, um... usually on the same train as

me in the morning, and I don't think she was there today."

*Don't think?* I sounded like a complete dick.

Wendy tipped her head. "Yeah, I think she's in. Pretty sure I saw her this morning. It's hard to miss her with that beam of a smile on her face wherever she goes."

"Thank you," I said, and she left with a wave.

I should have left it, and I knew it. There's no way I should have ever considered interfering with a situation at the hospital just because I was all a dither about a girl missing a train journey, but yet again that flame of panic was being a prick of a fool and chewing me up inside.

I checked my schedule and had a short while before my next appointment. I was cursing myself from the very moment I was up on my feet, but I kept on moving, letting Gina know I was heading out for a few minutes.

It'd been a while since I'd been to Kingsley Ward. It took less time than I was expecting before I arrived at the double doors and pushed my way inside.

The girl on reception greeted me with a smile and a "welcome, Dr Hall" and I stepped on up to the counter.

"I'm here to see Chloe Sutton, please," I told her. "Is she around?"

She pointed behind me with a nod, and I spun in a flash. And there she was. Chloe. Standing there with her fingers twisting together in front of her, staring at me with those big, wide eyes.

Jesus Christ, the girl was beautiful.

"Chloe," I said, and took a few steps forward. "Can I please have a minute?"

She nodded, and that beautiful blush was rising high on her cheeks. She gestured somewhere off to the corridor to the side, and I followed her nervous little steps with my heart racing.

She didn't know what I was going to say, and that was obvious. The white rabbit was in the headlights, gazing up with such beautiful innocence, and I knew in that moment, beyond any doubt, just why Wendy Briars had chosen her for Franklin.

She was a genuine little sparkle of life, so warm and so real.

I cleared my throat. "I'm here to offer my apologies," I told her. "I was a little preoccupied yesterday and didn't offer you enough of a welcome to the ward. Please give me another opportunity. Wendy says fantastic things about you, and I'd love to offer you a place on our team."

She was nodding along with my words. A delightful little bob of her head that had me transfixed.

“Thank you, Dr Hall,” she said. “It’s ok that you were... busy... that’s no problem.”

I wasn’t busy and we both knew it. It was hovering between us in the air, a bigger elephant in the room than Wellington at Pilsner, but we both smiled and glazed over it, and I gestured behind me.

“Please, let me know if and when you want to make another visit. I’ll be sure to welcome you.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“Excellent,” I said.

With that I turned, and took a few steps away, but her voice sounded out, a delicious trill that stopped me dead in my tracks.

“What were you, um...” she took a breath. “What were you, um, reading this morning, Dr Hall? On the train, I mean.”

I spun on the spot, and took a breath of my own. That white rabbit was in even greater headlights, those nervous fingers twisting even harder.

“Brave New World,” I said, then paused. “How about you?”

“White Fang,” she said, then blushed some more, a beautiful beetroot over freckles. “I really love wolves. Like *really* love them. They’ve been my favourites since I was a kid.”

“Wolves,” I repeated. “My mother really loves elephants. I took her to Pilsner a few days ago.”

Her face lit up. “I love Pilsner,” she said. “They have wolves, you know. One of them is called Winston and he’s amazing.”

I had this ridiculous shiver down deep as I flashed her a smile of my own.

“We met an elephant,” I told her. “His name is Wellington. A huge beast.”

She nodded. “Yeah, I saw him last time I was there. He’s their biggest, right?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“Cool,” she said.

“Great,” I said.

And it was awkwardly ridiculous, a bluster of small talk that meant an insane amount more than it should.

“I’d best get back,” I told her.

“Yeah,” she said, and pointed off behind somewhere. “I’d better get back

to it, too.”

She started retreating, those nervous fingers still twisting, and I said something I shouldn’t, far beyond any kind of professionalism.

“You weren’t on the train this morning.”

Such a stupid comment.

“No,” she said, and her eyes dropped to the floor, darting around a little before climbing back up to meet with mine. Fingers twisting. Twisting. “It’s, um...”

I should have held up a hand and blustered my way out of there, but I didn’t. I kept my eyes tight on hers, waiting for her to speak again.

“It’s, um...” Another little dither and pause, then she took a breath. “I, um... split up with my boyfriend. I’m in Halsey now... back with my parents.”

You could have knocked me down with the tiniest of feathers, right there and then, but I held it steady. Held it firm.

My voice was calm when I spoke.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “It’s always unfortunate when things don’t work out how we hoped.”

Her voice wasn’t calm when it came out again. It was gaspy and shy.

“I’m not...” she said. “Sorry, I mean.”

My eyes must have widened on hers, but I kept so still.

She shrugged, and flashed the most adorable little smile I’d ever seen. “He’d say I was a boring book addict, didn’t like me reading at night.”

I flashed her a smile right back. “I’m sure you’d have plenty to say about him in response.”

A nod. “Yeah. Sure would.”

There were footsteps behind and a few of the nurses came walking through, and the spell was broken all over again. I cleared my throat and backed away.

“You’re welcome at Franklin,” I said again. “Please do head over if you’d like a more thorough introduction.”

“Thanks,” she said.

That little boy in me was leaping in my damn chest when I left Kingsley and charged on back across to Franklin, and I tried to push him down. I tried to scoff at his insanity and his pathetic outlook on the world, but today I couldn’t contain him. I couldn’t force him back into the depths where he belonged.

The silly little fool would learn his lesson, of that I was sure. But not right then.

Right then it was all about Chloe Sutton and that sweet little smile.

# 16

*Chloe*

I never expected our longest ever conversation to be one where I was wobbly on my feet in a hospital corridor, telling him I love wolves. But I'd take it any day, all day long, just to hear his voice again.

Yep. I really needed a cold shower, and some kind of sense in my head. Neither of them were coming anytime that afternoon, though.

I was a nervous cloud, floating through the ward once he'd left it – happy on top of happy as I helped people through their day, laughing and smiling and listening to life stories. There was so much to be found in people, as well as in pages. I'd known that ever since I could understand words.

I was still grinning my brightest grin when Wendy Briars joined me in the staffroom at the end of my shift, and she smiled right back at me.

"You look happy," she said. "Have you had an opportunity to think about things with Franklin?"

I nodded one hell of a nod. "Yeah," I told her. "I mean I was always really keen to do the role, I just felt that maybe it wasn't quite right for me in Franklin." I zoomed out my words super fast. "But it is right. I know it's right. I saw Dr Hall earlier and he told me I could go get an introduction and I want that. I really do want to take over from Gina."

She was laughing when I finished speaking, a really warm laugh that made me giggle out a giggle along with her.

"Sorry," I said. "I can get a little..."

"Enthusiastic," she finished for me. "Never apologise for that, it's a lovely thing to see."

"Thanks."

I could feel my cheeks burning bright and I wondered if she could sense it, the whole burst of energy inside. I was keeping it in check. But just. Only just.

"I did hear that Dr Hall came over here to speak with you," she said. "That's a great thing. He's a difficult man to get to know, but a great one. It's a fantastic thing that he wants to welcome you to the team. You'll be very

valued there.”

I felt so much more tender than I should to hear that.

“He seems great. Really great.”

“He is,” she said. “Really great.”

I dawdled, and then picked my book up ready to go.

She looked at my novel intently. “Gina said you share train journeys with him. Said you share what you’ve been reading.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, we both read a lot. Bookworms, I guess. Two peas in a novel reading pod.”

“Excellent,” she said, but she had a weird expression. One I couldn’t quite understand. “Well, have a lovely evening. We’ll start you in Franklin next week. You have a lot of faces to meet and a lot to take in.”

I had this silly urge to give her a hug, because I was so happy and she was so cool and had offered me so much, but I held back. I waved goodbye and was off like a rocket, charging on out of there and down to Harrow train station.

In some ways getting a different train tonight felt more strange than not going back home to Liam. I checked my phone. No messages from him. No *babe, please come home* or *I'll love you forever, don't do this*. Not even a peep out of him. Probably already slouched down on the sofa, screaming into his gamer headset.

I guess it didn’t seem all that strange to him, either. Maybe things had been done between us for a long time, we just hadn’t wanted to admit it. Neither of us. Must happen to a lot of people – they just drift away from each other as days turn to weeks, and those weeks keep on rolling, on and on. Very sad, but very real.

I tried to read White Fang on the way back to Halsey, trying to sink into the story I’d read a billion times over and get caught up in Kiche and One-Eye and the awesome White Fang himself. I failed miserably. My mind was too tangled in knots, life spinning around through so much of it, and I shouldn’t be thinking about that corridor conversation in the slightest, but I was.

*My mother really likes elephants.*

I wondered what his mum was like. I wondered if she looked like him, with the same dark eyes and awesome cheekbones, and if she read books too.

It was a whole new load of wondering on top of wondering if this whole flutter of *want* I had for him was a hope about nothing that could ever be.

Because that's what it was. *Want*. I wanted him. I wanted him so bad I couldn't stop thinking about him in bed at night, especially not now Liam was gone.

Last night had been quite... intense... in a bed on my own...

The whole *what if* thing was weird for me, because some little part of me felt I already had the answers, whispering in the shadows. I knew nothing about Dr Hall's life, but that didn't stop these whispers tickling deep. It was barely conscious, and based on nothing sane at all, but somehow I knew this wasn't completely crazy, and this wasn't just me being a crazy girl with crazy dreams, going crazy over a man I didn't know. Because if I wasn't supposed to know him, I wouldn't be walking into a life with him in it every single day, right through the day.

Most people would say I was out of my mind.

Maybe I was.

It didn't stop me smiling all the way home, though. It didn't stop the bounce in my step all along Bridge Street and across my parents' front lawn, even though my feet were grumbling all the way. It didn't stop the smile on my face as I sat down at the dinner table, with Beano wagging his tail at my feet, and talked about my day with Mum and Dad, and asked about theirs right back.

They'd had good ones, just like me.

I got in bed that night and tried reading *White Fang* again. I failed. Again.

I settled down to sleep, trying to get an early night for once in my life, but failing at that too.

I pictured him. Dr Hall with his deep, dark eyes, and that beautiful smile – even though it only showed in flashes. I pictured his hands on novel covers, his fingers flicking the pages, and I couldn't help myself... my own fingers slipped their way under the covers, until I felt how hot I was. How wet I was...

*Want*.

I wanted to step closer and feel him up close, too close to be cold. I wanted to feel his breaths on my face, lips too close not to kiss.

I wanted his fingers teasing their way up my thighs, gentle enough to drive me wild. Not like Liam and his rubbing without care.

Oh, how I wished the fingers between my legs belonged to the stranger on the train and not to me tonight. My circles were tight and fast, teasing my clit just right. My breaths were tight and fast to match, quiet as could be with

my parents asleep just through the wall.

He was right there in my mind, up too close to ever ignore. Everything about him was right there calling deep, so hungry to taste.

I came for him, but this time there was no shuffle under the covers to make sure Liam didn't stir. This time I was free to ride the explosion all the way, and then to starfish and catch my breath and stare at the ceiling.

*Please, universe. Please one day make this crazy girl crazy happy and get me up close to Dr Hall. Just for a minute. Just to feel him against me one little time.*

I believed in the universe. I believed in how it sprinkles the right amount of life and lessons into your path ahead, and had done since I was old enough to believe in unicorns and wizards, and gnomes defending their secret kingdoms from evil frogs. Only the belief in the universe had never failed me. Never shrivelled up to nothing, scoffed at by everyone around until I realised there was no fairy tale world hiding away amongst our own.

No. I'd never been sold out by fate. I believed in the universe with every part of my soul.

It was just a shame I didn't believe in myself to match.

I rolled onto my side and pulled my knees up to my chest, and I felt that horrible little lurch in my heart. The one that could never imagine a man like Dr Hall feeling that amount of *want* for a girl like me.

My freckles, and scars, and my imbalances. My wonky toes and my duck feet, and the way my thighs are too big against my skinny calves, and how my birthmarks make my tits look weird.

But even then, with my scars and weaknesses piling up high, I couldn't hold back that tiny pinprick of light in the darkness.

Because I'd seen it. *His* tiny pinprick of light in the darkness as he looked at me. That tiny little glimmer in his eyes as they held true on mine. And I knew it. I felt it...

*Please, universe, please let it be true.*

Our story was only just beginning. We'd only just turned the first page.

# 17

*Logan*

I never make the same mistake twice.

Chloe presented her nervous smiling face back over at Franklin the very next day, and this time I did my professional duty to the best of my ability. I accompanied her around the ward with a much warmer smile, even if my words were somewhat limited.

I introduced her to Romi and Richard and Nadia from the day shift, and gestured her into one of our comfortable consultation rooms where she took a dainty perch on one of the seats.

She listened with little nods all the while I explained to her the importance of our ward here, and how we always put the patient before the prognosis, no matter at what stage of their road they are at.

“They aren’t cancer, or kidney failure, or COPD, they are themselves before anything, right to the very end. It’s the job of palliative care to honour their wishes and give every scrap of support that can be given, both to them and their families.”

Another nod, a gracious smile, “I understand,” she said and I saw the truth of her in her eyes.

“Do you have any questions I haven’t answered yet?” I asked her, and those fingers of hers did their usual twiddle.

“Do many patients stay in here? Right until the end, I mean?”

I fixed my eyes on hers. “Some of them are able to go home comfortably for their final days, and some of them are able to go to a hospice for that final support. But there are many who say their goodbyes in front of us, right here on this ward, yes.”

Another nod from her, and I wanted her to know what that meant. What it really meant to watch someone pass away.

“It’s a hard place to be,” I told her. “No matter how prepared you think you are to help someone slip away, it’s a completely different experience to actually witness them take their final breaths, and then to witness the pain of the people surrounding them. It doesn’t come easily.”

She didn't look fazed in the slightest, just shifted a little in her seat.

"My uncle passed away really slowly when I was twelve," she said. "He was in the hospice in Halsey, and I visited him every day with my mum." Her smile was so genuine and so kind. "It was hard to see him go like that, but the hospice staff were so supportive and so calm, you know? They tried their best to make him feel ok, right up until the end."

"They did their hospice proud. I hope people feel the same about our ward."

"I hope people feel the same about me, when I'm in here," she said, and she meant it. There was such delicate humility and warmth in her words. "I always wanted to do my best for people, too. Just like they did for my uncle."

"I'm sure you will do," I told her.

"Thanks," she said, with a fresh little blush rising through the freckles on her cheeks.

I took a breath before getting to my feet and calling our introduction session to a close.

She thanked me a lot on our way back through to Franklin's double doors and told me how much she wanted the position with that effervescent grin on her face. It was intoxicating, just how alive that little bubble of excitement was at my side.

I watched her leave, admiring her trot down the corridor back towards Kingsley, then forced myself back to the severity of my world without her in it.

The next few days were a rush of the same harsh routine on loop.

My patients were struggling, and I did my best to be their relief. My mother's petals were falling, and I couldn't make them stop, I could only watch that clock keep on winding down, every night I stepped back through the doorway at home.

I was tired. Jaded. Aching from strained legs and a strained spirit along with them.

Nothing was able to pick me up.

I did my best to smile for everyone else and keep their souls soaring high, but mine was lost to everything. I was scraping the barrel of my days, without so much as a smile to perk me up on the train in the morning.

But then it all changed.

The very next Monday morning Chloe Sutton stepped onto the ward, and along with her came that sparkle of soul everywhere she turned.

She paired up with Gina from her starting shift, and was gentle, and kind, embracing everything the role needed her to be, right from the very beginning. Her smiles were bright enough that they brought out a smile in everyone she met, especially those seeking the warmth in human closeness for their most desperate days.

Gina was impressed with her, and told me so at every passing opportunity, and so did Romi, and Richard, too.

I was equally impressed, I just kept that in check and didn't venture close enough to lose my mind. I kept my smiles professional, and my words professional to match. I avoided small talk, as I did with everyone, and she didn't push for more, just smiled and waved a *hello* in passing.

I could feel her nerves, dancing under the surface. I could see them beneath her smile, just a flutter. Heady and beautiful.

Four days went by, and her nerves were beginning to settle. I could sense it deep in passing, every fleeting moment I saw her near. Again, she was heady and beautiful.

I was surprised by her, as always. Impressed by her calm whilst maintaining her delightful buzz of enthusiasm, and by her strength in helping people through their pain.

Still, it wasn't Chloe Sutton that surprised me most that week, despite the fact I'd learned to expect the unexpected wherever that girl was concerned.

It wasn't Chloe who stopped me in my tracks, jolting me into a maelstrom of shock as her first week on Franklin Ward drew to a close.

It was me.

# 18

*Chloe*

My first days alongside Gina were intense and busy and sped by in a flurry that had me spinning inside, but they were amazing. Franklin Ward was amazing.

Gina and Romi, and Nadia and Richard were amazing, too. Everyone was so committed to everything they did, and never stopped giving.

I was determined to be like that too.

Those first four days on the ward went by fast and slow, both at once. I was exhausted every night when I got home to Mum and Dad's, collapsing in the armchair and barely even able to toss a ball for Beano in the back garden before dinner. Liam was dropping me texts, asking me what I was going to do about my stuff at his, and I was sending him suggestions, but he didn't really want to hear them, just wanted to keep groaning on at me between gaming tournaments. It only made me feel more exhausted.

Luckily, the craziness of the days made it easy not to dwell on the doctor at the centre of them. They were managing to keep my craziness for him in some kind of check, at least.

Dr Hall was polite, but quiet, barely saying a word to me outside of consultations. The difference between the doctor with his patients and the man outside of it was crazy huge. Two different pieces of a puzzle that I could never imagine fitting together.

I decided to keep my nosey little crush on him under wraps as best I could do. I didn't even attempt to ask him about what books he was reading, or how his journey was in the morning. I didn't say anything, just kept my comments patient-related and nothing else, and my smiles must have been nervous, but professional right back at his.

I hoped so, anyway.

Wendy Briars had nice things to say when she caught up with me as day four drew to an end. She said people had been giving her very positive feedback and congratulated me on doing a good job. It made me glow, but not enough. Not yet.

There was still so much to be learnt, and so much to see, and so much to do to make the biggest difference I could make to people. That's where my focus was. On doing my best. Always on doing my best and thinking about how I could improve and do better.

I wasn't expecting it at all when Gina let out a giggle on Friday morning, just as soon as Dr Hall had turned the corner at the end of the corridor away from us. He'd grazed by us with barely a word, just his usual nod and wave, and steps with purpose.

I guess I'd watched him all the way. I guess it was obvious, too.

"You like him," she said to me. Three little words that had my heart thumping right up in my throat.

"He's... brilliant..." I gulped. "A great doctor."

My words were stupid and I knew it. Her grin told me she knew it too.

"He's not married, you know. Goes home alone." She tipped her head at me. "Maybe you could brighten up his nights a little."

I was cold and hot both at once. Dizzy with embarrassment.

"I, um... I don't think he... um... likes me like that."

She laughed. "Believe me, he may seem cold to you, but I've seen the way he stares. He may think he's hiding it, but he's not hiding it from us, not when you've known him like we have." I held my breath through her pause. "He likes you. Likes you, likes you, I mean. He can't stop looking at you, even when he tries. He does this weird thing with his lip, pinches it at the side when you're near."

She pinched her lip in her teeth to show me, and I'd seen that. Barely there enough to even notice, but I still recognised it when she pulled the same expression.

I didn't say a word, just stood there, staring in shock.

"Come on," she pushed. "You like him back. Admit it! You couldn't hide it if you tried."

I shrugged and flicked through my clipboard notes. "He's a great man."

"A great man and a hot man. A great hot man who likes you right back."

I took a chance on her, a girl I hardly knew, because I liked her. I liked her enough to reach out with trust.

"So what do I do about it?" I asked her. "I don't even see him on the train anymore to ask him about his novels. I don't know what I could say."

She pushed her way into the pharma room and I followed her on in for the meds restock.

“You’ll have to be the one to do something,” she said. “There’s no way he’s ever going to make a move on you. Not since you’re half his age, and a member of his team. He’ll hardly even reach out to share a birthday card with people he’s known for years, let alone ask a lovely little thing like you out on a date.”

I couldn’t imagine going out on a date with Dr Hall. I’d be shaking like a jitterbug all the way through.

Gina’s face lit up in a smirk.

“You could try to get some chatter going with him next week at my leaving party. We’re all heading down to Casey’s Bar on Friday evening. Even Wendy is coming.”

I’d heard about the leaving party. It was already scheduled in my phone calendar. Liam had moaned on at me by text because it was one of his suggested *moving my shit* options, and I’d said it was a no go.

“Seriously,” Gina said. “See if you can get some red wine down his neck, and flash him one of those pretty smiles of yours and ask him to give you a *personal examination*.” She laughed so hard at that, and I couldn’t help it, I laughed along with her.

There was no way on earth I would be asking Dr Hall for a personal examination anytime soon. Not with my duck feet and birthmarks. It would be lamplight at best.

“Honestly,” she carried on. “You have to do something. There’s no way he’ll be the one grabbing hold of you first, not since you’re young enough to be his daughter.” She laughed again. “His very pretty daughter, who is every bit the book addict he is from the sounds of it. You’ll both be reading in bed together when you’re done with the fucking.”

She laughed again and I laughed along but the blush on my cheeks was a scorcher.

I helped her on the restock and changed the conversation back to the day, but I couldn’t shake it off. That butterfly flutter inside. That crazy flash of hope that maybe, just maybe, she was right.

Maybe he did look at me with that tiny pinch of his lip, and that deep dark depth to his stare.

I was still soaring high with that crazy flash of hope when I passed him next in the corridor, just after that Friday lunchtime. I dared to smile my very biggest smile and say a *hi* and got nothing back from him other than the same clipped nod as he walked by.

I was deflated in a fizz.

No.

Gina was wrong.

He didn't want me.

Not like that.

And it was ok. That's what I told myself. I gave myself a proper talking to inside my head, and said that Dr Hall was just Dr Hall, a great man to be working with, and I was just Chloe, a girl who was learning from him. It was true.

I was trying too hard to be worried about whether I stood a hope in hell that the man I was crazy about could ever be crazy about me too, and I was doing ok. I was doing good.

It was a dumbass part me that believed one short week in Franklin Ward could see me being good in that place. It was naive to think I could ever walk straight into that role with enough strength to handle it.

I wasn't expecting it when the bleep of the ECG sounded out loud from Room 8. Gina rushed to Jemma Hadley's bedside, and I was right there alongside her to help, my pulse racing hard.

Jemma wasn't breathing. Her eyes were flat and lifeless, and her lips were turning blue.

It gave me shivers right down to my heart, and the world slowed down before me, my eyes widening on her son as he cried out for his mum.

Gina tried. She did everything she could to bring Jemma back, trying her best to help her as I tried to ease her husband and her son away from her side. She was still trying when Dr Hall got there, stepping back with calm to let him take over.

But I was anything but calm as I watched him, dumbstruck and useless as I tried to support her son and husband.

Dr Hall's touch was magic. But the magic didn't work.

Not today.

The world slowed down even slower and I was in slow motion along with it. I felt everything – felt the screams of pain from Jamie's mouth as his dad held him tight and rocked and cried.

And no.

No.

I couldn't do it.

I wanted to find my strength and help Jamie and Kevin out of that room,

but I couldn't. I was standing there, mute and useless, staring at Jemma as Dr Hall tried to save her life in those final few seconds.

Gina was a saviour to my failure, slipping in and helping Jamie and Kevin out of there.

I was dumb. Lost to everything but Jemma and Dr Hall, and the care on his face as he did his best for her.

I don't know quite how long it took before Dr Hall backed away and said it was over. I'd barely even noticed Romi join him at the bedside and help as much as she could, but she'd noticed me.

She took my arm before she left the room, led me out along with her, and I was still mute, trying to summon the words that were choked up so tight I didn't think they'd ever unravel.

She saved me the battle.

"It's ok," she said. "The first time is always so hard. Always."

I managed a nod, and looked to the side to see Gina with Kevin and Jamie, about to close the blinds in the room next door.

She was calm. Still so calm.

"Really, Chloe," Romi said in a whisper. "Don't give yourself a hard time, it's so tough."

I managed another nod, but the tears were welling and I was doing everything I could for my trembling lip not to give up the fight.

I'd spent time with Jemma, Kevin and Jamie every day that week. They were happy and making plans for the things they were going to enjoy as a family, before Jemma would have to take her last breath. I'd seen pictures of their dogs at home, and Jemma's favourite planters in her garden.

I'd heard them laugh, and I'd seen them hold each other so tight.

"Take a break for a minute," Romi said, and squeezed my hand. "Honestly, Chloe, head to the staffroom and give yourself a bit of a time out. It's ok."

I managed another nod, but the world was shaking as I turned and walked away. My head was pounding and my chest was ragged, and it took every scrap of strength I had not to break down and sob like a lost little girl right there in that corridor.

I made it through the staffroom door but only just.

My first sob was a gulp that tore me apart way down deep inside. My eyes flooded and spilled, and my arms wrapped tight around my stomach as I doubled over.

I was snotty, snotty and desperate and broken, and I couldn't stop it. Couldn't fight it. Couldn't do anything but break for Jemma and her family along the corridor.

I stumbled to a chair and collapsed, sobbing and rocking and sucking in breath.

I barely heard it when the door opened. I could barely see through the tears when someone stepped inside.

It was him.

It was his voice that sounded out. It was him who stepped up close and spoke my name.

"Chloe. Take a breath, nice and steady."

But it wasn't nice and steady when I took another breath, it was a gasp and a sob and a gut-wrenching splutter that took the wind right out of my lungs.

He crouched down beside me, and I could feel his heat. His hand reached out and squeezed, so steady and calm against my arm.

"It's ok, Chloe. It's going to hurt. It always does when you care. Let it out."

I felt so small sitting there. A small, sad, broken little girl.

I was the broken little girl crying herself to sleep once Uncle David had given up his fight and passed away. I was the sobbing little girl Mum held tight, sobbing along with me when she told me I'd never see Granny Weobley again, my pink bookmark gripped tight in my hand.

Dr Hall's hand didn't move from my arm, and I felt the gesture so hard. But still, I couldn't stop the tears. I couldn't stop how raw and ragged I felt rocking on that chair, hurting so badly for the Hadleys.

I tried get a grip of myself. I tried to tell Dr Hall I'd be ok, and to leave me to cry, but I couldn't.

My eyes met his and they held, fixing hard, even through the tears.

His eyes held right back.

Fixing hard.

So hard and so steady.

And more.

There was more.

Everything stopped. Right then in that moment, everything stopped.

There was barely a breath moving in either of us as his arms reached out and pulled me close.

I folded into him, pressing tight, and it was there. Just as I'd dreamed it would be. Just as I'd asked for, but better. Better than I'd ever believed it could be as he held my body close to his.

His warmth was against me. His chest was firm. Strong.

His breaths were hot against my forehead, and his arms were so solid and so right.

So him.

"It's ok, Chloe," he said again, and this time, in his arms, I believed him.

My sobs settled into cries, and my gulps settled into gasps, and he was holding me. Holding me so tight.

Nothing had ever felt more right in my life than those long moments my chest was pressed to his. His heartbeat so steady against mine. His voice so strong, but so gentle.

"That's it," he encouraged. "Steady breaths."

I calmed so naturally, held so safe.

I'd never belonged anywhere like I belonged in his arms, and I knew it. I felt it with every single scrap of my soul.

So much warmth in that touch. Warmth, and calm, and *life*.

The moments were magic beyond any words, until the spell was broken.

Romi came in through the door.

It was me who pulled away in that flash, jolting back from Dr Hall like some kind of guilty teenager and wiping my tears and snot away on my sleeve.

Romi looked shocked at both of us, but hid it quickly. She dropped down close alongside me as Dr Hall got to his feet and straightened his tie.

"Hey, sweetheart, how are you doing?" she said, and I managed a nod and a smile.

Still, my eyes were focused on Dr Hall as he backed away.

Still, his eyes were focused on mine, every step that he took, and then he did it.

He bit his lip at the corner, just like Gina told me, and I felt it. I felt it so much.

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks so much for that, Dr Hall. For your help."

But he didn't hear me. He was already through the door.

# 19

*Logan*

It stayed. That insanity of closeness with that beautiful girl and her beautiful heart was too strong to let go.

I felt it right through me as I walked through the ward back to the Hadleys and their devastation, and it didn't leave me.

It wouldn't leave me.

I did my best for my patients as I went about my work, but I left the hospital as early as I could that day. I headed to the train station with that feeling of human touch burning deep, and I craved it. Craved the way she felt in my arms, her fragile frame shivering, her hold so tight. I craved it with everything I had.

I let myself in at home, and my legs felt unsteady as I headed into Mum's bedroom. Her petals were still holding, and her eyes flickered open as that smile of hers bloomed bright.

She reached out for my hand as Olivia finished up with her dinner tray, and I sat with her, squeezing her hand right back.

She knew something was different. Mother's instinct, I imagine. Felt it screaming out through my silence.

Olivia said her goodbyes and I gave her my thanks and Mum gave her wave, and still Mum's hand was holding tight.

"What happened with you today?" she asked me, and her eyes were intent, searching.

I didn't bother shrugging, or trying to bluster out my usual daily rundown. I just sat there next to her without saying a word, and that was enough for long minutes.

The crossword stayed on the bedside table, and her oxygen kept on rasping, both of us enjoying that simple contact in the lamplight.

But my heart craved more. For the first time in years, I needed more. I needed that girl.

"You can talk to me, you know," Mum said when I looked away.

"I know," I said, and I did know.

I'd been able to talk to her about anything and everything, ever since I was old enough to speak. Yet still, I held my crazy fixation on that beautiful girl back from her. Most likely because I was still trying my damnedest to hold it back from myself.

"I'm going to be gone soon," she said, and I took a breath. "I'm going to be gone soon, Logan, and I don't want to leave you like this."

I managed a nod, counting on the attitude my spirit usually rallied at this point, assuring me that my solitude was better for everyone, including myself.

Tonight, it let me down.

Still, it didn't matter how much I craved her. The rush of closeness with that beautiful freckle-faced girl could never be translated into something more. She was too young, with too much of a road ahead of her. Far too precious a little beauty living her life to ever consider tying it up alongside mine.

Mum didn't carry on with her usual chatter that usually followed. She didn't tell me that Amy was a lovely woman who was arriving to see her tomorrow, or give me that usual wink and a nudge. Instead, she tugged her hand from mine and took hold of my elbow, pulling me closer until my head was on her shoulder. She held me, tight, and I let myself breathe as that little boy in his mother's arms for the first time since I *was* that little boy in his mother's arms.

Mum was so strong, even though she was so frail. So alive, even though her lungs were fighting for every rasp of air.

"It should be *me* holding you," I said to her, and she laughed.

"You're plenty strong enough for everyone else in the world, you can at least let me be your mother and give you a proper damn hug."

She gave me a squeeze before she let me go.

I loved her smile. I loved the sparkle in her eyes, and that tickle of her fingers as she touched my cheek.

"Now let's get on with that crossword," she said. "Five clues left to go."

I was smiling right back at her as I reached for the newspaper.

"Time to get cracking then."

I wrapped her up snug and fixed her nighttime oxygen before I left her and sat in my armchair downstairs when I was done. But I couldn't read. There was nothing on the bookshelves that reached out to me. My heart was somewhere else.

I wondered where she was tonight, that sweet girl. I wondered if her tears had dried and she was sitting somewhere with a novel on her lap, that tatty pink bookmark gripped in the front cover.

I wondered if she was thinking of me, the way I was thinking of her.

Her body had fit against mine so perfectly. Heart racing and crying out for the steadiness of mine.

Her cries had been so raw and so true. Her eyes filled with such genuine hurt for others' pain.

She had so much of that hurt coming, so many days ahead on the ward. The last thing I should do was add more.

So, I did what I usually did and forced myself back under the steel. I made the resolution to hold back from my own needs and treat her as I should treat her – as a dedicated member of my team, needing professional support in a demanding profession.

I spent the weekend with Mum, and with Amy, the girl she was so keen to have as her daughter-in-law, trying not to think about the beautiful Chloe Sutton. I enjoyed Amy's laughter through the house as she joked along with my mother, and a selfish part of me wished I could tick that final box on the list.

Amy was a lovely woman, and had always been a great young friend for my mother. She was a pretty thing, with glossy dark hair and bright blue eyes. Tall and toned and a thumbs-up from Mum at every opportunity. Funny, and sassy, and smart.

But I'd never felt any attraction to her.

Even though she'd look at me with the gaze of someone who'd close the gap in a heartbeat, I'd never felt the pull to feel her body next to mine.

And even if I had... even in that moment of weakness for that slam of flesh on flesh and skin against skin...

No.

I couldn't do it.

I'd never be able to fulfil the daughter-in-law request. Mum could plead all she liked, but she would never get that particular tick on the wall.

Still, I could do the others on Mum's list.

I knew the list by heart.

*Climb a mountain.*

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.*

*Put my toes in the sea.*

Amy called into the living room to speak with me before she left. She sat herself down in the chair opposite and for the first time ever since knowing her, I saw the way her fingers twisted in her lap.

I couldn't focus on anything else.

"How do you think she's doing?" she asked me. "She seems happy, but..."

Her voice trailed away, and I didn't have to speak. She already knew the answer.

I saw the tears prick in her eyes.

"Hopefully she'll be with us for a little while longer," I said, to ease the blow, but it didn't disguise anything. Mum's end wasn't all that far away.

"It's going to be so fucking hard when she goes," Amy said, and reached into her handbag for a tissue. "I can't imagine life without her in it."

She wasn't the only one.

"How are you doing now?" she asked me, and I realised that Mum had been talking to her, quite possibly more than she should have.

My eyes were cold when they met hers, closing off from conversation, and she read that in a flash.

She shifted herself to leave, and I felt terrible as she gave me her kindest smile.

Sympathy.

She gave me sympathy.

I didn't want sympathy.

"If there's anything I can do, for you as well as Jackie..." she said, and her voice trailed away again.

"Thank you," I replied, and got to my feet to see her out.

She waved as she walked down the path, then looked up at Mum's bedroom window and waved again. I noticed fresh just how attractive the woman was, her hair so glossy under the dusky half-light.

I watched her drive away, and the faintest part of me wished she was staying in the guest room tonight, just to feel someone else in the house with us.

Luckily, that wish shrivelled to nothing soon after. At least I still had control of some of myself.

Instead of wallowing in my own stupid cravings, I began planning.

That list on Mum's wall needed ticking off, and time was running out.

# 20

*Chloe*

My weekend was busy, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake off that tingle, right the way through me.

I went to a family barbecue on Saturday afternoon, and went for a long walk with Beano and my parents on Sunday, and handled grumpy, back and forth texts from Liam, but Dr Hall was always there. In my thoughts. Constantly.

I was crapping myself with nerves when I headed back into the ward on Monday morning. I was aching for his touch again, and aching to talk to him properly. Aching to ask him how his weekend was, or what he'd been reading, or even how the blond bearded guy was doing on the train. Anything just to hear him speak.

It didn't happen.

I'd give my nervous shuffle and smile whenever he passed by me, and he'd give his usual nod. Nothing different on the outside.

But everything was different on the inside. I could feel it there, glowing between us every time he was anywhere near me. Our eyes would stay on each other just a second longer than they should do, and he'd do that pinch of his lip, and I'd feel my cheeks blush bright.

"Are you going to do something?" Gina pushed on Wednesday afternoon. "It's like awkward city with you two desperate for a piece of each other every day of the week." She laughed. "I'd also really like to see some action before I head out of this place for good. I don't want to be pinging Romi for updates every five minutes."

I giggled along with her, but I didn't say anything. What could I say?

I wasn't going to follow Dr Hall down a corridor and ask him if he wanted to hang out after work, was I? The ground would probably open up and swallow both of us whole.

I did ok at work that week. I helped everyone as best as I could, and began to get an understanding of what conditions were like on the ward, and what medications were used and how. There were no unexpected goodbyes to

be handled on my shifts, and I got to know everyone a little better.

All except him.

All except the man my whole soul was screaming to know.

I was crapping myself with nerves all over again when I headed over to Casey's Bar on Friday night. I'd picked out one of my nice evening dresses in a lovely dark blue, and paired it up with some sparkly sandals, and fastened my hair up in spiral curls. I had my smile on my face, trying to give my best impression of calm, even though my fingers were fiddling with my handbag all the while I approached the little crowd of hospital staff at the far table.

Richard, and Romi, and Gina herself. Wendy was there talking to Theresa from Hilton Ward, and there were Lourdes and Benjamin and Annabelle, who I'd only met in passing.

And him, of course. Dr Hall. Still wearing his grey suit with his burgundy tie from the shift that day, no doubt straight to the bar from the ward.

As per usual, I was the last one to the party. I sat myself down at a spare seat with a gulp of breath, and Gina pushed the prosecco bottle across the table at me.

"Here you go," she said. "Let's catch you up with the rest of us. Unfortunately, I'm on orange juice, but everyone else has already had a few."

I scanned the others, and they were chatting, happy. I shrugged and thanked her and poured a glass of my own, and it was a dumb idea to drink it as quickly as I did and pour another, because I hadn't managed any dinner yet, and I barely drank anything ever, not even when I was out with Liam, but still. Nerves, you know. Nerves asked for prosecco, and the prosecco delivered.

It delivered me staring over at Dr Hall, without being able to hide a peep of it anymore. It delivered me laughing along with my new hospital friends, but fluttering right through me at the thought of walking away from this chance – this one little chance at actually speaking with him.

I was plucking up the courage, I really was. I was sipping away at my drinks and flashing him glances he'd flash back at me, and I was getting ready to do it. Getting ready to clear my throat and head around the table to chat with him, like it was the most natural thing of all time.

But he didn't give me the chance.

It wasn't even ten p.m. when he got up from his seat and said his goodbyes. He told Gina he was happy to have worked with her for so long, and to keep him informed about the new little member of his family, and

everyone smiled along, but nobody attempted to slow him down or make him hang around for another drink. I imagine they'd all figured out there was no point trying.

I held my hand up and said *have a nice weekend* to him like all the others, but my heart was thumping wild. My whole body tensing.

Gina saw it. She slipped up closer, while Dr Hall was still visible through the front windows walking away.

"Do it," she whispered. "Do it now, or forever hold your peace. Events like this don't come up very often. Do it!"

I should have shaken it off and got back to my prosecco. Definitely. There's no way I should've faked a yawn and grabbed my coat from the back of the seat before telling everyone I'd had a lovely evening and *see you later*.

It took a few minutes to say my goodbyes, and I was jittery the whole time, itching to get going and chase my chance.

Gina pulled me in for a hug as I finally left the table, but it was a quick one.

"Now go!" she whispered. "He's probably already halfway to the train station."

I kissed her on the cheek before I went, and I did it. I dashed on nervous legs right the way from Casey's down Hampton Street and turned back along the high street. I raced along on stupid sparkly sandal heels right the way down towards the train station, but still there was no sign of Dr Hall.

I cursed myself as I reached the station entrance, worried I may have left it too late and he was already on a train and off on his way, but no. There he was, standing on the platform, staring off into nowhere until he heard the clack of my heels.

His eyes widened, just a little, and I slowed the hell down, pretending I hadn't just shot across town like a racehorse to catch him up. It didn't work. It was obvious to both of us what I was doing there. More unspoken... stuff... brewing right there as I panted for breath with flushed red cheeks.

I thought he was about to say something but the train came loudly into the station, bringing with it a draught of air that blew right over us. It took my breath, sent shivers right through me. I saw it in him, too. People stepped off through the doors, but neither of us moved, just stared at each other in the orange glow of the train windows.

I took a massive, massive gulp as I stepped onto that train, two doorways along from where Dr Hall was standing. It wasn't even the trainline I needed,

but I didn't care. I had to take that chance.

*Thank you, prosecco.*

*Please, universe, can you be a decent friend to me, as well?*

I stumbled along to the train seat I used to sit in every single morning and dropped myself down with a pounding heart.

*Please, universe! PLEASE!*

The whistle sounded, and my heart dropped, wondering if maybe Dr Hall had bailed to get a different train, or chosen to sit a few carriages over in safety from *crazy girl*. But no.

It was his shadow first, approaching from behind. My heart was doing somersaults as he took his usual seat, and his eyes clamped on mine.

The train was pulling away from the station by the time he spoke.

"You seem to be on the wrong train," he said, and he knew it well and true. We both did.

"Maybe I've made a mistake, then," I replied, and it was the prosecco talking. For sure, it was the prosecco talking.

I tried to keep my knees still, but they were shaky as hell. My fingers were twisty, and I felt like a fool, but I couldn't stop it. Couldn't change how I felt and what I wanted. Not now I'd come this far.

He didn't pull a book out of his briefcase, and he didn't look away from me.

It was weird watching him heading in this opposite direction. Churchley, then Newstone, then Eastworth.

We didn't speak. Didn't say a word. Just stared. Silent.

Wenton, Sunnydale. Still nothing.

Then it was Eddington.

Make or break, even though I had no place to go there, it still felt like I could bail from that line.

I didn't break.

The whistle sounded and we pulled away, and I was on unknown turf now, heading further away from London with my tummy an absolute tangle of *what the hell are you doing?*

I would have said something, but no words felt right, so I kept quiet. Kept hoping and wishing and praying to the universe that I wasn't just some damn idiot on the craziest mission ever.

The train pulled up at Redwood station at 10.45 p.m.

He got to his feet, and his eyes were still fixed on mine.

“This is my stop,” he said.

And maybe he should’ve said *see you on Monday* and walked away. Maybe this was a stupid ditzy thing that could never be. But he didn’t. He stayed there, standing, and waiting, until I got to my feet as well.

I walked ahead of him, and I could feel him, just a few steps behind as we headed up the aisle.

It was like that very first morning I’d held back for him, feeling his presence, feeling every single step that he took, but you could multiply the sensation a hundredfold.

*Plus this time, he was the one holding back for me.*

I stepped out onto the platform and didn’t recognise it. I moved to the side as he stepped out to join me, and I didn’t know what to do. I was trapped there, a deer in the brightest headlights there could ever be. A trembling, baby deer at that.

He tried to break the awkwardness, I know he did. I could see the battle as he cleared his throat and summoned his professional voice.

“Chloe,” he said, but I couldn’t let him. I couldn’t let him be the professional Dr Hall.

*Please, universe, please. Please let Gina be right.*

I already had my eyes closed as I took those steps towards him. I wasn’t even sure how well my lips were lined up for his when I headed for his body and pressed up tight.

It would have been easy for him to step away. Easy for him to halt my motion. Easy for him to say *no, Chloe*, and make sure this was shelved for all time.

But he didn’t.

Gina was right.

He kissed me back.

His lips were warm, like the rest of him. Firm, like the rest of him.

His chest was as solid as I remembered, his arms just as welcoming and calm.

Until the kiss deepened and our mouths opened and his tongue met with mine.

Until that calm turned to fire, and fire turned to want, and want turned to need.

I needed him.

I needed him like I needed breath. Because he was life. Touching him

was life to me.

His fingers twisted into my curls, and his mouth was as skilled as his hands. His tongue dancing with mine, and teasing. Tempting and claiming.

It was everything I imagined, but better. Because I'd never had anything like this. Like him.

My arms wrapped up around his neck and I sank into him, and I felt safe there, in my prosecco haze.

The train pulled away behind us, and we were left on the empty platform, kissing hard.

I never wanted it to end, but it did.

He sighed as he pulled away, and his fingers untangled from my hair.

"The train to Halsey will be here soon," he said. "I can wait here with you."

I shook my head. "Please. Please let me come with you."

His forehead pressed to mine. "This isn't professional conduct."

"I don't care about professional conduct," I said, and managed to laugh. "I just ran across Harrow like an idiot, just to share a train with you. I'm not going anywhere now."

He smiled at my giggle.

*Thank you, universe. Thank you.*

*Thank you, prosecco, too.*

It was the most natural thing in the world when his fingers slipped into mine and his hand squeezed tight and strong. But my heart was still pounding. My tummy was still an absolute mess of flutters. Flutters on top of flutters.

"My life isn't what you're expecting," he said. "Please be prepared."

"Show me," I said, and those butterflies fluttered even harder as he led me away.

# 21

*Logan*

Her hand was burning in mine, and everything with any sense in me was bellowing that I should put her in a cab and send her back to Halsey. Yet no amount of logic or reason could make me do it to myself. My feet kept on moving, step after step.

We didn't speak on the walk. Words had nothing to say.

My footsteps were loud and hers were light. She was a bundle of energy coiled up tight. Stunning. Innocent and fresh.

The streets were empty and familiar, but the journey was alien in the most beautiful of ways with her at my side. Her eyes were soaking in everything. Every nook and cranny, door and window. Every turn in the road.

Mine were all on her.

King Street approached quickly. She stayed right by my side as I put my key in the lock, barely stepping ahead of me as I gestured her inside.

If the journey home had seemed alien, it was nothing compared to seeing that girl in my hallway, staring up at me with sparkling eyes.

She blustered, and stumbled over her words, prosecco confidence dissipating just as soon as she was in my space.

"I need a minute," I told her, and she nodded, gaze shooting around the hallway as I headed upstairs.

Olivia was waiting. Mum was asleep.

My thank yous were brief, and I could tell she was curious, glancing back over her shoulder as she headed to the stairs with me following.

I could almost feel the shock from her as she registered Chloe downstairs, and Chloe was shocked in return, dithering a little as Olivia raised her hand in a wave and said her goodbyes.

I stood still as she closed the door behind her. Silence.

My stare burned bright for Chloe as hers burned right back. A long moment of pause in that beautiful tension, and her heart was racing along with mine. I could sense it.

I didn't explain Olivia. Didn't say a word. Just stepped up close and

tipped her face up to mine. My touch was firm and definite, and my lips were definite to match, pressing tight to hers before my tongue pushed in hard.

She murmured in the sweetest way, relaxing into my kiss as I took control, her shoulders dropping and her chest pressing to mine. Her arms snaked up and mine snaked down. I held her tight and her fingers stroked at my neck, then stilled.

I walked her backwards, my tongue still claiming hers. I pressed her against the wall and slipped my hands around her waist.

She tensed.

Self-conscious.

A skittish little sparrow fluttering at my touch.

I pulled away from the kiss far enough to stare eye to eye, and sure enough she was self-conscious. I could feel the thrum of timidity as she sucked her bottom lip into her mouth.

“Tell me how you’re feeling. We can slow things.”

“Please, no,” she said. “I’m just a bit...”

She dropped her gaze, and I felt the slam in my ribs. Such a beautiful little thing consumed by nerves.

Her humility only made her all the more stunning.

She shrugged, and those edgy fingers of hers met in front of her to do their twisting.

“Nervous,” she said, with a little giggle as her cheeks flamed pink. “I’m, um...” She took a breath. “I’ve only been with my boyfriend, and it wasn’t very...”

Another slam in my ribs as I realised just how inexperienced this little sparrow was.

Again, that inexperience only made her all the more stunning.

“There’s no need to feel nervous,” I told her, and brushed her cheek. I used the moment to reiterate my warning. “I told you my life isn’t what you’d expect. Please be prepared for that.”

“I don’t care,” she said, and she meant it.

I slipped her coat from her shoulders and she let it fall. Her dress was a delight on her, fitting perfectly, the darkness of the blue hugging her tight. I hitched it up, slowly, trailing my fingers up her thighs as I went, and she closed her eyes, breaths quickening.

I kissed her neck, teeth nipping as I peppered my way down to her collarbone, and further, dropping to my knees as her dress hitched higher

around her hips. She was wearing black lace, slick to her pussy. Her scent was divine as I pressed my mouth to her wetness. Her thighs were quivering as my tongue lapped at her slit through the lace, and I realised then, in that flash of a moment, that I was lost to everything but consuming that girl. I tugged the lace to the side, and she was soft and delicious, those wet lips ripe for my tongue. I splayed her, and there was the hard little nub of her clit, begging.

A sweep of my tongue made her gasp. The flicks made her push against my face.

The suck and the nip made her buck. Self-consciousness fading under the need.

I got back to my feet after the tease, and her mouth was waiting, kiss desperate.

I hitched her up against me, and her legs wrapped around my waist, instinct loud enough to scream, body to body as I carried her through to the living room. I dropped her down into the chair and I raised her legs over the arms, thighs spread wide.

She hitched in a breath as I lowered her dress straps, and her bra straps with them, freeing her sweet little tits for me. Her nipples were tight little bullets. My mouth was hungry for them. Fingers gripping flesh as I sucked. Hard.

Her head tipped back, arms raising over the back of the chair to hitch herself higher, seeking more.

I gave her more.

My fingers circled her clit, steady but firm. A slow, careful rhythm that had her circling her hips to match.

I took my time.

Her breaths were fast, mouth just inches from mine, her hips pushing her pussy to my touch.

Still, I took my time.

Her murmurs became moans, her wants taking over her nerves.

Still, I took my time.

Steady.

So steady.

My lips teased her neck. Teeth pinching flesh.

Her hips were frantic.

Still, I took my time.

Steady. So steady.

Her bucks became impulsive, her own rhythm lost to it.

Still, I was steady. My mouth was hot on her skin, nipping.

Steady.

Steady.

Steady.

And she was done.

Panting, squirming, soaking my fingers with her wetness. Her hands came around to grip at my hair, and I raised my face to hers, her eyes so hazy on mine.

“Yes... yes...” Her voice was beautiful.

She came for me.

Stunning.

Her eyes were closed tight when she tipped over the edge, and my lips pressed to hers, claiming her open mouth with mine as she whimpered.

Shudders, and squirms. Gasps and bucks.

Desperate and wild, as her body tensed, tensed, tensed... and then collapsed.

She collapsed into the chair, chest rising and falling. Her smile was a glow against mine, and that insanely addictive buzz of life about her flared up in a giggle.

“I can’t even...” she began, and she was heady, her arms wrapping around my shoulders. “I’ve never, um... not like that.”

She squirmed enough to look down between her legs and saw the patch of wetness on the chair underneath.

“Oh shit,” she said, but it was my turn to laugh.

“Don’t even begin to worry about that,” I told her, and her cheeks flamed up even brighter.

Another giggle, then she took a breath, and relaxed. Her hands came around to my face, and her thumb brushed my lips, and she was happy.

Happy enough that it resonated in me. Because I felt it.

I was happy too.

I’d almost forgotten what that felt like to feel happiness right the way through me.

I kissed her forehead as I got to my feet.

“I need a minute,” I told her for the second time. “Please help yourself to the kitchen. Tea, coffee, a snack. Whatever you want.”

“Thanks,” she said, and was already tugging her dress back down as I left her in her seat.

Mum was fast asleep upstairs, but the lamp was still on at her bedside. I stepped up close enough to check her meds had been taken. Her juice was on her bedside table, and her breathing was shallow but regular.

I switched the lamp off as I left, keeping the door open a sliver, then headed back downstairs.

Chloe was still in the living room, crouched down on her knees in front of the nearest bookshelf. The Bernard Cornwell section.

“Excalibur is my favourite,” she said.

“The Winter King is mine,” I replied, then headed on through to the kitchen.

I set the kettle to boil and leant back against the counter as she joined me. She was fidgety, but still glowing –a strange combination that made her all the more gorgeous under the harshness of the kitchen lights.

I tugged my tie off and unbuttoned my top button.

Her eyes were fixed on my fingers.

“Tea or coffee?” I asked.

“Coffee, please. Black, three sugars.”

I smiled at that and poured. “That will keep you up a while.”

“Good,” she said, and smiled that nervous smile, buzzing with self-consciousness all over again.

Then she cleared her throat. “The woman, who was here... is she, um...”

“She’s a carer,” I told her. “For my mother. My mum is upstairs.”

“Oh. Is that where you...”

“Yes,” I said. “I went up to check on her.”

I turned my attention to stirring my drink, and I could feel her eyes searching me. Wondering. Sensing.

“She’s dying,” I told her. “She has weeks to live. COPD reaching its peak. She can barely breathe.”

That gaze of hers widened, and I felt it. That sympathy.

“I’m sorry.”

“Everyone is sorry,” I told her. “Everyone is always sorry. It doesn’t stop the inevitable.”

“I had no idea,” she said, and I sipped my coffee.

“Nobody does. My personal life and work life are two very separate things.”

She nodded. "Is she awake?"

"No. Fast asleep."

She nodded again. "I hope I'm not disturbing anything... if she needs you, I mean..."

"I'll hear her if she needs me."

Another nod. Nerves again.

It was my turn to clear my throat. It was my instinct that took the fore. My stance was tall against hers as I placed my coffee on the side and stepped over.

"Relax," I said.

It was like we were in the ward, her looking up at me, full of such adoration it ate me up. Another nod, but this one was different. Heavy.

"I... I'm not really sure how to do things... Liam was quite..."

I smiled at her. "Give yourself up to me," I said. "Feel whatever you feel, just let yourself feel it."

I took her fingers in mine.

She placed her coffee on the counter and I led the way back through.

She kicked off her heels in the hallway.

"I'm so damn nervous," she said.

She took a breath before we climbed the stairs.

# 22

*Chloe*

I wasn't lying. Saying I was so damn nervous was an understatement.

My legs were shaky and my thighs were still soaking wet from where he'd touched me, and my clit was this crazy pulse of a flutter that was tickling right the way up through my tummy, and I'd never felt like that before. I'd never felt even close to anything like that before.

My lips were puffy, and my cheeks must have been scarlet, and I'm sure my fingers were jittery as hell in his. I'd never been more excited in my life as we climbed those stairs.

The landing was dark, but the glow from downstairs showed me the slightly open doorway as we passed by on the landing. I guessed that was his mum in there. I could hear the oxygen machine, a low steady rumble from inside.

Dr Hall's steps were fast and firm as we stepped inside his bedroom. He turned on both lamps and my tummy did this lurch of nerves on top of nerves.

I couldn't be in the light. Not like that. I mean, I had scars and birthmarks, and Liam always used to joke how my stomach did this weird jiggle when I rolled over. Embarrassing.

Dr Hall hung his jacket on the wardrobe door and took out his cufflinks. He turned away from me to place them carefully on the chest of drawers, and I looked at him afresh.

I don't think I'd ever seen him without his suit jacket on.

His shirt was white and fitted just right. His hips were slim, and his ass was toned in his suit trousers. His hair was unique, and it was a strange feeling, how much I liked it like that. Shapes like a constellation across his scalp, from the nape of his neck up in three patches.

The man was the most stunning thing I'd ever seen.

For real. He was literally the most stunning thing I'd ever seen.

His smile was different than I'd seen before when he turned and approached. His eyes were different too. Darker. More feral somehow.

I'd never seen him like that.

So raw.

So powerful.

I'd seen him in control. Calm and in control. He was permanently the most solid and confident person in all creation in the hospital, but not like this.

This was a whole other kind of control.

*Control of me.*

I knew then that nerves wouldn't mean anything to him. He wouldn't back off from confronting them and pushing through, no matter how much I was screaming for lights out, there was no way.

I had to close my eyes when he unfastened my dress at the back and slipped it down. I sucked in my stomach and tried to raise my tits.

"Relax," he said, and his voice was lower this time.

I tried.

"Relax, Chloe," he said, and his voice was firm. In control like he was at the hospital. In control like he was as the doctor. "Just breathe."

I listened.

I breathed.

Slowly.

Deeply.

I let myself feel the nerves.

"Good girl," he said.

He led me to the bed, lowered me onto my back.

He unclipped my bra and tossed it to the side, and I couldn't help but suck in my breath again, well aware of the birthmark on my ribs. Liam said it looked like a badly drawn llama. I'd never been able to see it as anything else since then.

And there was more. Further down. The scar from my appendicitis was really deep and made that jiggle in my tummy even more of a jiggle.

But Dr Hall didn't care.

Genuinely, he didn't care.

His eyes were every bit as feral, and every bit as hungry as they looked at me and my imperfections.

"You're a beautiful girl, Chloe," he told me, and I felt it. It gave me this weird little gulp and this weird relief, and happiness, and I couldn't stop it. The word was out before I even realised.

“Thanks.”

One stupid word.

It made me giggle and cover my face with my hands.

His hands were firm as they pulled mine away from me.

And then he said it again.

“Truly. You’re a beautiful girl, Chloe.”

Again, I couldn’t hold it back. The words were goofy, and nervous.

“You’re pretty hot yourself, Dr Hall.”

“It’s Logan,” he said. “My name is Logan.”

*Logan.*

I knew it was Logan. I’d heard it was Logan. But it was a whole other thing hearing it from him. A personal introduction.

I took a breath. “You’re pretty hot yourself, Logan.”

He smiled at that. A smirk.

I loved his smirk.

He ran his fingers right the way down my body, from my collarbone, down over my nipple, and down lower, tracing the scar on my belly.

“Appendicitis,” he commented, and I nodded.

“I was twelve.”

I wasn’t expecting it when he lowered his head and peppered kisses right down the track of my scar. I wasn’t expecting how real it felt as he touched me for me.

He slipped my knickers down my legs and off, and I wished I’d shaved properly, but I really didn’t think I’d actually be on his bed at one a.m. after Gina’s thing.

Again, it didn’t matter.

He eased my thighs open and looked at me. Properly looked at me.

He looked at me, and he wanted me.

His fingers spread me wide, but it was more intimate this time than downstairs. The lamplight was bright, and his eyes were fixed, and his thumb was every bit as skilled as it worked my clit just right.

It was more tender this time, and I was already squirming at his touch, my clit going crazy for more.

I’d never known it go crazy for more. Not even with me. I’d usually rub myself off until I was a wriggling mess, and then I’d be done.

I moaned when he pushed two fingers inside me. I raised my hips when he curled them.

*Fuck.*

*It felt intense.*

*Intense and... great...*

*Fuck. It felt great.*

Rhythm from both sides, and those curled fingers were pressing hard, and I didn't know myself as my body took over. The lamplight could have been a beacon of searchlight and I wouldn't have cared, I was too crazy for more.

My breaths were short, my moans were so real, and I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop working back at him.

I could hear the squelches. I could hear how wet I was, but I didn't stop moving, didn't let the self-consciousness take over. Until I needed a pee.

*The worst possible time ever to need a pee.*

I told it to go away as he worked me with his fingers curling in and out, his thumb skimming my clit. But it wouldn't go away. I was burning inside...

*"I'm sorry," I said, "But I really need to go to the..."*

He shook his head. *"Just relax," he said.*

*"But I need the..."*

Then I felt it. A rush of shudders from within. Shudders that drove me wild.

*Fuck.*

I could barely breathe and the squelching grew louder and my gasps turned to a long drawn-out moan as he pulled his fingers free and I exploded on the bed, hands gripping the sheets as the white bloomed behind my eyes.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck.*

*Fuck.*

My ears were ringing when I came down. My smile must have outshone the sun. I could feel it on my face. But it didn't stay there long. He didn't give me time to speak, he was up and at me, his hot mouth on mine.

His hands took mine and raised them over my head. My wrists were pinned, and his hips were hard as they pressed against mine.

I wanted him so much I couldn't take it.

*"Please," I said, and it sounded desperate.*

But again, he was slow. Slow and firm.

I didn't know this side of him. Not at all.

I didn't know he would be this in control, not in the way he was. So in charge without saying a word.

He pinned both of my wrists in one hand, and unbuttoned his shirt. I wanted to see him, but he was kissing me too hard as he lowered his pants and pressed his bare flesh to mine. He was big. I could feel it. Fuck, I could feel it.

“Please...” I said again, but his hips kept grinding, his dick rubbing against my clit. “Please...”

Gasping. I was gasping.

“I’m on the pill,” I said, like a rambling idiot. “Please...”

“Relax,” he said again, and this time the growl was primal. Enough to give me shivers.

And then he gave it to me. One deep thrust. Hard.

*Fuck.*

Deep slams. Flesh against flesh.

*Fuck.*

I lifted my legs and wrapped them around his waist, and his face was in mine, breaths heavy.

I took it all. I craved it all. I wanted it all.

Circles and thrusts. Circles and thrusts. Hips so strong, angled like I’d never known. Right against the spot that had just driven me insane.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck. And a whole lot more fucks.*

“Please...” I cried out, and I didn’t even know what I was asking for.

The rhythm was magic, my whole body was screaming.

Slams, and circles. Over and over. Wrists pinned firm.

He had me. Every part of me, claimed by every part of him.

*Fuck.*

He came as I did, grunting as I moaned, hips slamming hard, and it was everything.

He was everything.

I didn’t know myself as he calmed his movements and lay still.

I knew then that I could never be without this, not ever again. Not without losing my mind.

I guessed my mind was already screwed though. I’d been crazy over this man since he was nothing more than a stranger on the train, handing me my bookmark back.

He moved away from me but took my hand and held it tight to his chest, and I caught my breath along with him, exposed under the lamplight but not

caring anymore.

I really didn't care anymore.

It was the most natural thing in the world when I rolled to face him. I wanted to see him. I wanted to see all of him the way he'd seen all of me. I opened his shirt, desperate to soak him in the way he'd soaked in me. To know his body. To know *him*.

I wasn't expecting the scar twisting so dark around his waist.

Mine was nothing compared to his. Nothing at all.

I felt like an idiot right there and then. My scar was a puny little nothing.

"I had kidney cancer," he said. "A decade ago. I had a kidney removed."

There were no words I wanted to say. My words were all in a movement, echoing his with everything I had.

I kissed his scar. Tiny kisses right the way up and around.

It only made him more gorgeous to me.

Everything that made him him, made him more gorgeous to me.

His cock was still hard. Veined and thick, still wet from being inside me.

I kissed my way down, and he was looking at me as I took him in my hand.

I didn't let the nerves creep back in before I sucked him into my mouth. I didn't care how I looked or how I was doing. My hair was a mess and my body was sweaty and my makeup must have been smeared to hell, but nothing mattered. Only the way I made him feel.

His hands reached down and took hold of my hair, and he guided me, over and over.

I loved the way he owned my mouth. Nerves had nothing to say.

My mouth was wet and noisy. I cupped his balls and swirled my tongue around the end of him, loving the way he moaned. Loving it so much as I sucked him back in. Loving *him* so much as he tensed.

"Jesus Christ," he said as his cock touched the back of my throat.

I pulled free, sucking him hard along the way, and my tongue lapped as he started to spill.

His thrusts made me so proud. His groans as his cock pulsed made my heart explode.

And it was amazing. The salty taste of his cum in my mouth made me smile. It actually made me smile around his dick.

I'd never get enough of it. Not ever. No way. I could spend my whole life with my mouth around his dick and I'd never get enough of it.

I climbed up his body when he was done and he pulled me into his arms, and again, I felt so safe. So safe and so wanted there, without any words.

And that's where I slept. Prosecco hazed and glowing bright, before the lights were even out, I fell asleep, as comfortable as I could ever feel.

I belonged there.

# 23

*Chloe*

I woke up and stretched before suddenly remembering where I was. My heart started racing. I rolled over but he wasn't there.

No Dr Hall – sorry, *Logan* – to be seen.

*Logan*.

I'd fucked Dr Hall and now he was *Logan*.

It was when I rolled over again that I realised I was in a prosecco thump. My head was woolly, and I'm sure my makeup was a state, and I wondered if I'd been a clumsy idiot in my sleep. Hopefully not.

The light was shining through the bedroom curtains and I looked around the room. It was immaculate in a way I hadn't noticed the night before. Hardly on my list of priorities, I guess, to look around the bedroom of the man I was about to have sex with.

The top of his chest of drawers had bottles and boxes arranged neatly in rows. His wardrobe was huge, with his suit jacket from the day before hanging neatly on the outside. He had a laundry basket that was closed shut with no trailing pants or socks dumped all over it. Not like mine usually was.

I stretched out some more, loving how the bed smelt of him. Musky but clean.

That's when I noticed the fresh glass of water on the bedside table next to me. I gulped some down and got to my feet. My clothes were lying neatly over a chair in the corner, along with his shirt from the night before.

I didn't fancy wrestling myself back into that tight little number like a dirty stop out, so I opted for his shirt instead. I pulled it on and buttoned up a few buttons, then crept my way out of there.

I hoped he wasn't all set to pile me out of the front door and never mention our hook-up again. Because he could do. He could draw a line under it and say *thanks, but no thanks*. It wouldn't be anything more than a one-night stand then. No biggie, I suppose.

Except it would be. It would be plenty big enough for me.

The door to his mum's room was still open a bit. I was trying to creep by

without disturbing anyone, but I didn't manage it. I was barely across the doorway when a voice sounded out from inside, over the top of the rumble of the oxygen machine.

"Logan? Can you come in a minute, please? I'm out of juice."

Her voice was weak, but full of character, even in that one sentence. I paused, just out of view, wondering what the hell I should do. Should I rush down and grab him and tell him his mum was shouting out? Should I stick my head around the door and say sorry, I'll get him?

She answered the question for me.

"Logan? Is that you out there?"

I cleared my throat and took a breath before I poked my head around the door. Then I answered her question.

"Hey, sorry, no. He's, um, downstairs I think."

The woman sitting up in bed looked amazing. She had a wild-coloured scarf on her head, and her bedcovers had flamingos on them, and her room was full of trinkets and pictures on the wall – a massive contrast to the neatness of Logan's room along the hall. But it wasn't that. It wasn't the surroundings she was sitting in, or the scarf, or the flamingos. It was her.

Her eyes were so alive against the tiny body she was sitting up in. The tubes going into her nose didn't take away from the smile that lit her up as she saw me standing there, and she was beckoning me over, holding out such frail hands with such enthusiasm.

They grabbed hold of mine as soon as I was close enough, and squeezed tight, and she was looking me up and down with a grin that lit up my heart.

"That's Logan's shirt," she commented, and I felt my cheeks flame up as usual. "That means you're a very special person. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Chloe," I said, and I was smiling right back at her.

She relaxed against her pillows. "Chloe." She paused, her hands still squeezing mine. "It's nice to meet you, Chloe. Please tell me I'll be meeting you again."

My hands squeezed hers right back, and I knew something. Just from her smile, I knew something. I liked her. I liked her a lot.

"I hope so," I said. "I really hope I'll be meeting you again."

"My name's Jackie," she told me. "I'm Logan's mum." She let go of my hands to gesture to a carton of juice in a mini fridge on the other side of the room. "Be a darling and pour me a juice, please, would you? I'm dry as a

witch's snatch." She laughed then, a crazy little cackle.

I couldn't help grinning at her as I grabbed her glass from her bedside table. I could feel her watching me while I crossed the room and poured her drink, and even though I felt as examined as I'd ever felt, I didn't feel judged by her. Not in the slightest.

I gave her the drink and she thanked me and took a decent glug before she spoke again.

"Wasn't expecting to find a pretty young thing in here this morning. Where did you meet with my boy?"

I didn't have the chance to reply before footsteps sounded on the landing. My nerves shot up, right the way through me, and I'm sure my eyes were like dinner plates as I turned around.

There he was, and it was weird to see him like that, in a pair of casual trousers with a t-shirt on the top. To be honest, I'd never have imagined him like that, not in a million years.

He had a plate in his hand, and on it was a slice of what looked like peanut butter on toast with no crusts on the edges.

"Love you, darling," she said as he handed it over. Then she grabbed my arm with her other hand. "He takes real good care of me, you know. I'm one lucky lady."

His eyes were on mine, and they were burning dark again. "There's breakfast downstairs, if you're hungry."

Yeah, I was hungry. My stomach was rumbling at the peanut butter. I nodded with a *thanks* and it was a whole new weird to be in that space with him.

"Lovely to meet you, Chloe," his mum said as I took a few steps away.

"Lovely to meet you too, Jackie," I said back, and gave her a stupid little wave that I'm sure made me look like a dumbass as I left her room.

I could feel Logan following me until his mum's voice shot out at him. "Don't you go anywhere yet!"

She was laughing that cackle of a laugh. I turned back to face him and he was smiling at her and then at me.

I loved to see him smile like that.

His eyes were so intense as they fixed on mine. "Head on down. I'll be there in a minute."

I nodded, and did that stupid wave again, and he smiled harder.

"I'll be downstairs," I said, stating the obvious.

I went down the stairs and found my shoes positioned neatly on the shoe rack, and my coat hanging neatly up above.

Tidy. He was so damn tidy.

I was smiling at that too. As if I'd ever found neatness a horny quality in a guy in my life.

Every damn thing about Dr Logan Hall was horny as hell.

I poked my head into the living room and smiled again at the whole wall of bookshelves on the far side. I only hoped I got the chance to have a proper look at them later.

*Please, universe, dish me out another winner and let me stay awhile.*

The kitchen smelt lovely. There were sausages and bacon ready to be cooked, and a pan out with eggs at the side, and a dining table with cutlery already positioned, for two of us, and an empty mug out by the kettle. I was still wandering around like a nosey bitch when I heard him heading down the stairs. I leant back against the counter to look as chilled as possible, but I'm sure it made no difference. I was a bag of nerves as he joined me.

He headed straight over to the kettle and set it back on to boil. "Black, three sugars, yes?"

I nodded. "Please."

"Sausage, egg and bacon?"

I nodded again, and I couldn't hold back the smile. "Yes, please. That sounds amazing." I paused. "I love bacon."

*I love bacon??*

Fucking hell. Brilliant conversation starter.

But it didn't seem to matter.

"Me too. Can't beat a decent breakfast on a Saturday morning."

I watched him there, in his casual trousers and bare feet, pottering about the kitchen and setting the pan on to heat. He was still as him as ever, even though he didn't look like the him at the hospital. His face was still as concentrated, and his shoulders were still as high, and his posture was still as perfect. I wondered if he really knew how to relax, or if he lived in this permanent state of efficiency.

I looked up at the clock on the wall and it wasn't even 8 a.m. No wonder I felt rough. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen 8 a.m. on a weekend.

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say a word, just watched him making breakfast through loved-up eyes. Loved-up and fluttery, and nervous, and hoping I didn't make a total tit of myself in the aftermath of the hottest

night of my entire life.

He didn't say anything either, but he wasn't jittery about it like I was. He was every bit as calm as usual, not fazed in the slightest as he got on with prepping food.

"Scrambled or fried?" he asked as he picked up the egg box.

"Fried, thanks," I said, and he cracked them into the pan.

I decided to force some words from my mouth.

"Your mum is so nice," I said, and he smirked.

"My mum is a character. She's quite something." He paused, and that smirk was still on his face. "I'm sure you'd get on well with her. She's every bit the eternal optimist, like you are."

I'd been told that a lot in my life. That I was the eternal optimist. It didn't surprise me that his mum was too. You could see it beaming from her smile, hear it in that cackling laugh.

"I'm sure I'd get on well with her too," I said, and if I'd have still been on the prosecco confidence, I'd have followed it up with a *hopefully we'll find out*, but I didn't dare.

He dished up breakfast and I sat down at the table opposite him.

Yep, he was stunning. Even more stunning than the night before, if that was ever possible. He took a swig of coffee and got stuck into his bacon, and I buttered a piece of toast with shaky fingers.

I'd never been nervous of buttering damn toast before. I just hoped it wasn't obvious.

He'd finished before I had. He put his cutlery down onto his plate and stared over at me without words while I finished mopping up the last bit of egg with my toast.

I knew it was coming before he spoke. I could see it in his eyes.

"Chloe..." he started, but I didn't want it. I didn't want to hear it.

My voice did me proud in that second, it really did.

"Please, don't do it," I told him. "I know it was a mistake and shouldn't have happened and all that, but please don't say let's just forget about it and I'll see you on Monday and nice to know you." I took a breath. "Because it's more than that to me. Since the bookmark thing, and then seeing you worked at the hospital, and then coming to the same ward... I mean, it's too weird to ignore, right? And I get it, that you're my boss and it's not professional, but I really liked it. And I really like you." I took another breath. "And I even like your mum now, too. So please don't send me away and say goodbye."

I stopped myself, and he was staring at me, so intently it took my breath.  
“What makes you think I was going to do that?” he said.

# 24

*Logan*

The girl was a delight, sitting across the table from me with that buzz of nervous energy about her all over again. I could feel it, stirring my calmness with a thrum right through me, that mirror of hers, just distant. Faded deep. But I always felt it. I felt it every time she was anywhere near.

“What makes you think I was going to say that?” I asked her, and her mouth dropped open.

“I just, um... I figured it would be...” She lost her voice.

“Sensible,” I said. “Professional. Yes, it would be both of those things. But it would have been both of those things last night too.”

Her eyes were pools of hope, and it was beautiful to see. “Last night was amazing.”

Her honesty was divine. The simple truth in her words was addictive. It would always be addictive.

“Yes,” I said. “It was amazing.”

She took a sip of coffee and she couldn’t stop the grin.

I still didn’t know what the hell I was doing entertaining the idea of keeping the sweet little sparrow around me after a night that should never have been, but I couldn’t stop myself. Even now, in the cold morning after the night before, I couldn’t stop myself. I was lost to reason.

Seeing her in my shirt was surreal but exciting. Seeing her hair so messily casual was enough to drive me wild.

Her freckles were stunning in the morning light. Her lips were bare of lipstick and begging to be kissed. *She* was begging to be kissed. Every single part of her.

I was contemplating it. Truly, I was contemplating closing that distance around the table and grabbing hold of her all over again, but then she spoke.

“You said your mum is ill,” she said, clearly as a subject change.

“Dying,” I replied. “I said my mum is dying.”

“COPD,” she said, and I nodded.

“COPD, yes. That’s the final culprit. She’s had a rough ride.” I took my

last swig of coffee. “They told her she had two months left to live twelve years ago. She’s surprised a lot of people a lot of times.”

“Maybe she’ll surprise people again,” she said.

But no.

I knew she wouldn’t surprise people again. Not this time.

“She has a little while left,” I said. “But she’s reaching the end.”

She nodded at this but looked at her plate.

“It’s ok,” I told her. “You can talk about it. Death is death. People gloss over it and avoid the topic as much as possible, but it doesn’t change a thing. My mother upstairs is dying. She knows it, I know it. It’s just a matter of time now.”

I gathered our plates and took them to the dishwasher.

I’d burst the post-fuck bubble of conversation, that was a certainty. I made sure I was smiling as I turned back to face her.

“You saw the bookshelves last night.”

Her face lit up at that. “Yeah, I saw them. Didn’t get enough time to go through them one by one,” she laughed. “But I saw them. Very impressive. I ran out of space at my place. Liam used to groan at me every time I got new ones. Maybe one day I’ll get the chance to have a billion more. I can hope.”

Adorable. The look on her face was absolutely fucking adorable.

“Help yourself and go look at mine,” I said. “I’ve got to get Mum up and dressed. The carers don’t come on a weekend.”

“Thanks for breakfast,” she said as she got to her feet.

“My pleasure,” I told her, and she walked on through to the living room.

My shirt looked better on her than on me. Her ass was nicely curved, heading sharply into a tiny waist. She was light on her feet, the white rabbit always ready to make a dash for it wherever she turned. She looked back over her shoulder at me three times before she was through the hallway, her big blue eyes searching mine, and it was intoxicating all over again, that much enthusiasm my way from such a pretty, buoyant creature as Chloe Sutton.

If only I was able to deliver what she deserved right back at her.

“Enjoy the selection,” I said as she stepped into the living room. “I’ll be back soon.”

“I’ll start back up with Bernard Cornwell,” she said with that cute little giggle of hers, and dropped to her knees.

I prepared myself for round two of questioning from my mother. Predictably, she was ready to roll the very moment I was over the threshold.

"Please tell me she's still downstairs?" she asked, and I nodded affirmation.

"Yes. She's still downstairs."

"Good," she said. "Don't you dare give up on that sweet little thing, Logan. I'll be turning in my grave if you give up on that little darling."

I stared at her straight on. "I barely know her. She's a girl I met on the train that I now work with. She's barely more than half my age, and the only thing I know we have in common is that we like reading. That's it. The sum total of how compatible we are."

She was shaking her head at me. "That's bullshit, Logan. I've never heard such crap in my life." She gripped my hand in a vice with hers, and slapped it to her chest. "This is where it counts. Not how compatible you are. Not where you met her. None of that crap. What matters is here. In the heart."

She was off again, all about the emotional *love overrides everything* shit and how *maybe there is such a thing as fate*, and normally I'd scoff and write it off. Normally I'd tell her to stop her fluff with me and save it for the carers, but not today.

Today I couldn't find the words.

She noticed it. I knew she noticed it. I could feel it in her stare.

"I saw it for myself," she told me. "I saw the way you looked at her, and I sure as hell saw the way she looked at you. Compatibility can kiss my sweet ass. You're besotted with her."

Her words slammed me. I felt it deep. And with the slam was that whisper of something inside, something I'd given up on a long time ago.

"Tell me I'm wrong," she said, and let go of my hand. "Tell me I'm wrong and I'll shut my mouth."

I couldn't tell her she was wrong.

I knew what was coming next before she said it.

"I haven't seen you look anything like that since Evelyn. Not even close."

I shifted on my feet, and my jaw tensed.

"Don't make the comparison," I said, and she held her hands up.

"Fine. I won't. But you know it, and I know it. Don't you dare let me croak it without giving yourself a shot at bloody happiness, Logan. Not now she's in the picture."

I poured her another juice. "Want another slice of toast?"

She shot me a smirk. "I want another slice of meeting Chloe, please. That's top of my list for today."

I pictured Chloe downstairs, nosing through my book collection. Then I pictured Chloe upstairs, spending time with my mother and all her buzzy eccentric ways.

“I’ll see how long she’s around for. Maybe she’ll venture up for another hello.”

“Good,” she said, and settled herself down. “I’m sure we’re going to get on like a house on fire.”

I looked over at her list on the wall.

“Don’t even think about trying to coerce her into the daughter-in-law crap, Mum. She’s a girl from work I happen to like a lot. She’s not some kind of fated soulmate.”

“Cross my heart,” she said, and laughed. “The rest of the saying can get fucked.”

“More toast, then?” I asked, and I loved the way her eyes sparkled as she finished her juice and handed me the glass back.

“Maybe Chloe can bring it up for me,” she said.

I rolled my eyes at her before I left the room, but I was smiling.

I was smiling in a way that had been lost to me for a long, long time.

# 25

*Chloe*

Logan's bookshelf was incredible. So much fiction, so much non-fiction, so much reference. He had a whole chunk of medical books, hardly a surprise. He had books about local walks and landmarks. He had books on time management, and achieving your best, and loads of other stuff that had my brain pricking, curious.

And the fiction. Oh wow, the fiction. So much classic, so much thriller, and so much fantasy and supernatural – just like Mythago Wood. Only not like Mythago Wood, since Mythago Wood is its own thing entirely, but yeah. He had a lot. And a lot that I wasn't expecting.

I was caught up, my finger running along the spines when he joined me back in the living room. I had a load of questions about a load of books, but those dried up the second I saw him there, his hands in his pockets, looking casual while not looking casual at all.

"Great bookshelves," I said, as though that cut it in the slightest.

"Glad you appreciate them," he replied. "Not many people do." He laughed a little. "In fairness, not many people ever see them, of course."

I shrugged. "Don't think they would appreciate them all that much if they did. People twist their faces when they realise what a bookworm I am. Unless they're from the library club. Those guys are cool."

"Can't say I've been," he said.

I smiled, and he smiled, and for once it was easy. Relaxed. And then we laughed, both of us. This little laugh that was easy and relaxed, and right then, in Dr Hall's living room, messily dressed in his shirt, I knew it was going to be ok. We were going to be ok.

"My mother is keen to see you again," he said, and that made me tingle a proud little tingle in my stomach.

"I'm pretty keen to see her again too."

"Guess that's the day sorted." He laughed that easy laugh again. "She doesn't usually stop when she starts. You'll know her entire life history by the time she's finished with you, and she'll know yours."

*And yours, I hope, I thought, I hope I'll know yours.*

There was so much unspoken and unknown about the man in front of me. I was still paddling in the dark pool of him, so deep I was still just a tiny splash on the surface, knowing in my heart that the water went down one hell of a depth.

His eyes were fixed on mine, brooding like usual. “Please bear in mind that this is unusual for her. I’m sure you’ll see some enthusiasm.”

“Unusual to have visitors, you mean?”

“Unusual for *me* to have visitors,” he said.

I nodded, and I could feel my cheeks pinking, because I liked that. I liked that this was different.

I hadn’t even checked my phone, but I didn’t want to. My parents would think I was with Liam and they were the only ones who would really think about it, and I didn’t want to burst the bubble here by bringing in the world outside. It could stay there. I didn’t want anything but this space, and to stay here as long as possible.

“I’m glad I’m a visitor,” I said, and he nodded.

“I’m pretty damn glad you’re a visitor too,” he replied. “It’s not quite the weekend I was planning, but it’s a pleasant surprise.”

*Weekend.*

I noticed he said weekend.

*Fuck yes, universe!*

He tipped his head behind him. “Head up to see her whenever you want. I have some emails that need answering as a distraction.”

“I’d better shower first,” I said, and he laughed.

“Use my toothbrush and all that jazz.” His eyes were sparkling for a moment, and they reminded me of his mother’s upstairs. I hadn’t noticed that before – the similarity.

“I’ll use your toothbrush and all that jazz,” I said, and it was nicely awkward standing there, fingers twisting in front of me even though I was doing my best not to look nervous.

I made a move for it on quick feet, but he stopped me as I passed him in the doorway, his hand nicely strong on my wrist.

“I mean it, Chloe,” he said. “I’m glad you’re a visitor.”

“I mean it too,” I replied, and his stare took me back to the night before. That power and strength and fire. “I’m really glad I’m here.”

I wouldn’t have pulled away from him if he hadn’t squeezed my wrist and

then dropped it. I would never have wanted to pull away from him in my life, and I knew it. Crazy, but true. This was more than any sense in my head, or any logic, or anything more than that burn of something more. Something beyond words, that you feel so deep it goes right through you. Like that tingly lurch you get in romance novels when they finally touch, or when one of them first tells the other that they love them. Only this was real life. This was real now.

“Make sure Mum doesn’t grab you before you make it to the bathroom, or you’ll never get there,” he said with a smirk. “It’s past her bedroom on the opposite side.”

I wanted to kiss him, but I was too jumpy. I wanted to wait to see if he kissed me, but I was too jumpy for that, too. Instead I was off on skittish legs, as usual, bounding up the stairs like I was on a mission, and he was watching me every step, calm as rock.

I showered in his bathroom. I used his toilet, and his lovely quilted toilet roll, and one of his nice towels from the rack. I looked in his mirror, and looked for his toothbrush, but it wasn’t on the counter top, not like in my place. No. It was in the cabinet to the side of the mirror, nicely positioned along with his toothpaste. And other stuff. Creams and soaps and other goodies I shouldn’t be nosey with, but couldn’t stop. It was only when I took the toothpaste out that something caught my attention. Something right at the back.

A huge bottle of insulin. The kind that we restocked up on in the pharma room at work.

I didn’t know he was a diabetic. I hadn’t seen any signs of it. Still, I hadn’t seen many signs of many things about that man.

I used his toothbrush and then his soap to clear my face of any makeup dregs, and then I tackled the task of getting dressed back up in my evening dress.

His mum did a whistle as I stepped inside her room, staring me up and down with a huge grin.

“No wonder you got yourself into Logan’s shirt,” she laughed. “You look amazing in that dress, sweetheart.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Feels a bit weird to be wearing it at 10 a.m.”

She gestured to her wardrobe. “I’ve got plenty of comfies in there. You’ll likely fit into a load of them.”

I wasn’t so sure of that, but I appreciated her optimism.

“Honestly,” she said and pointed over again. “Go take a look. Can’t have you in that thing all weekend now, can we?”

*All weekend.*

I appreciated her optimism even more.

I took a look while she took a fresh look at me. She had a load of joggers I’d just about get into and some t-shirts too.

“Thanks,” I said again and took an outfit’s worth.

She patted the seat next to her bed. “Now come and tell me how you ended up in here on a Saturday morning, darling. I’m all ears.”

So, I did.

I told her about dropping my bookmark on the train and how he’d been amazing and given it back to me. I told her about reading books in the mornings and commenting on the titles, and how one day I’d seen him go into the hospital and not known who he was, but ended up in the same ward as him, and how good he was as Dr Hall.

She listened to every word, nodding and smiling, and quizzing me for more.

It felt so weird to talk about it like that – about just how crazy a story it was, but she didn’t make it feel like that. The smile on her face told me she thought it was so much more than weird.

“Synchronicity,” she said when I got to the Gina’s leaving party bit. She patted my hand. “You a believer in synchronicity, sweetheart?”

“I believe in loads of stuff,” I told her. “People think I’m a bit dappy for it most of the time.”

“Never stop believing in it,” she said. “No matter what people think, never stop believing in it. I never have. It’s where your heart sings loudest, when that belief in the world comes true.”

She was just like me.

The eternal optimist.

I could see it a mile off, that she was a *glass always full, even if it’s empty* kind of person like me.

I loved that. I rarely found it in other people, especially people in her position.

Her oxygen was rumbling. Her chest was strained and tired. Her limbs were so frail they looked like they might snap, but her energy, the energy from within. You could never snap that. Not with all the strength in the world.

She cleared her throat before she spoke again. “So, what do you know about my boy?”

I smiled before I answered.

“Nothing very much,” I said. “Apart from that he’s a fantastic doctor and a big reader. Both of those things are brill.”

I left the *great in bed* stuff unsaid, but she laughed and hinted at it for me. “Pretty damn good at other stuff too, I imagine. Or you’d have been off like a shot this morning.”

I knew I was blushing beetroot, and she laughed at that as well.

She paused, and her eyes sparkled. “Let’s get you a bit more clued up on Logan Hall, then, shall we?”

# 26

*Logan*

I couldn't think about emails. I couldn't think about anything other than the girl upstairs. I managed to drag my attention back hard enough to my laptop screen that I got the emails fired off, but I was desperate for her, being so close but so far.

It was a while before I climbed the stairs to pull the sparrow from the clutches of my nosey mother, but clearly that didn't matter. Those clutches were welcome.

I'd known that would be the case.

I could hear their laughter from out on the landing – mother's amazing screech of a cackle seemed more energetic than ever, and Chloe's sweet little giggle along to match.

It was a beautiful thing, hearing them together. It was enough to slam me right through my gut, that lurch of such genuine affection inside.

Mum wasn't wrong, and I knew it. I was besotted with the girl in a way I hadn't even contemplated since Evelyn all those years ago. I barely mentioned her name anymore, not even to myself, but I couldn't avoid it with Chloe here, in my home. The similarities of how I felt about her were undeniable. I craved her with every part of me.

Hearing her with my mother was a beautiful thing, but not nearly so beautiful as when I put my head around the bedroom door and saw them there, laughing together – sweet Chloe and my mum, both of them lost in each other and the humour in each other's words.

Mum was sitting up high in her bed, leaning towards the delightful ball of energy at her side as she giggled. Chloe was leaning right back at her, looking divine in her dress from the night before.

Her eyes were jewels when they turned to face me, that shimmer of laughter still bright on her face. But then her eyes deepened, and held mine, and it was different. Unspoken knowing, and a whole load of emotions that went along with that knowing. I knew then that Mum had been speaking to her along particular topics.

Now wasn't the time to engage it.

"Are you ready to let Chloe go for the day, yet?" I asked, and Mum held her hands up.

"I'll keep Chloe here as long as you'll let me. She's a superstar." She shot Chloe another smile. "Was great to spend time with you, sweetheart."

"Was great to spend time with you too," she said and got to her feet, some of Mum's folded clothes in her hands.

I put my hand on Chloe's shoulder as she stepped out onto the landing, and this time I didn't leave it. She was blustering out some words about how great my mum was again as she walked away, but I didn't let her finish. I spun her towards me and pulled her close, and my mouth was waiting, hungry for hers.

Fuck, she wasn't expecting it. She dropped the clothes, tensed and then relaxed, breathing out a whole world of relief in my kiss. She murmured that perfect little moan as her tongue met mine, and she was hungry right back, arms reaching up to wrap around my neck. I pushed her backwards towards my bedroom, huge steps over the threshold, and the bed was waiting, messily unmade from the night before. We fell down onto the mattress, desperate and wild. Her kiss was delicious. Her touch was divine, and she was grinding up at me, straining for more.

I tore her out of that dress again in seconds. She was naked underneath, smelling of body wash and shampoo. My kisses moved from her mouth down her neck, and kept on going, and this time she wasn't jittery and self-conscious, not like the night before. Her thighs were spread wide, and her hands were urging me down, hips pressing up at me as my tongue lapped its way between her pussy lips.

"Yes..." she whispered. "Please, yes... I need it..."

So did I. I needed it more than I could even begin to say.

I needed her pussy in my mouth. I needed to squirm at her clit until she was a squirming little wreck to match. I needed her to take my fingers until they made her pant and beg and hiss that she was going to come for me.

I needed her to lose herself until her heart was pounding in her ears, breath hitching as she struggled not to burst, and then to feel lost to it. Lost to everything but my body and hers.

She delivered it all.

Her bucks were lost to rhythm, her whimpers were out of control. Her hands were strong on the back of my head, holding tight. Her pussy was a

beautiful vice around my fingers as she drenched me with that gorgeous little stream of her as it dribbled from her slit.

She came hard.

Deep.

My fingers claimed her, my tongue made her bite back a squeal, and she came for me.

My heart was pounding in my ears, my breaths fierce along with hers.

She didn't waste a second once she'd finished. She wasted no time in tearing my t-shirt over my head with feral grasps. I dropped my pants, and she was ready, wriggling down the bed to wrap her pretty little mouth around my cock.

I couldn't stop the thrusts. I couldn't stop craving the gurgles and the splutters and the moans as she gave me her mouth.

I dropped her onto her back, and her eyes were wide on mine as I knelt over her, dominant and desperate.

She wanted me to take her, I could see it in her eyes. Eyes desperate for more.

It was enough to make me primitive as I thrust my cock into her open mouth. I cursed under my breath as I fucked her face, staring down at her watering eyes as she strained to take me, and it only made me take her harder. Deeper. Choking her with thrusts that stretched her throat.

Beautiful.

She was absolutely fucking beautiful.

I pulled my dick free before I came, working my cock with my fingers.

"Tell me you want my cum," I said, and she nodded.

"Please, please come in my mouth. Please..." she opened wide.

My cock was pulsing, balls tensing hard, and I needed this. I needed her.

My first spurt streaked her face, the second streaked her tongue, and then she sucked me. She sucked me as I spurted, a needy little kitten mewling for the cream.

I held her cheeks as she swallowed, and her breaths were as ragged as mine as she opened wide to show me she'd drunk me down.

"Good girl," I said, and she liked that. Sweet little Chloe liked to be a good girl in the bedroom as well as on the ward.

I was still breathing heavily as I dropped onto the mattress and pulled her close. She was still breathing heavily right back as she snaked her arm around my waist and rested her cheek on my chest.

I held her tight, and we collected ourselves together. Flesh to flesh.  
Wrapped up in limbs and needs and wants, and so much still unsaid.

She was the one to open the door to the unspoken and set the wheels in motion.

“Your mum told me a lot about you,” she said.

# 27

*Logan*

My mum always starts with the happy parts. She tells the stories of how I obsessed with medical books as soon as I was able to read them, or how I'd wanted to be a doctor since I was old enough to understand what a doctor really was. She calls it vocation. Life purpose. Fate.

It was none of those things.

It was being a tiny child in hospital relying on doctors to save my life. Relying on doctors to give me the strength I needed when I was scared and small and trying to manage the pain and fear of Childhood Leukaemia. It still gives me shivers thinking about it now. The nights when Mum had fallen asleep exhausted beside me and I was still awake, my young mind churning with what-ifs you should never have to contemplate at five years old.

*What if I die? Will it hurt? Will an angel come for me?*

Tossing and turning and watching Mum sleep.

*What will Mummy do if I leave her? How sad will she be? How much will she cry then, when I'm in heaven? Who will hug me like she does when I'm not alive anymore?*

She tried to be strong for me, and did excellently, but it was an arduous task. I'd catch her crying when she thought I was sleeping. I'd stare at her trying to hold back her sobs when she saw me in pain. I saw the fear in her eyes, mirroring mine, even though she held me tight and told me everything would be ok.

She told me over and over and over again that I'd get better, and most of the time I believed her, or I tried. Other times I felt like I was an unlucky boy who wouldn't ever get to live the life most little boys did. I wouldn't get years ahead of Santa Claus, or sports games, or friends' birthday parties with cake and games in the backyard. I wouldn't get to meet animals at the safari park, or go on holidays to the beach and build sandcastles.

As it turns out, I did. Mum was right and I was lucky, but even at that age, I knew others wouldn't be.

My mother likes to tell everyone how brave I was. How well I dealt with

the treatment – the chemotherapy and the pain and the fear, and how I was such a strong little soul, always such a strong little soul. Still, you can see it in their eyes, when they register the sadness of the condition I went through. The sympathy, the sorrow, that *poor Logan* face.

That look that only grows sadder when she gets out the pictures of me as a tiny little body with no hair, holding on to her as tight as I could.

People think my alopecia might cause me some kind of self-consciousness problems and they avoid ever mentioning it. It's almost funny to see their expressions as they first register the patches on my scalp and pretend they haven't noticed. They couldn't be more wrong.

I addressed any worries I had about losing my hair long ago. I still remember it falling out around me in bed at night, and trying to put it back on my head in the morning before anyone noticed. I remember looking in the mirror and seeing my sad eyes underneath my rapidly balding scalp and hoping it would grow back one day.

It was hard.

The whole experience of the treatment, and the hospital stays, and the pain was intense. Petrifying.

It took over eight hundred days until I was given the all clear. I still remember that rush of utter relief when they told me it was done. No more drips, no more consultations, no more days wandering around hospital wards with other kids trying to smile like me.

I knew other people wouldn't be so lucky – that's why I gave my attention to them. That's why I wanted to be the doctor who took people in their lowest moments, when there was no hope left, and made the end of their life as easy as possible for both them and their families.

It's never easy, not even close, but I try my damn hardest.

I will never forget my mother's fear in her lowest moments, etched so deep onto her face that I could read it in the lines, even though she never stopped smiling on the surface.

I will never forget my fear in return when she was diagnosed with breast cancer when I was twelve years old, and then bowel cancer when I was barely out of university.

I was pretty damn convinced I would lose her through the years. My experiences of things coming good weren't all that many to ease the pessimism. We lost my grandparents early. My grandfather had lung cancer, and it was slow. Really slow. Saying goodbye to him was so damn hard.

I was only nine years old.

I saw Mum's pain at that too.

My grandmother fell down in the street one day when out with some friends – a heart attack she never woke up from.

I was ten.

I've seen grief. I've seen the devastation of those left behind. I've seen people wailing, rocking on the floor when they realise the person they love most in the world has gone.

I never wanted to put anyone through that when I said my final goodbye to the world. It was a decision I made early on, and was resolute on, even after college when there was a whole host of gorgeous young women seeking their true love for a lifetime.

No. I focused on the ones who just wanted a fuck for the night instead.

That changed when I met Evelyn.

She was a vet. Probably still is.

She spent her time helping animals – she'd say it was her vocation, or destiny or whatever. Mum had this cute little Jack Russell terrier at the time with some fucked up stomach problems – probably ate some festering piece of crap from under the hedge in the park or something, who knows. Anyway, Scamp he was called. We took him to Evelyn for an emergency appointment.

We walked into the consultation room and she knocked me sideways. She was auburn, this cherry red that shimmered under the lights in there. She had this cute little nose and this sweet smile, and a way she puffed her eyebrows when she concentrated. But it wasn't just that. She had so much compassion in her eyes when she sorted out Scamp's meds that I couldn't forget it, it blew me away.

I tried. I really did. I tried to forget I'd ever gone to that place and wipe her from my mind forever. But no. As it turns out, Evelyn came into the local hospital with her uncle a few weeks later, assigned to the ward I was working on.

The rest, as they say, is history.

We were happy. She was ever the eternal optimist against my eternal realism, but that worked for us. We had virtually nothing in common, but again, that worked for us. We were two strange jigsaw pieces that fit together like a dream, and I pushed it aside – that utter determination not to let anyone get close enough to hurt at my loss.

Then I was diagnosed with renal cell carcinoma. Again, the rest, as they

say, is history.

I pushed her away, she left me, whatever. It wasn't pretty.

Last I heard, she got married to some lecturer guy up in Lancashire and they have a couple of kids and a springer spaniel. I'm happy for them. Genuinely.

When I'd lain there in bed, with Chloe in my arms that Saturday afternoon, I knew she'd heard all this from my mother. Condensed, and interspersed with great memories of me graduating as a doctor, and sweet little snapshots of me being a bookworm, or once winning a football trophy, or the first time I went hiking up Ben Nevis. Whatever.

Mum always told people the shitty times as well. She'd say it made me who I am. Brave and strong, and wanting to help people. I appreciated her kind words, but in truth it made me a realist who doesn't do closeness anymore. I just help people deal with losing theirs.

"I saw some pictures," Chloe said, and she held me tighter.

"Mum has a habit of that." I sighed, and held her tighter back. "Please don't let it influence you. It was a long time ago."

She looked up at me. "How would it influence me?"

I met her eyes, and I knew my stare would be heavy. "Because I'm not leukaemia, or kidney loss, or grief, or losing my hair. I'm a doctor living his life, who happens to like the gym, and walking up hills, and reading too many books for any regular person, and who works far too many hours to be sane."

She smiled at me, that big grin on her face that made her so unique. "I didn't know you liked the gym and climbing hills. Not until your mum said."

And that's when she had me.

It was her absolute focus on the positives, genuinely. That absolute love and joy in her face when she focused on my Ben Nevis climb and not my chemotherapy, and it wasn't a *gloss over it, don't make him sad by talking about his bodily failures and the shit that goes along with them* – it was the plain truth in her seeing me as the same man she dashed across Harrow for on a Friday night.

I relaxed.

She relaxed.

We lay together and breathed, and I wondered where the hell this was going, for both of us.

But it didn't matter.

I didn't care.

Not in that moment.

All that mattered to me was having her there in my arms.

She was the one who broke the silence with another bout of positive thinking.

"I saw your mum's bucket list," she said. "I heard about Wellington, the elephant. That's super cool you got to touch him."

I smiled back at her. "Mum loved it. Yes, it was pretty cool."

She laughed. "Super cool?"

I couldn't stop myself laughing to match. "Yes, Chloe. *Super cool.*"

She rolled onto her front and rested her chin on her hands. "You know what else would be super cool?"

"Please tell me."

Her eyes lit up like glitter on sunbeams.

"Doing the others. The other things on her list."

I brushed some stray hair from her forehead. "We've barely had time to plan them. They would take some organising. Some of them might not even be possible."

The little sparrow shrugged at me, "Won't know until we try." And she laughed again, and that's when I knew it for certain.

I was in love with her.

I was in love with everything about her, even the things I didn't know.

# 28

*Chloe*

If I didn't know I was in love with him before spending some time with his mum, I sure as hell knew it after.

He was right.

He wasn't leukaemia or chemotherapy or one kidney or missing hair.

He was him.

He was Logan.

I was in love with Logan Hall.

His warmth at my side was more warmth than I'd ever known. The way he looked at me was nothing I'd ever felt from Liam – not even when he said I was the love of his life. And it wasn't just him I was addicted to. Not anymore. I loved Jackie, too – even though I'd only just met her.

"Honestly," I said, "there's no time like the present. My gran always used to say to me, *if you want anything done, my girl, you get up and do it now.*"

Logan laughed. "You want to climb a mountain right here and now, do you? Push a wheelchair up a hillside and get Mum singing hallelujah at the top?"

He wasn't expecting it at all when I stared back at him, cool as a cucumber. "Why not?"

I kept my smile as my words registered, and he was thinking. I could see him thinking.

"Seriously, Chloe, there is no way we'll get a wheelchair up a mountain. Not without hiring one for crazy terrain, and working on training to get her up there."

I tipped my head, the smile still on my face. "Ok, so maybe not a mountain. Not like Everest. But what about some smaller ones? Ones that make you feel like you've climbed Everest?"

He was still thinking, but I guess I thought quicker than him on this one.

"I did it when I was a little girl," I told him. "My auntie lives near Wales, where they have the Malvern Hills. Have you heard of them?"

Logan's face was so serious. "Maybe, in passing."

“They’re super cool,” I said. “A whole row of them, and they feel mega high, and it’s brill being up there, and I’m sure they have paths we could push your mum’s wheelchair up.”

He was looking for reasons to shoot my idea down as unfeasible, I know he was, but I kept smiling, kept nodding, and he couldn’t stop himself. Eventually he smiled back.

“It would be a long drive, and quite a climb.”

I shrugged. “So what?”

“And we’d need to prepare her...”

I shrugged again. “So, let’s go ask. See what she says.”

His smile stayed on his face, and he tipped his head, staring right back at me. “You’re serious? You want to drive with me across country to some hills you climbed up as a kid, and push my mum’s wheelchair up a pathway until we reach the top?”

“Yeah, that’s what I want,” I told him. And I was serious. I was as serious as it ever gets.

He propped himself up on his elbows. “It would take some planning.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “I’m sure that together we would plan it well.”

“I suppose it’s feasible,” he said

“Let’s do it then,” I said, and he laughed.

“We can’t do it today.”

“Tomorrow, then.”

He laughed again. “Then you’d best go ask my mother.”

I was up like a shot, bounding out onto the landing on skittish legs, not giving a shit anymore about being naked in front of him. I threw myself into Jackie’s clothes before I reached her doorway, and I couldn’t stop myself, I was straight in there, jolting her out of a crossword.

Logan was behind me, footsteps loud and calm, but I jumped right in, heart racing fast.

“Do you want to climb a mountain tomorrow?”

She put her pen down and leaned closer. “What, sweetheart?”

I pointed to the list on the wall.

“*Climb a mountain,*” I said. “Do you want to do it tomorrow?”

She was trying to fathom what I was saying, her eyes wide on mine, and Logan chipped in after me.

“Chloe wants us to head to the Malvern Hills tomorrow and push your wheelchair to the top, and I said to her that—”

“Yes!” she said, cutting him off. “Yes, I want to climb a mountain tomorrow! Count me right in!”

I spun to face Logan, and I can only imagine how bamboozled he must have been with the grins coming from the two of us, both of us already set on the hill climb mission with everything we had.

He debated it for a few seconds, fighting the rationale, or whatever he needed to do. And then he sighed. Sighed with a grin of his own.

“Sure,” he said. “We’ll head to the Malvern Hills tomorrow.”

I air punched. For real, I air punched, and so did Jackie. We high-fived and said how great it was going to be, and it was madness, just how well I felt I knew her already.

We had a few minutes of enthusiasm bursting between us before Logan weighed in with the practicalities.

“What about footwear?”

Jackie found out I was the same size shoe as her and said I could use some of hers from when she could walk up hills.

“What about the car journey?”

Car journeys can be fun, and Jackie could take a nap, and I wouldn’t mind at all sitting in the backseat so her oxygen could stay charged and plugged in.

“What about finding the correct route and working out the best way?”

I shrugged at that. “We’ll do it.”

That’s when that sparkle in his eyes matched his mum’s. “Yeah,” he said. “I’m sure we will.”

It was so exciting that evening. I helped Logan make cottage pie and we ate it upstairs with Jackie. We laughed about old memories, but these were all good. Tales of Christmas and silly fun on holiday, and how Logan likes films from the 80s.

I told them I liked films from the 80s too. I was still in love with the goblin king from The Labyrinth and had been forever...

Almost as much as I was in love with Dr Hall.

We laughed. We finished the crossword.

Logan held my hand as we sat side by side by his Mum’s bed through the evening.

I didn’t let him go.

It was dark when he got his mum ready for bed.

“Ham sandwiches,” she said and we both looked at her. “That’s what I’d

like. Ham sandwiches and a cup of tea, on top of a mountain.”

“I’m sure we can manage that,” Logan said.

“And a biscuit or two for after,” she added with a grin that had me grinning right back.

“I’ll get up super early and get everything ready,” I said.

“I don’t think I’ll sleep,” she said, “I’m so excited.” She gave a little sigh, settled against her pillows. “So damn excited.”

“You’ll sleep, Mum,” Logan told her. “Sweet dreams.” He kissed her forehead and hugged her. My heart melted for them both. I stepped quietly from the room. I wasn’t sure I’d sleep either.

I was already back in his bedroom when he switched off her light and came back through, and I was ready for it. That unconscious fizz of want, knowing full well he was feeling it too.

He didn’t give me a second before he was up against me and kissing me deep.

“Wait!” I said, hands on his chest.

“What?” he said, his breath hot on my mouth.

“Have you got any ham?”

“What?” he said again.

“For the sandwiches. If you haven’t got any, we need to go buy some.”

He let out a breath, thought for a moment. “Not fresh ham, but I think there’s a tin in the cupboard.”

His lips touched mine. I pushed him away. “You *think*? Or there definitely is?”

“Chloe, I’m sure there is.”

“Go check,” I said, “Please, we need to make sure she gets what she wants.”

He sighed, dropped a kiss on my nose. “Don’t go anywhere!”

As soon as he was out the door, I did go somewhere. I stripped off and got into his bed, made sure both lamps were burning bright before I covered myself with the sheets.

He was back a minute later, unbuttoning his shirt the moment he saw me there.

“I guess this means there’s definitely a tin of ham in the cupboard,” I said as his trousers came off.

“Two tins, actually,” he said, dropping his boxer briefs and kicking them away.

I flung the sheets off me, my legs already parted for him. “Then we’re good to go,” I said.

I was all over him, hands desperate for his skin, just as his were desperate for mine.

He fucked me. Hard enough that I moaned at every thrust.

He made me come so hard that my ears were ringing, and my breaths were crazy in my chest.

I sucked him. I begged for him. I touched every part of him like he was the gold at the end of my rainbow, because he was.

He was everything.

It was when we were facing each other in bed in the dark that he spoke low and quiet to me.

“Thank you for caring,” he said, “for Mum.”

“Making sure she gets her ham sandwiches isn’t really caring for her,” I said.

“Oh, it really is,” he said, stroking my hair.

“Shit!” I said, suddenly realising.

“What?”

“Biscuits. She wanted biscuits for afters. What are her favourites? Have you got any? I mean, if you haven’t got any, her favourites, I mean, we’ll have to stop somewhere on the way. She –”

“Stop!” he said and touched a finger to my lips. “Custard creams. She loves them. I can’t stand them. But I know there’s a tin that’s full and there’s backup packets of the bloody things in the cupboard.”

“Urgh,” I pulled a face and shuddered. “I hate custard creams.”

“Something else we have in common,” he said.

“We can hate custard creams together. Start a club even.” I laughed.

He pulled me closer. “This is why I love you, Chloe. You’re such a hilariously cute little soul.”

*Love.*

My breath hitched.

He heard it.

I was waiting for it, the backtrack. The *I said love, but I meant...*

But it didn’t come. He was silent.

So I said it. Even though it was ridiculous, and almost everyone in the world would roll their eyes and say it was *stupid* and *it couldn’t possibly be love after five minutes* and all that stuff, I said it anyway.

I ran my fingers up his neck, and teased them across his scalp, through his hair and over the patches of skin, back and forth, and then I said it.

“I love you, too.”

# 29

*Chloe*

Seeing Logan there behind the steering wheel, laughing along with his mum in the passenger seat, was a beautiful snapshot of their world. They were two peas in a pod, both of them caught up in the journey, and I felt floaty inside. So grateful to be a part of that.

I sank myself into the backseat, trying my best to give them space together, but it was no good. They didn't let me.

"How is our little mountaineering instigator doing in the back?" Logan asked, his eyes fixing on mine in the rearview. "Don't even think about taking a nap on us now, this is your day too."

I'd been up since before six, even though that was an alien time zone to me. I couldn't stop myself, tossing and turning and excited about climbing the hills. I was like a kid on Christmas Eve, so buzzing for what was coming in the morning that I could barely sleep a wink.

I'd still been buzzing when I made three lots of ham sandwiches into foil packs. Buzzing all the more to see Jackie, dressed and ready for the journey and actually sitting in her chair at the dining table. Logan had been buzzing, too. I'd seen it shining from him as he served up toast with peanut butter to his grinning mum.

The day was great and it hadn't even started. I'd packed up the sandwiches into a backpack along with a packet of custard creams, and dropped in two Kit-Kats from a pack I found in the cupboard. Who doesn't like a Kit-Kat?

Logan made up two flasks of tea, found some plastic cups, and we'd been ready to roll.

*Climb a mountain.*

I'd seen it so clearly on Jackie's bucket list, and helping make it happen was an honour.

I laughed. "No naps for me. I'm wide awake and doing great in the back," I said, and meant it. I was doing great.

The roads kept rolling and the views outside kept rolling with them. City,

to town, to country. We hit Cheltenham before lunchtime, and that's when the pings started vibrating my pocket. Liam.

*So when the fuck are you picking your stuff up?*

*I'll get rid of it myself if you don't get your shit together.*

*Don't think you can bail out on me without bailing out your crap with you.*

He was right. I did need to get my shit together, and I would, but his messages were so at odds with the atmosphere in the car as we neared the Malverns that I was pleased when my phone bleeped out of battery. It was almost symbolic, battery flat and gone from my old world. I was glad.

I settled into the seat and smiled as Jackie let out a roar of laughter at a memory, and this smile was all for myself. All for the glow inside.

I may have been behind Logan and out of view, but that didn't make any difference. I still felt that spark between us, the glow inside him meeting mine and blooming brighter. I may not have known him, not truly. I may have known barely a shiver inside the gale of his soul, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered around Logan. Nothing but instinct.

It felt like no time at all had passed before the ridge of the Malvern hills appeared in the distance. Jackie let out a *wowww* that was so genuine it made me soar. We found the car park we'd plotted out the night before, and pulled up into a space.

Time for the ascent.

Logan set up her wheelchair from the trunk, and we helped her in, making sure her oxygen was fully charged and secure. I slung the backpack over my shoulders, and we were off. Along the track, climbing slowly along with the grind of the wheels, and every step was magic, the beautiful soul in that chair soaking in every breath like it was her world. Logan's steps were steady and strong, and mine were a dance at his side, pointing out everything around us. Every wonder, every breeze, every tree rustling on the hillside. Jackie was singing on the same page, pointing out everything along with me, her smile bright enough to dwarf every smile I'd ever made.

The sky was bright, with a stunning haze of clouds. The grass was green and the path was solid enough to keep the chair moving, and Jackie was more alive than I'd ever known alive to be, even in the body that was fighting for every breath.

We passed people out with dogs, and families with tiny children skipping down the bank. We passed ramblers, and a woman zooming in the opposite

direction on a bike with ribbons on the handlebars.

We climbed, we laughed, we lived. The path narrowed and wound its way higher, and my breath caught in my throat as the crest of the hill came into view. It was magnificent in a way I'd never appreciated, the strength of the land dwarfing us as nothing but tiny sparks on its plains.

"We're going to damn well make it, you know, all the bloody way to the top," Jackie said, and her words were caught with emotion.

The last few steps on any ladder are the hardest. The final chunk of the road was tough. The path wound and faded to nothing, and I took hold of the chair along with Logan and we pushed together, working hard. Push. Push. Push. Harder. Harder.

Jackie laughed over the bumps in the grass, gripping the arms of the chair as she cackled and bounced, and we were laughing with her, even though we were gasping for breath. And then we were there. At the very top. The wind whipping around us, wild and free, with the spread of the land sprawling right the way below for miles around.

It was beautiful. I couldn't breathe, and it wasn't from the exertion, it was from feeling the pure euphoria coming from Jackie. I'd have climbed Everest just to see her so happy. It was magic. Magic enough that I believed in fairytales all over again, looking at the world through the eyes of a child seeing their very first rainbow.

When Logan took my hand in his, I had no words, I just squeezed back harder, and I was higher than the hills we were stood on. As high as Jackie's squeal of joy as her arms rose to the sky in celebration. As high as everything I'd ever dreamed of and ever wanted, all tied up in the now.

"I climbed a mountain!" she cried. "I'm on the top of a fucking mountain!"

Logan knelt at her side, and she wrapped her arm around his shoulders and held him tight. I'd have stepped aside and left them to their moment if she hadn't beckoned me up to the other side of her chair. I knelt in the grass, and she held me too, pulling me close.

"Thank you," she said. "Thank you both so fucking much."

There was no thank you needed. Not in a million years. The thank you was all mine.

The colours of the land below were a patchwork. Greens meeting yellows, and gripping the greys of the town as life trundled on below, oblivious to the heights. People going about their business, so many of them

taking day after day without realising the miracle of life itself, just as I'd done for so many days of my own. Days with Liam, sitting and staring on as he played his crappy games like they were life itself. Nights with my mind spinning in bed, trying to dream myself to sleep, knowing deep down that I was a square peg in a round hole.

We found a little nook, sheltered from the breeze and it was a joy all over again to see Jackie with her ham sandwich.

"Bloody lovely," she said with a mouthful. "And tea never tasted better than it does up here." She raised her plastic cup to us.

Logan grimaced when she dunked a custard cream and I couldn't help laughing.

It was bliss. Crazy absolute bliss.

We stayed on the hill for as long as Jackie could manage, but she faded fast. Exhausted.

She was barely conscious as we made the descent, hardly able to move as we loaded her back into the car, but that didn't matter. She was still flying high on the drive home, even if it was in dreamland.

Logan and I kept the talk light as the familiarity of London approached, more talk about work and books and a whole host of other stuff scratching the surface. We were talking about the difficulty in estimating people's time left alive when he asked me the question.

"Given your absolute vocation was helping people through their medical challenges, what made you opt to train to be a nurse and not a doctor?"

I laughed. "I hardly think I could be a doctor somehow."

He didn't laugh along with me. His voice was deadly serious as his eyes met mine in the mirror. "What makes you think that?"

I looked out of the window as I answered, trying to keep my voice light. "I'm hardly a super genius, and university and training would take forever and cost a fortune, and what if I didn't make it?" I paused. "My parents were pretty hard up when I was young. Dad says that dreaming too high achieves nothing. I always figured nursing would be best for me. I love nursing, anyway. It makes me super happy."

"You make an excellent nurse," he said, and I felt that burst of pride down deep.

"Thanks." Another goofy one-word response with my cheeks flaming bright.

He carried on. "I think you'd make an excellent doctor too."

“Thanks,” I said again. “Maybe in an alternate dimension somewhere I’ll be one.”

Once we were back on familiar turf I expected Logan to begin making plans to drop me back at Mum and Dad’s, but he didn’t.

“You’ll need your uniform for the morning,” he said. “We need to call in and collect it from your parents’ place, yes?”

My voice was weak and wobbly as I gave him directions, pointing him onto my parents’ estate with shaky fingers, still in shock that I was staying the full weekend. He pulled up outside and it felt like I was already in some alternate dimension, Logan Hall and his mum at the bottom of the front lawn. Maybe I really would be a doctor someday. I laughed inside at the thought.

I dashed up the front path and through the front door with enough of a bound to jolt Mum and Dad out of their seats in the living room.

“Just grabbing some bits and I’m off again,” I said with a wave, and was straight on upstairs, piling my uniform and a few more clothes into a bag along with my charger and my own toothbrush.

I gave them another wave on my way out, and Beano a bit of a fuss en route, but I hardly caught a breath until I was sliding back into the backseat.

“And here she comes,” Logan said, turning in his seat to face me with a smirk. “The white rabbit, dashing, dashing, dashing. Wouldn’t think you’d just climbed a mountain with how much energy you’ve still got in you.”

“I’ve always had a lot of energy,” I told him. “Mum and Dad called me jitterbug when I was a kid.”

“Jitterbug,” he said. “Suits you.”

Jackie was still sound asleep when we pulled up on Logan’s driveway. We were careful when we moved her back to her bedroom, making sure she was snuggled up nicely before Logan switched off her lamp and said goodnight.

And then it was there all over again.

The pulse of need for the man standing in front of me on the landing.

The nerves right the way through me.

The shiver of want through my spine.

His eyes were as dark as I’d seen them. His jaw was as firm as I knew.

My fingers twisted. Twisted. Twisted. Nervous.

My words caught. Stumbling.

He closed the distance.

His hands were hot. His mouth was hotter.

My arms were a frenzy, his were firm, owning me as he paced me back into the bedroom and threw me onto the mattress. I was already whimpering, already desperate as his weight crushed down on mine. Desperate for the grind. Desperate for his flesh. Desperate for him with every scrap of me.

I squirmed out of my clothes and tore him out of his, and he didn't stop kissing me, didn't stop grinding himself in just the right spot to send me wild. I was tugging, coaxing, straining to pull him inside me, but he didn't let me have him, just kept me simmering. Teasing. Grinding just enough to set me on fire.

Then he flipped us over and pulled me up on top, my legs spreading wide as he slammed his cock up deep inside me.

I was riding him.

I was riding Logan Hall.

The lamps were bright, and I was exposed in the spotlights, and his stare was fierce, but for the first time in my life I felt I belonged there. I was on display, bold and bright, and I felt amazing for it. My scars and imperfections loved the light.

Loved him.

My hips circled, breaths ragged. His hands were rough on my tits, twisting my nipples and tugging, and I felt it right the way down to my clit.

"Good girl," he growled, and I was a good girl. I was a good girl and proud of it as I rode the beautiful man beneath me.

Our rhythms blended. Faster, faster, faster. He gripped my hips and thrust hard, angling himself just right to drive me crazy.

"Take it," he said, and his voice was a growl. "Take it all and come for me."

I couldn't have held back if I'd tried. My hands pressed to his chest, and I rode faster, tits bouncing and breaths panting. And then I came. Hard. Tipping my head back and lost to everything but the waves eating me up, and he was right there, coming along with me, cursing as he exploded deep. Fuck, I didn't know my body. I didn't know the sensations. I didn't know anything but the way his body took over mine until I was done. Spent. Fizzing as the waves calmed.

I was still buzzing right the way through me when I collapsed onto his chest, and he held me tight, both of us panting without words, because there were none. The thump of heartbeats said it all. The thump of heartbeats was heaven.

We were silent for long minutes before he spoke, and I felt the atmosphere changing. I could feel it in him, brewing, brooding. Those reservations still eating him up deep inside.

“Jesus, Chloe, I really have no idea where we can go with this. It’s unprofessional, and impractical, and so many red flags on so many levels. A whole load of them we’ll never win.”

It didn’t sound like him talking. Didn’t sound like the man I’d shared such an amazing time with. He sounded like a man that needed convincing. My heart was rocking, but I said the words.

“So tell me it’s over,” I said. “Look me in the eyes and tell me we’re over.”

He looked me in the eyes, but they told me anything but that we were over.

I smiled at him. “We work together and you’re older than me. So what? What does that really matter?”

He brushed his thumb against my cheek. “There’s a load more to it than that,” he said, and his eyes had an intensity about them that I couldn’t understand. I was bobbing right back on his ocean, lost to the depths and wishing I knew them.

“What else is there?” I asked, and he looked about to speak, he really did. He leaned in and brushed a messy hair strand from my forehead and he looked ready to show me his soul.

But he didn’t.

He kissed me instead.

It was me who spoke next, my lips puffy from his. “Please don’t let the red flags ruin this, Logan. Please just give us a chance. Please.”

He didn’t answer. Still brooding. Still churning.

But that didn’t matter. Not that night.

The way he held me was all the answer I’d ever need.

# 30

*Logan*

We sat in our usual seats on the train on Monday, both of us trying to read our novels, but failing. We couldn't stop staring at each other. Not past the line of oak trees at the Sunnydale viaduct. Not past the corner shop sign with its fresh newspaper headline on Callow road. Not past the five red doorways along the station at Wenton.

The people were going about their lives like clockwork. The woman tapping on her phone as she stepped onboard at Eastworth, ignorant of the passers-by. The man with the messy blond beard, cursing under his breath at Newstone as he tried to find his rail pass. The elderly woman at Churchley, with her permanent scowl on her face, and her garish floral scarf tied in the same lopsided bow under her chin.

But my life wasn't clockwork. Not anymore.

My life had been hit with the beautiful tornado that was Chloe Sutton.

I could feel the little white rabbit straining to run as we reached Harrow station, but I took her hand and held her steady.

"Hold it, jitterbug. A steady pace will cut it."

It was Chloe who let go of my hand once we reached the hospital car park. We headed up to Franklin Ward quietly, but the fizz from her was anything but quiet. She was wired tightly, energy fit to burst as we stepped through the double doors onto the ward.

"I, um... I'll see you later..." she said, and she was off, the rabbit finding her feet as she scurried away to drop her bag in the staffroom.

I watched her leave, wondering again just how the fuck this could work, the feelings made all the worse under the fluorescent reality of working life. The girl was a youngster, buoyant and effervescent. She had a life stretching ahead, crying out for happiness and fun.

I had anything but that ahead of me.

I'd had anything but that since I was a tiny boy who knew pain a tiny boy should never know.

Mum had been struggling through the night. She was slumped against her

pillows as I took her morning coffee in, barely stirring as I helped her into her daytime oxygen. She smiled, but her eyes weren't sparkling their usual shine, making it more obvious than ever that her time left was fading.

It only reinforced the urgency of the list on her wall.

Every time Chloe brushed past me in the corridors that morning it sent an undeniable wave of hope through me, but hope was unfounded. Hope was more often than not a false high that led to a greater low. I knew that much.

She poked her pretty face around my consultation room doorway that lunchtime, a big bright smile ready to greet me, and I smiled back as she stepped inside.

"Just wanted to say thanks," she said. "For an amazing weekend."

"The thanks are mine to give," I told her. "For giving an amazing weekend to both me and my mother."

She took a seat opposite me. "I hope we can have plenty more of them. Motorcycle ride next, right?"

I should have taken my first steps towards retreat there and then, for Chloe's sake more than my own, but I couldn't. The beautiful grin on that beautiful face quashed any scraps of realism left in my brain.

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.* I pictured Mum's handwriting and her eyes glittering every time she read the list aloud.

"Can you ride? I motorcycle, I mean?"

"Yes, I can," I told her, "Not for years though. And I'd need a motorcycle to put her on the back of first," I said, and in typical Chloe style she shrugged at me.

"So get a motorcycle." She grinned. "I'm sure you could hire one, right?"

I leant across the desk to take her hand. "Yes, Chloe, I could hire one."

"Great."

"Super cool," I said, and laughed.

"Well, I... um... better get back and leave you to it..." She made to leave, but I didn't let go of her hand. I couldn't. I gripped her tight and moved around the desk, my mouth so desperate for hers that I couldn't stop myself. Her hands wrapped around my shoulders, just as desperate for the kiss as I was, both of us so caught up in this fatal craving that we were fireworks, soaring up to explode, set to fall down in tatters and ashes in the fatal aftermath.

Because that's what this was. Fatal.

Tatters and ashes waiting to fall after an explosion that lit up the sky.

She just didn't know it yet.

Typically, of all the points in the day for someone to burst unannounced into my office, Wendy Briars picked that moment to head on in with a clipboard in her hand. She jumped back, shocked in a bluster, eyes skipping from me to Chloe as though she'd just walked in on the moon landing.

"Sorry!" she said. "Oh wow, I'm sorry. I should've knocked."

I held a hand up, awkward, blustering right back at her that it was fine, no apology needed, and Chloe was blustering along with me, freckled cheeks scarlet and eyes wide as she backed away.

"I'll see you later," she said, and was off, skittish legs carrying her out through the door.

Wendy was still shocked, holding her clipboard limply in her hands as she stared over.

"Can I help?" I asked, and she snapped back to it, clearing her throat and working through some nurse schedule details for the coming week.

I knew it would be around the ward in no time, not because Wendy was a gossip of any kind, but because that kind of sight would be too bizarre an event for her to resist sharing. Strangely enough, that felt ok. Everything about my relationship with that pretty young thing felt strangely ok.

I only saw Chloe in passing as she was heading down the corridor that evening. She was nervous, smiling her shy smile as she stepped up to me.

"My train to Halsey leaves soon," she paused. "I guess I'm going home to Halsey, right? I mean, you work late, and it's a Monday, and I've been with you all weekend, and..." She laughed to herself. "Sorry."

"You'd better get your white rabbit feet on the run," I told her. "Yes, it's a Monday, and I work late. You being with me all weekend has nothing to do with it."

"Great," she said.

"Enjoy your evening," I said, but we stood there, staring.

"About the motorcycle..." her words were as nervous as her smile. "I guess you'll want someone to photo it, and take a video maybe, so you remember it?"

"That would be good," I laughed. "*Super cool*, in fact. Was that an offer?"

"Yeah, that was an offer." Her nervous smile morphed into a grin as she backed away. "Better get that train."

"Run, rabbit, run," I said, and she did. Skittish legs carrying her off on

another journey.

My own journey at the ward hadn't ended by a long way. I had tears from families being torn apart. I watched hopes crashing to fears as people were told they had even less time ahead than the scraps of time they were hoping for, their own bucket lists anything but finished in their final days.

It only made me more determined to make sure Mum's list came to fruition – all bar the daughter-in-law request, of course.

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.*

I'd better get to it.

# 31

*Chloe*

The week went by quickly and slowly both at once, if that is even possible. The days whizzed past at work as I got caught right up with whatever was going on in the ward. Wendy must have shared the fact she walked in on our kiss, because Richard, Romi and Nadia would wink at me and nudge me every chance they got, asking questions about the weekend and how loved up I was with Dr Hall.

I tried to keep it professional. I didn't want to spill all the details, but I couldn't hold back my grins and giggles and the fact that I was absolutely bursting with infatuation for the man who'd stolen my heart over one single weekend.

Work days were intense. I laughed with people, I helped people through their pain, whether that was in body or soul. It was both happy and sad in that ward all day, and my soul was leaping and falling over and over, up and down, leaving me tired as hell every night on the way back home to Halsey on the train.

Still, tired or not, I was always missing him. Logan. Even though I'd only spent a few full days with him, my heart wanted a lifetime more. For real, it wanted a lifetime. Crazy mad, but crazy true.

He didn't kiss me again for the rest of the week. Plenty of smiles and *how are yous* and tense passings by in the corridors and on the ward, but never his mouth on mine. No Tuesday kisses, no Wednesday kisses, no Thursday kisses.

I was nervous as all crap when Friday evening approached. I didn't know what to say, or how, or whether there was anything at all on the cards for the coming days. I should have been focused on getting my stuff from Liam before he chucked it out, and reading the last novel in the Grigori Trilogy, and I told myself that I'd be happy with that. I was practically running an internal mantra that it was ok, that I'd be excited to lounge in bed until midday on a Sunday with my book in my hands under the duvet. No Logan, no big deal. Unfortunately, I didn't believe my own bullshit and I was

nervous as hell.

When Logan approached me in the staffroom as my Friday shift reached its end, my pulse was racing, mouth dry. He looked calm. As steady as ever. Eyes holding onto mine and not letting go.

“How is your availability for photography looking this weekend?” he asked. “I have a motorcycle waiting in my garage.”

I didn’t play it cool. Not even for a second. My answer was right back at him, nodding like a bobblehead. “My availability is great. Super great. Just tell me what you need.”

He tipped his head, and his smirk was amazing, eyes sparkling like his mum’s.

“How about I *need* you to come home with me this evening?” he said. “We could make a weekend of it. Take Mum around her sharp bend and catch up in other areas.”

“Are other areas in your bedroom?” I asked him with a laugh, nerves fast disappearing under the relief.

His smirk was still on his face, eyes still sparkling. “Yes, Chloe. A fair amount of the other areas are indeed in my bedroom.”

“Count me in,” I said. “All areas sounds fab to me.”

“Let me get my coat and briefcase,” he replied, and I was taken aback as he went to grab them at six p.m. on the dot, finishing on time for the first time I’d ever known.

I kept looking up at him all the way out of Franklin Ward and through Harrow District in disbelief, but he was always there, smiling back at the grin on my face.

We walked slowly back to the train station. I reached for his hand when we reached the car park entrance and he took hold and held it strong. It felt amazing.

The conversation started shifting once we were away from the hospital, easing up once we were away from the sheen of professionalism.

“How’s your mum?” I asked, and he took a moment to answer.

“Alive.”

“Alive and as well as possible, or alive and not doing so well?”

“Alive and not doing so well.” He paused. “She hasn’t stopped harping on about you all week by the way. She thinks you’re a divine little thing.”

“I think she’s pretty damn awesome too.”

“I gathered,” he said. “Two of you eternal optimists bouncing up against

the eternal pessimist at every opportunity.”

I squeezed his hand, because I felt it from him, stewing deep – that eternal pessimism. It was hardly a surprise that Logan Hall was a pessimist. I don’t think it would ever surprise anyone that the guy was pessimist, given the life he’d been through.

“Maybe between us we can find a middle ground,” I said with a laugh. “My optimism crashing into your pessimism. Maybe we can find a realistic place, right in the eye of the storm.”

He stopped me in my tracks and turned me to face him, and his face was deadly serious when he spoke.

“Never lose your eternal optimism for my sake, Chloe. Run away long before you lose yourself to my negativity.”

I’m sure I bit my lip, staring up at him wide-eyed like he’d just told five-year-old me to stop putting her fingers in plug sockets.

“I mean it,” he said. “The last thing I want to be doing is making your life miserable.”

“You wouldn’t,” I whispered, before my brain had a chance to filter my words enough to play it cool. “Being around you could never be miserable. You make me too happy.”

His mouth didn’t argue, but his eyes did. His stare didn’t believe me, and I really couldn’t work out why that was – what the hell made him so sure he’d kill my sunny outlook.

So, I asked him.

“Why are you so sure you’d make me miserable?”

Once again, he skipped the topic and took my hand back up. “Let’s just enjoy one day at a time, shall we? The shadows will always be waiting in the shadows.”

I didn’t argue with him. Granny Weobley had taught me a lesson just as soon as I could understand her words.

*The moment is now, Chloe. It’s always now. Not about reliving the past or dreaming up the future, it’s in the here and now. Enjoy as many of those moments as you can, because they never come twice, my love.*

But still, I wondered what could be waiting in his shadows.

We arrived at the station and it was bustling with commuters. The seats were all taken when we boarded the train, so we stood at the end of a carriage, pressed up close.

It was a whole load more tense as we walked through Redwood. I tried to

make general conversation and tick boxes on my virtual Dr Hall knowledge chart, but that conversation just wasn't flowing. I was aching too much for his flesh.

The carer lady was upstairs in Jackie's room when we arrived at his place. We said hello, and she gave a goodbye, but Jackie was still sleeping, head lolling onto her shoulder like she'd just run a mile and flaked exhausted at the finish.

Logan was finishing up work emails on the dining table downstairs when her eyes finally flickered open and fixed on mine. She grabbed my hand in a vice the moment she saw me.

"Chloe, sweetheart." She let out a heavy sigh. "I'm so fucking glad you're here. Was worried you'd got fed up with us after climbing the damn mountain last weekend."

"Hardly," I said, and leaned in close. "How are you feeling?"

Her eyes were sparkling much less brightly than the week before. "Shit," she told me. "I've been either retching, wheezing, or sleeping all week."

Seeing how weak she looked in bed that night, I fully believed her.

"Hey," she said. "Tomorrow I'll be a biking queen, racing around the bends. So glad you'll be here for it."

"So am I," I told her, wondering if she was really up to it.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, "but believe me, I'm going to do it. Whatever it takes to get me on that bike. I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"Good," I said, "whatever it takes."

"Let's get on with some other shit in the meantime," she laughed, and pointed to the newspaper on her bedside table.

I helped her with her crossword while I waited for Logan, and it only took a few minutes of chatter and question solving before I was well and truly caught up in the laughter of Jackie Hall. I wasn't expecting the conversation to take a deeper turn when it did. My laughing stopped, muted the very second she turned serious.

"Thank you for making him so happy," she told me. "Believe me, Chloe, I haven't seen him anything like this happy in years. I thought I'd take my last breath before I ever saw him smile like that again."

I don't think you can reply with a *you're welcome* to that kind of thanks, so I didn't say anything, just smiled and twiddled my fingers around the crossword pen.

"You can talk about it, you know," she told me. "About you and him, I

mean. I've still got a good pair of ears on me, even if the rest of me is bloody useless.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know what to say, really I don’t. I hope I get to make him a load happier. I will try if he lets me, just not so sure he will.”

“He’d best bloody well had do,” she said.

She pointed to the last line on her bucket list, and I felt the flush burning me up.

*Get a daughter-in-law.*

“I know my time is running low,” she said, “so I’m sure I’ll never get to see him say his vows with a pretty little thing like you. But to know he’s happy when I say my goodbyes... that would be worth more than a hundred more years of life in me, I promise.”

I don’t know why the default social politeness kicked in, but it did. A fake smile bloomed, and I started speaking it, the usual waffle that people say to brush the serious stuff away.

“You might still have ages left yet! You’re so lively!”

She shook her head. “Oh, poppet. Thanks for trying the nice crap, but that’s bullshit and you know it. I’ve got weeks left at best.”

My words stuck useless in my throat, but I didn’t need them. She kept on talking.

“I’m not scared of dying,” she said. “Haven’t been for years. I had years of dark nights, crapping myself I wouldn’t make it through to see Logan grow up. But I did. I made it through. Death doesn’t scare me now.” She gave a middle finger to the sky. “It can get fucked.”

Her words brought a tear to my eye. I imagined her struggles, just from the bits of her past I’d heard. Cancer. Grief. Pain.

“I mean it,” she told me. “Plenty of things about life scare me, but death doesn’t do shit to me now.” She patted my hand. “Leaving Logan is what scares me. Leaving him in the darkness with no light at the end of the tunnel. With no one to love him.”

There was a shiver in my tummy, one of those weird tickles that hints at something unconscious.

Logan’s ocean was dark and I knew it. Whether I was a happy enough soul to light up the surface of his world, I didn’t have a clue, but his mum did. His mum believed I was happy enough to light up his whole universe, it was beaming out through her smile.

“I can see perfectly well the way he looks at you,” she told me. “If I was

around a bit longer I'd damn well stand a chance of ticking off that last box on my wall. You'd make a great daughter-in-law too, sweetheart. I just know it."

I was still tickly in my belly when Logan joined us upstairs, sitting himself down next to me.

He loosened his tie. "Emails sent, working week done," he said, and leant back in his chair.

His mum chuckled. "Can't say I ever remember you leaving the work week behind. I'll believe it when I see it."

Yet somehow, this time, I knew she'd see it.

"You'd better get rested up," he told her with a smirk. "Can't have you snoozing on the back of the bike tomorrow and missing the bend."

She was laughing as he changed over her oxygen mask for the night.

"I won't be snoozing on the back of that thing, Logan. I'll be more bloody awake than you are."

# 32

*Logan*

Life was shifting around me. Lost to all recognition.

I woke with that beautiful girl at my side, her freckled face resting on her arm, deep in slumber. For the first time in memory, I settled back down under the covers, pressing up tight to the creature who was stirring my heart. She snuggled up tight right back, loving even in unconsciousness, wrapping her limbs around me like a limpet as I held her.

I could've stayed there for an eternity, the world waking through the windows, but no. We had one hell of a day ahead of us.

Her eyes flickered as she woke, a smile on her face as she stretched.

“Was I snoring?”

I laughed. “No. You were quiet in your snoozing.”

She giggled back at me, resting her head against my chest. “Hopefully I wasn’t drooling either.”

“You were, but I mopped it up.”

Her eyes shot wide. “You didn’t? I wasn’t?”

I laughed at her shocked face. “No, Chloe, I’m just kidding.”

She slapped my chest and then she kissed me.

My body was still alive with hers, the night a blur of skin and flesh and closeness. I couldn’t get enough of her, and her want was equally as demanding as mine.

Her pussy had been a beautiful haven, her mouth a hungry seeker. Her hair a cascade against the pillow, rippling as I’d claimed her.

“Thank you for another brilliant night,” she said, her mind clearly caught up in the same memories.

“Once again, the thanks are reciprocated,” I told her, sliding my fingers up her spine.

I was ready to start over again, but she was up in a jolt, eyes wide awake as she propped herself up on her elbow.

“It’s motorbike day!” she said, and did a little boogie under the covers. “Can’t wait to see your Mum’s face!”

It was incredible, just how excited the girl was for my mother's pleasure – a woman she barely knew. She'd virtually skipped up her parents' front lawn when we'd made the trip to get her things for her weekend stay after dinner last night, dancing in the passenger seat as we'd headed back to mine.

She was extraordinary, and addictive.

So addictive that I'd been out every night on the bike. Turns out I was still good at it – just like riding a bike, you never forget. I was taking that bend three or four times a night, imagining Mum whooping on the back. I was grinning like a loon every time, all to myself.

Yes, my regular practicalities were flying out the window, one step at a time. I barely recognised myself as we prepared Mum for her bike ride, settling her on the back of the bike with her oxygen tight around her waist, literally bound to me with multiple bungee cords to keep her held steady.

It was plainly ridiculous. Unsafe in every perceivable way, but still, her insistence and her laughter kept me moving. The thrill in her cackle was too strong to ignore.

As was Chloe's. Ridiculous or not, this was happening.

My little jitterbug was a gemstone at the side of us, staring on at the bike like it was a mine of gold, eyes glittering as brightly as if it was her going for the ride and not my mother. She was a flurry with the pictures, capturing every movement and every second as we prepared to leave, finally stepping up in front of us to take one last picture of us together, Mum with her thumbs up as I fired up the motorbike.

“AMAZING!” Chloe squealed. “You look AMAZING! WAIT! Wait while I set to record.”

I waited until she was ready to film us pulling away and I couldn't remember a time I'd done anything so wild, and so meaningful, both rolled into one. My pulse was alive, energy pounding deep and, with a thumbs-up from Chloe and a “Yee-ha!” from Mum, I set off from my driveway, a man on a mission, determined to give my mum the experience a bucket list deserves.

Mum squeezed as tightly as she could as we left our street, body pressed up to mine, noticeably tiny and frail, even through the leather jackets and the cords binding us together. Our helmets would have stopped our speech even if the wind hadn't, but that mattered not. Speech had no place here, I could feel her excitement in the air, all around us, lighting up my heart along with hers.

I only wished Chloe could have been on the bike with us. I'd have loved to have felt her thrill at the ride along with my mum's.

The country roads were winding, views intense. The bike zoomed up the crest of our nearest hillside, engine screaming loud. I was at one with the machine beneath me, soaking up every turn like I'd never let it go.

I knew the bend in the road we were heading to so well now after practising every night – a long straight road between Redwood and Harrow, sloping downhill only to veer in a sharp curve at the bottom. The fields were plains on either side, huge oaks sprawling in the distance, and Mum loved it there. She'd commented on just how amazing it would be to sail around that bend on the back of a motorcycle, without fail, every single time we'd driven past there.

Now was her time to test out her theory.

The hill peaked under the tyres, and the road fell away. The land was a blanket underneath us, chequered with greens, and the road opened up, beckoning our acceleration with open arms.

I should never have done it – cranked our speed up to gone 100 mph – but I couldn't stop. If I'd have believed in a soul, I'd have believed mine was sailing as high as a kite, enjoying the moments nearly as much as my whooping mother. My chest was fluttering, and my senses roared free, and I took it. I took that bend at a speed that should never have been.

The tyres gripped the tarmac, and the motorcycle growled, and we swept around that bend, the bike tilting so perfectly, my dear mum yelling and screeching every second of the way.

Fuck yes. I was grinning like a fool. My recklessness had been worth it.

We were nearly done with the bend when I registered Mum freeing her arms from my waist. I daren't look, but my intuition said it all. My mother's hands were in the fucking air.

I'd have called her crazy if I hadn't already been in the crazy category myself, heart racing as I glanced in the rearview mirrors to find Mum's hands pointing up the sky.

Yes, she was batshit crazy on a batshit crazy morning and so was I.

I was smiling just as brightly as her when I pulled up in a lane, making sure to check her out for wellness before we went any further.

Her fingers fumbled in a flash, raising her visor enough to speak.

“YESSS! Fucking hell, yes!!!”

She grabbed my shoulders and crushed me in her arms as hard as she

could manage.

“FUCK. Thank you, Logan. Thanks for being such a fucking star. You’re a star, Logan Hall! A fucking star!”

Oh, how my heart melted for her. But I couldn’t hold back from the truth. My words came out easily.

“It’s Chloe you have to thank for being a star,” I said.

“Yes, she is,” she replied. “So don’t you dare let her go, boy. Don’t you fucking dare.”

I twisted in my seat, and we sat there, visors raised as we smiled, and it was one of those moments you know is burying itself in your memories for all time. That shared connection between me and the woman who’d created me. The woman whose fragility didn’t ever hold her back. Whose fire was still alive in the ashes.

Unfortunately, that fire was fading, day by day.

As my eyes held hers, both of us fixed in that moment, I felt the little boy in me crying. Breaking at the knowledge that the woman who’d always been my light in the dark would be leaving me soon. It meant shit that I was a man now, strong in a world of cold hard rationale – my mum was dying in front of me, slowly, one precious day at a time.

My smile was tinged with pain, breaths choking up with hers as she nodded.

“I’ll be dying happy, Logan. So fucking happy.”

Jesus Christ, I didn’t want her to go.

I couldn’t speak, because my words would break in my throat. She didn’t push me, just rested her helmet against mine and held me tighter.

“I’m so glad I’m leaving you with a smile on your face, boy. So damn glad.”

I forced down the pain with a nod. “Stay as long as you can, Mum.”

She was exhausted as I rode us back home at a steady pace, arms weak as she held me. Her head was lolling against my shoulder as I pulled up on the driveway, barely stirring as Chloe shot out of the front door, beaming bright, camera already positioned for another shot.

Mum managed a thumbs-up as we helped her from the bike. She gave Chloe a *thanks for being such a star* with shallow breaths as we helped her upstairs and changed her back into her bed clothes.

We watched her sleep awhile, Chloe’s hand in mine, both of us gazing at Mum’s happy face as she sank into dreams.

“Your mum really is amazing,” Chloe told me, and I nodded.

“Yes, she is.”

She looked up at me. “Figures, since she produced such an amazing son.”

“I do love your compliments,” I laughed. “You’re an amazing creature yourself, Chloe.”

“Thanks,” she said, and even now her shyness showed, cheeks flushing pink.

I loved her like that.

Still, *figures*, as the girl would have said.

I loved her like *her*.

# 33

*Chloe*

I couldn't get enough.

By the time we left his mum sleeping my body was thrumming. It was about more than the darkness in his eyes, or the strength of his hands, or the way his mouth consumed mine so completely.

It was about him, as him. As Logan Hall.

It was about the passion in his smile, catching himself unawares at just how happy he was.

It was seeing the joy between him and his mum, both of them flying high as they pulled away from the drive that morning.

It was from feeling the want in his arms. In his touch. In his breaths.

It was from knowing this was the very best of how I could possibly feel for another human being. Because it was. There was no way my soul could be dancing through the clouds higher than it was that night.

We went for coffee downstairs, but we didn't make it to the kitchen. We were pressed up tight in the hallway, my back against the wall as he slammed his body into mine.

My kiss was ready, his was rough and deep.

I loved it like that.

That's I guess what led to that first tickle of knowing. That sneaky little dance inside that wanted more.

I wanted rough and deep. I wanted to lose myself to his touch. And he felt it. Holy fuck, he felt it.

He was ferocious as he tore me from the wall and marched me through to the living room. His hands were fierce as he ripped my t-shirt from my chest and yanked my bra down from my tits.

He pushed me down into the armchair and dropped on top and I was his, lost to everything on earth but the way he wanted to use me.

My nipples were hard, chest heaving. His mouth was brutal, nipping at my skin as he tugged my jeans off and spread my thighs.

I was wet but tight as he pushed three fingers in at once, yelping like a

dirty little girl as his thumb brushed my clit.

“More please,” I whispered. “Please.”

I don’t know exactly what I was asking for more of, but he gave it. He knew my body better than I did.

“Are you ready to be a dirty girl for me, Chloe?”

It set me on fire to hear his voice so filthy. I was nodding like a fool as his dark eyes glinted up at mine.

“I’m ready,” I told him. “Please make me a dirty girl. I’ve never been one. Not yet...”

I managed to shut myself up before my mouth ran away from me. My breaths were sharp as he lifted his wet fingers from between my legs and pushed them between my lips.

“Show me how much of a dirty girl you want to be,” he said, so I showed him.

I sucked his fingers like they were my lifeline, mouth wet and slurpy as he worked them in and out.

It’s weird, just how dirty something can feel while you’re rippling with the intensity that comes with loving someone. I loved him with that filthy glint in his eyes just as much as I loved the doctor on the ward. Just as much as I loved the man holding me tight in bed at night.

It was true – as much as I loved the man so strong and safe, there was another part of me that craved the thrill of him being so rough.

“Get ready to be a dirty girl,” he growled, and I was ready.

I was ready with a squeak when he pushed my legs up against my chest and forced the first of his fingers into my ass.

I was ready with a groan as he eased the other two in to join them.

“Relax,” he told me, and there was his doctor tone, undeniable.

I nodded and breathed, letting him work his fingers in and out – the most intense physical examination I’d ever had.

I’d always said no to this stuff. I’d never let Liam come anywhere near my ass, but with Logan it was a whole other world.

My ass felt intruded, and tender, and I was nervous, sure... but I liked it.

I could do it.

I relaxed, I breathed, I stared at the man sliding his fingers into my asshole.

Then slowly, thrust by thrust, circle by circle, as his knuckles worked me open, I turned into a whole other girl.

My ass fucking loved it.

“Yes!” I gasped, and started bucking back at him.

He didn’t speed up, just kept it steady, kept it deep.

“Yes!” I gasped again, and it was me bucking back harder. Me who wanted more. More. More.

I wasn’t ready for it when he dropped down and lapped at my clit. I wasn’t ready for the explosion that found me in a heartbeat, my fingers twisting into his hair and holding him tight.

“Fuck! Please! Please!”

I was a flailing fish against him, working my ass against his fingers so hard it hurt, but still, I wanted more.

I came for him, a panting, gasping wreck. I barely knew myself as my clit shot sparks right through me and my ass made the waves crash even higher.

The waves were still rippling through me when he pulled out of me and positioned himself up higher. I was barely focused as he spat onto his fingers and worked them over his cock.

It was only the very second before he thrust inside my ass that I really registered it was coming. I tensed enough to grit my teeth as he shunted deep.

My ass screamed. Hot.

My ass screamed. Tight.

My ass screamed, because it fucking hurt.

But still, it wanted more. Still, it needed more.

Still, I was begging for more.

His face was in mine, his breaths hot on my mouth as I begged him to fuck me. Little girl lost.

My tits bounced under him, clit still pulsing, and it was different. Dirtier. Filthier.

Fuck, I wanted more.

I’d never get enough of more, more, more. I’d spend a lifetime taking it, and still I’d want more.

“You’re so fucking tight,” he told me, and his smile was ferocious. “Jesus Christ, Chloe, you’re so fucking tight.”

Seeing him so horny, so lost in me, with his dick up my ass, made it bizarrely one of the greatest compliments I’d ever had.

I bucked underneath him, as best as I could. I squirmed and wriggled and moved against him, seeking him deeper, deeper. Desperate to feel him come in my ass.

He knew what I wanted. His smirk was every bit as ferocious as his smile.

“Quite the filthy little jitterbug with my cock inside you, aren’t you?”

He took hold of my wrists and pinned them high as he came, thrusting hard with every shunt of his hips. I was pinned, a toy in the chair, taking everything he wanted to give me.

My breaths were as frantic as his when he came inside me. His grunts were primal. His body was wild.

He kissed me as his cock unloaded, and I felt it – love.

Love from him.

Love for me.

Love, even in the dirty.

Love, even in the raw.

He was sheened in sweat as he collapsed onto me, my wrists still pinned up high. He kept on kissing me, kept on grinding, and my ass was throbbing sore when he pulled out. I felt like he’d bulldozed my butt with his dick, but still I was wriggling for more.

“The jitterbug jitters,” he said, and ground against my clit over again.

Fuck, I couldn’t take it. I couldn’t. I was wriggling and squeaking, my body still reeling from the last orgasm, but again, he knew my body better than I did.

Slowly.

So fucking slowly.

The rhythm was firm.

Coaxing.

My body was tingling.

Wired.

The man ground his dick against my clit until I came again, and this time I had no words, just pants, body bucking like a bronco while he was holding me firm.

“Good girl,” he said, and I unravelled.

I gave up, cresting on the heights, and he was everything. He was my whole fucking world.

I guess that’s why my mouth ran away with me. I guess that’s why I blurted the stupid unblurtable as I lay gasping for breath under the man who’d stolen it.

“I love you,” I told him. “Seriously, Logan, I love you. I love you so

much, it's unreal. So don't ever stop this. Please, don't ever stop this. I wouldn't be able to breathe if you did."

And that's when he stilled.

That's when he tensed and pulled his body away from mine.

Spell broken, his eyes primal in a whole other way, jaw gritted hard as his shutters came down.

"Let's get that coffee," he said.

# 34

*Logan*

I hated myself as I walked through to the kitchen, knowing full well I'd cut her off in a moment of expression. I couldn't help it. My barriers were up, steel strong, emotions sealed.

She followed me through, jeans and t-shirt back on, fingers twisting in front of her in that way I knew so well. She didn't speak, just stared, and it broke my heart to see her like that, so confused and so unsure.

I didn't know what to say to her, so I said nothing, just flicked the kettle on and made coffee, wishing life was different, and that I hadn't been that little boy, fighting bodily demons in the hospital ward.

I'd already handed over her mug when she cleared her throat and spoke to me. Her words were timid. Shy.

“Sorry, if I, um... said more than I should.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t.”

“Oh.” The confusion on her face deepened.

I leant against the counter, trying to find words of my own.

“You said you couldn't breathe without me, Chloe.”

Her eyes widened. “Yeah, I meant that I was feeling it, you know?”

I did know. I was feeling it too. I was feeling that utter reliance on another person. On the happiness she gave me, and the sparkle in her smile. In her touch, in her laughter, in her warmth at night.

“Life is fragile,” I told her. “Love is fragile with it.”

“Not this love,” she said, and I fell in love with her all over again. Her honesty, her outpouring – so natural and so true. “This love isn't fragile. I know it isn't.”

“Life's fragility makes all love fragile.” I sipped my coffee, soaking in her stare. “Love leads to loss. Loss leads to pain. Therefore, all love ends in pain.”

She was still confused, mulling over my words. “But love makes it worth the pain, right? You only ever get a fall after a high.”

There it was again. That optimism. That beautiful optimism that made her

who she was.

I wish I believed her.

I almost told her my truth. I almost broke down those barriers and confessed my own reality, but I didn't. The steel didn't bend, even though my heart was beating for it.

"You love me, right?" she asked. "You said so. And it was more than that, I felt it, too. I feel it, Logan. And it's not me being the crazy happy girl who sings through life. It's true, and it's real, and I know that."

"Chloe..." I started, but she was shaking her head.

"Don't do the whole impractical thing. Don't do the whole professional and age and all that, please. It doesn't matter, and it doesn't make any difference, and I don't care. I don't care that you're older, or work with me, or think I'm better off without you. Because that's what this is, isn't it? You think I'm too young and too happy for you. You think I should be with someone more like me, and who will dance around with me, and be silly with me."

The girl had astute perception, but she was wrong on the essentials. I thought she'd be better off without me because she would. She was in her twenties with her whole life ahead of her. Adventures to be had, and children running around her feet.

I wasn't that life ahead of her. As much as I wanted to be, I couldn't be that man.

She put down her coffee, fingers twisting fresh. She shrugged, eyes tearing up, and that hit me right in my gut.

My voice was strong when I spoke next. "I think you're an incredible woman, Chloe. You make me happy in ways I'd have never known."

"So, why are you so determined to throw it away, then?"

Again, I nearly told her. It was there, brewing, ready to burst out in flames, but she spoke next. It was her who shrugged her shoulders and pulled up a smile.

"Let's live for the moment," she said. "It doesn't have to be about the love, or the life, or this imaginary future I've got in my head. Because that doesn't matter, does it? Lightning could strike in the garden tomorrow, and I could be gone just like that, and so could you. But that just makes every single second more important, doesn't it?"

She was wise before her years. Such a wise little soul. Such a wise little jitterbug.

She carried on before I answered her.

“We had a great day today, didn’t we? And your mum wants to go to the seaside and I really want to help take her there, and I was looking forward to being with you this weekend, and I don’t want to leave.”

She was right on all those things.

She was right that Mum wanted to go to the seaside and we had the weekend still going strong, and I was looking forward to being with her too.

My sides collided. Rationale versus heart.

The heart won.

“Yes, we had a great day today. One of the best of my life.”

Her smile was every bit as bright as I’d ever seen it.

“So, let’s have another great day tomorrow. I promise I won’t tell you I’d die without you again.” She laughed and rolled her eyes. “I’m sorry I said it. Doh.”

“It wasn’t that,” I said, but she shrugged again.

“I’m sure I’d survive.”

I didn’t answer that, just gave her a shrug to match.

She finished her coffee and made to head out of the kitchen, but I closed the distance and took her wrist, pulling her back to me.

“There’s no need for a sorry. There never is.”

Her freckles were magic under wide eyes. Her mouth was slightly open, breaths catching.

“Live in the moment with me then,” she said. “Live in the weekend with me.”

Right then, in that kitchen doorway with that beautiful creature alive in my arms, I couldn’t have done anything else if I’d tried.

# 35

*Chloe*

Logan's ocean was as deep as I'd figured. I felt it there, calling from the darkness at the bottom, and I couldn't work it out. Wouldn't even know where to start.

His walls were high, and the waters were fierce, and I was still bobbing along on the surface, unsure quite how to sail.

My God, I wanted to.

I wanted to break those walls apart and dive right inside.

He held me tight in bed that night, but I couldn't sleep. I was nervous and choppy, untangling myself from his arms slowly in fear of waking him with my jitters. I stared at the ceiling in the darkness, brain churning over like a Ferris wheel, not knowing what the hell I could say or do.

I was as quiet as I could manage when I headed to the bathroom for a middle of the night pee. The last thing I ever expected was to see the lamp shining out from Jackie's doorframe, still slightly ajar.

I dared to poke my head around the door, to check she was ok as much as anything else, and she must have seen the movement, flicking her eyes my way and greeting me with a smile.

She tugged the oxygen mask away from her face as I approached, shuffling to sit up higher in bed and flicking off the video on her tablet.

"You're up late," she said, and I smiled back at her.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Left Logan dreaming?"

I nodded. "Yeah, he was flaked."

"Good," she said, and her eyes lingered on mine. "What's up with you, sweetheart? I can see that brain stewing in that pretty head of yours."

Part of me thought I should back away and play dumb, rather to pull her into the churn, but it was her smile, calling so loud without saying a single thing.

I pulled a chair closer to the bed and sat myself down.

"Logan is..."

She waited until I continued.

“I’m just not sure he thinks this is right, me and him, I mean.”

Her smile faded as she took a breath. “He’s got his walls up, I’m guessing.”

I nodded. “And I get it, if this isn’t right for him, or if I’m not right for him, or if I’m saying too much.”

She shook her head. “Believe me, darling, this isn’t you. It’s all on him.”

I was glad about that. I took a breath as it sank in. “He’s normally like that?”

She tipped her head from side to side. “I wouldn’t say normally. He doesn’t normally get this far, keeps everyone away with a barge pole.”

I could imagine that.

She reached for my hand and squeezed. “I told you about Evelyn? The girl he split with when he was in hospital getting treatment?”

I nodded.

“I guess he spoke to you about her?”

“A bit.”

She sighed. “He’d say it was about things getting tough and the split being the best thing for her, but that’s bullshit. He pushed her away so hard she couldn’t stay anymore.”

“Because of the life being fragile thing?”

She nodded. “Because he thought he would leave her grieving.”

I felt the heartache down deep, even from the thought of it.

“But there would have been grief anyway. She lost him. Dying or not, she still had to let him go.”

Her eyes were sad. “He doesn’t see it like that. He sees fear in illness, devastation as people have to watch people they love ending their world.” She paused. “Like he’s watching me.”

I didn’t buy into that viewpoint. His logic was opposite to everything I’d ever felt.

“Yeah, he’s watching you die.” I hated saying those words but knew I had to. Knew that I could say them to Jackie, “Watching you, but valuing every single minute with you. Getting to share so much you want to share. Watching you live some of your craziest moments and knowing you’re having the time of your life.”

She laughed. “You’re preaching to the converted, sweetheart. I’m with you all the way. Unfortunately, Logan isn’t. He’s watched too many people

die.”

“No shit,” I laughed along with her. “He’s surrounded by it every day of his life.”

She squeezed my hand a little tighter. “Please don’t buy into it and leave him like Evelyn did. I’ll be reaching the end soon, and I don’t want to see him fuck up his chance to live a happy life and end up alone. I promise you, darling, he is besotted with you. You make him sail the skies. I’ve never seen him so happy as he is when he’s with you.”

I felt the tears brewing in me. “I’ve never been so happy as I am when I’m with him.”

She nodded, and squeezed again. “So don’t let it go. Please, Chloe, don’t let it go. No matter how hard he tries, don’t buy into his bullshit. He’s just a pessimist, preparing everyone for the losses and not living for the blessings.”

“I won’t let it go,” I said.

“Is that a promise?”

Her eyes were deadly serious, and so was my answer.

“That’s a promise.”

The smile that came out of her at my words was enough to take my breath. She took a breath of her own, tears in her eyes, and I got a shiver down my spine, because it was beyond words and reason, the feeling I got from her in that moment.

Her breath was pure relief.

Her shoulders eased, as though she was saying goodbye to every bit of tension in her, and I felt scared and happy both at once as something changed.

I didn’t know what that something was, but I knew how important it was.

It took a little while before she spoke again, smiling a mischievous smile.

“Fancy watching some shitty gameshows with me?”

I grinned, realising just how awake I was. “Sure, I’ll watch some shitty gameshows with you. I’d love to.”

She shunted up on her bed, pulling her oxygen tubes and shifting her bed-sore donut, leaving me enough space to slip my bum alongside her and snuggle up under the duvet. She put shitty gameshows on and we high fived when we got the answers right, laughing along to the stupid presenter.

It was an incredible feeling, being so close to an incredible woman as we laughed through the early hours of Sunday morning. I barely noticed when the tiredness caught up with me and my eyes started flickering closed, barely

noticed that Jackie was snoozing beside me, tablet dropped down on its side and gameshows still blurting.

I fell asleep there, next to my boyfriend's amazing dying mum. Because that's what he was – my boyfriend. Even if he didn't want to admit it, to himself as well as me.

I fell asleep next to my boyfriend's amazing mum, and it was an amazing place to be.

Knowing Jackie Hall was an honour I'd never forget.

I just wished I had longer alongside her.

# 36

*Logan*

I awoke with a start to find an empty space beside me. The covers were rumpled, Chloe gone. For an awful moment I thought she may have cut and run, abandoning her *live for the moment* logic. But no.

I found her asleep next to Mum, slumped in bed alongside her with the oxygen machine rumbling its rumble.

It was one of the most moving sights I'd ever seen.

Mum's tablet was dropped between them on the duvet, both of them dreaming deep. I could picture it crystal clearly, them both giggling together watching some crappy TV show through the night. Mum often did that when sleep evaded her.

I left them to it with a smile on my face and made my way downstairs in my dressing gown to start up breakfast. I was turning the bacon when my jitterbug appeared in the kitchen alongside me, still yawning from waking up.

“Have a fun night?” I asked, and a grin lit up her face.

“Gameshows.”

“I can imagine,” I said.

Yesterday evening’s conversation seemed to have no bearing on her as she stepped up closer, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“It’s going to be a sunny day,” she told me, and I could see it. The sun already promising to be in its glory. “How about we chill out in the garden with some good books? Maybe your mum could come out with us?”

I kissed her head. “Novels are a great choice for a Sunday.”

She laughed her beautiful laugh. “Super cool.”

“Indeed, Chloe. Super cool.”

She skittered back to the hallway, casting me a glance before she left. “Could I please use your excellent bookshelves as a Sunday library?”

“You are always very welcome to use my bookshelves as a library. Take your pick.”

“Thanks,” she said, and left me to it.

By the time I called her back in for breakfast she had a book under her

arm, ready to roll.

*All Creatures Great and Small.*

“Good choice,” I said.

“What are you reading?” she asked me, and I smirked.

“As pessimistic as ever,” I told her. “Of Mice and Men.”

“Happy days,” she laughed, and it was there between us, that connection bubbling away.

We ate breakfast happily, and book chatter was lively as we recounted some of our favourites. I don’t know how neither of us had ever asked the question before when it came from her mouth, but we hadn’t.

“What’s your favourite novel of all time?”

I ate my final piece of bacon before I answered her. “It’s impossible to choose a favourite.”

She shrugged with a smile. “Sure, but... if you were being sent to an island for one hundred years and you could only take one novel with you, which one would it be?”

I met her eyes with a smile of my own. “One novel?”

She nodded. “One novel.”

I didn’t have to ponder it nearly as long as I would have expected, the answer was right there on my tongue.

“I doubt you’ll have heard of it,” I told her. “Moon Magic by Dion Fortune. She was a psychologist who turned esoteric back in the early 1900s.”

She was as pale as a ghost, sitting there open-mouthed as I began to share my knowledge, barely breathing when I paused.

“Have you heard of it?” I asked her, and she nodded, finding her voice.

“It can’t be,” she said. “No fucking way. It just can’t be.”

I pulled a face. “I know it sounds unusual for it to be of my tastes, but it’s about a doctor closed down to his emotions, pushing everything into his work.”

She was nodding. “I know, yeah. Dr Malcolm.”

“You’ve read it?” I asked, and she was still pale.

“It’s one of my favourites of all time. For real. It’s the way it’s so magic between Rupert and Lilith and the hope in his world, and how good he is as a doctor.”

I felt my whole body tense up. Because she was right. It couldn’t be. There was just no fucking way.

But it was.

And on some absurd level it did make sense, because of our shared medical passion, and the magic born out of that for the characters, and how they find something higher in essence beyond the rational world. For me it was a long shot at hope. A man experiencing what I ultimately wanted to, but never believed was possible. For her it was inspiration, buying into the story. Two completely opposing beliefs about the tale, two completely opposite viewpoints. I could see it a mile off.

We talked about it, both of us still caught up in the shock.

We talked about Rupert's journey with himself, and him losing so much of his essence to his ill wife far away. We talked about its weaknesses, the way it was clearly dated with long outgrown cultures, and how cruddy some of those could be. Still, there was no denying it. The core of that novel had caught us both up and swept us along through its pages.

"I still can't believe you like Dion Fortune novels," she said with a giggle. "I'd have never bet on that in a million years."

"Most people wouldn't have," I told her. "Including me."

I was still reeling when we gave Mum her breakfast and helped her outside into the garden. I couldn't stop looking at Chloe, sitting there on the lawn with All Creatures Great and Small in her hands, caught up in the pages.

Insanity.

The way Chloe Sutton was so polar opposite, but so in sync with my world was insanity.

Mum laughed along with us as we ate lunch, recounting tales along with Chloe while I listened. The women were an inspiring pair, both of them so in tune with their own serotonin levels that they really did put me to shame.

Sunday was slow and beautiful, every minute sinking in, glorious.

I didn't want it to end.

Mum's energy was gone completely long before the afternoon was done, but she was determined to stay outside with us, drifting in and out of sleep on her lounger. Chloe and I moved closer, lying together on the grass as we read, her foot brushing over and over against mine.

Once again, I could have stayed alongside her for a lifetime, but lifetimes are fleeting things.

Her hair was a ripple on the grass, and her smile was timeless and she was everything in the world I could ever have wanted. Yet, that responsibility goes both ways. You have to give in this world as much as you receive, and I

would have loved to have been that man for her. I would have loved to have soared her spirit with my own.

We helped Mum into bed once dinner was finished, then headed back down to the living room to carry on reading. Our quiet was a stunning time of connection, both of us soaking in words and enjoying the companionship that a shared hobby brings.

I fucked her that night. Slowly. Quietly.

I held her in bed. Firmly. Safely.

“I’m going to say it again,” she told me, before falling asleep. “Be pessimistic all you like, but I’m going to say it all the same.” I could feel her staring up at me, even in the darkness. “I love you, Logan. Call it a moment, or call it a lifetime, I don’t care. I just want to tell you I love you. Even more so now I know the freaky shit about you having the same favourite niche little novel as I do.”

I smirked to myself, because I felt exactly the same way as she did – loving her even more after the Moon Magic revelation – and if I’d have believed in destiny, even for a fleeting moment, I’d have believed that she was mine. That some kind of universal energy had put us together, our polarities making us whole.

But I didn’t believe in destiny.

Especially not with having my dying mother in the room next door to me, getting ready to say her goodbyes.

And most certainly not with preparing to say goodbyes of my own.

Still, I said it.

I told the truth.

I looked at that girl at my side, knowing exactly the smile she was pulling, and I gave her the tiny little utterance from my heart.

“I love you too.”

# 37

*Chloe*

We sat on the train together, but there were no novels this time, not even the pretence of getting caught up in the words. There was only us, smiling and talking. Small talk. Big talk. It didn't make any difference, just talking to him made me tingle inside.

We walked into work, hand in hand, and this time I didn't let him go, still squeezing tight as we headed through the double doors on Franklin Ward. Everyone smiled to see us like that, Nadia seeing us first and nudging Richard alongside her. It felt right. It felt safe. It felt real.

I was all in with this new world I was living in. My old life with Liam was nothing more than a shadow of a memory next to my life with Logan.

Liam was still pinging, screaming about my stuff at his, and I knew it needed doing. I told him I'd be over soon. Still, my mind couldn't be on it. It was on the people on the ward, helping their journeys as best I could. It was on snippets of time with the man I loved, sharing smiles every time we crossed paths. It was on my friends on the ward – because that's what they were now. Friends. Even Vickie on Kingsley Ward was still messaging me to keep in contact and meet up when we could.

I was always a happy person and had been forever. I'd always seen the joy in every little snapshot of life. Every smile. Every laugh. Every time you share one of those meaningful little snippets of time with someone, and know you'll remember it forever. But this was different. Colours were deeper and those rivers of happiness were flowing faster, and every breath felt like magic.

I watched Logan on his consultations and admired the pit of his brows and the sincerity in his eyes. I saw how genuine he was when he placed his hand on other people's and listened to their words. He was an inspiration. A man I respected with my whole heart.

I wasn't expecting it when he came along with his briefcase as my shift reached an end. I was still staring in shock as we walked back to the train station and he took my hand to board the Redwood train – but not staring in

shock as wildly as Jackie did when we walked into her bedroom together that evening.

“Chloe! On a work night! So nice to see you, sweetheart. So nice!”

It was nice to be there.

We ate dinner, and spent time doing the crossword, and Logan got her ready to sleep. She had a shine in her eyes as she wished me goodnight, and I’m sure I had one right back at her, thanking the universe for the whole lot of it. Every single bit.

Then it was us. Me and Logan.

Still, I had shivers. Nervous.

He chased those away from me as soon as his mouth pressed to mine.

I couldn’t say it, *I love you*, not with him kissing me so deep, right the way across the landing and through to his bed. I couldn’t tell him how I was devoted to him, every second of every day. It made no difference. I didn’t need to. My touch said it all, and so did his.

He kissed my scar, and my birthmark and ran his fingers across my skin, fascinated by every curve, every crease, every inch of me. I was just as fascinated back, fingers shaking because I was so in awe of that man. I was so in love with the imperfections that made him more perfect. The depth in his eyes took my breath. The strength in his arms made me soar.

I’d been fucked by Liam hundreds of times over the years, but it had never been anything like sex with Logan. It wasn’t just sex. It wasn’t just someone trying to shoot their load, grunting and groaning. It wasn’t just someone pounding in the dark, trying to get their dick in my mouth to come down my throat before rolling over and falling asleep.

This was making love.

He made me come gently that night, in lamplight, slow enough that I could barely take it, that slow crest and burn. He teased my whole body with his mouth until I was squirming, begging him for more.

He gave me more.

He gave me slow thrusts right inside me, then raised my legs and fucked me hard, eyes fixed on mine, waters crashing with depths I didn’t understand.

I knew what I wanted, and I guess my squirms told him so, begging quietly for *more*. I wanted to feel that intensity again. I wanted to feel his body pushing mine. I wanted to feel the thrill of the dirty.

He pulled out and worked my ass with his fingers first. One, then two, then three. He circled just right, until I was circling my hips along with him,

my hand down between my legs, rubbing my clit nice and hard. He spat on his hand, worked his cock, then positioned himself just right. I held my breath as he pressed up to me, letting out a groan as he eased his dick inside. The stretch was incredible. Feeling my body so consumed was divine.

*Ah, ah... please...*

He rolled me onto my side, raising my leg up high as he fucked my ass. He held my face and pulled me to him, twisting me enough that we could kiss. Tongues and lips and teeth, breaths panting, bodies thrumming. He started grunting when he came, and I was right there with him, coaxed to the edge, his fingers between my legs and working circles along with his thrusts. I didn't want it to end, but the peak was irresistible, both of us lost in the motions.

And lost in the love.

We lay together in the aftermath, breathing together. He was still behind me, arms wrapping me tight. I stroked his wrist, and there was so much I wanted to say. There was so much I wanted to tell him about how my world was with him, whatever he might think about it – I was his forever and ever. But he beat me to it. He beat me to it with the words.

“I wish that moments could last for all time.”

“Then they wouldn’t be as special,” I said. “But there are plenty of special ones, aren’t there? Plenty of moments you can feel again.”

He kissed my neck. “Plenty of special moments ahead for you, Chloe. You are an incredible woman with an incredible world awaiting her.”

“An incredible world with you,” I told him, and I didn’t care anymore. Not about his shutters coming down, or the depth of his ocean, because there is only truth. Regrets come from holding back, or telling lies, or living illusions. They never come from baring your soul for the creature it is.

He didn’t answer me, so I carried on.

“Why won’t you let me in, Logan? I promise I can listen, I promise I’ll do my best to understand. I know things have been tough, and I know you’ve lost a lot of people, but that doesn’t stop you loving more of them, does it? Why would it stop you loving me?”

He kissed my forehead with more tenderness than I’ve ever known.

“Let’s just live in the moment, shall we?”

I sighed and nodded. Taking my own advice as I snuggled down in his arms.

# 38

*Logan*

I adored the cycle of my days with that woman. I adored the train journeys in the morning, with her giggling her beautiful laugh as we spoke. I adored her hand in mine on the way to the hospital, and the way she'd wave in the corridor with her pretty little smile nice and bright every time we passed by.

I adored Mum's face every time she saw Chloe along with me in the evening, and the way she'd pull her in tight for a hug.

I adored the giggles at crossword answers and how they'd gossip cute gossip when I was out of earshot, their eyes twinkling bright.

And Jesus Christ, I adored her in bed at night, her body opening up with a siren's call, always craving more, more, more.

The girl was a wonder, more than I'd ever dreamt possible, and I almost found hope again. Almost pushed the darkness aside and told her my truth. Almost believed that my life was worth her devotion, whatever the cost of that might be.

Luckily, I didn't.

Luckily, I held back long enough for my rationale to come to its senses.

It was on Thursday evening that she came rushing up to me in the consulting room with a shine in her eyes and that trademark nervous smile on her face.

“Can I help you, Miss Sutton?” I asked with a smirk, dropping my pen onto the desk.

She scrambled into the seat opposite me, picking up that same pen and twiddling it in her fingers.

“Richard, Romi, Nadia and Soren are heading out after work tonight. Richard’s wife is pregnant and they’re going out for a drink to celebrate.”

“Excellent news,” I said. “I’ll be sure to congratulate him when I see him.”

She hovered there, eyes on mine. “Vickie from Kingsley is going too, if I go.”

I held her gaze. “I hope you have an amazing time. I imagine you aren’t

joining me home tonight, don't worry, hopefully I'll be able to finish up the crossword with Mum without your wisdom.”

I laughed, but she didn't laugh with me, her eyes were still fixed on mine.

“I was hoping you could come with me.”

I stopped laughing. “Come with you? Out drinking around Harrow on a Thursday evening?”

She nodded. “Yeah. It could be fun, right?”

I loved her nervous smile, freckles adorable under bright eyes.

*Fun.*

I was becoming ever more familiar with the concept since the Chloe whirlwind slammed into my world.

I should've said no, and used the opportunity to work late, or head back home and use the evening to review Mum's medication for the millionth time. But I couldn't. Those gorgeous eyes of hers wouldn't let me.

I sat back in my seat and let out a breath.

“Sure, Chloe, I'll come out drinking around Harrow with you on a Thursday evening. I'll just have to let Olivia know we are going to be late.”

She air-punched, in that beautiful way I was becoming so familiar with.

“SUPER COOL!”

Her giggle was glorious.

She was already up and out of her seat before she spoke next, backing away to the door.

“You won't regret it,” she said. “We'll have so much fun.” She reached the doorway. “Can't wait to tell Vickie we'll be going.”

“Enjoy your afternoon,” I replied, and she nodded before she shut the door.

So there we had it. A night with the team in Harrow, celebrating Richard's good news. It felt strangely appealing – the social company. I imagine it was then that I came to realise these people were a lot closer to me than I'd given credit for in all the years I'd been working with them. I knew their mannerisms and their history and their family details. I knew the way they made small talk and greeted me every morning. I knew the way they tried to include me, in almost every activity they did both on the ward, and out of it.

I made sure I'd finished all upcoming consultations and answered my emails before I got ready to leave the hospital that evening. Chloe was still in her nurse's uniform as we left there, and so were the others, a bunch in blue

as we made our way across the car park. They were laughing, talking, congratulating Richard and singing him songs, and I couldn't hold back the smile, grinning at Chloe as she joined in with their *hip hip hoorays*.

We started in The Plough inn, sitting at a corner table recounting the ward that day. We moved to Brewery Tavern down the High Street, where the rest of the bunch started on the cocktails. I'd had a couple of glasses of red by the time Chloe was a tipsy little jitterbug, buzzing along at my side as we made our way out of there.

The others were hitting Blackthorn's Bar – a nightclub down Ponton Road – and we shouldn't do it. Even Chloe was hesitant as the others started their walk. It was Vickie who grabbed her hand and started with the *come onnnnn*.

I'd have let her head on alone if she hadn't looked up at me with such pleading eyes. Her speech didn't match her gaze, it was more of a '*I completely get it if you don't want to go, and we can go home to your mum, and...*' but it was her excitement, her enthusiasm, her zest about me coming along with her that stole my senses. I started following the group of nurses, still in uniform, Chloe's hand still clasped in mine.

"I can manage one more drink," I said, and she grabbed me tight, arms flung around my waist as we set off down the street.

I was still in my suit as we headed into Blackthorn's. The others were still in blouses and sensible shoes and hair tied up neatly. It made no difference whatsoever. They were up and alive, hitting the retro disco tunes with a rush up onto the dancefloor as soon as we were done at the bar. Vickie grabbed Chloe and dragged her on up there, and Chloe flashed me a smile on the way, beckoning me to go with her. But no. My idea of *fun* didn't stretch quite that far.

The club was loud, and the tunes were pulsing with bass, and I watched my jitterbug jittering to the beat along with her friends. That's when it hit me all over again, just how much younger than me she was. Her early twenties showed loud and clear as she jumped and twisted and sang along to the words, caught up in the moment well and truly as she found her groove with the others.

She was alive. She was wild. She was free.

She was a beautiful dancer, and a beautiful girl, fresh-faced with a whole world ahead of her, stretching as far as the eye could see.

The men in the club were staring. People were edging closer to her on the

dancefloor, and she was oblivious, flashing me glances and waves right through the songs. Still, they were looking, still they were edging closer. She could have had any of them, and sure, most of them would be morons, and plenty of them would be assholes, but there would be some men out there who would be everything a girl like Chloe could want for the rest of her life.

I just wasn't that man.

I could never be that man.

I was silent as I sipped my wine, caught up in the happiness of watching that stunning woman enjoying her night, mixed with the sadness at knowing we could never be forever.

She was out of breath when she dropped herself into the seat at my side, swinging her arms around my neck as she came in for a kiss.

"Let's go home," she said.

*Home.*

I only wished it could be her home for keeps as well as mine.

We said goodbye to the others and headed out into the street, and Chloe was laughing and joking all the way to the taxi, telling me just how much she'd enjoyed the night.

We were in the backseat of the cab by the time I pulled my phone from my jacket pocket, totally unaware of just how much the bass from the tunes had hidden the ringtone.

There were seven missed calls from Olivia. My heart turned to stone, that zip of panic up your spine as you realise there's trouble awaiting.

"Faster, please," I said to the cab driver, and hit the call back icon.

"What is it?" Chloe asked, tensing up alongside me.

"Olivia?" I asked as she answered, and her voice was fast. Edgy.

Mum wasn't good. Swollen legs and shallow breaths, insistent she didn't want the hospital.

My palms were sweaty when we pulled up outside my place. Chloe was a dash on her feet alongside me as we headed inside and straight up to Mum's bedroom. Sure enough, Mum's tiny frame was rasping, even more so than usual. Her feet were propped up on pillows at the bottom of the bed, but it didn't make a difference. Her ankles were swollen and she was yellowing, clear as day under the lamplight.

"I'm so sorry," Olivia said. "I didn't have Chloe's number, and I hoped you'd be home soon, and Jackie insisted she didn't want an ambulance."

"It's ok," I told her. "The apologies are mine to give. I had no idea you

were trying to call me.”

Chloe was hovering as I took a seat at Mum’s side and began to take her temperature. Olivia had left the room for fresh juice when my jitterbug stepped up to me and put a hand on my shoulder. Her eyes were tearing up.

“I’m the one who should be sorry,” she whispered. “I should never have dragged you out so late with your mum at home like this.”

“You didn’t drag me,” I told her. “You’re perfectly entitled to have a great evening with your friends, and I’m perfectly capable of leaving you to enjoy it.”

“Still,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

I called out the emergency doctor to sign off my request for an increase to the morphine driver for Mum, and he signed it off easily, barely needing to look at his fragile patient or listen to her moans of pain.

It was a dramatic increase, and it worked.

Her pain eased off as soon as it had settled, and, right before my eyes, my mum eased off along with it.

Mum slumped. She wheezed. She faded. Those few remaining petals preparing to fall.

“What can I do? How can I help?” Chloe asked, but I shook my head. There was nothing.

She was still at my side when the other doctor left, sitting alongside me with her hand in mine.

“It’s going to be a long night,” I told her. “Maybe you could get Romi to cover your shift in the morning if you want to stay up with me.”

She nodded, and grabbed her phone. “Of course I will.”

I didn’t sleep and neither did Chloe, watching my mum until sunrise started up outside the window. Chloe had kept it together and so had I. She’d ventured off into the bathroom once or twice, feigning a toilet trip when I knew full well she was crying. The redness around her eyes betrayed her more than her sad little smile.

The sun was up when Mum finally stirred into life, woozy-headed as her eyes fluttered and fixed on mine.

She reached for my hand with weak fingers, barely managing a squeeze.

“Are you in pain?” I asked, but she shook her head.

“No, darling. No pain.”

I was relieved. Even if for one fleeting moment, I was relieved.

Her time wasn’t over. Not just yet.

But soon.

Soon she would be gone.

I looked once again back up at the list on her wall. The squiggle of handwriting still awaiting its peace.

*Put my toes in the sea.*

“Ready for the beach, Mum?” I said.

# 39

*Chloe*

Jackie was barely moving as we fastened her into the passenger seat. She was fading as we wired up her oxygen, yellowing fast.

I was choked up in the backseat as Logan headed for the coast, trying my best to keep a smile on my face when his eyes met mine in the rearview. Most of the time, I managed it. Other times not anywhere close.

He kept chatting to his mum along the way, even though she was barely able to answer, and even as the world crashed down around him, he managed to sound like him. Calm and steady, and every bit the Logan Hall I knew, until every now and then there was a crack in the calmness. Until every now and then, I heard the choke in his words.

He was hurting so bad.

It was strange to watch the other cars pass on the other side of the road outside the window, people going about their regular days. Kids pulling faces in the back, and people chatting, laughing. People on their way to work. Others off on happy days somewhere. So many people, so many lives.

Ours was sombre and beautiful all at once.

I knew it right down in the core of me, just how close to saying goodbye Jackie was. I could feel it. Hear it in every one of her shallow breaths. And even though it had been obvious since the day I met her that she was reaching the end of her life, it was still a shock deep down in my stomach, to sense it so close.

I couldn't even imagine the pain Logan was in as he took his mum on her final wish of a journey. I could feel his hurt in the air. Feel it thumping deep in my heart through every mile.

He'd stopped talking by the time we pulled into Frensham Beach car park. He chose the bay off to the right and off the beaten track, and there wasn't a soul in sight on a Friday midday. Not over on this part.

*Thank you, universe. Thank you for the quiet.*

The sky was cloudy, but the air was calm, and the sea stretched out away from us, blue as far as the eye could see. Jackie managed to open her eyes

nice and wide as we helped her into her wheelchair, and they sparkled bright as she saw the waves.

“Gonna put my toes in the sea,” she said, and Logan nodded.

“Here we go, Mum. Toes in the sea.”

He pushed her down to the sand, keeping her steady all the way. The wheels of the chair kept turning, even when the sand tried to suck them in. They kept turning, over and over, and kept letting us closer.

*Thank you again, universe. Thank you.*

We stopped a little way from the water, giving a huge sweep of a view, and Logan knelt at her side, taking her hand as they both looked out at the skyline.

I was beyond choked up as I watched them there, resting tight together. The tears were streaming down my cheeks in silence, honoured to see that closeness between two human souls.

I kept my distance, watching them manage to share their words, and I had no desire to intrude. Not even for a second. This time was theirs. This time would always be theirs.

I just wanted to capture for Logan.

I took one single photo of them from behind, heads resting together as they spoke with the blue of the ocean as a backdrop, crying so hard I could hardly see. Jackie’s head was shrouded in a bright red fluffy hat, and Logan’s was bare, his alopecia the stunning pattern I’d come to know so well.

I snapped the picture.

A gorgeous memory for that gorgeous man.

And then, once again, I stepped away.

They were talking a few minutes before Logan looked in my direction and beckoned me over. I stepped up and this time I didn’t even try to hide my tears, just knelt down on the other side of Jackie’s chair and took her other hand in mine.

She was awake, even though it must have been hard as hell to stay conscious, managing to summon the last of her energy for this last incredible journey. I realised with a whole fresh pang, right there and then, just how much I was in awe of that woman and her beautiful strength.

“I’m ready to put my toes in the sea,” she whispered, and there was a tear running down her cheek that took my breath. “Let’s get another tick on the wall.”

“Let’s go,” Logan said, and my awe doubled to see him so steady in his

pain as he prepared his mum for the final few paces.

We took off our shoes and cast them onto the sand, and I helped Jackie up from her chair along with Logan. We supported her, holding her weight through every step she took. Her eyes were on the sea, resolve insanely firm to walk her own path, even so close to her last goodbye.

I never ever wanted that walk to end.

I'd have spent the rest of eternity walking across that beach for her.

The sand was cold and damp between my toes. The waves gave a beautiful crash before us, a rhythm as timeless as the universe itself.

*Thank you, universe.*

I'd always loved the seaside. I loved building sandcastles and enjoying ice creams on the rocks, and trying to spot jellyfish in the sand. But it was nothing like loving the seaside as much as I loved it with Jackie Hall's arm in mine.

She let out a happy little gasp as the first wave met our feet, toes curling into the sand. Her eyes were every bit as magical as I'd ever seen them, the life shining bright from her smile.

She laughed. And that was magical too.

"Feels even better than I remember," she said. "Fucking hell, it feels good."

I closed my eyes to soak in the feeling myself, and she was right. Just like always, she was right. It sure felt fucking good.

"Thank you," I told her, and she turned her face to mine. "Thank you for sharing this with me."

The life was still shining bright when she answered me with a squeeze of her hand.

"Thank you for being here, sweetheart. Means the world to me."

Logan was quiet, supporting his mum like steel, his solemn gaze every bit as deep as the water on the horizon. I only wished I could hear the song of his soul and help his pain.

We walked Jackie a little way forward still, until the waves were around our ankles.

"More," she said, reminding me of me.

We helped her on. And it was crazy good to be in the splashes, water soaking our clothes up to our knees.

Again, I never wanted the sensation to end.

Jackie was still staring at the horizon when her legs started to buckle. She

gritted her teeth and tried to stay on her feet, but her fight was done.

We carried her back between us, fastening her back into her chair while her head lolled limp to the side. Exhausted.

She slept all the way home, pain muted by morphine, and I stayed quiet in the backseat, poised ready for any words Logan might want to say.

As always, he didn't want to say many. Churning. Churning. Deep enough to feel it in my core.

How I wished I could help him.

How I wished I could be the steel of his support, even for one little day.

The road felt so much quicker on the way back, and we pulled up onto the driveway with the sun still bright outside.

It was a crazy feeling, helping Jackie back inside and knowing full well it may be the last time she was alive and breathing outside of those walls.

We climbed the stairs. Slowly.

We crossed her bedroom. Just as slow.

Logan's breaths were shallow as he eased her into her bed and wired her oxygen up fresh. The rumble, rumble of the machine was already so familiar to me that I knew there would be a horrible void when it was gone.

"She might make it another day or two yet," he said, as he propped her feet up high on pillows. "Maybe three if we're lucky. Four if it's a miracle."

I nodded. "If anyone is capable of a miracle, it's her."

His eyes didn't share my hopes. "A miracle at the end of a row of fights with her body, every fucking step of her life."

I knew that. I knew she'd had a whole string of diagnoses and wars – more than one poor woman should ever have to battle. Still, she herself was a miracle. In any storm she was faced with, Jackie Hall would be the rainbow shining bright at the end. Her heart was a rainbow. Her smile was her soul.

I made Logan some dinner while he sat with his mum, and I broke down in sobs for a few solid minutes before putting the pasta on to simmer. It doesn't matter how many times you see people preparing at the end of life's road, nothing prepares you for the slam of watching someone you love slip away.

I loved Jackie.

I loved the man grieving alongside her.

I loved our life together, all three of us here together and enjoying every minute.

*Please, universe. Please. Why do you have to take her away?*

I knew the universe wouldn't grant my wishes this time, but still I asked.  
Still, I prayed.

I was still uttering the mantra as I took Logan's bowl of pasta upstairs.

*Please, give her a few more days. Please, universe, just a few more days.*

*Please, universe.*

*Please.*

# 40

*Chloe*

We were up all night while Jackie slept, both of us at her side, watching her breathe. Slowly. Rasping for every breath.

I wasn't expecting her to be with us in the morning, oxygen machine still rumbling its rhythm and filling her lungs – but she was. She was still with us.

Her eyes opened with a flicker, and she jolted, grimacing as she shuffled on her donut cushion. I almost burst into tears when her gaze landed on mine, her usual smile on her face as she coughed out a *good morning, sweetheart*, before taking hold of Logan's hand.

"Made it through to another day, boy. Be a darling and grab your mum a coffee, would you please?"

I didn't need to see Logan's face to know he was fighting back the tears of relief as much as I was.

"Fucking hell," Jackie said. "You two must look rougher than I do. Guess you didn't sleep?"

I laughed. "No. We didn't."

She grinned at me. "Nice of you to keep an eye on me while I dreamt my dreams."

I put my hand on Logan's arm as he made to stand, jumping up on my feet before him.

"I'll go make coffee and breakfasts," I said, and Jackie gave me a thumbs-up.

"Always up for a morning egg, sweetheart. Always."

She pulled me in for a hug before I left, and I could tell then that she was struggling. Her arms had barely any strength left at all, and her heart was barely more than a flutter against my chest.

Yeah. Her time was running out. Fast. But still... we had another day. Hopefully it would be a great one.

*Thank you, universe. Thank you.*

I was a busy little bee as I started work in the kitchen, getting the pans simmering and the eggs cracked and the kettle on – but not too busy. Not

busy enough to cut Logan out of time with his mum.

I held back a fair few minutes before finishing off the eggs and heading back up there with the tray in my hands, giving out the coffees and breakfast plates with a smile.

They'd been talking. Deep. I could see the tear streaks down Jackie's face. She squeezed Logan's hand before she took her breakfast plate from me.

I wondered whether I should leave them to it and head back to Mum and Dad's, but Logan's smile at me said more than words. He didn't want me to leave, and neither did Jackie. It was written all over their faces.

The swell of happiness in my chest, knowing I was so welcome and wanted at such an important time in two peoples' lives was something no amount of money could ever buy. The closeness and the tenderness and the belonging felt like gold dust right through my spine. There was no doubt, I really did belong there. With Logan. I belonged with Logan. Nothing would ever change that.

Jackie was trying to talk and eat both at once, recounting just how epic her beach trip had been. Logan was trying to ease her to enjoy her eggs, and calm herself through her chatter, but she was swishing his voice away with her hand, that mischievous grin on her lips.

"I mean it, Mum," he told her. "Save your energy."

"Battery is running pretty damn low, Logan. A few extra words sure ain't gonna have an impact."

She had a point.

We made short work of breakfast, and Jackie managed a few mouthfuls at least. Again, I insisted on cleaning up and headed downstairs to load the dishwasher, and once again I made slow work of it, desperate to preserve every scrap of Jackie-Logan time I could.

She was fast asleep again by the time I made it back up there, Logan sitting as still as I'd ever seen him as he stared at her.

"How is she doing?" I asked him, and he shook his head.

"Running on fumes. I'm surprised she made it through the night."

I shrugged, holding my smile steady in my optimism. "Maybe she'll make it through another."

His eyes were heavy as lead as he looked at me. "Maybe we'll all become penguins overnight."

His pessimism made me sound like a moron, to be hoping so easily. I was

quiet when I sat next to him, fingers twiddling in my lap as I wondered what the hell I could say to make any of this seem more OK. I didn't need to, though. He sighed as he pulled me closer.

"I'm sorry, Chloe. I'm frustrated. I don't mean to take it out on you. Not for a second."

"It's not frustration," I told him. "It's hurt. Hurt you'd have to be a robot not to be completely destroyed by."

"You're right," he said. "Grief destroys people. Always has, always will. You can think you've prepared for a whole fucking decade, but losing someone you love is always going to put you on your knees."

I nodded. "Always. But it's not over yet, Logan. It's lucky you have this final time with your mum, so you can both say whatever you want to say, right? That's a great thing."

Again, his eyes were heavy as lead. "Grief is never lucky, Chloe. Pain like that is never deserved and never set to ease. We get so involved with all the crap that goes on every day that we don't realise we're all going to get fucked just as soon as we're knocked down by someone taking their final breath. It doesn't matter how solid you think you are, you'll still get torn to shreds when you say your last goodbyes to someone you love."

I didn't disagree with him, but I didn't say anything, just kept quiet to let him say whatever he wanted to say. Only he didn't. He didn't say another word, just did his usual trick and the shutters came down.

I wished I could reach inside him and hold on tight. I wished I could give him some of my soul to help his own stay steady. But no. Never.

Not on Logan Hall's watch.

He stayed solid until early that evening. He barely stepped away from Jackie's bed unless it was for a toilet break. I drifted asleep with my head resting on his shoulder for a decent chunk of the afternoon, but not once did he shift from me. He was every bit as awake as I left him when I came back to my senses, his eyebrows pitted and pondering.

"You should sleep," I whispered. "I'll wake you up if anything changes or she wakes."

He shook his head. "No, thanks. I can manage."

But there's no way anyone can manage that much stress on top of that little sleep. Everyone has his limits, and Logan found his as the darkness through the windows closed in, end of life medical team waved in and waved out, Jackie awake enough to eat a few spoonfuls of cereal and drink some

juice. I saw his head lolling, breaths deepening over and over, but it still took another full hour before he admitted defeat and said he was going for a power nap back in his room. Thirty minutes max, he said – but again, his body had its limits.

It was about an hour until Jackie opened her eyes again.

I made to shoot out and let Logan know, but in typical Jackie style she grabbed for my wrist and pulled me closer, a light twinkle still there in her eyes.

“Let him sleep,” she said. “Us girls can have a chat in the meantime, can’t we?”

I could tell by her tone that she wanted to speak to me. It was a joy to sit back down in my seat and lean in to the bed.

“I love having chats with you.” I smiled. “I’m pretty sure you know that by now.”

Her laugh was a weak cackle, but it was still the Jackie Hall cackle I loved. “Oh yeah, darling, I sure know that by now.”

“Once we start talking I never want us to shut up,” I giggled back. “I’ll be up another few days straight if we get in the flow.”

“Good,” she said. “Because I’ve got some things I want to say to you.”

I felt that strange little tickle you get in your stomach when you know something important is coming. Because it was coming. That importance was shining right through her eyes from her soul.

“There’s some things I want you to know,” she said. “Some little snippets of wisdom from a wise old crow like me, I’d like to share with you.”

I bet they’d be a whole load more than snippets of wisdom. I’d known that from the very first moment I met her, just a few short weeks ago. Hell, it felt like a whole load longer than that. It felt like I’d known her my whole life.

She looked me right in the eyes and cleared her throat.

And then, wise old crow, Jackie Hall, started talking.

# 41

*Chloe*

“You know what, Chloe darling? There is a lot I’ve learnt in this frail body with a sharp mind still working. Now I’m at the end of my road, I want to share the workings of my sharp old mind with your sharp young one.”

I got a flush of shivers even thinking about it. I could see it in her eyes, a lifetime of wisdom right there for taking hold of and grabbing tight. I wanted this. I wanted to hear everything she had to tell me and carry it with me for the rest of my life.

I pulled my chair up even closer. “Please tell me everything. I’d love to know.”

Her smile was magnificent. She took as deep a breath as she could.

“You know what, poppet? The most important thing I’ve ever learnt, from the highs and lows and peaks and troughs? Positive mental attitude. If I could put it in a bottle, I’d spend the rest of my days walking around and giving it to people.” She laughed. “Not that I have any days left ahead of me to dish it out.”

I didn’t do the socially awkward thing of trying to brush it off, saying that she had loads of time left, because both of us knew she didn’t. Both of us knew this was the end.

She smiled at me and carried on.

“You look around you and see so clearly that people stress too much. Almost everyone has a big pile of crap they churn over day after day. It’s normal. Only it doesn’t have to be.” She paused. “People resign themselves to be a product of what has happened to them without realising that they have a choice of who to be in any given moment. Change takes an instant.” Another pause as she rasped in her breaths. “My journey has taught me to use my energy in a positive way. Don’t angst, don’t stress and don’t worry. The shit that’s going to happen is going to happen anyway.”

I smiled at her. “I get it. The whole big pile of crap thing. I hear it all the time, see it all the time.” I tipped my head. “I’m sure some of the time I get caught up in it myself too.”

“You’re a positive little soul,” she told me. “Just make sure you keep hold of that. No matter what happens, sweetheart, you keep hold of that. It makes you who you are.”

I nodded. “People tell me I’m an overly positive little soul. They roll their eyes and say my glass is always full, no matter how shit the horizon looks.”

“Having your glass full is the winner, Chloe. My life and journey has taught me to enjoy everything, not just the chosen moments. And this isn’t from some New Age floaty book, this is from learning the hard way.” Her eyes twinkled. “All the minuscule things have huge power. It’s the tiny things that we need to appreciate, all day, every day. And if things go crap and need sorting, they need sorting. No looking back and dwelling on the past. No blaming things for what’s happened. You just do it. Done. Dusted. Move on.”

She raised her hands to illustrate, and I felt it. The genuine burst of knowledge in her.

I nodded and she continued.

“That’s also what my journey’s taught me – take life as it comes. It will come, it will come. Take life as it comes and don’t give up on you. On what you can do.”

I could picture her through the years. I could see her always pushing herself. Always doing her best. Always being Jackie Hall and everything Jackie Hall stood for.

She smiled, to herself this time as much as at me.

“I stayed at my friend Amy’s place a few months back, and I was feeling pretty damn rough when I got there. To get upstairs to bed at night she had to stand behind me and push me up every step, but I did it.” She fixed her stare on me. “A few years ago I would never have asked for that help. No fucking way. I’d have seen it as giving in, and rather gone ass over tit down the stairs than rely on someone else to help me.”

“I get that,” I told her, because I did. I did get that. I saw it day after day, the frustration people had in the ward when they couldn’t do the basic things they wanted to. So sad to watch.

“These lessons are simple. They’re choices. Believe me, I’ve made loads of the bastards.”

Another laugh, although this one was more of a wheeze than a cackle. Then she shifted in bed, pulling a face as she squirmed.

“Oh, my fucking ass. It’s a pain in one.” She smirked. “This was an Amy gift, you know? This support cushion for my butt. Bless her heart, there’s so

much sentimentality there, but it's fucking useless, it just looks like a pretty donut.”

I couldn't hold back my own giggle, helping her shift on the pretty donut until she settled back down.

I cleared my throat and asked her a question, wanting to know just how far she'd come since she was a young little thing like me.

“Do you think what's important to you has changed over time?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “In the early days it's all about being good enough, doing the right things, getting the right stuff. But that doesn't matter. Doesn't matter at all near the end. It only slows you down.”

I was nodding along with her, eyes holding hers so steady.

“Believe me, sweetheart, what's important is the simple shit. Being around people, sharing, talking, eating. Simple pleasures that most people don't even take notice of. Their heads are always stuck on what's ahead of them and not on what's there, right here, right now. And that's sad, because your time is every second, and once it's gone, it's gone forever.”

“I can believe that,” I said. “I've blinked before and weeks have passed by, my head in the clouds while my evenings zip past doing things I don't care about and won't ever remember.”

I pictured Liam on the sofa. I pictured me eating dinner with him in silence, neither of us having a word we wanted to say. What a waste.

“The other thing,” Jackie added. “Don't ever justify what makes you, you, or how good you are. You don't have to stand up and be counted for shit that doesn't matter. You want to eat a feast, you fucking eat one. You don't have to justify how much or how little is on your plate, darling. Not ever. None of it ever matters – we are all as equally as important as the next person. There is no top dog, just the stupid damn illusion of one.”

I felt a shiver, because I could sense that all around me, everyone always wanting others to look at them like they are the best.

“The joy in the moment, sweetheart, the joy of you being you for who you are, embracing love and friendship. It's magic. It's always magic. Don't stress, just be you for who you are. That's the greatest magic of all.”

She was quiet for a few long seconds with her hand in mine.

“I hope you know how happy I am you're with my son, Chloe. Believe me, breathing my last breaths and knowing he's got you by his side is the biggest relief I've ever had.” She squeezed my fingers. “You can't put an old head on young shoulders, my lovely, please remember that and enjoy it for

what it is.”

“I’ll try my best,” I said, and I could feel the tears tickling from down deep.

“You’re growing together, you and Logan, people always are. Going through challenges with someone, and coming through the other side together always shows learning on both parts. Never underestimate that – people never give it enough credit. Growing up.” She wheezed another cackle. “People never stop growing up, they’re fools if they think they do.”

“I’ve got plenty of growing up left to go,” I giggled back.

We laughed together before she carried on.

“I really am blessed, because I’m still here, even after all these years of being terminally ill in a whole load of ways the universe wanted to throw at me. Cancer, breathing, whatever. I’m blessed to be experiencing it all, every single day, and I never stop smiling. If anything, I’ve been grinning more the closer I get to reaching the end, because each moment means so much more.”

“It’s so hard to see people struggling so much,” I told her, and I meant it. Seeing people so lost as they succumbed to their end days was enough to tear my heart in two. Jackie seemed to read my mind.

“I’ve seen a lot of people in hospices, you know. Plenty of people in a similar situation to me have been very low and resigned, especially since their families are suffering so badly around them. I’d always say to them, *if you were more positive, they would find it so much easier to be positive too.* Which is pretty damn true. Without being rude, I’d say, *what is it you want to be remembered for? What do you want your final part of the road to mean?*” She paused again. “Every morning my first waking thought is ‘thank you universe for another day’ and to sum it up in a nutshell, another woman I knew who is dead now, bless her soul, said that her first waking thought was always *shit, what’s going to happen today?* Tragic.”

It was tragic. I could imagine the poor woman who said it, petrified of every hour ahead of her.

Jackie carried on.

“I know I’m viewed that way by others – as a super happy, positive person. At the hospice I hear it a lot from doctors I’m involved with, and nurses – because it is unusual apparently. Don’t get me wrong, when you are ill as fuck there are lots of things that aren’t pleasant, lots of things aren’t nice, but just look away, think something nice for a minute, and bish bosh bang. Done. Fear. What fear does, what feeding anxiety does is exacerbates,

so for me, I am in pain all the time, but I don't suffer my pain, because pain is there for a reason. And that reason doesn't define me."

I was nodding. Listening. Trying to soak her up with every scrap of my mind.

She laughed again. "Yeah, I mean, I suffer with some things, like I'm always going on about my ass, because when it's sore, it's fucking sore. But there's always more than that bubbling away under the surface. My lungs have been in pain for years, right up until getting this morphine driver. But I don't let it define me, because otherwise I can't let the life and joy in."

Once again I saw the similarities between Jackie and Logan, mother and son. I saw the same passion in their eyes, and the same determination. The same unwillingness to be defined by their bodies and not their hearts.

She pulled me in closer, and I could hear it in her voice. Every word was a struggle.

"And this is what I want you to know, sweetheart, before I say my goodbye. Every single excruciating experience I've been through, I've taken something valuable from it. It's had a purpose. People don't give credence enough to the power and strength of mind over matter. I'm not saying you can make pain go away, it's just, again it's this fear based thing. We fear what we don't fucking know. So make it known. Take it onboard. Feel it. *Feel yourself, always feel yourself.*" She paused and smiled a fading smile enough that it choked my breath. "And feel, Logan, sweetheart. Please feel Logan too. He's gonna need you. He's gonna need you by his side. Even though he might try to push you away."

I nodded, and I knew the tears were coming, I couldn't have stopped them if I'd tried.

"I'll be by his side, I promise."

"Thank you, darling, because I need that too. I can't say goodbye until I know you're going to be holding his hand at my funeral."

"I will be, I promise. I swear."

Tears ran down her cheeks as mine did, both of us trying to smile, and with that she reached up behind her and pulled an envelope out from behind her elephant postcard.

"On that note, sweetheart, I need you to promise me something else."

"Anything."

She handed the envelope over, and the scribble only made the tears fall harder.

*Logan.*

It was a letter for Logan.

“Please make sure he gets this,” she said.

And with that, she gave up.

She lay back against her pillows, and smiled as she let out a breath, tears still flowing as I watched the weight of the world fly away.

I kissed her hand before I got up from my seat, choking back my tears as my legs found their strength.

Then I rushed to get Logan.

# 42

*Logan*

Chloe shook me awake, trying to hold back the tears and failing.

The words were out of my mouth without any thought.

“Has she gone? Has she?”

A shake of the head from a sobbing Chloe as she grabbed for my hand and pulled me from my bed.

It doesn’t matter how prepared you think you are to say your goodbyes, it falls to nothing as that pain slams like molten hell in your gut. When the little boy is screaming inside, begging that his mum doesn’t die. *Please, please, don’t take my mummy. Please, no. Please.* When your memories tumble right the way through you, all the things you wanted to do, all the things you wanted to say. All the things you’d said and wished you hadn’t. All the things you are losing, when your rock of a mother takes her final breaths.

I don’t know how I found my feet. I don’t know how I kept my breaths steady as I followed Chloe with her tears streaming down her cheeks and crossed the landing to Mum’s bedroom.

Chloe held back, my little jitterbug hovering just a second with wide eyes, not quite sure whether I wanted her there or not.

I did.

I *needed* her there. I needed her hand in mine. I needed her at my side, and at Mum’s side, because she’d given us so much. Loved us so much. My beautiful freckle-faced girl had only been with us a fleeting moment of time in our world, but it was worth a lifetime.

*She* was worth a lifetime.

The man I’d become, so sure of his footing, was falling. The terrified child within me was peering through with scared eyes, no matter how hard I tried to hide him.

Chloe’s head was on my shoulder, my hand gripped tight as I leant in and took hold of Mum’s fingers.

I sucked in a breath as Mum’s eyes flickered open, and I saw it there in her smile, the pure joy in her heart as she saw my jitterbug there alongside

me.

Her eyes were happy, even as she neared her end.

Her grip on mine was firm, even as her body reached its limits.

“I love seeing you two together,” she rasped. “I’ll rest easy now.”

I knew Chloe’s tears were streaming without looking. I knew her smile would be magical to match my mum’s, love and pain both at once.

Then Mum’s attention was all on me, and I understood more than words could ever say. That connection. That love. That infinite bond between child and mother that nothing will ever stand a chance of replacing.

“I’m so proud of you,” she said, “Honestly, sweetheart, I’m so proud of you. I’m so proud of the man you’ve become.”

I couldn’t hold back the sobs, the tears.

There were tears in her eyes, too. I could hear her straining, her desire to speak at odds with her body’s desire to breathe.

We were quiet as we sat together, all three of us, breaths in rhythm as hers faded. I knew the end was getting nearer, and so did Chloe. She excused herself to go to the toilet, leaning in to kiss Mum on the forehead before she went. I could see it a mile off, that sweetness in her scurrying away to give us our last final moments together.

I knew what Mum was going to say before she said it. She gave my hand the very slightest squeeze as soon as Chloe was out on the landing.

“Don’t...” she wheezed. “Don’t you... let her go...”

I didn’t answer, just squeezed her hand right back.

“I love you, Logan,” she rasped, and I nodded.

“I love you too, Mum.”

Then she left me, giving me one final smile before her eyes closed. I felt her give up. I felt the very second she let out a sigh and slumped a final slump against her pillows. I knew she wouldn’t be opening those twinkling eyes again.

I’d seen it enough times over the years to know that her mind was done, just the body slowing down, shutting down, the smallest of breaths. I couldn’t stand it. The tears fell, and the little boy in me piped up, one single whisper.

“Mum.”

Chloe must have been hovering on the landing. She stepped in when she heard my whisper and wrapped her arms tight around my shoulders as my tears came flooding, matching them with sobs of her own.

We cried. We breathed. I held Mum’s hand as her body kept on rasping in

tiny shallow breaths, and Chloe held mine.

The tears calmed to streaks, both of us in silence as we sat there. Both of us lost in thoughts as she faded away. Fading as her petals fell, leaving just the stem, a broken body that gave up at the final mile.

It was sunrise when her breaths finally stopped.

The sunlight was creeping in through the curtains when I knew Mum was really gone and the little boy inside broke his heart. Gasps and sobs, hands trembling as the truth hit, stabbing deep.

That retch of *no, no, NO*, when your whole body racks with the pain. Crying, begging, pleading for another minute, just another minute, just another word.

But it was time.

This time was really the time.

No hopes, no miracles, no more smiles on her face or twinkles in her eyes.

No more cackling laughter.

My mum was gone.

# 43

*Chloe*

We sat at her side, sobbing. We held each other. There was nothing words could ever say through the pain, through the loss... but there was more. There was more than the pain and the loss – enough to shine like beautiful warm lamplight in the pitch darkness.

Love.

I could feel it in the air all around us.

Love that consumes you completely.

Love that consumes your heart and wraps up your soul.

Love for the woman just gone.

The incredible woman just gone.

Love for the man in my arms.

Love for this beautiful world of theirs I'd been lucky enough to be a small part of.

Logan calmed after a few frantic minutes, struggling to compose himself. He forced down his chokes and stilled his breaths, pressing his forehead to mine.

“Thank you.”

I managed a smile.

“I will never need thanks. Ever.”

He took a while before he called the end of life team, still holding her hand when I let the doctor in downstairs and led her up. I watched as she checked Jackie's pulse, and did the final examination, and it felt so surreal, even though I'd been working with people at the end of their life for weeks now.

It was nothing like watching them sign away Jackie Hall.

The funeral director appeared when the doctor had left, and we moved along into Logan's bedroom as they took her away. The house felt so different without her there. Silent and empty.

I held him close, pulling him to me on the bed, both of us lost in our heads but connected in body.

Jackie was gone.

She was really gone.

It was long past lunchtime by the time I ventured downstairs to get some food for us. Logan drank a glass of water, but barely touched his plate, managing only a couple of bites at the sandwich before he retched and gave up. I barely managed any myself either, hardly a surprise.

I abandoned the practical crap then, giving myself up to the loss as the outside world carried on turning. There was birdsong outside the window, and rumbles of cars along the street, but we didn't move, just stayed holding each other in silence. Minutes ticking and ticking, and turning into hours,

We were there for hours.

He stirred at my side when the afternoon was long fading. I ran my fingers across his cheek, tracks deeply reddened by tears. I looked him in the eyes, desperate to feel him, and I could feel it there in him, too. That desperation to be felt. To be touched. To feel heart-beating flesh on flesh.

It felt so natural when his lips pressed to mine. It felt so natural when I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and kissed him back. Slowly at first. Softly.

But it changed.

Over long, slow minutes, it changed.

The primal call inside was life staking its claim. That urge for shared breaths, and touch, and warmth. That urge for closeness that swallows you whole.

I'd never felt anything like it. I'd never felt the passion in the pain, or the call of the heart through the grief.

Logan's hands were fierce but loving. His rawness was fire.

I wrapped my legs around his waist, body calling. His body answered, pulling me from my clothes as I pulled him out of his. But this wasn't about sex. This wasn't about pleasure, or lust. This was about two bodies connecting and wanting to feel alive. This was about bonding beyond reason. Beyond logic. Beyond anything I'd ever imagined.

He was strong and sure as he pushed inside me, and I wanted that. I wanted the force. I wanted the life.

His hands held mine up high, and his eyes were pleading with me and eating me up at the same time. All I had to do was dive in.

"Take me," I said and I surrendered to those eyes, took Logan Hall into me as I fell into him. And I was there in the depths. This time I understood

them, plunging deep, losing my breath.

I felt it all.

Saw it all.

And in that moment, I knew every part of him as though it was me.

I knew his love, and his pain, and his fear.

I knew the tiny child in him alongside the beautiful man, with his strength, his steel, his fight.

I didn't come close to an orgasm. I didn't want to. I didn't want anything other than his flesh on mine, rhythm pounding, breaths meeting breaths as he consumed me and I consumed him right back.

He collapsed onto me when his body gave up, his face pressed to my neck as his mind came tumbling back to him. I felt that too.

Oh fuck, how I felt that too as his arm reached around me.

The exposed soul that had just devoured mine was breathing hard and thinking hard.

I felt the tension in him. Knew it wasn't just the cogs of his mind that I could hear.

It was the shutters coming down.

# 44

*Logan*

Lying there with the divine creature that had stolen my heart, I wished I could be the man that gave hers what it deserved.

I couldn't.

I could never be that man.

The pain of losing Mum was razor sharp, slicing me in two, and it was there in Chloe, too. It was there in her eyes, shining raw along with love. Love for *me*.

The sacrifice of loving a man like me was more than she should ever know.

I held her tight to my chest as I gathered my breath, but I knew she could feel the difference in me. It was ripe through the tension in her arms.

“Don’t do this,” she whispered. “Don’t shut me out.”

Once again, my truth was on my tongue, desperate to spill out in a river and come crashing into hers, but no. No.

“Get some sleep, jitterbug,” I told her, but she wouldn’t. She pulled herself up to look me in the eyes, and hers were wide, bottom lip trembling with a pain that wasn’t from losing Mum.

“Please,” she whispered. “Don’t do this.”

I wished I didn’t have to. I wished I cared more for myself and less for her, but I didn’t. My love for her was beyond any love I’d ever have for myself. My care for her future was more than enough to sacrifice the joy in my own.

“Get some sleep,” I repeated, and reached up to brush stray hair from her forehead.

I looked at her through fresh eyes as she sat above me, legs folded underneath her on the bed. I saw her freckles in the lamplight, and remembered the very first moment I saw her on the train, sitting there so sweetly, lost in her own little world.

It would have been so much easier for her if she hadn’t been sitting on that train that morning.

“What is it?” she asked, bringing me back to the moment. “What makes you do this? Shut me out like this?”

I propped myself up on my elbow, wishing she wasn’t quite so astute and so answer seeking. The beauty in the purity of her truth and expression was enough to pang my heart like a hammer blow.

She carried on talking before I could even begin to find an answer.

“I mean, I know it must be really, really shit, and I can’t imagine what you feel like right now, I really can’t... because I feel so shit myself, and it’s nothing compared to how you must feel... but please don’t push me away. I want to be there. I want to help. I want to be the Chloe you let me be in your mum’s bedroom. I want to be the Chloe she was so happy to see you with. I want to be the Chloe that –”

I shook my head, and she stopped speaking, those saucer eyes wide on mine.

“Not now,” I said. “This isn’t the time for this. Just sleep. Sleep and we’ll talk in the morning.”

“You aren’t going to sleep, though, are you?” she said. “I know you aren’t.”

She was right. I wasn’t.

“Get some rest,” I told her. “You’re exhausted.”

“So are you,” she said.

She was right. I was.

I dropped down onto my back, staring at the ceiling and wishing this wasn’t the godawful time to be having this godawful conversation. If I hadn’t been such a reckless, short-sighted fool in the first place, then we wouldn’t have had to. She’d have been at home at her parents’ place, reading some of her favourite paperbacks and playing with her dog, none the wiser about the curse of fucking pain going on in my world.

“We can do whatever you want,” she said. “If you want us to stay quiet, we can. If you want us to talk, we can. If you want to stay here, we can. If you want to go out, we can.”

I loved her mantra of helpfulness, but it changed nothing. She didn’t belong here. She couldn’t.

“You really are a beautiful little sweetheart,” I said to her, but she saw past the compliment in seconds.

“So why are you so keen to let me go?”

I wished I had an answer for that, but any answer I had would only make

it harder for the angel to find her wings and fly the fuck away from me.

“You are, aren’t you?” she pushed. “That’s what you’re thinking, isn’t it? About me going?”

I met her stare. “I’m thinking about you getting some sleep,” I said, but she was shaking her head.

“You can try to get rid of me, Logan, but I don’t want to go. And even if I did, which I don’t, I promised your mum I would never walk away, and I won’t. I don’t want to.”

“Mum didn’t understand things,” I replied, but Chloe didn’t listen, she was still shaking her head.

“Your mum *did* understand things,” she said. “She understood how important you are to me, and how good we are together. She understood how much we enjoy time together and just how great the world is when we’re standing side by side.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Did you rehearse that?”

She shrugged, and did her usual finger twiddle in her lap.

“Might have done. A bit.”

I smirked, because she was incredible. A stunning girl, with a stunning mind, and a stunning heart to match.

She smirked along with me, then took a breath.

“She really did understand things, Logan. She did.”

“She understood the things she knew,” I said. “But there was plenty my mum didn’t know. About me.”

“So let *me* know then,” she whispered. “Let *me* understand.”

Again, it would have been such a relief. Such a weight off my shoulders to come crashing down, shared with the woman I love. Unfortunately, a problem shared is a problem halved, and Chloe’s gorgeous shoulders were far too young, and far too happy to take on half of my burden.

I imagine my eyes must have hardened as the walls came back up around my heart. I imagine she must have seen it a clear mile away, how I tensed up to ice coldness beside her on the bed.

“Don’t,” she said, but it was too late.

*I* was too late.

I was still feeling sick, grief slamming to my core as I pulled myself up from the bed and put on my dressing gown. I headed out onto the landing, being careful not to even glance at Mum’s open bedroom before I took the stairs down, two steps at a time.

Chloe was in my shirt when she joined me in the kitchen, a familiar sight, and one I'd remember forever. What little of forever there was left.

"This isn't right for me," I told her, forcing out my words.

I was trying my best to keep it cool, my veneer of strength rising up enough to keep me steady, even though my insides were spaghetti.

"What isn't right for you?" she asked.

I flicked the kettle on to boil, knowing full well I wasn't up to drinking coffee, but needing the break in her stare.

"We aren't," I said. "I love you, and I'm grateful, but us being together... that's no future, Chloe."

"Stop it," she said, and this time there was an edge to her voice I hadn't ever heard before. Frustration. I felt it too. Only mine was directed like a mirror, right back onto myself. "I mean it, Logan. I told your mum and I'm telling you. I'm not going anywhere. I want to be *here*. With *you*."

I knew it then – seeing her so firm in her resolve – that there was no way I could ever make her see sense for her future. She'd never walk away, not if she knew the real reason I was so keen to push her from my side. So, I didn't reason with her. I sucked myself in and pushed myself on, for her sake and not for mine.

I was giving her the stab of the needle, to save her the infection. This was an infection that would be deep in her heart. Deep and long. More painful than any breakup I could give her, right here, right now.

"Maybe I don't want you to be here," I told her, hating myself at the words. "Maybe I need some time. Some space."

"That's not true..." she said, but there was a flash of self-doubt in there.

"She was my mother, Chloe. Do you think you can fix that? Do you really think that you holding my hand through the night is going to make up for the space I need alone?"

She didn't answer me, and that self-doubt was more than a flash on her face this time. It was a blush, pink through the tear streaks, pounding her heart along with the grief.

I stared at her and she stared at me, and I kept it firm, kept it cold, summoning every scrap of professionalism I'd learnt through the years and keeping my damn fucking emotions under the surface where they belonged.

"Honestly, Chloe. Thank you for being there for me, but I'm through with that now." I paused, fighting the urge to retch up the whole fucking load of the pain and fall to my knees. "It was easy to get caught up in Mum's fluffy

ideas of companionship forever, but it's still true that you're barely more than half my age and I barely know you. Please. Just give me some fucking space, will you?"

It broke her.

And it was all I could do to hold it together.

I felt her fracture inside, pain on top of pain. Rejection. Grief. Loss.

It took every scrap of my willpower to keep steady as her sobs rose back up in her throat.

"I just..." she tried. "I can give you some space... if that's what you need... but how about tomorrow? How about we -"

I was shaking my head.

"This isn't going to be fixed by tomorrow, sweetheart. How about you get yourself back to work and back to your training contract, and I'll give you a call sometime."

She didn't know what to say.

Seeing her like that, the white rabbit twitching to run while her heart screamed out for her to stay, was a bludgeon to every scrap of hope I'd grabbed hold of since she danced into my world – the whirlwind in my darkness.

Luckily, the white rabbit won.

"I'll, um... get my things then..." she whispered, and walked away on stumbling legs.

I didn't go after her. I stared at the kettle, breathing strong to fight the tears, listening to the floorboards creaking over my head.

I don't know how I managed to call a taxi. I don't know how I managed to watch her there, standing at the front door, jittering with a whole fresh kind of jitters without holding her tight and begging her to stay.

The lights of the cab shone through the window, and I walked on out alongside her, handing over the cash to the driver before she could protest.

"Halsey," I said, and he nodded.

Chloe was dithering as I opened the rear door and gestured her inside.

"Thanks again," I told her, and my voice sounded so fucking cold.

She didn't answer, just shrugged, a fresh stream of tears down her cheeks.

"Make sure you head into work," I said. "The ward will need you tomorrow."

She shrugged again. "I'll try my best."

"That's a good little jitterbug." I managed a smile, leaning in to kiss her

forehead.

"I mean it," she said once she had dropped into the backseat. "I love you, Logan. I don't want to leave. I don't *ever* want to leave."

It was my turn not to answer.

I closed the door and raised a hand as the car pulled away, watching her saucer eyes watching me through the window until the street corner blocked her from view.

She was gone.

I hated myself.

My little freckle-faced jitterbug was gone.

I made it back to the dining room table before I collapsed with my head in my hands. Ripples of pain ate me alive, over and over as my goodbyes tore me apart.

Because it wasn't just one goodbye I'd said that evening.

Wasn't just one farewell I'd made to every joyous moment of my life.

I stumbled upstairs to the bathroom, retching in the sink before I met my eyes in the mirror.

I saw my pain. I saw the futility. I saw everything I needed to see to open that bathroom cabinet and pull the huge insulin bottle from the back of the shelf.

I couldn't do this anymore. I couldn't do it.

I stumbled along the landing, and this time I couldn't stop the glance inside Mum's room at her empty bed, oxygen pipes still dangling limp by her mattress.

The insulin bottle was in my hands when I went into my bedroom to check Chloe had taken all her things. I was still looking for her clothes at the side of the bed when I caught the flicker of white from my pillowcase.

A letter.

I saw a letter.

*Logan.*

My gut twisted and lurched.

I could hear Mum's voice calling my name, her scrawl a squeeze of her hand on mine.

I put the insulin down on the bedside table and picked up the envelope, turning it over and over in my hands.

*Logan.*

I sat and stared. Thought. Drifted in and out of sleep, that envelope in my

hands until the very first hints of sunlight started up through the window.

*Logan.*

The world started turning. Rousing to life. And I was still a part of it.

I was still Dr Logan Hall.

No matter how much I wanted it to be done for me, I was still Dr Logan Hall.

Fuck it.

Fuck it all.

I took the letter downstairs, and this time I really did flick the kettle on. This time I got myself a mug from the cupboard and spooned out coffee from the pot, and I pulled myself together.

I sat down at the dining table, my teeth gritted tight and my throat dry as a bone, cursing myself for my own fucking weakness in a cruel fucking world.

Then, finally, I tore that envelope open.

# 45

*To my son, who fills my days with love and joy. I watched you grow from a boy into a man, and no mother could be prouder of all you've achieved.*

*When you read this I will no longer be here, but please smile for me, knowing that my life has always been a good one where lessons are learnt and blessings are earnt. You have always been my biggest blessing, my boy, and I'm so pleased to leave you with a blessing all of your own.*

*I can now pass on, sound in the knowledge that if you open your heart and life, like I know you can do, and share the good, bad and joyous with that beautiful little sweetheart by your side, you will never be alone.*

*With Chloe I know that you will see how wonderful it feels to be loved, safe and secure. Everything is always better if you share your love and joy. Everything. She is strong, with a wise little head on her shoulders, and she loves you as you, for you. For the amazing Logan Hall I love so much.*

*She's a lucky girl, my love. A very lucky girl. And you are a very lucky man alongside her.*

*I have given her all of my blessings, and all of my snippets of wisdom, so what have you got to lose, my precious boy? The best things in life can't be bought or sold, they are given. Chloe wants to give you herself and all that comes along with it.*

*Don't be sad, for I will always watch over you. Remember me in all the funny, crazy memories we have had, then start building a whole set of new ones with the woman you love.*

*Life is a span of years,*

*Full of hope, love and tears.*

*But there is a time and a place in every day,*

*To find a special moment to see your way.*

*Thank you for being my pride and joy, from a tiny bundle of sheer delight into the loving, caring man I'm so joyous and so damn proud to call my son.*

*Love you to the moon and back.*

*Mum.*

If only she could have known.

# 46

*Chloe*

I let all three of us down that night.

Logan's mum, when I'd promised her I wouldn't be leaving him.

Logan himself, when I walked out of there without the greatest fight he'd ever had.

But mainly, I'd let myself down.

I'd walked away from the love of my life, knowing he was meant to be my world. I'd walked away from the place I was happiest, even in the worst of the pain.

Mum and Dad were in bed when I walked through the front door that night. I petted Beano, but even he was dozy, flopping back into his bed without even bringing me his ball.

I crept on upstairs, and already my bedroom felt alien to me. Cold and empty, even though it was packed with my things.

I had a faded old bed set I'd loved for years, and my favourite photos of college up on the walls. I had some of my old teddy bears sitting up on top of the wardrobe, and a sparkly pen set on my desk. Once upon a time it would have been enough – to rush on home to the safety of my parents, like the little girl falling off her bike outside.

But I wasn't that little girl anymore.

I didn't make it into work the next morning – I'd have been useless if I'd have tried. Luckily, Romi was still available to help me out and cover my shift. I tried calling Logan right through the day, leaving him messages he didn't answer. I was ready and set to head on over there, and attempt his front door. I'd found out the train times and got myself dressed ready for the journey, and was just about ready to put my shoes on when I heard the bleep of a message on my phone.

*I need my space, it said. Please, Chloe. Give me my space.*

Fuck.

I sat down on my bed and cried all over again.

I didn't know what to do.

I was missing Logan worse than I could have thought possible, and missing Jackie along with him, both of them gone like a gulf from my soul. I tried to hide it as best I could from Mum and Dad, keeping my distance bar a nibble at dinner that night with a whimper of a *bad stomach*.

I laid down in my room and failed at reading. I tried to sleep but failed at that too.

I was still barely awake when my alarm sounded for work the next morning. My legs were like jelly when I threw myself into my usual nurse uniform, still pulling on my sweater as I ran down the street.

I made it to the train, throwing myself in the carriage and dropping down onto the nearest seat, barely catching my breath before it pulled away.

And then I wondered what the fuck I was doing there.

How the fuck would I make it through the day in a ward full of people trying desperately make it through their own?

I'd just have to try.

I'd have to try for Franklin. For the staff and the patients.

And for Dr Logan Hall.

The man who would want me to help the ward, instead of helping him.

Who knows how I did it, but I did it. I choked back everything I could, sobbing frantic sobs in the toilet every time I had a couple of minutes I could grab. I managed tiny smiles, giving my all to being as genuinely happy as possible, even though I'd taken a grater to every scrap of my insides.

The other nurses knew I was going through some painful shit. They could see it a mile off.

Romi pulled me aside before lunchtime, and her expression spoke a million words.

“Are you alright, Chloe? Has something happened to Dr Hall? Wendy said it’s Dr Edwards in this week instead of him. And I know I’ve been covering… but I don’t know what I’m covering for…”

I’d seen Rachel Edwards in the ward before, and she was great. Really great. But nowhere near as great as Logan, not in Franklin Ward.

“Logan’s got some, um… issues…” I said, and then lost it, lip trembling as I goofed up with my words.

She pulled me into the staffroom and was up close in a heartbeat, holding me tight.

“Hey, girl. Let it out. Let it out,” she soothed. “What the fuck’s going on?”

I cried, gasping. I pulled away enough to shrug, but she didn't leave me, wouldn't even look away.

My friend.

She was my friend.

So I told her.

I told her everything in a nutshell. I told her about how I was beyond in love with Logan and would be for the rest of my life. I told her about Jackie and how she was the most incredible woman I'd ever met. I told her how we'd said goodbye to her, and how my heart was still torn up, just not anywhere near as much as Logan's.

She listened, nodded, and I saw it again, as clear as day, just how skilled and how supportive the staff in Franklin Ward were, helping people with loss and fear and grief through every working day of their lives.

"You get over there and tell Logan how you feel," she said. "He can say he needs his space all he likes, but he needs *you*, Chloe. For sure, he needs *you*. Nobody is invincible. Not even Dr Hall."

I shrugged again, frustrated through the tears, because how could I get him to reason? How could I get him to listen when he wouldn't even answer my calls?

I told her as much, but she didn't stop nodding, her hands gripping my shoulders.

"You do what it takes, Chloe. If you wanna speak to him then you head on over there. You bulldoze his door if you have to. Just get yourself in front of him, and make sure he knows how you feel."

I loved her logic. I nodded, and calmed my tears and I told her she was right. I would do whatever it took to get myself in front of him.

I was pretty confident when I set off from Harrow that night on the Redwood line train.

The train passed Churchley, and I was still breathing steady, knees knocking just a little as I shuffled in my seat.

Newstone came and went, and my fingers started twisting in my lap as I pictured Logan opposite me, his paperback in his hands.

Eastworth had my nerves fluttering in my stomach, memories of Jackie dancing through my heart, hurting bad enough to catch my breath.

Wenton, Callow, then the Sunnydale viaduct, and the pain was hard, tears pricking.

Then it was Eddington, and my old life. The old life that was done for

me. So alien it was strange.

Then Redwood.

The train arrived at Redwood train station.

My legs were shaking as I stepped from the carriage. I focused on every footprint as I made my way to King Street and the man I loved.

And there it was. Logan's house.

I walked up his front path, legs still shaking.

I knocked at his front door and waited. No answer, so I knocked again, harder.

Still, there was no answer.

I stepped back and looked up at the windows, but there was no sign of life. Nothing.

I called his phone. No answer.

I knocked again. No response.

I called his name through his letterbox, but the place was still, silent.

So, I sat on his doorstep and waited, waited, waited. Still, there was nothing. Not a single sound came from behind that door.

Finally, the ping of a message had me leaping to my feet, fingers scrabbling at my phone. But the message wasn't from Logan. It was from Liam.

*Just come and get your fucking stuff, will you? I mean it. I'm chucking it out. You'd better get your ass in gear if you give a shit about it.*

I didn't give a shit about it. Not anymore.

The tears came streaming all over again, and I had one last attempt at the front door. I shouted his name, cried with all my heart, but still no answer came.

It was cold outside when the sun started setting. I tried his phone once more before I figured I was knocking at nothing and gave up with a fresh bout of tears, defeated as I made my way back to the train station.

The journey was agony. My sobs kept on coming, right the way through to Halsey. I could barely even breathe when I crossed the front lawn. My parents were watching TV when I stepped inside. I excused myself as best I could and headed right on up to my bedroom, but after an evening of being the one rapping her knuckles against solid wood, this time it was Mum who was knocking at *my* door. I let her in, and showed her my tears in their full glory.

"Oh, Chloe!" she said, and she held me and rocked me, in that way only a

mum can do for her child.

It only made it harder, just thinking how much Logan was missing his mum.

I shared my story from start to finish with Mum, and she listened. I told her how much I loved Dr Hall, and she smiled.

“Then you don’t let it go,” she said. “Whatever it takes, Chloe, you don’t let it go. Not if you love him that much.”

I managed a smile, through the grief and the fear, and she smiled back at me, tears springing up of her own.

“What happened to my little girl?” she asked. “You’re not a little girl anymore, are you? You’re a woman. A woman who knows her road.”

I nodded, and for the first time in my life, my fingers didn’t twist in my lap.

She was right. I was a woman.

And I did know my road.

I was a woman in love, with Logan Hall.

And I’d reach him. I would.

Some way, somehow, I’d bring those walls of his tumbling down.

# 47

*Logan*

She would have been a storm of sunlight in my rain. Hearing her knocks and cries at the front door that night was a summons that brought me to my knees.

Fuck. I wanted her.

Fuck. I needed her.

But fuck, she sure didn't need me.

So, I sat there in the darkness.

My phone was still on silent, resting on the table along with the insulin bottle, and Mum's letter was propped up next to it, the *Logan* scrawl burning bright.

I'd known the final extent of the news before Dr Mitchell had called me that afternoon, but it didn't matter. There was always room for pain on top of pain.

Still, I'd deal with it. Just as I always dealt with it. Just as I always forced my way through the misery with a heart of cold steel.

I took three days out that week to get myself in check for the ward, making sure I looked like the regular Dr Hall before I set off for the train that morning. My seat felt empty without jitterbug opposite, but I was prepared for that. My novel was closed, redundant on my lap, but that didn't matter. The solidarity in the pages was enough to keep me steady.

I kept my steps brisk on the way into the hospital. I said my hellos to the reception staff and headed on up to Franklin Ward like everything was as normal as normal could be, waving at Richard as I passed him. It was Romi who looked like she'd seen a ghost when I brushed past her in the corridor on my way through to the consultation room. She darted away with a clipboard clutched to her chest, flashing me glances over her shoulder, and I knew exactly where she was headed.

She was headed straight for Chloe.

I was barely settled in my seat when the nervous little rap sounded at the doorway. I cleared my throat before I called the *come in*, being sure to keep my gaze cold and calm as my little jitterbug stepped inside.

She dropped herself straight into the chair opposite, leaning in across the desk with her eyes open wide. Only this time her fingers weren't twiddling. This time she wasn't a jitterbug at all.

"I came to your house on Tuesday night," she said. "I was calling you right through the evening. You heard me, right? You must've heard me."

"I'm sorry," I replied. "I've been quite caught up with arrangements for Mum's funeral." And I felt sick to my gut for my bullshit.

"Right," she said.

"Right," I said back.

Her eyes were fierce and loving both at once. Beautiful. Just like always, she was beautiful.

"I've been worried about you."

I nodded. "Thank you. I'm doing ok."

"Right," she said.

"Right," I said back.

And it was more bullshit.

The whole sorry thing was bullshit, stabbing me way fucking deeper than she'd ever know.

"Is this it, is it?" she asked. "This is really how you want it to be?"

I picked up a pen, and this time it was me who twiddled. "I'm not sure I know what you mean, Chloe. If you mean professionalism, then yes, that's how I want it to be."

"Right," she said.

"Right," I said back, and despised myself for my sorry fucking life.

"I love you," she told me. "I can say it a million times, and I will keep on saying it. Because I love you."

"That's nice to know," I said, and she scowled at me.

"Why are you being like this?"

I didn't have an answer to that. Not one I could ever share. Not since I loved her so fucking much.

"Look, Chloe," I began. "I really appreciate all you've given me. Both me and Mum. But it's over now. We have Franklin Ward to focus on, and you have so much to be learning, so much to be enjoying."

She shot me a look of fire as she got up from her seat.

"I mean it," she said. "I love you, Logan."

If only I could have said it right back to her.

I used the lunchtime break to head across to Gavton Ward. Dr Mitchell

was expecting me and led me into his room, digging his papers out from his cabinet before taking his seat.

“Don’t give me any bullshit,” I told him. “Just give me the news.”

He gave me the news.

I understood every scrap of it.

I understood exactly what it meant.

I was the weatherman, fully aware what storm was coming, before any of the clouds reached the shore.

It was ok.

This time, it was really ok.

I focused on Franklin Ward and nothing else. I choked down my pain every night, and stared at the insulin, and fought back the tears at Mum’s letter, and I focused on Franklin Ward. Always tried to focus on Franklin Ward.

Days passed by and Chloe appeared in my doorway every morning. Every morning she’d sit in the chair opposite me and give me the same words before she got up and went about her day.

“I love you, Logan. I can say it a million times, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll keep on loving you.”

Every day I did my best to ignore her.

Every day I did my best to let her go.

The staff on the ward were different after my few days’ leave, shooting me sympathetic glances every time I passed by. I knew they knew my mum was dead. I knew they were feeling for me, and sad for my pain, but I didn’t want it. I didn’t want anyone feeling any pain for me. I didn’t want anyone feeling *anything* for me.

So, I kept them at arm’s length, just like the old days, before Chloe sprang into my world. I didn’t speak, and didn’t share, just focused on Franklin Ward. Always on Franklin Ward.

My evenings were filled with practicalities, keeping me busy at home.

My days were filled with being a doctor, helping people in their weakest moments, even while I was battling mine.

People were calling me at home, on my phone as well as on Mum’s, giving their condolences and crying their tears, and *so sad, so sad*, but I didn’t want them. I didn’t want anything but to say the very last farewell to my mother and commit her to ashes at Redwood Crematorium.

Days on end I waited. Days on end the arrangements took time to come

together. Until finally, thank fuck, the ceremony began to take shape.

I gave people the details, dishing out the information to Mum's friends like it was just some standard appointment at the hospital, then I alerted the hospital coordinators of the funeral date. Another tick of the practicalities box. They assured me that Rachel Edwards would be available for my shift. Good. Excellent. Everything in place for the service.

*All except my jitterbug.*

Even as the funeral drew near, I said nothing to any of my ward team, no acknowledgement of me committing Mum to the fire. No acknowledgement of being a man grieving in a ward filled with grief.

Until the night before.

There was a tiny little break in my armour the night before.

Chloe was in reception when I left Franklin Ward that night, propped up at the desk as she checked through her medication forms, and this time, for the first time in days, I reached out for her, taking hold of her arm as she met my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I told her. “Honestly, Chloe, I’m sorry.”

Her shrug lit up my heart, the same usual manner from the same gorgeous little creature.

“So, don’t be sorry,” she said. “Don’t be sorry anymore and stop pushing me away, will you?”

I only wished I could.

“Goodnight, jitterbug,” I said, and this time, for the first time in forever, I stepped out of the ward before she did.

# 48

## *Chloe*

The weekend had been a crap one, trying to get through the days without Logan. I spent time with Mum, Dad and Beano, but my heart was in pieces. Still, I was determined. Every day in Franklin Ward I put myself on the line.

I was getting pretty used to the routine, heading down the corridor to Logan's consultancy room every morning. It was a ritual I was confident in, rapping at his door then pacing my way inside, plopping myself down into the chair opposite him and telling him how much I loved him.

I wasn't expecting it when I swung the door open that morning and walked straight in on Dr Edwards sitting there in Logan's seat. My face must have paled, jaw dropping to the floor as she stared over at me.

"Can I help you, Chloe?" she asked, but there was no way she could help me. Not unless she could click her fingers with a *Ta-da!* and give me my Logan back.

My words came tumbling.

"Lo – I mean, Dr Hall," I paused. "Is he not in today?"

She shook her head. "I don't believe so. I've been asked to cover him on the ward."

"Thanks," I said, and made a hasty dash back out of there, almost bashing into Wendy Briars outside the door.

"Whoa, tiger," she laughed. "You never stop zooming around at lightning speed, do you?"

The grin on her face was huge, until she caught sight of the horror on mine.

"What is it?" she asked. "Are you ok, Chloe?"

I was shaking my head before she'd finished speaking.

"I don't think Logan is in, and I need to see him, and I can't, I don't know where he is."

I knew she knew more than I did. I saw it in her eyes.

"I, um... I believe he has called in an annual leave day," she told me. "I believe it's for a family event."

The horror on my face must have been a masterpiece, because it dawned on me. It dawned on me in a second.

The funeral.

He was at his mum's funeral.

And I couldn't... I couldn't believe it... because I should be there... I should be there alongside him.

"Chloe?" Wendy pushed. "Chloe, are you ok?"

I was shaking my head again, panic rising.

There's no way I shouldn't be at Jackie's goodbye. Just no way. No, no way. The tears pricked at my eyes just thinking about it, the woman I admired so much having a send-off without me being there to pay my respects.

Logan didn't tell me.

It rattled around my heart, just the thought of it.

He was at his mum's funeral and he didn't even tell me it was happening.

"I have to go," I told her. "Please, Wendy. I have to go. I have to find him."

She looked up and down the corridor as I dithered on my feet, a racehorse about to gallop. She could read me. I'm sure she could read me. After all, she was a friend of mine too.

I was so, so grateful she was.

"I'll find someone to cover your shift," she said. "Get going. Just get going."

I managed a bluster of *thanks, thanks, thanks*, and then I was off, shooting through to the staffroom and throwing on my sweater over my uniform. It was still before 10 a.m., but I didn't have time to wait. I was already trying Logan's number before I was out of the ward, cursing under my breath as it rang straight through to voicemail.

*You have reached Dr Logan Hall. I'm sorry I'm unavailable at the moment. Please leave a message.*

I left him a message.

"Answer me," I told him. "Please, Logan. Please just answer me."

I shoved my phone in my pocket and barely managed a wave to the other nurses before I was out of Franklin Ward. I was zipping out of there, through the main hospital reception and out onto the street, zooming off for Harrow train station before I even really knew where I was heading to.

*Fuck.*

*Please, universe. Please bail me the fuck out here.*

I started with the basics. I sat down on a bench on platform one and started searching for funeral director details in Redwood. That's one thing about Logan. Practicalities. He was the lord of efficiency. No doubt he would have chosen one locally.

There were two funeral directors in Redwood. I had my fingers crossed – literally – as I called the first number.

*“Webber’s funeral services...”*

“Hi,” I said. “I’m, um... I’m needing to find Jackie Hall’s funeral arrangements. I believe it’s going ahead today...”

The hover on the line gave me the answer before she did.

*“I’m sorry, but I don’t have any Jackie Hall listed.”*

“Thanks,” I said, and I was gone.

My fingers were trembling as I dialled the second firm. I was mumbling *please, please, please*, before the receptionist answered, fingers crossed tight again.

“I’m needing to find Jackie Hall’s funeral arrangements. I believe they might be today. Please could you help me?”

And thank the universe, she could.

“Yes,” she said. “The service is at Redwood Crematorium. It takes place at eleven this morning.”

Eleven.

Fuck.

It was ten already.

“Thanks,” I told her, and hung up the phone.

I checked the train times, and it was close. There was one in five minutes setting off for Redwood, but I didn’t know how far the crematorium would be from the station. It was pulling in to the platform by the time I’d called up the street map details. Fifteen minutes’ walk time to the venue from the train station.

It would be close.

Really damn close.

I tried Logan again three times on my way there. I tapped my foot on the floor, heart racing past every station until the train pulled in at Redwood, and then I sprinted. The jittery racehorse in me actually sprinted. I galloped through the streets on the way to the crematorium, begging, BEGGING the universe to let me get there in time.

I could see cars in the crematorium car park before I saw the venue itself. I was out of breath but still racing, pain stabbing like a dagger in my ribs at the sight of the empty hearse parked up by the entrance. I plunged through the doors, my breaths whistling in my ears as I tried to find my way through to the main service room.

And there it was.

The entrance.

A fresh set of double doors, lovely and grand in a heavy shade of brown.

11.07 a.m.

I slammed my way in through the doors, expecting to find Logan in an empty room all by himself. But no. It was nothing like that.

A sea of faces turned to stare at me from either side of the aisle. A whole world of people, different ages dressed all in black.

And there he was.

Logan.

Standing right next to Jackie's coffin and staring at me, just like everyone else.

He looked incredible, just like always. His sharp black suit was gorgeous, his dark tie matching the darkness of his eyes just so.

*Here I go.*

*Make or break.*

*Tiger or mouse.*

My legs were jelly, but my resolve was steel. It would have been so easy to sit my butt down on one of the pews at the back of the room like a meek little pipsqueak, but I didn't. I just kept on walking.

The people's stares turned with me, everyone's attention fixed right on my jelly-legged footsteps, my chin held high as I closed the distance.

He was watching me every step of the way, still as a statue as I reached him and sat myself down on the pew at his side.

I didn't speak and neither did he, and no matter how hard he tried to hide those shutters, he failed. This time he failed.

Shock.

Relief.

Love.

I saw it all in his eyes in one tiny flash of a moment. And I knew it. I took a breath in that seat and I knew it.

I'd done the right thing.

A woman appeared at the podium, clearing her throat for the service, and he sat himself down at my side close enough that I could feel his warmth through my crappy sweater, completely at odds with the rest of the funereal garb the rest of the crowd was wearing.

But that didn't matter. Nothing else mattered but Jackie and Logan.

"Today, we're here to celebrate the life of Jacqueline Ann Hall," the woman said.

# 49

*Logan*

She was a lifeline in my pain, a beautiful radiance in a stormy world, filled with grey.

Her being there next to me was a shock that had me reeling inside, but it was shock on top of a whole slammer of shocks that morning – looking around and seeing so many faces coming together to say goodbye to my mum.

I'd forgotten over the years just how many people Mum had in her life. So many visits, and friends. So much joy and companionship and laughter. I'd turned my back on the whole load of it a long time ago, shutting her up in a guise of security, her in her final days with me, without the stress and interruptions of visitors.

Yet again, I had been wrong. So fucking wrong.

I sat down next to my jitterbug, and I couldn't stop myself, no matter how hard the steel inside wanted to hold firm. I took her hand in mine and squeezed her fingers, thanking her without words. She squeezed me right back, and it took everything I had not to wrap my arms around her and hold her tight, letting her know I was sorry for not inviting her there. Sorry for not letting her in.

The service started up, everyone listening to the funeral celebrant recounting the story of her life. The whole room was attentive, but the shiver of tears were audible, even over the speech. I kept my pain silent, tears flowing but muted. Every emotion inside battling to stay out of view.

*Jacqueline Hall was an amazing woman, full of soul and life.*

*Jacqueline loved elephants, and mountains, and sandcastles on the beach... but mostly she loved laughter. Laughter and the people laughing with her.*

Chloe was looking at the coffin, crying tears of her own.

I realised just then how much of an asshole I'd been for excluding her from something so important to her loss.

I squeezed her hand again before I let her go to step up to the podium. I

cleared my throat before I began talking, feeling a fool for expecting so few people that I hadn't prepared a speech.

As it turns out, I didn't need one. The words just flowed.

*Mum was an amazing woman. So much wisdom in that always laughing head of hers. I learnt so much from her over the years, more than I will ever be able to say...*

Everyone listened. Everyone cried.

I told them some of my favourite memories, about Mum and I swimming in the sea. About Mum cheering as I first rode my bike down our street, and how she whooped and leapt in the air when I graduated.

I told them how incredible it is to have a mother like her on your side. How she held me tight when I was scared, and promised me it would all be ok. How she told me jokes in the middle of the night when I couldn't sleep, and how she read me kid's stories in amazing funny voices.

I was almost done when the emotions lost their fight and burst free of me up on that podium. The tears streamed and I choked on my words, taking long moments to compose myself. It should have scorched me, the weaknesses in my armour coming to light. But no. It was ok.

It was ok because I felt it there through that room. Something I'd been trying to forget for an eternity.

Love.

Love from so many people from such a genuine place in their hearts.

People I'd known since I was a boy, cheering me on through my journey along with my mother.

People I'd known from our local street when I was growing up, waving at me every morning.

People Mum had laughed with down the local shop, catching up on sunny gossip.

People from the hospitals, who'd she'd shared so much darkness with on her journey.

Love was everywhere. All around me.

And at the centre of all that love was Chloe. My beautiful jitterbug. The one who loved me most with all her heart.

Mum's friend Amy took to the podium after me and told her own little story. She told the room how she was just a nervous little teenager when Mum came into her world. How Mum had helped her through shyness, and fear, and shitty relationship breakups, and had always been there with a

smile.

The whole room was smiling along through their cries, all of us remembering the twinkling rock that was my mum, and again, I learnt something right there and then – I learnt just what a funeral truly means.

It's not about the fluffy bullshit of her spirit hovering above her coffin, or about people wallowing in the loss. It's not about the crappy rigmarole of assigning her body to the flames and handling all the cruddy documentation.

It's about reflection and celebration. Celebration of an amazing person and what she meant to the world.

The funeral director ushered me out of the hall before everyone else, and I had Chloe's hand firmly in mine. She stepped out alongside me, standing close as the first of the guests made their appearance and gave their condolences directly.

Again, there were so many faces in line to speak with me. So many words. All of them so powerful and so true.

Chloe didn't move, she stayed steady right by me. She smiled her smile and listened along with me, and that's when I learnt yet another lesson – my freckle-faced jitterbug was a strong little cookie. A rock, just like my mum. A smiling beacon with twinkling eyes and a giggling smile, but a pure cornerstone underneath.

Jesus Christ, I fucking loved her.

The final guest offered their condolences and joined the small crowds gathered around the car park, and Chloe squeezed my arm before she spoke, staring up at me with those pretty blue eyes.

“Where is the wake?” she asked, and I cringed inside.

“I, um... didn't arrange one. I didn't think there would be many people here.”

“Oh,” she said, and I figured that even she was resigned to the impossibility of scheduling a wake in the blink of an eye, but no. Her optimism was still a gemstone shining through loud and clear.

“We can do it,” she told me. “I mean, it'll be tough, but we can do it. Your place is plenty big enough, we just need some drinks and some food and some... I dunno, *stuff*, but we can get it. We can.”

I managed a tiny laugh at her. “I don't think there will be many caterers set to provide a reception banquet with twenty-five minutes to go, sweetheart.”

Her shrug set my heart on fire.

“We can do it. We can call in at a store on the way back to your place, and stock up a trolley with some lunch stuff, and we could do it.” She paused. “I could do it.”

I should’ve said she was crazy for even considering it, racing like a whirlwind to cater for a whole houseful of people. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t say it because it wasn’t true. If anyone could do it, it was Chloe Sutton – and she’d do it with a smile on her face.

I could feel her happiness when I cleared my throat and called everyone’s attention. I directed them to head across town to my house and I handed Amy the keys to let everyone inside.

Then we were off, Chloe and I piling into my car and whizzing straight off to the local supermarket, and I was smiling. Even in my abject pain of grief, I was smiling. Smiling along with her.

“Sandwiches,” she laughed. “I can do some pretty good sandwiches.”

I remembered only too well, the image of Mum, of the three of us, tucked into that nook at the top of Mum’s mountain. Mum munching down on that ham sandwich. “They will be the most delicious sandwiches on the planet, I’m sure.”

She laughed again. “See if you’re still saying that after eating my chicken salad ones. I didn’t know vegetables when I was a kid you know,” she said. “I got a Saturday job at a cafe once and I mistook a cabbage for a lettuce and put it in someone’s sandwich, for real. Doh.”

I’m glad she wasn’t looking at me, because the love in my eyes would have surpassed every expression of love she’d ever known.

“Here it is!” she announced when the store came into view, and the white rabbit was off hopping, even before the car was properly parked, racing off to the trolley bay and beckoning me after her with a Cheshire cat smile on her face.

I followed her. I helped her. We stocked up the cart with loaves of bread and piles of cheese. With ham and chicken and salad, and strawberry jam, and a whole host of snacks to go alongside them. Then wine, bottles and bottles of wine, and bags of tea, and jars of coffee and gallons of milk.

The car was rammed full of supplies when we set off to my place, and I was still smiling, picturing Mum’s face laughing along with the spectacle of the last-minute banquet arrangements. The front door was open wide when we arrived, people milling around and chatting. I was usually the most pedantic of parkers on the driveway, but today I pulled the car up on the front

lawn without giving a shit for the grass.

We rushed the shopping into the kitchen with *hellos* and Chloe was a whirling dervish as she set up the sandwich bay on the countertop, flashing me one of her pretty smirks as I rolled up my sleeves to help her.

“No,” she said. “Your place isn’t here, Dr Hall. It’s out there... with your guests. With the people who want to see you.” She was already getting the ham out of the pack and poked her tongue out. “Clear off, please. Your mum would be loving them being here.”

She was right. Mum would have loved people being here.

I didn’t try arguing with the bouncing bunny, just kissed her on her forehead before I left, and if I’d have believed in a heaven, I’d have believed in one right then.

But there wasn’t a heaven. Not for me. That hadn’t changed. Despite just how much every single part of me was desperate for that girl to be at my side for every single moment of my life, nothing had changed – my gemstone of an angel needed to fly away and leave me behind.

But I couldn’t do it. Not anymore. I couldn’t send my angel away.

Her sandwiches were incredible, even the chicken salad ones, and her teas and coffees were perfect. She dished out the food and her laughter along with it, listening to everyone’s stories of Jackie Hall with a shimmer in her eyes.

And so did I.

I listened to everyone’s stories of Jackie Hall with a shimmer in mine.

It was long past sunset when the last of the guests finally said their goodbyes and left us to it. Chloe was already in the dining room collecting empty glasses from the table, the industrious little white rabbit still bouncing around the room. But no. No. Not now. I couldn’t take a single second more without her body next to mine.

Heaven. It’s not the afterlife. Not for me. It’s the stunning power in the here and now, the passion and the primality in people’s flesh when the need for closeness eats them alive.

Glasses went crashing from Chloe’s hands as I grabbed her from behind and spun her into my arms. My mouth pressed to hers with a ferocity I’d never known, breaths frantic as I backed her up into the counter, sandwich bay be fucked.

And I was done.

In that moment my rationality and my reservations were all gone, crashing onto the floor tiles along with the fragments of broken glass, pulse

racing as I kissed my way down her neck, seeking more, more, more.

Chloe was a shining light in my world, and she blinded me. In that kitchen, with the carnage of my mother's goodbye all around us, that beautiful creature blinded me with her light.

# 50

*Chloe*

So many feelings spinning inside, tumbling together. Hurt and love and grief and relief. I couldn't kiss him hard enough. I couldn't tear his suit from him quick enough. My hands were a complete contradiction of strong and stumbling, both at once.

He slammed me back against the counter and the leftover sandwiches shunted into the wine bottles, the whole load clanking and rattling.

Like my heart.

My heart was clanking and rattling too.

His skin was burning, his mouth was hot, his breaths were frantic and so were mine, hands heavy and desperate. With him I was always desperate. He hitched me up on the counter top and the sandwiches scattered. My fingers sank into the mess of a platter as my back arched, thighs trembling and spreading as he slid my knickers down my legs. He nipped at my tits first as I moaned for him, his teeth gripping tight and tugging. He kissed down my scar, peppering my imperfections with pure damn lust, and then he pressed his lips so close to my clit that I bucked against him, begging for more. Always begging go goddamn hard for more.

He sucked me. Lip smacks mixed with a twist of his tongue, a rhythm that drove me crazy as I squirmed. Yes. Yes. *Fucking hell, yes.*

My legs wrapped around his shoulders like a vice, but it didn't make a difference. He was in control, in power, the force in the fury of my love. Because I was furious. I was furious that he'd cut me out. I was furious that he'd tried so hard to leave me behind. I was furious that he didn't answer me, when I was reaching out. So, I told him so, I found my hiss of a voice amongst the passion.

“Why the fuck didn't you invite me to the funeral, Logan?”

He met my eyes, and his were as shuttered as ever, even through his need for my flesh.

“Because a funeral means nothing, Chloe. I expected just me and a coffin. It's just a tick box ritual that people gloss up to be some spectacle of a circus

show.”

But no. It wasn’t. And he knew it. I knew he did. Even his shuttered eyes couldn’t hide his real soul through his words.

“You know that’s bullshit,” I said. “You know it means something. You felt it today.”

“I don’t give a fuck what I felt today,” he grunted at me. “I just want to feel you now.”

He picked up the rhythm and I sank right back into his touch. I gripped his hair tight, tugging as he squirmed his tongue against my clit. The smooth patches of his scalp were silk against my fingers, just as his lips were silk against my body. I couldn’t hold back. Not for a second. I squealed the house down, riding the waves, then I panted, shuddering, the nerves still cresting, cresting, tingling.

And he didn’t stop.

Even when I moaned at the tender spark of my clit as his tongue kept on digging, he didn’t stop.

He pushed three fingers inside my pussy, and slipped one back for my ass, and this time the bucks were straight from my hips, my palms crushing bread and strawberry jam against the worktop.

*Fuck.*

*Fuck.*

He was rough as he stretched me. His eyes were the darkest I’d ever seen them when he stared up at me, his tongue still lapping at my clit. My head fell back and I was lost to the second burst of sensations, shaking and shuddering right the way through.

“I hope you’re ready for a long fucking night,” he said, and his tongue kept on moving.

I was ready for a long fucking night, alright. I was ready for a long fucking *lifetime* with Logan Hall.

So I told him so. I met his eyes and I told him so, my voice alive with the passion.

*I’m ready for a long fucking lifetime with you, Logan.*

That’s when I felt it. Saw it. Sensed it. The change in his stare. The change in his stance. He tensed, and darkened even more, and that ocean inside him was a hurricane.

I didn’t get it. Didn’t understand. And he didn’t give me chance to, just roughed his fingers up some more and thrusted another two into my ass. I

don't know how I managed it, but I raised my heels up on the countertop and spread my legs as far as they would go. My pussy was spread wide between them, exposed in every scrap of its intimacy, and I wanted that, I wanted to bare it all to him.

That's when he surprised me to a whole other level.

That's when he palm-slapped my clit. A sharp little tap that had me yelping.

"You'd better be a good girl for me tonight, Chloe. I'm going to take every little bit of you and make you mine."

"I'm already yours," I said back, still catching my breath.

He slapped me again. I liked it. Liked it even though it hurt. Liked the dark stare from his eyes.

"*More*," I whispered.

"My fucking pleasure," he said and ran his tongue up my pussy lips first, flicked at my clit and then slapped me hard.

I bucked and I cursed and I loved it, a sharp shock of physical pain to dull the pain inside.

He gave me another slap, and I moaned for him. He gave me another and I bucked and cursed some more. I didn't know this part of myself – needy in a whole new sense of the word, right from the pit of me.

This wasn't Chloe Sutton, the bouncy little jitterbug who smiled at the world, this was a whole different Chloe. A Chloe who felt the roughness of the depths, and the pain in the waters, and still craved the love in Logan's arms.

"Kiss it better," I said and he grinned right up at me before peppering my clit with soft little kisses that had me sizzling through. He straightened up, and his chest was magnificent, even more so with his scar stretching right the way around his side. I loved him like that. Worshipped him like that.

He undid his belt and dropped his trousers, and his cock was a beast with its veins, already glistening with precum. He was inside me in one thrust, fucking me hard, and I took him deep, moaning so loud as he hit the spot.

God, I loved him. God, I loved that man.

"I need you," I whispered. "Fuck, Logan, I need you."

"You don't," he said, and he kissed me fiercely enough that I could barely breathe.

He didn't come inside me before he hoisted me down from the counter. I wrapped my legs around his waist, and he carried me upstairs with his mouth

still on mine. I closed my eyes as we passed Jackie's bedroom, not wanting another stab of the grief to steal my joy.

He threw me down on the bed, and my knees were up on my shoulders in seconds, his balls slapping me as his cock drove inside. My tits bounced underneath me, mouth open wide as he stared down.

He saw me as me. The me now. The woman I had become, self-assured and confident and determined to be with the man I loved.

Because I was.

I was a woman now.

I was *that* woman now.

A woman in command of my destiny, gifting my body to Logan, to take his all.

He took his all and gave me mine. I was crying out as he pounded his dick against my sweet spot, tender and crazy for it both at once. He cursed under his breath as he came inside me, muscles rippling in his arms as he tensed up and let himself go.

I thought it would be over when his weight collapsed on mine, but I should've known better. The kisses kept coming, bodies grinding, sweat on sweat, and he touched me, and coaxed me and loved me until time lost its track and I lost all sense of it.

It felt like hours that I was nothing but tingles, my whole body shivering and shaking. I knew what was coming as he positioned himself above me all over again, and I wanted it. I wanted it rough.

He gave it rough.

His cock pushed inside my ass in one shunt of his hips, and I cried out to a whole other tune. His weight was all on mine as he made me take him, and I loved the way it was so sore and so fucking good both at the same time.

Yes.

My voice didn't sound like sweet little Chloe when I asked him for more.

Yes.

I sounded like a whole new creature.

Yes!

His eyes were onyx, pitch black as they pooled in mine.

Yes! More!

It hurt me when he thrust even harder and filled me deep.

More!

I hissed like a bitch when he fucked me fast.

*More!*

“I’ll give you fucking more,” he said and rolled me onto my side, slamming in even harder still.

He wrapped his arm around me and slid his hand between my legs, and this time the stretch was a demon. Three fingers in my pussy as he pounded my ass.

I was going dizzy with it, pain turning to pleasure.

But still I said it. Still I wanted more.

*More! I'll always want more from you, Logan!*

That’s when he came for me, pulling his fingers from inside me to strum at my clit and cresting my peak along with his as he shunted his cum into my ass.

It was heaven, right there, right then.

Both of us gasped for breath, both of us exhausted as he rolled away from me. This time he didn’t come back, just lay staring at the ceiling with his chest rising and falling.

“I mean it,” I told him. “I’ll always want more.”

I propped myself up on my elbow as I caught my breath, but he was still staring up at the ceiling, those damn fucking shutters still down.

That’s when I saw it, standing like a monument on his bedside table. The huge insulin bottle. I recognised it from his bathroom cabinet all those weeks ago, but I didn’t think about it at the time. I didn’t understand.

But now I *did* understand. That’s what palliative care work does for you – it opens your eyes to a whole load of new things.

Scattered conversations about strange contemplations that barely anyone else would consider.

*So how would you do it? If you had to? How would you do it?*

Insulin. The answer people gave, nurse to nurse, was always insulin.

Logan saw me looking at it, but didn’t say a word.

“Please tell me you weren’t going to...” I started, and again he didn’t say a word. “I know you’re not diabetic. Please tell me you weren’t going to do it.”

But he was going to do it. I saw it in his face.

Logan Hall was planning to kill himself with an insulin overdose and not tell one single soul.

“I’m right, aren’t I? You were going to use that to finish yourself?”

“It’s not like you think it is,” he said, finally, but still his face told a

whole other tale.

I edged closer to him, eyes brimming with tears afresh. My belly was twisting, and I felt sick, heart racing with a shit ton more than an orgasm with his dick in my ass.

“How is it not like I think it is? Huh? Seriously, Logan, you just have to tell me! Please, just fucking tell me!”

His eyes met mine, and he was as dark as ever, jaw gritted hard. “Like I said, it’s not like you think it is.”

I was shaking my head, panic overloading, trying to get my mind around it, how someone like Logan Hall could be so consumed by his mother’s loss that he’d kill himself. Because I got it. I got it that he was torn apart, but it’s the last thing she would have ever wanted. The last thing I could see a man like him doing with his feet so firmly on the ground in life.

“Please tell me you’re over that,” I said. “Your mum would be devastated.”

He laughed at me. He actually laughed at me. A cold laugh that chilled me to the bone.

“You think this is about my mother? Really?”

I felt like a fool as I looked at him, cheeks pinking up like sweet, naive little Chloe all over again.

“I don’t know what else...” I managed, and his laugh dried up, his eyes glossing over with tears, even though he was trying his damned fucking hardest to stop them.

“This isn’t about my mother, Chloe. It’s about me.” He paused, his voice choked up, and my belly did that lurch when you know something bad is coming. Something really fucking bad.

He sighed, and stared back up at the ceiling again, his breaths still ragged in his chest.

“Tell me,” I whispered. “Please, Logan, just tell me.”

He sucked in one hell of a breath before he answered, then held it. Held it until he met my eyes.

“It’s not about Mum, it’s about me,” he said again. “*I’m* dying, Chloe. I’m fucking dying.”

# 51

*Logan*

I knew what was coming. She shuffled backwards on the bed, face paling and mouth dropping as she shook her head.

“No... No, Logan.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m terminally ill, Chloe. Sad but true.”

Her head shook harder, and the tears came.

“No... It can’t be...”

It broke my heart to see her like that, so lost in the panic of grief.

“Yes, sweetheart,” I told her. “It can be. I have CLL – Chronic Lymphocytic Leukaemia. The big fucking C has come to get me all over again.”

She sucked in a breath and clutched her chest.

And then she cried. Sobbed. Broke down on the bed next to me.

I didn’t move. Didn’t even try to make it better, because there is no better. There is no way to dull that shock or that pain. Christ, I knew that well enough.

Minutes passed as she tried to digest it, retching as the truth sank in. She managed to calm her breathing, but her eyes were still petrified when she looked over at me.

“They can help you though, right? What are they going to do? I mean they can slow it down, right? Right? What treatment are you having?”

I should have told her the truth weeks ago. Her pain would be all the worse for the delay.

“I’m not going to have any treatment,” I said. “I’m done with that, Chloe. I’m not going around that same cycle again. The cancer has spread. The bloods make it obvious, and I’m not interested in finding out more, or getting treatment, or pondering the life and the universe and everything. This time I’m done.”

“But you seem fine...”

“I always seem fine, jitterbug. I do my best to keep myself together. Always have, always will.”

It was true. I tried to keep my energy levels up and ignore any pain. I tried to keep my focus on what I was doing, always. On taking care of Mum, and the people on the ward, and barely giving any attention to potential symptoms or the results of the routine check-ups.

Until this one. Until this one flagged the abnormal counts and my summons for further tests came calling.

“Really, it’s ok,” I told her. “I’m not scared, not anymore. I’ve been as antisocial as I can for years now, making sure my piss poor genetics aren’t going to leave people pining my absence when I’m gone.” I paused. “Until you, that is.”

Her eyes flashed with passion. With fight.

“Not just until me!” she squealed. “Why do you think nobody gives a crap about you, Logan? They do! Look at those people today! EVERYONE gave a crap about you, you just don’t want to see it! The people at work give a crap about you. You’re their FRIEND, even if you don’t want to think so.”

I hated the twinge inside me, that soft hearted part of me latching on to her words.

She carried on before I could find my response.

“And not just that, but you help SO MANY people! So many people on that ward! You inspire so many families, and doctors, and nurses, and ME, Logan. You inspire ME!”

“I will still be helping people while I can. I’m not going to give up my job until I have to.”

“What then? Huh?” Her eyes were sparkling with hurt. “You just come home one day and wipe yourself out with an overdose?”

I hated just how pathetic my plan sounded when spoken aloud.

“That isn’t quite how I was seeing it...”

She shook her head. “Don’t do this. Just don’t do it.” She held her hands up in some kind of shrug. “How about you get some treatment? At least see what they have to say. At least see what they can do.”

I sighed. “I’ve been here before. I know the story. My genetics are an utter shit pile, uncles, aunts, grandparents... Mum... Me. We all get wiped out by it, sweetheart, it’s always just a matter of time.”

She was still shaking her head. “You don’t know that!”

I let out a sad little chuckle. “I do, Chloe. I’m a realist, I know it well enough.”

“You’re not a realist,” she told me, and her voice was strong enough to

make me shiver, her eyes shining bright with her truth. “You’re not a realist, Logan, I swear to God, you’re not. You’re a fatalist.”

“And you believe in unicorns and fairytales and the power of the etheric.”

She didn’t flinch, not even for a heartbeat. “So do you,” she said. “Somewhere deep down inside, you believe in something too.”

I laughed. “You think?”

She nodded. “I know.”

“Then I guess you don’t know me at all.”

It was her turn to laugh. “Maybe I just know you better than you know yourself.”

I laughed right back at her. “Then these past few weeks have been pretty insightful.”

“Yeah,” she said. “They have.”

I felt a pounding of negativity right down in my ribs. Not wanting to buy into any of this floaty bullshit.

“Tell me, sweetheart,” I said, shuffling closer. “Tell me where this incredible *insight* of yours comes from.”

I didn’t sound like an asshole, and I didn’t mean to be. My voice was calm and shuttered, detached from my feelings like a train carriage, unclipped.

She pointed to the stack of books behind the insulin bottle. “There,” she said. “It comes from there.”

I couldn’t help raise an eyebrow. “From novels?”

She nodded. “Yep. From novels. From Mythago Wood and Lavondyss and Dion Fortune novels. From Master and Margarita and the Initiate and Stonehenge.”

“That has nothing to do with my belief in anything. It’s a hobby, nothing more.”

“Not true,” she said. “I can feel it. Even if you can’t, I can see that little spark in you when you talk about the stories. I can imagine you as a little boy, running along with those characters through their journeys, and knowing, just knowing there was something there.”

I could remember that. I could remember my imagination running wild as a little boy, spiralling around my head as I thought about the otherworld, and magic, and fate, and all the crazy shit that might be behind the surface of the cold, hard world we lived in every day. But I was wrong. Watching so many people die had rubbed it away, more and more over time.

She didn't give up speaking.

"You think there wasn't even a little tiny hint of fate in how we met, Logan? Do you?" Her eyes were so alive. "How we met on a random train reading random stories, and how we found out we worked in the same place, in the same ward?" I felt the strength in her belief as she paused. "You think it wasn't crazy as all hell when we found out we both had Moon Magic as a favourite, of all of the novels in the world?"

"Coincidences," I replied. "Reality is full of them."

"BULLSHIT!" she snapped.

"TRUTH!" I snapped back, and then I got to my feet, grabbing my dressing gown and slinging it on. "And you know what else is truth, Chloe? The truth is, that this is not your fucking problem. You're a ridiculously inspirational young woman with an incredible life to lead. You have a whole ocean of love and happiness ahead of you, and I'm not a part of that. I can't be a part of that. And now you know why."

"I want that ocean of love and happiness to be with *you*," she said, and she was calm. So fucking calm.

"You'll need a sailboat to cross it then, unfortunately, not an ocean liner."

"I don't care." She shrugged. "I want to cross it with you."

Her truth was intoxicating in its simplicity. So pure in her words.

"And this is why I didn't tell you," I said. "I knew you wouldn't make the choice to walk away, especially not once you'd had all those fluffy conversations with my mother. I know you promised her you were all in for all time."

Her mirror of me was perfection, the power in her eyes worthy of a crown.

"This isn't about your mother," she said. "It's about *me*."

# 52

*Chloe*

So many answers to so many questions in one tiny explanation, the puzzle was complete and crystal clear.

Logan was dying. Slowly, quickly, made no difference, it was concrete sense all round.

*Fuck you, universe. Fuck you.*

I didn't hold back my words, not even for a second. I didn't even begin to back away from him with his crazy crap expectations of *have a nice day, I don't want to know you anymore*.

"I mean it," I said to him. "You're an inspiration, and I love you, and an ocean of love and happiness with you can be as short a crossing as it likes, it doesn't mean it's any less important, or any less valuable. If anything it makes it *more* valuable. In some ways it makes *every single moment* more important."

"You're out of your mind," he replied. "You're young and have a whole lifetime ahead of you."

I shrugged my usual shrug. "And I might get knocked down by a bloody bus tomorrow, who knows?"

"You won't be saying that when I'm rasping for breath, all tubed up like my mother, and you're wiping my ass in your twenties while your friends are out there boogying on the dancefloor every night."

"Would you have sacrificed a single minute with your mum, even when she was at the end? Would you have rather been out somewhere else? Anywhere in the world doing anything you liked?"

He paused then. Stopped in his tracks.

"No."

"Then what makes you think I would either, *if* we get to that point with you?"

"*If?*"

"Yeah," I said. "*If.* Nothing in this life is certain."

I heard Granny Weobley's voice, giving me one of her wise old lessons,

and I said it aloud.

*The moment is now. It's always now. Not about reliving the past or dreaming up the future, it's in the here and now. Enjoy as many of those moments as you can, because they never come twice, my love."*

"Lovely little mantra, where did you get that from?"

"My grandma," I told him.

"Good for her."

I looked at his face, at his scowl, at his gritted jaw and the darkness of the pain in his eyes. But there was more. Just a hint, but I could see it. Feel it.

I was reaching him. Some part of me was reaching some part of him, and somewhere there was a tiny little sparkle of brightness in his darkness, all that way deep inside him, he was reaching right back out at me.

He just didn't know it.

He wouldn't let himself know it.

"How many people have you lost?" I asked him. "In your life, I mean."

"Too many," he snapped.

"And how many of them would you regret spending a single second with?"

"Stop this," he said. "You can't reason with me."

*Reason*, he used the word *reason*.

"If this was the other way around, and I got hit by that bus tomorrow and ended up in Franklin Ward on my way out, tubed up to the oxygen machine while my organs packed up, would you walk away from me with a *see you later?* Hey? Would you?"

"Of course not," he snipped back. "But this is different."

*Different. Different. Different.*

Everything was always so damn different. Except it wasn't. It was exactly the same.

We loved each other.

Call it fate or destiny or coincidence, or two people having more in common than they could ever know possible, mixed with things on total opposite sides of the scales, like weird magnets that couldn't stay apart... it didn't make any difference whatsoever.

We loved each other.

And that wasn't going anywhere. Ever.

I got up from the bed and walked up to him in his dressing gown, still naked, and tear streaked, with my heart absolutely reeling in pain... but my

feet didn't stall for a second. I walked right up to him and put my hands flat on his chest.

"One tiny second of joy is worth a lifetime without it," I said. "I want every single second with you I can get. Every single second, of every single day."

"You're out of your mind," he said, but his voice was buckling. "We have no fucking idea just how many seconds I've got left."

"So let's find out," I told him, and remembered his words to me weeks ago. "Let's just enjoy one day at a time, shall we? The shadows will always be waiting in the shadows."

"That's my line."

"I pinched it." I managed a smile. "I love you, Logan. I can say it a million times, but it doesn't matter. I'll keep on loving you."

He laughed, just a little, but he laughed. "I've heard that line plenty of times with your pretty little ass in my patient's seat."

"You'll hear it plenty more," I laughed back. "So how about you let that fatality go for just a minute, hey, and let us enjoy one day at a time?"

And he listened to me. Thank God, finally, he listened to me.

He reached out and pulled me close, and his warmth was divine. The greatest thing I'd ever felt in my life.

"How could anyone ever refuse such an incredible little jitterbug like you?" he said, and my heart soared free.

Even in the cold hard shock, and the pain, and the *fuck you, universe, fuck you*, the universe was still smiling. Smiling right down on both of us, both Logan and me. Because that's what love is. That's what love always is. Whether it's being on a beach putting your toes in the sea, or climbing a mountain in a wheelchair, or eating a fried breakfast in your boyfriend's shirt, it's every moment. Every single moment of joy in your life. And I was damn sure I was going to have a whole ton more of them with Logan Hall.

# 53

*Logan*

The girl was a diamond, shining through every piece of rough I'd ever known. Glowing bright, even in the misery, the shock and the pain.

We ate some of the leftover sandwiches, staring at each other in silence, and I felt a glimmer of something I hadn't felt in years.

Hope.

It was just a glimmer, but I felt it.

I felt hope.

"When was the last time you made plans?" she asked me, and her question was genuine in the most stunning of ways.

"I do still make plans sometimes," I managed a laugh. "I tend to take each week as it comes."

Her shrug set my heart alight. "Then we should start making more of them. There's so many things I want to do with you."

There it was again, that optimism. Always a fountain of the most incredible sparkles, even in the darkest of times.

"We could take each day as it comes," I said.

"Each day as it comes, sure. But days turn to weeks and weeks turn to months, and months even turn to years, no matter if you have CLL or any other miserable crap hanging over your head."

I stopped munching my jam sandwich and looked at her through fresh eyes. The sweet little girl on the train who didn't look like such a sweet little girl anymore. It looked like a wise old woman was staring out through her eyes.

If anyone had a soul, it was Chloe Sutton. I could feel it in every single one of her breaths.

"I guess I should make my own bucket list one of these days," I said.

"A list. You should make a *list*. The bucket can go screw itself. We don't even know what size of a bucket you have left. It could be a whole swimming pool for all you know."

That was true enough. So was her comment on how my realism was

fatalism. That had been clear enough when she'd drawn out every detail of my current diagnosis before we'd made our way downstairs.

I was dying. I knew that much. But I didn't know how or when, not yet. Not set in stone.

"Please tell me you're not going to write yourself off without a decent fight," she said. "You're Dr Logan Hall, you fight as hard a fight as you possibly can for everyone else with a bucket list, it's the least you can do for yourself."

"I'm not sure about that," I told her again. "I'm not sure I want to fight another one of those scraps for myself. I've had enough of them already."

"So do it for me." Her eyes were gold dust. "Fight that fight for me."

I finished my sandwich and brushed my hands together to get rid of the crumbs, and then I answered her.

"On one condition," I said, and she was nodding her head in a flash.

"On *any* condition."

I tipped my head. "I'll fight for you, if you'll fight for me. Become a doctor, Chloe. Go back and study to be a doctor."

I saw her breath catch. "But I can't... it's complicated, and I'm not that much of a brainiac, and I might fail after all that work."

"Who's the fatalist now?" I asked, and she smiled around another bite of ham sandwich.

I watched her chewing, adoring her freckled cheeks for the millionth time.

"Alright then, Dr Hall," she said. "You have yourself a deal."

So we did it. We made a deal.

With her standing in my shirt, buttoned up halfway, with the last of her ham sandwich still in her mouth, we made a deal.

My fight, for her ambition.

We went into Franklin Ward next morning, but this time my grief wasn't bound tight behind a barricade, it was free to flow loose. I felt myself choking up inside, and this time I didn't force it back down, letting it prick at my eyes between consultations with no self-cursing.

It was liberating in the most blissful of ways.

I was different that day, saying *Hello* to the nurses on the ward with a new little pang inside. *Friends*. They really were my friends. And so were the other people reaching out to keep in contact with me after Mum's funeral. My diary was already filling up, faster than I'd ever known. And it was a

good thing. It sure did feel like a good thing.

The train ride seemed new to me when we took the route home that night, Chloe sitting opposite with her beautiful smile on her face.

I'd been travelling it daily for nine years straight, but this one was different, just like everything else was seeming to be. Churchley had bright blue benches I'd never noticed before, and one of them had a giggling toddler swinging his legs next to his mum. Eastworth had a rail attendant doubled up laughing with a little old woman and her poodle, and the station at Wenton had a man on his knees at the one on the far right, a paintbrush in his hand as he fixed the missing streak of paint on the door.

A girl was playing hopscotch alongside the corner shop sign on Callow Road while her dad watched her from the awning by the doorway, and the line of oak trees by the Sunnydale Viaduct were fluttering in the breeze.

That's when I learnt my most valuable lesson of them all – watching the world outside those train windows and knowing in my heart that Chloe was noticing all the very same little snippets as me.

Every moment truly is magical, just so long as your eyes aren't blind to the wonders.

We arrived at Redwood at the usual time, and those magical moments stretched out the whole walk back, hand in hand with the woman I loved.

They stretched out the whole night through, sitting cuddled up in the armchair together with our noses in two different novels. They stretched out through a joint shower, with Chloe's glorious hair smothered in foam. They stretched out through me kissing that pretty little wonder from her head to her toes, and sucking her clit as she cried for more. Always more.

Then we slept, right through until morning.

The magical moments continued from the second I opened my eyes and found her held tight in my arms. She yawned and stretched and smiled at me with her freckled face, and I felt my heart break free. Broken free by the love of my life.

"I absolutely love your house," she said to me as she skipped along to the train the next morning, the white rabbit in her still bursting to run on skittish legs. "I love your bookshelves even better though."

"I love how you love them," I laughed.

"I love how *I* love you," she giggled back.

I didn't understand it, just how such love and positivity could come out of a future so bleak, but it did. It was bursting out loud and clear, even so soon

after the revelation. It wouldn't have stopped, even if I'd tried.

That day I was smiling when the woman boarded the train at Eastworth, tapping her phone just like usual. I guess it was a shock to her, to see me smiling in my seat. She almost jumped back on herself, eyes open wide as I held up a hand.

"Hello," I said.

Her smile was a picture.

"Hello," she said, and gave me a wave right back.

Chloe's smile was brighter than anyone's, grinning across at me like I'd just completed a marathon rather than said some random hello to a woman on a train, but still that overzealous reaction didn't hold back that strange little glow inside.

The man with the messy blond beard didn't curse under his breath at Newstone as he tried to find his rail pass. Not today. Not when he saw my smile as I held up a hand to him, wishing him a *good morning* as he passed my seat.

The elderly woman at Churchley ditched her permanent scowl when I offered her a *hello* as she boarded, grinning right back at me from under her garish floral scarf and nodding her head.

"Hello there."

Chloe didn't comment while I was dishing out my greetings. Not at all. She dug herself deep into her novel, or tried to, even though I knew her mind was all on me.

I could see it in those fidgety feet, dithering around on the carriage floor in the way I loved so much. I could see it in the burst of colour on her freckled cheeks, and the way her fingers were so quick as they turned the pages.

*The Sea Priestess.*

She was reading *The Sea Priestess*. Another one of my favourite novels of all time.

She cleared her throat when we approached Harrow and her eyes were dancing with mischief, a pretty little joke in her smile as she raised her cover to show me.

Oh, the memories.

I raised mine up at her, still in those same seats on that same journey, just like when she didn't even know my name

*Moon Magic*. I was reading *Moon Magic*.

“That’s my favourite novel of all time,” she said, with that same mischief in her smile.

“What a coincidence,” I replied, but she shook her head.

“Not a coincidence, Dr Logan Hall,” she said to me. “It’s fate.”

And for once, after decades of not believing in such utter rubbish, I did now. I believed her.

My fate truly was Chloe Sutton.

# 54

*Chloe*

It was a bizarre feeling, pulling up outside Liam's place in Hedley Road, like a whole lifetime had passed by since I'd lived there.

"He's expecting you?" Logan asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah, he's been trying to get me here for weeks. He'll be air punching all night when I've taken my things."

He parked up and got out of the car with me, standing right by my side as I knocked on the front door. It took a minute before Liam appeared at the entrance, in his slob of a shirt with his low slung jeans, the headset still on his head from his gaming tournament.

"Thank fuck," he groaned. "Finally. I really was going to chuck it out as trash, you know."

He was lying. Liam might be a whole different creature to me, but he had never been that much of an asshole.

I packed up the novels still waiting on the shelf, and Logan and I loaded up his car with boxes upon boxes of my essentials and trinkets. Books, and cushions, and random bits of furniture. The coffee table I'd inherited from Granny Weobley, and the sweet little chair I'd picked up at a boot sale when I was just fourteen.

I gave the apartment one final look around before I left, setting my eyes on Liam one last time as he sat on the sofa, busy on his game tournament.

This was my life.

It was hard to believe that this was really my life just such a short time ago.

It sure didn't feel like it had when I said my goodbye to the man I thought was my world and headed my way back downstairs to my man who really was. Liam barely managed a wave before I left him, and that didn't surprise me. Me leaving him had hardly left a dent in his reality. His reality was all invested online.

Logan and I drove back to Redwood with an audiobook on in the background, both of us caught up fast in the Arthurian trilogy. My things

were rammed in the backseat, and I could hear them jangling, my heart a flutter of excitement to know that I'd be adding all my things to Logan's house.

Except it wasn't Logan's house now. Not anymore. It was *our* house. It was my home.

The weekend was ahead of us, and that had a whole flutter of excitement of its own burning deep. We were heading to Pilsner, the safari park, the very next morning, to see the wolves and the elephants – there was one hell of a handsome hound there called Winston. And Wellington. There was a huge beast of an elephant called Wellington. I still adored Jackie's elephant postcard, propped on her bedside table. I still wished I could've seen her face when she first touched his trunk.

At least I got to enjoy a whole load of cool times with her. And Logan.

I'd get to enjoy a whole load more cool times with Logan, too. Our road ahead was far from over. Even Mr used-to-be-fatalist had turned the corner on his predictions. We had so many awesome experiences to relive together and so many new ones to be made, and they were stacking up. They were stacking up so fast it made my heart sing.

We had a weekend on the coast by Frensham Beach booked up in a few weeks' time, and a night out with the other staff from Franklin Ward at a charity quiz next Wednesday, and then Jackie's old neighbours were coming to the house for Sunday lunch – one of Logan's culinary delights.

Things were good.

They were great.

Really, really, really damn great.

I told Logan so as we pulled up onto the driveway that night.

"Life is brilliant," I said with a grin – the new statement I said about five billion times through every day.

"Every moment counts," he replied with a smile – the reply he gave to that statement about five billion times every day.

I took his hand from the steering wheel to squeeze it tight.

"Your books will have to share their space with my books," I laughed. "I hope they get on real well."

"I'm sure they will. I'm sure they'll have plenty in common."

"And we'll have plenty for the charity shops," I said. "No place on our shelves for doubles."

"Indeed," he said. "We'll have to arrange a drop off in our increasingly

busy schedules.”

He leaned in for a kiss and I peppered another three in a row on his lips.

“Let’s get your stuff moved in then,” he told me, and then he smirked his very best smirk. “I’m sure it’s going to be extremely super cool to have you as an official King Street resident.”

“Super super cool,” I said, and set off on an unpacking gallop to get my stuff moved in.

We really did live by the every moment counts mantra, and Logan took to it better than I’ve ever known anyone take to anything. His attention was always on the now, and his smiles were always bright, and he held me so tight in bed at night that I really couldn’t imagine being without him.

We made friends upon friends, and he got to know my dog, Beano, and Mum and Dad would laugh with us across his dining table as we enjoyed takeaway pizza most weeks.

Even me, embracing life in every moment with every single breath I ever took, wasn’t expecting it when Logan pulled a tiny little box from his pocket on Frensham Beach on our weekend break, and dropped down onto one knee in the sand.

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it, hear myself whispering *oh my God, oh my God, oh my God* over the crash of the waves.

“Chloe Sutton, the most fantastic little jitterbug of all time, would you please do me the honour of becoming Mrs Chloe Hall?”

Tears pricked, and they fell, and my nods were frantic, still not quite believing it, even when the sparkle of the diamond caught the sunlight.

“Yes!” I said. “Hell, yes, Logan. Hell yes!”

The ring was a perfect fit on my finger, and it was crazy, just how a *hello, stranger* on the train can turn into something that sets your life on a whole new road.

I guess that’s fate, though, isn’t it? It rocks into your world and taps its magic wand and there you are, staring out at a horizon that blows your mind.

Logan Hall still blew mine every day.

As the incredible doctor in Franklin Ward, always giving himself so strongly to so many people that needed him.

As the incredible bookworm who recounted words from the pages with a smile every time we read together.

As the incredible lover, who made me wriggle and squeal in bed at night

and beg him for *more, more, more* when my body was taking all that it could take.

And as the incredible man I was in love with. The man who inspired me more than words could ever say, and soar my soul to the moon and back.

Our wedding day was at Halsey. My dad's arm was so happy in mine to be walking me up the aisle to a man they respected so much and had come to know so well.

"I'm so proud of your choice, little one," he said to me. "I'm so happy for the man you're saying yes to."

And he was proud of my choice. I'd seen it every time he'd smiled at my fiancé and realised just what an awesome man I was going to marry.

My mum was in tears in the front pew, giving me a thumbs-up as she saw me and dabbing a tissue to her eyes.

Vickie, Romi and Wendy were sitting with Gina, and Richard and Nadia, all of them beaming with happiness as I made my way towards the man of my dreams to say the eternal *I do*.

My college friends were in a cluster, and my schoolfriends were not far away, and my family members were sitting around Mum, grinning bright along with the others.

It was everything I'd ever dreamed, bringing every one of my romance novel hopes to life.

But it was the other side of the aisle that really made my heart soar. The groom's side of the church, packed full with so many people Logan had come to know all over again.

Friends.

He had so many friends, from so many points in his life.

It was just such a terrible shame that Jackie Hall wasn't sitting there in the front pew, smiling her incredible smile with her twinkling eyes. But I felt her there. Her words of wisdom in my mind. Her cackle of a laugh. I knew I would always feel Jackie Hall.

Logan's gaze was magical, the love I saw in his stare was divine. It was all I could do to stop the tears from falling.

He was the same beautiful man who'd captivated me on the way to Harrow every morning, with his glorious beard and his solid jaw. His eyes were every bit as dark as they'd ever been, and his brows were still stunningly heavy, but there was more there when I looked at him that day.

He was alive in the most magnificent of ways.

His suit was spectacular, the rose at his buttonhole was exquisite, and he looked at me with a wow as he took my hand in his.

"You are the most gorgeous creature I've ever seen, jitterbug," he whispered before the vicar led the service, and I believed him.

In his vision, and his heart, I was the most gorgeous creature he'd ever seen, and my imperfections were loved every little bit as much as the rest of me.

I was so happy there, feeling like a princess from one of my storybooks in my flowing white satin. I had twinkles in my hair from my pretty slides, and my makeup was a natural sheen that lit up my eyes.

I handed my bouquet over to Mum and took both of Logan's hands in mine, glad he had opted for no top hat so the beautiful patterns on his scalp were in the light.

Then we did it.

We said the words.

We made the vows.

Sure, every moment counts. Every second means the world. But that moment, when he slid that golden band on my finger, was the happiest moment of my life.

I was the luckiest woman alive to be able to call myself Mrs Logan Hall.

# 55

*Logan*

“Almost there, Mrs Hall,” I said, and she laughed at my side.

“I’m sure I don’t remember it being this much of a trek last time.”

I laughed along with her. “We’re not taking the wheelchair route this time, that’s why.”

The path climbed, higher and higher, and my lungs were hot with my breaths, Mum’s urn gripped tight under my arm and Chloe’s arm wrapped tight around my other.

The horizon was glorious, plains upon plains of green, and in a few minutes more we were right there at the top, with the wind zipping by us, a perfect bluster for our task.

Glorious. It was absolutely fucking glorious.

I was the luckiest man alive.

It was the final day of our honeymoon – a beautiful trip around Wales. It had been Chloe’s idea to take Mum with us, sharing all of our beautiful moments together, and now we were calling back in on the Worcestershire ridge on the way home, both of us sure as steel this was where Mum would want to be.

“I wish she was here,” Chloe said, and pressed even closer to my side. “She’d have loved it up here today.”

“She’d have loved it up here *any* day,” I replied. “She loved every single minute she was breathing.”

I wasted no time in taking hold of the urn and twisting the lid off. Mum was nothing but a cluster of white dust inside that case, but for once in my life the physical remnants symbolised so much more.

“Here you go, Mum,” I said. “Enjoy the moment.”

Then I scattered the first of her ashes.

The breeze caught her and carried her away, handful after handful going back to the earth. Chloe helped me, both of us together, setting Mum free from her wooden case, and it was another of those moments amongst moments that steal your heart and take your breath away.

We scattered and we smiled, grateful for the woman who'd been such an amazing soul, and enjoying the sun lighting up her dust as it swirled away in the breeze.

"I love you, Mr Hall," Chloe said, and I kissed her head, breathing in her beautiful mousy hair, glistening with shimmers of gold.

"I love you too, Mrs Hall."

It was a wonderful feeling, being a man loving a woman who'd taught me to love so much.

So many people, and so many places. So many shared memories and hopes and dreams.

There were so many times I'd heard her thank the universe, and I'd never felt the call to thank it myself, but right there, on the heights of the Malvern Hills, I broke my own tradition just once.

"Thank you, universe," I said. "For giving me so much time to love."

"I'm right with you on that," Chloe added.

I'd been lucky with the follow up consultations. My CLL was there, but it wasn't advanced as the doctors originally thought. My lymph nodes were struggling and spleen cancer was forming, but it was ok.

For the time being, it was ok.

The days I expected ahead of me, with an insulin bottle by the bedside, were turning into months, and they could be turning into years. Who knew?

But Jesus Christ, I was going to enjoy all of them. Every single moment of every single day.

"Ready to roll?" Chloe asked, and I screwed the lid back on the empty urn, taking one last breath at the beacon before I looked down into her eyes.

"Sure am, jitterbug. Let's get home."

"Super cool," she laughed, and I laughed back with a smirk.

"Super cool, indeed," I said.

It was dark when we pulled back up on the driveway that night. There was a pang of emotion in my chest when we stepped in through the doorway.

Happiness.

Sadness.

A strange combination of the two.

Chloe knew exactly where we were headed, and took the stairs right up alongside me.

Mum's door was already open, the trinkets on her shelves still exactly as she left them.

And her bucket list still pinned up on her wall.

*Meet an elephant.* Tick.

*Climb a mountain.* Tick.

*Ride the back of a motorcycle around a sharp corner.* Tick.

*Put my toes in the sea.* Tick.

*Get a daughter-in-law.*

Chloe handed me a pen, and her rings caught the perfect sparkle in the lamplight.

I'd been waiting for this.

Waiting for the right moment.

Waiting until we'd truly set free the woman who had cackled and laughed and smirked her way through the freedom in every day – every moment – of her life.

"We did it," I said to her. "Bucket list completed."

And then, finally, with the memory of her whooping and air-punching sounding loud in my mind, I ticked off that very last box on her list.

# Epilogue

*Ten years later*

“Dr Hall! Can you come, please? We need you in room seven.”

I still got a burst of joy every time they called my name like that, no matter how many times I heard it.

I scooted on down to room seven, following Erica on my whippet fast legs, scooting along the corridor.

Logan used to call me the white rabbit. He told me that’s how he used to think of me, right back at the beginning on that train.

The white rabbit.

*I’m late, I’m late, on a very important date.*

Only I wasn’t late these days, not anymore. My life with Mr On-Time had seen me clear of that little habit.

I stepped into room seven, and Leona Robinson was already up on the bed, her forehead glistening with sweat and her cheeks almost crimson with her efforts.

I put my hand on hers and smiled, and my words came out with a calmness that still surprised me, even after so long with it coming out of my mouth. My voice sounded just like my husband’s through all those years in Franklin Ward. A doctor, soothing so well.

“Ready for the push?” I asked her, and she nodded, giving me a thumbs-up.

“Yeah, Dr Hall. I’m ready.”

Her husband was at her side, looking a touch more nervous than she did. I gave him a smile and told him it was going great, and he let out a sigh of relief.

She had this. His wife had this nailed.

Pushing, and pushing, and grimaces, and groans of pain, but Leona Robinson was a trooper as she gave birth to her beautiful little baby. Hours upon hours vanished to nothing, as those gorgeous little eyes met their mother’s eyes for the very first time.

“It’s a boy,” I said, feeling the tears pricking, even now, after witnessing

more labours than I could ever count.

“A boy!” Leona cried, and her husband was crying too, holding her tight as I placed that tiny little beauty on her chest, skin to skin. “Oh, wow! A boy!”

“Congratulations,” I said. “And well done, you did great.”

Her nods and thanks were enough to have justified every year of study and training I’d ever done. Just to hear her gratitude in that special moment of her life was all the reward anyone could ever need.

I stayed with them a few minutes before making my exit and heading back to my consultation room. I paced behind my desk for a minute, jittery legs jittering hard, even after so many years feeling steady on them.

I could never stop it, those tears running down my face. Tears of pure joy at seeing such a magical part of so many people’s lives.

I would never get enough of it. Not in a billion years.

I’d calmed down by the time I sat myself down in my seat and called up the paperwork on screen, but I paused another few seconds, picking up the picture of my beautiful husband to give him my usual smile.

“I did it,” I whispered. “Another *super cool* wonder under my belt.”

He’d certainly been a *super cool* wonder of mine, every single day he was a part of it.

I’d had Logan Hall at my side for six whole years before his body had finally given up the fight and taken him away from me. He’d fought his battle, as hard as he could fight it, and I’d been there through every minute, battling alongside him.

My God, he was a fighter.

My God, his strength had inspired me, right through to the very end.

Holy hell, I still missed him. There wasn’t a single minute of the day I wasn’t missing him deep inside.

My shift was almost over when I filled in Leona Robinson’s paperwork. I checked my phone in the staffroom, calling up my messages as I grabbed the novel from my locker.

Vickie.

*You still coming to the quiz later? Gina is coming, and so is Wendy.*

I smiled as I called up the response tab.

*Sure am. I'll see you there.*

I was still in touch with everyone from Harrow District, and had come to know every single one of them so well. They were all amazing, and so were

the people Logan had brought along to me, a whole network of people who'd been such rocks to me in my grief when he left me behind.

Nobody wants to say goodbye to the man they love at forty-seven years old. Nobody wants to stand at the podium at his funeral and try to express just how insanely incredible their husband was to them, and how much he gave them in their life.

Logan Hall had given me everything a soul could ever give another. Support, and encouragement, and laughter, and inspiration. Nights in his arms, and his touch driving me wild, no matter how many times I'd ever felt it.

Logan Hall drove me wild, right up until his final breath. He always would in my memories.

I'd never have been a doctor if he hadn't encouraged me with every part of his heart.

I'd never have had the faith in myself to push myself through all the study and exams and the stress of training, not without him having so much faith in me that I believed in it too.

His books were still on the bookcase when I stepped into the living room that night, arranged just as we'd always arranged them. I picked up one of the novels from the shelf, holding the pages up to my nose for the glorious scent of the paper.

I'd never forget that very first second I saw him on the train that morning – the man who was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

His shoulders so broad and suited. His tie neat and burgundy, classic against a bright white shirt. But it was his face – eyes dark and serious, brooding with more depth than I'd ever known. His jaw steady, and serious to match. His beard neat and severe. His eyebrows wise. *Perfect*.

His cheekbones so defined. His hair with that flick of salt and pepper, just enough to make him look refined.

My magician. My mentor. My lover.

My husband.

I glanced at the envelope on the mantelpiece – *Chloe*, scrawled in his glorious handwriting.

Today I didn't open it, I was already cutting it fine for the quiz night – fine enough to scoot on upstairs and grab my dress from the wardrobe.

And there he was again, my husband. Memories on top of memories, on top of more.

I had kept a few of his suits on the rack, hung up so neatly along with my clothes, and took a couple more seconds to run my fingers over the sleeves, smiling to myself for the bazillionth time at the thought of him standing there in one of them.

I'd never forget any of it. Not one little scrap. Not until I was taking my very final breath to go and join him.

But that wasn't for today.

Today was about today.

*Every moment counts.*

Tonight I'd be living some pretty damn good ones in Harrow, along with my damn good friends.

The train was my regular journey.

Sunnydale Viaduct and Callow Road, Eastworth and Newstone and Churchley.

Every time I took the route I had a paperback on my lap, always sitting in that same seat all the way to Harrow, just so long as it was free to be sat in.

And every time I thought about my *hello, stranger*.

All hellos ultimately have their goodbyes. And all goodbyes hurt so much harder if the love they are founded on is so damn strong.

Still, all hellos with people you love are worth it. They are all worth their weight in gold.

I got up from my seat at Harrow Station, and like always I smiled at the empty seat opposite before I left the carriage.

*Goodbye, my beautiful stranger.*

*Goodbye, my beautiful Dr Hall.*



\* \* \*

*Chloe*

*Hey there, jitterbug. My white rabbit, and Cheshire cat and my sparkle of golden light that lights up my heart.*

*I'm sorry I had to say goodbye.*

*You know when I'm writing this I can see the end on the horizon, but please don't think I am bitter about it. I'm not in the least bit bitter at all.*

*I really didn't imagine I'd ever get this much time. I really didn't imagine my bucket list would ever stretch so long, or give me so much.*

*You brought that to me, sweetheart.*

*You were the one who brought me to life when I was all but gone already.*

*I'm so proud of you, Chloe. I'm so proud of the incredible woman you are.*

*I'm so proud of the wisdom on your shoulders, and the compassion and love in your heart.*

*I'm proud of how well you cherish every moment, and always thank the universe for every day it brings.*

*Honestly, jitterbug, I thank the universe for every single day it's given me at your side.*

*Please don't miss me any more than you have to. If there is such a thing as a soul, mine will be looking right down on yours for the rest of your life.*

*I really do hope there is such a thing as a heaven, or an afterlife, because the prospect of another chance of time with you is enough to make me smile, even if my fingers are getting too weak to write this.*

*I love you, sweetheart.*

*Thank you, for showing me how.*

*I'll say hello to my mum if she's up there waiting. I can't wait to hear her cackling laugh again if she is.*

*Be you, sweetheart. Be the amazing woman you are for every minute of your life you have ahead of you, and I thank you for everything you've given me, in both the high times and the lows.*

*With the greatest blessings a soul could ever give.*

*With all the love in my heart.*

*From your stranger on the train, and the doctor on the ward, and the man who tried to push you away before you showed him just how bright the light can be.*

*From your ever grateful husband.*

*Logan.*

*x*

THE END

# For Jackie

This novel was hugely inspired by Jackie, who is an incredible woman that I have the pleasure of living with.

Jackie has fought a very long battle with cancer, being diagnosed as terminally ill a number of times, only to battle her way back and defy the odds. Despite this, and all the trauma she has experienced and fought through, she is an unbelievably positive woman who means a huge amount to a huge number of people.

I've been honoured to get to know her, and see how excellent she is with the people around her. So many friends of hers come to visit, and every single one of them values her time, her wisdom and her advice.

My boyfriend, Tim, shares his home with her, and they are best friends with a beautiful friendship. Witnessing how close they are, and the tremendous bond they share, is a privilege.

Jackie's bucket list in the novel is based on Jackie's bucket list in real life. Her personality is vibrant and unique, and she amazes me every single day. She wrote Jackie's letter to Logan, and the chapter where Jackie is speaking with Chloe before she dies were real life words and insights of hers that Tim captured on video while she was sitting in her garden chair.

Thank you, Jackie. I hope this novel does you proud.

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To my friends, Boo, Maria, Lisa, Tom, Hanni, Sue, Lauren. Love you all.

To Jackie's carers, who have supported her – and Tim and I – a fantastic amount over the past few months.

To Jackie's friends, who I have been lucky to get to know.

All of you have been incredible. I appreciate it all so much.

# About Jade

Jade is an author from the English countryside, enjoying a stunning location on the Welsh border. She is best known for her utterly filthy explicit novels, which she was always destined to write – being such an utterly filthy woman herself.

In March 2018 she found her long-term partner, Jon, dead from an aortic dissection, and the catastrophe shaped her world with a hurricane of shock and misery.

However, beautifully, she found that there was a very bright light at the end of an intensely dark tunnel, and now lives with her amazing boyfriend, Timmy, and his best friend, Jackie, enjoying a fantastic life every day.

The past few years have inspired her novels very much, and she hopes they inspire you, too.

Find Jade (or stalk her – she loves it) at:

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