

Some people  
are only  
in our lives  
for a season  
but you and I  
were never meant  
to be apart.

# Diverge

C . B . F R E Y

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# AUTHOR NOTE

Diverge is a stand-alone, contemporary romance. It does contain situations that could be triggering for some readers.

This book contains explicit language and explicit sexual content.

It is intended to be for readers 18+.

For a full list of triggers, please visit the author's website.

Alternatively, you can visit the author's Instagram.

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For those who believe you can have two great loves in a single  
lifetime.

This one's for you.

**PLAYLIST:**

**Just Pretend**

Bad Omens

**Die4u**

Bring me the Horizon

**Chokehold**

Sleep Token

**Snuff**

Slipknot

**Sugar**

Sleep Token

**I Should Go**

Levi Kreis

**It Is What It Is**

Lifehouse

**You are the reason**

Calum Scott

**The Loneliest**

Måneskin

**Atlantic**

Sleep Token

**It Is What It Is**

Lifehouse

**Another Love**

Tom Odell

**Breathe Again**

Sara Barielles

**Mount Everest**

Labrinth

**Woke up in Love**

Kygo, Gryffin, Calum Scott





# Chapter One

## Billie

The shrill of the phones ringing in the call centre across from me has my mind recoiling back into my current reality. I sigh as I sit and watch my mouse move across my computer screen. Scanning to the bottom right corner, I notice it's only two in the afternoon.

How much slower can time *actually* go?

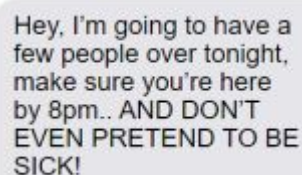
“Hey Billie, do you have the notes from our meeting last Friday?”

I stare blankly at Laura's face and wonder how I ended up here. Taking orders from people who chug caffeine all day to meet deadlines that are way too unrealistic to meet, so they end up breaking their backs by bending over backwards for the company that *'cares about their mental health.'*

“Earth to Billie!” Laura waves a bunch of papers in my face, and my hand twitches as I stop myself from smacking her across the mouth.

“Uh, yes, I do. I'll email them to you.” Opening the file quickly, I send her the email. Getting up out of my seat, I am making a beeline for the kitchen when I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket.

BESTIE



Hey, I'm going to have a few people over tonight, make sure you're here by 8pm.. AND DON'T EVEN PRETEND TO BE SICK!

I let out an audible groan as soon as I read the text from my best friend Grace. She is the wisest, most beautiful human in the world, but my god, she can be a pain in the ass. I start typing as I enter the kitchen.

ME

Do I have to? I think I just want to curl up in bed with a book. It's too cold to go anywhere.

BESTIE

Bitch, you better get your ass to my place tonight or we're never doing lazy Sundays again.

Lazy Sundays are our bonding time. All we do is eat snacks, lay in bed, and watch trash TV. It's *my* kind of night. As for the whole "*getting together with friends and drinking until your face goes numb,*" that's more Grace's type of fun. I roll my eyes and lock my phone as I slide it back into my pants pocket.

I did promise Grace I would at least *try* to be more social. Making myself a cup of coffee, I take a sip and return to my seat.

"Billie, those notes you sent me, can you make sure that next time they are more in-depth? I don't understand them." Laura peeps her eyes over the partition from across my desk where hers is.

*Well, if you would fucking go to the meeting yourself, you wouldn't need my notes.*

"Sure, Laura," I manage to say, squashing my internal voice down deeper inside my chest.



Grace is lucky. She was born into a wealthy family. Me, on the other hand, all my brother and I got was an apartment left to us by our dad. Grace can quite literally have whatever she wants, whenever she wants it. After growing up together, I now notice how different we are. She loves everything and anything to do with partying and being a social butterfly. I, on the other hand, love staying at home in my own company, listening to music and reading books. Sometimes I think we are complete opposites and have no idea how we stayed friends, and other times I love her for being different to me. I

look over to the acreage surrounding Grace's home and wonder if she has ever even stepped foot between the hundreds of trees on her property when I feel a hand on my shoulder. Turning around, I look up from where I am sitting to find familiar ocean-blue eyes smiling down at me.

"Hey, Billie," he says with a smirk on the corner of his lips.

His familiar husky voice vibrates through my ears and into my now-frozen brain.

I narrow my eyes and immediately jump to my feet facing him when I realise who he is. My heart is in my throat, my mouth is substantially dry, and the last place I want to be right now is here.

"F-Finn?" I fumble my words because that's all that I can get out right now.

I'm speechless. Finn is Grace's brother. The one who looked very different from what he looks like now, standing in front of me, and for a second, it looks like he hasn't changed from that teenage boy I used to know. Looking him up and down, I notice he's gotten taller, more tanned, and a lot more muscular. His button-up shirt hangs open, revealing his perfectly carved chest and abs. Realising I am now staring, I clear my throat and look away as he chuckles at the flustered sight of me.

"Did you miss me?" His tone is teasing, and I clench my jaw as my mind works to come up with words, to say *anything*.

*Is this really happening right now?*

"That depends, do people usually miss assholes?" I cross my arms across my chest as I swallow, putting on a brave face, a *mean* face.

He chuckles and puts one arm around me, my skin tingling everywhere his arm touches, and we begin walking. "Why don't we have a drink and do some catching up?" I look back to everyone huddled around the fire talking, laughing, and drinking, and my eyes skate to where Grace is sitting.

She's laughing and carrying on about something that happened when we were in high school together. I know the story, and she *knows* I hate the story, but I let her tell it anyway as my legs carry me with Finn away from the fire, to the drinks station. Currently everyone is around the fire, so we are alone.

"So, did you have to convince the government to let you back into the country?" I ask with a sarcastic smile. The corner of his mouth lifts slightly as he pours whiskey into his cup.

"I see you haven't changed one bit, Billie." His ocean-blue eyes lift, and I swear it feels like he's looking directly into my soul.

*How would you know?*

I avert my eyes from his and nervously begin making myself a drink. How can he still affect me like this when I haven't seen or spoken to him in ten *fucking* years!?

"Well, you certainly have. You were a lot shorter before you left." I say as he stares down at his drink and clenches his jaw. A moment passes before either of us speak again.

"How have you been?" he asks, and I look up at him like he's just asked me how I am after my dog had died or something.

"Are you joking? I'm not doing this with you." I finish making my drink and turn to walk over to the group huddled by the fire, when he reaches out to grab me, his strong hand clasp my arm with an iron grip.

"Will you just talk to me?" His tone is impatient and unyielding.

*The nerve of this man.*

"Talk to you!?" I scoff. "What gives you the right to turn up after a decade and demand a conversation with me?" I rip my arm out of his hold, staring up at him as my hands begin to shake.

Running a hand through his hair, he looks at the floor. "I know I messed things up, but this is why I came back." He

pleads, “Please just give me the chance to explain things to you.”

Red-hot rage simmers underneath the surface of my skin at the sight of him standing in front of me, practically begging.

*Begging.*

After he left, without a single word.

“How dare you stand there and ask me how I am like ten years haven’t passed without any contact from you?!” My breathing has become erratic, and I feel the others’ eyes on us now. Everything I left unsaid is being unleashed in a raging tornado out of my mouth. “How can you pretend like nothing has changed?!” I yell at him as he looks back to the group, and I know they’re staring, but I don’t care. “Did it all mean absolutely nothing to you... was it all a lie, some sick joke?” I push him with both hands, but he barely even budes. “Did you feel like a stud telling all your friends about what we did?!” I can hardly recognise my own voice as I spew the words at him.

“Billie...” He reaches out to grab me again, but I swat his hand away before he can touch me. “Please, just calm down.”

“Calm down?” I place my drink down on the table. “Would you be calm if the person who ghosted you just turns up after a decade? The person who you grew up with?” I feel my breath hitch and force the pain back down into my chest.

He doesn’t respond, just stands there, looking at me.

My skin is on fire, my ears buzzing with fury. “You’re pathetic.” I point to him, my finger digging into his chest.

“You’re a fucking coward!” I spit the last words at him like I’m aiming a dagger at his chest. I *want* him to hurt, just like he hurt me all those years ago. I’ve kept so much hidden, so many things locked up deep inside me for too long.

I hear him audibly sigh as I turn and walk away. Glancing back over, I see him downing his entire drink and pouring a new one.

*Good luck. You really think you can just come back into my life and ask me how I am without so much as a phone call in the past ten years?*

We grew up together, for fuck's sake. I had known him since I had known Grace. We slept together once, followed by a week of silence, then he left without even a goodbye. Just *poof*, gone. Did I think after sleeping together, we would spend the rest of our lives together and just be happy? No, don't be silly. Those things only ever happen in fairy tales. However, I did expect to at least talk about what happened, but before we even had a chance to, he left with his father to go halfway across the world.

"I need to talk to you for a second," I say with gritted teeth. Grabbing Grace's hand, I guide her inside through the large floor-to-ceiling glass doors, closing them once we are inside.

"Look, I'm sorry!" she blurts out. "I knew he was going to stop by. I didn't know when, and I was kind of hoping you two could just move past it. It has been a decade after all." She gives me a half smile in an attempt to soften her words.

"Grace, I love you, but I don't want to see him." I grab my bag and my jacket off the lounge as I make my way through the large white lounge room towards the front door.

"Billie, please, I'm sorry. Please stay for a bit longer?" she pleads after me.

"I'll text you when I get home." I know she will text me incessantly until I let her know I'm safe anyway. Opening the front door, I hear Riley's voice from my left.

"B, where are you going?" I look up at my older brother Riley and his friend Nathan beside him.

"Uh, I think I'm just going to head home. I have a headache, and I need to get some more things finished for work," I speak as I hastily make my way off the porch, done with the constant questions. I just want to get out of here.

"Wait, you came with me. How are you getting home?" Riley reaches for his keys inside his pocket. "I'll drive you."

“No, honestly, it’s fine. My house is just a fifteen-minute walk anyway. I’ll text you when I get home. You stay and have fun.” I continue on my path when I hear Nate speak.

*God, can I just get out of here!?*

“I can drop you off if you like. I have to head that way anyway and pick up my brother from practice,” he says. It’s cute how much he cares and does for his brother. I’ve always admired that about Nate.

“Are you sure? I really don’t want to overstep or anything.” I sigh and look from Riley to Nate. He chuckles and shakes his head.

“B, it’s no trouble.” He looks to Riley, who nods.

“Make sure you text me. If you don’t, I will be knocking on your door in the middle of the night to make sure you’re okay.” Riley points a finger at me and instantly makes me feel like a little kid. I roll my eyes at him and make my way to Nate’s Jeep.

I’ve known Nate for a few months now since he has been hanging out with my brother. They do mixed martial arts together, and I think that’s all I really know about him. Other than the fact that he absolutely adores his younger brother, Noah. Pulling out of Grace’s parents’ estate, we make our way through the dirt roads covered in trees. You wouldn’t think you could find such a huge estate so close to the city, but I guess that’s what being rich can get you. I look down at my hands in my lap and pick at the skin on the sides of my nails. I try to steady my breathing as anger surges like a tidal wave inside me.

*How dare he just come back and pretend like nothing happened?*

*Arrogant prick.*

“What was that back there?” Nate’s deep voice breaks the silence, interrupting my thoughts.

“What do you mean?” I pretend not to know because it’s easier than spilling my deepest secrets.



“I’m not blind. You were fine before Finn showed up, and as soon as you exchanged words with him, you wanted to bail on the party.” He glances over at me, and there’s a hint of light that flashes in his dark green eyes as we start passing streetlights. Nate is ridiculously attractive. Dark curly hair that falls to his eyes from the top with a shorter cut at the bottom of his head. He’s wearing a leather jacket with a white tee underneath. Also completely covered in tattoos from his neck to his hands.

*The perfect bad-boy image.*

“I’d rather not talk about it.” I look at my phone and see a text pop up from Grace.

BESTIE

A screenshot of a text message from 'BESTIE'. The message is displayed in a light blue speech bubble with a tail pointing to the left. The text inside the bubble reads: "Billie, I'm so sorry for not warning you Finn was coming. That was shitty of me. Text me when you get home." The background of the bubble is a slightly darker shade of blue, and the text is white.

Billie, I'm so sorry for not warning you Finn was coming. That was shitty of me. Text me when you get home.

Locking my phone, I look outside and watch the trees and streetlights pass as we continue driving.

“Do you actually need to go home, or was that just an excuse to get out of there?” He pushes on as he turns his head to give me a smirk. A smile breaks through my icy exterior. I can’t help it, he’s charming. “So, does that mean you wouldn’t mind coming with me to pick up my brother? I think there’s still the second half of the game to go.” His warm smile makes me feel completely safe.

“I guess I have a spare forty minutes.” I smile back. “For Noah.”

He chuckles as he makes a turn. “Noted.”



# Chapter Two

## Nathan

The smell of her flowery perfume has engulfed my Jeep, and it's the only thing I can smell. I'm glad she agreed to come with me to pick up Noah. If I were being completely honest, I didn't want her to go home yet. Not without having a night where she can enjoy herself. I pull into the parking lot of the outdoor basketball court and turn the car off.

"I usually just watch from the car. Noah hates it when I'm on the sidelines. He thinks I jinx his game," I explain as I take a sip from my water bottle. I feel her eyes on me, and as I turn to look, she looks away.

"Sounds like Noah is a bit superstitious." She smiles as she looks out towards the court.

*Goddamn that beautiful fucking smile.*

I knew the moment I met Billie that she was trouble, which is why I never tried to pursue things with her. I had my own shit to sort out and still do, not to mention she's Riley's sister.

The players are running while the coaches are on the sidelines, yelling some words of encouragement. Feeling my phone buzz in my pocket, I pull it out to read the text.

RILEY

Natey boy! a few of the guys want to go down to the club in about an hour. Wanna join?

I stare at Riley's text, not sure how I want to respond. When does the whole clubbing scene start getting old? Because it did for me a long time ago.

ME

Nah I'm going to skip it. Got lots on tomorrow.

“Was that my brother asking where I am? ’Cause it wouldn’t be the first time.” She rolls her eyes and shifts in her seat. She’s not wrong. Riley is a bit overbearing, but like any older brother, in his mind, he’s just protecting her.

“He’s asking if I want to go clubbing.” My honesty surprises her, and she snaps her focus on me.

“What?” She snickers. “He never goes clubbing.”

“He’s drunk. He only goes clubbing when he’s wasted.” I place my phone back in my pocket.

“Right.” Her tone is short and sharp, and I can sense she’s thinking about something that is making her mad or upset.

The coach blows the whistle for full-time, and I see Noah grab his stuff and head over to the car. I roll the window down to greet him.

“Noah, say hi to Billie. She’s coming with us to get something to eat,” I say as she looks at me as if to say she never agreed to get food with us, but she doesn’t protest.

“Awesome, ’cause I’m starvingggg.” Noah throws his bag through the back door and climbs in. “What’s up, Bills?”

She looks at him and smiles. Noah is about to turn eighteen, and I have been looking after him since he was in nappies. Now being in my thirties, I’m pretty much the only person he has in life to look up to, and I’m not sure if that’s a good thing. Our parents weren’t exactly the best of parents. Mum was addicted to drugs at an early age, and Dad, well, he was worse. As soon as I turned eighteen, I became the legal guardian of my little brother due to my parents not being fit to take care of him. I didn’t really have to do much to provide evidence of that given that they were abusive.

“Living the dream, young man, living the *fucking* dream.” Sarcasm oozes from her tone as she turns away and starts scrolling on her phone. Noah looks to me through the rear-view mirror and raises his eyebrows at her response. I laugh as I pull out of the parking space.



“This burger is amazing.” Billie scarfs down half her burger in less than a couple minutes, and I am thoroughly impressed at how such a small-framed woman can be so hungry.

She shoves a couple of fries into her mouth, and her eyes roll back into her head as she moans. My mind instantly goes somewhere else at the sight.

“Have you never had burgers from Five Guys?” Noah looks at her in astonishment as she continues to eat her burger.

“Honestly, I don’t really venture to this part of the city. It’s a little dodgy, no offence, so I don’t like to come here alone,” she admits.

“I bet you regret that decision now though, right?” Noah winks at her, and I kick him under the table.

Ignoring Noah’s question, “Why aren’t you eating?” she asks as she looks to me as I sip my drink.

“Not hungry,” I say simply. I mean, I can eat; I can always eat, but after a couple of beers at the party, I decide not to overindulge. Coach Tyson wants me to compete in the next few months, so I don’t want to jeopardise a win by eating greasy meals this late into the night.

She laughs and takes another bite of her burger. “Afraid you’ll mess up your impeccable physique?” she says with her mouth full. I’d be lying if I said I never really noticed Billie. I have always checked her out whenever I had the chance to see her, whether it be when she comes to pick up Riley from the gym or when we all hang out together. She’s small, probably five-five, with long, dark brunette hair that falls just above her hips. Her siren eyes complement her perfect little cupid’s bow of her lips. She’s smart, but what I can’t pinpoint is why she has such a sour attitude about life.

“Nice to know you’ve been checking me out.” I smirk, and her cheeks flush. “Best not tell Riley about that,” I joke, and her lips curve as she struggles to hide her smile.

“I’d rather stick a fork in my eye,” she responds, as she begins packing her rubbish away in the takeaway bag.

We spend another hour talking about Noah's love for basketball and how one day he wants to join the NBA and move to America. Every time Noah asks her about herself, she doesn't really say much. Always avoiding the questions, talking about anything but herself. She's good at that, directing the focus to someone or something else to avoid talking about herself or her life.

Truth is, I know Riley from the gym. We met there a few months ago, and he never really talks about his sister either. So, I don't really know much about Billie.

Her laugh fills the restaurant as Noah continues his story about some prank he pulled on a teacher at his high school once. I notice for the first time the way she watches Noah intently as he tells his story.

Her eyes shimmer and the dimple on her left cheek appears when she smiles.

"What do you like to do, Billie?" I interject in the middle of their conversation. Not caring that it was rude. She looks at me, bemused as to why I would cut off her conversation with Noah.

"Uh, I work a lot, Nate. I don't exactly have the time to have hobbies," she says matter-of-factly. Noah, clearly uncomfortable with the shift in energy, excuses himself.

"Everyone works to make a living, but that doesn't mean we stop having things we like to do." I cross my arms, eager to push her.

"Why the sudden interest in the things I like to do?" she counters.

I shrug. "Maybe I'm interested to know." Her eyes move to Noah, who is now standing outside talking to a couple of his friends who showed up, then back down to the table as she slouches in the booth.

Billie sighs. "Honestly, I don't even know anymore. I studied art when I was in university, but then when our dad passed away, I needed to get a job. So, I ended up working in

corporate design.” She sighs and takes a sip of her drink. “Five years later, here I am still working a job I despise.”

I can pretend like I understand, but I don’t. My job is nothing like hers. I guess you can say I am *self-employed*. If I’m being honest, I didn’t grow up in the best neighbourhood. Had a shitty upbringing and *definitely* didn’t get a degree from university. I hung out with the wrong people and grew accustomed to their *ways*.

I’ve become better at hiding it over the years, so people just think I am a professional athlete.

“Soul-sucking corporate, huh?” Uncrossing my arms, I reach into my pocket for my phone.

“Why don’t you leave me your number, and maybe we can figure out some hobbies you enjoy together?” Reaching across, I slide my phone over to her.

“Or maybe I can teach you to defend yourself so you can come to the ‘dodgy’ side of the city and not fear being mugged.” I smirk.

She looks up at me then back down to my phone. “You know I can just ask my brother to teach me if I wanted to, right?” She smiles, the dimple on her left cheek appearing.

“Sure, if you want to learn about the history of Muay Thai, karate, tae kwon do, boxing... the list goes on.” I smirk when she lifts the phone and starts typing in her number.

Riley has a fascination with all the different fighting styles. He once went home and did a deep-dive research on all kinds of fighting styles and talked my ear off during a whole forty-minute training session about how tae kwon do is probably the best style of fighting. I, on the other hand, fight because I need to.

She hands me back my phone, and I grab it, but she doesn’t let go. “Riley cannot know.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” I wink at her and slide out of the booth. Holding my hand out to her, she takes it as she slides out of the booth, and we head outside to where Noah is standing.

“Let’s get going. Miss Quinn here needs to get her beauty sleep,” I say to Noah. Billie smacks my shoulder with the back of her hand. *Feisty*. I’m keen to find out just how feisty. Noah says bye to his friends as we walk to my Jeep parked on the side of the road.





# Chapter Three

## Billie

**U**ghhhhh. I audibly groan as I roll out of bed and get ready for yet another day in what feels like prison. Slipping into the bathroom of my one-bedroom apartment, I look at myself in the mirror. My hair is knotty, dark bags under my eyes, and my lips are so chapped that no amount of ointment will fix it. Well, I guess that's what you look like when you work forty hours a week and snore like someone is cutting off your air supply.

*That would be nice.*

Quickly throwing my hair up, I wash my face and brush my teeth, then slap on some makeup to make me look somewhat human and head to the kitchen for some much-needed caffeine. Taking my phone off the charger on the counter, I see I have several emails from work.

*Surprise, surprise,* and a text from a number I don't have saved in my phone.



**Billie, I know you probably never want to see or speak to me ever again, but please at least let me explain to you what happened. Let me try and make this right between us. I really don't want to...**

I stop reading as soon as I realise who this message is from. Sighing, I turn and make my way over to my tiny balcony overlooking the garden. At least the sun shines onto my balcony in the morning, and I can get some essential vitamin D. I look back over to my phone on the counter, fighting with myself over if I should read the rest of the message. I know I'm going to end up reading it, but at this current moment, I just need a second to myself to think.

Do I really want to hold on to all that past pain?

Could there possibly be a good reason as to why he left and never contacted me?

I can't believe I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt after ten years of radio silence. Though a part of me wants to know, and a part of me desperately wants an explanation as to why he left and didn't say anything.

Why did he at least not send a text or even an email? I just want closure for the ten years that he has occupied my thoughts and my heart.

Feeling the sunshine on my face, I soak up every minute I can of the sun's rays and decide I'm going to hear him out. The least he can do is explain, and I don't need to share anything, I can just listen. Closing the balcony door when I'm inside, I pick up my phone and continue reading.

**Billie, I know you probably never want to see or speak to me ever again, but please at least let me explain to you what happened. Let me try and make this right between us. I really don't want to impose on your life, but I need you to know my side of the story. I won't stop trying to contact you because I need you to know. I need you to stop being so stubborn and talk to me.**

There's a twinge in my heart as I reminisce about all the good times we shared together with his sister as well. The days we spent riding his parents' jet skis, camping outside in the mountains, and sharing basically every waking second together in school.

I squeeze my eyes shut as the memories all come flooding back in. Everything I had hoped to override or erase somehow.

How can you, when they were probably the most fun you had with your friends? 'Cause that's what we were back then.

*Friends.*

*Billie- Aged 18*

*"Are you sure you want to do this, Billie?" Finn's hand cups my face. His eyes locked onto mine as he holds himself up on top of me while the rain patters against his tent.*

*“I’m sure.”*

*I place my lips on his, moving my hands from his bare chest to his broad shoulders. Deepening the kiss, his hand trails down from my face to my breast. I’m nervous because this is my first time, and I’m happy it’s with Finn. I trust him. I’ve known him for a long time, and I’ve had a crush on him since we were kids. Electricity courses through my skin as he squeezes my breast resulting in an escaped moan.*

*“You’re so beautiful, B,” he whispers into my ear, and I can’t think anymore.*

*The ability abandoned me as soon as his lips touched mine. He adjusts himself and slowly pushes himself inside me. It burns and aches, but the sensation is odd because it starts to feel... good... in a way.*

*“I’ll go slow,” he reassures me.*

*Slowly, he pushes himself deeper and deeper until he’s completely buried inside me.*

*I squeeze my eyes shut at the feeling of being so full. His dick is the first one I have seen so I don’t know if it’s big or not because I have nothing to compare it to, but oh my god, it feels big.*

*“Are you okay?” His voice is filled with concern as he searches my eyes when they open.*

*“I’m okay, I just... feel so... full.” I chuckle, and he laughs. He begins to move in rhythm, and the sensation begins to change from fullness to something I have never felt before. A pleasure I’ve never encountered. He buries his face in my neck and plants small kisses down to my collarbone. I feel that sensation start to build in my centre as our breathing picks up, our bodies moving together as one.*

*Shaking my head to keep the memories at bay, I start typing a reply.*

ME

*I’ll meet you at the estate after work.*

His reply is almost instantaneous.

FINN

Perfect. I'll have a hot chocolate ready for you.

Yep, just like the old days.



I managed to get something to eat after I ducked out of the office at nine thirty p.m. Today was brutal. We had potential clients visit from overseas, and everyone in the office was manic. I drive myself over to the Mackenzie estate in complete silence, going over all the different scenarios possible with Finn.

One thing is for sure, I can never forgive him for leaving without a goodbye and never contacting me again.

No matter *what* he says to me.

Reaching the front of the estate, I press the buzzer by the large gate, and after a few seconds, it slides open. Driving up the dirt road, I think about how the Mackenzies have never really made many changes to their estate in all these years. Granted, the trees are bigger, but everything else remains the same. Abundance of grass, beautiful blooming trees lining the road, and a small barn on the corner of the estate. Pulling up to the large fountain at the front of the big white house, I see Finn waiting outside on the porch, sitting on the swinging seat looking down at his phone. He hears me roll up and immediately stands, putting his phone in his pocket and running a hand through his beautiful dirty blonde hair.

“Thanks for coming, Billie.”

“Is Grace home?” I ask.

“No, she’s out with Russell.”

*Ah yes, Russell, how can I forget her current fling of the month.*

Walking inside, I place my bag on the couch in the lounge room, spin around, and cross my arms across my chest. “So, talk.” I cut to the chase because I’m not here for pleasantries.

“Do you want your hot chocolate first?” He flashes his killer smile, showcasing his perfectly white teeth. He’s dressed in a fancy suit, obviously must have just gotten home from work, or is still probably working.

The suit accentuates his body perfectly.

He’s tall, has broad shoulders, and quite clearly works out from what I saw the other night at the party.

Sighing, I squeeze the top of my nose with my fingers, feeling a headache coming on from just being in the same room as Finn. The hostility and pure hate I’ve harboured for this man for such a long time has without a doubt poisoned my body.

“I came here because you said you wanted to explain why you left, so... explain.”

Finn sighs and takes a step towards me, and I immediately take a step back.

“What, so you can’t even stand to be in the same room as me?” he places his hands on his hips. “We quite literally grew up together, B.”

Becoming impatient, I groan.

“Did you call me here to reminisce about the past or to explain yourself because if you don’t start explaining in the next five seconds, I’m leaving.”

He sighs.

“It’s complicated.” He looks away as if it troubles him as if it causes him pain.

*Yeah, right.*

After begging to see me, this is all he’s giving me.

Just like I guessed he would.

“Let me make it less complicated for you, Finn.” I grab my bag, fling it over my shoulder, and look him dead in the eyes. “Don’t contact me ever again... that shouldn’t be too hard for you, considering you did it for ten years.” It feels like steam bellows through my nostrils as I begin heading towards the front door, then I hear him call out.

“Do you really think that’s logical, B?” His voice is stern, I feel him grab my arm and spin me around to face him, my hands landing on his hard chest. He smells absolutely divine, which makes me angrier. “How are you ever going to make that happen when your best friend is my twin sister, huh?”

Fraternal twins. Yes, how can I forget? Anytime the three of us would argue, he would take his sister’s side.

Grace always took my side, though.

Pushing him away with all my might, I take a breath. “I mean it. Don’t contact me again.” My chest heaves, and my heart pounds in my ears as I make my way to my car, almost tripping over my own two feet.

Driving out of the Mackenzie estate, I pull over on the side of the dirt road. It’s late, and there are hardly any cars out at this time. My breath hitches as I fight to hold in my tears. Grabbing my phone out of my bag, I begin typing a message.

ME

A blue speech bubble with a white border and a tail pointing towards the top right, containing the text "Are you free?".

Instantly, I see the three dots appear as he types.

NATHAN

A grey speech bubble with a white border and a tail pointing towards the top left, containing the text "Meet at Bar 88 near Five Guys?".





# Chapter Four

## Nathan

Looking at my phone, I check the time, quarter past ten. I finished a job not long ago, so I had to head home to change before coming to meet Billie. Sitting at the bar, I place my phone on the bar top, and it immediately lights up. Unknown caller.

I put my phone to my ear. “Speak.”

“We need you on Monday. I will send an address after this call.” Kieran’s voice comes through.

“I want the money upfront this time.”

“Done. You can pick up the cash from Joe’s tomorrow night.”

I hang up and place the phone back into my pocket when I see Billie enter the bar. I wave her over as I take her in. She’s dressed in all black, a skin-tight leather skirt that hugs her delicious curves and a black satin button-up top with heels. Looks like she just finished work.



Her hair sways as she walks over to the bar and plonks herself down next to me.

“Rough day?” Tilting my head, I examine her face. She’s been crying. I clench my teeth to stop myself from reacting.

“Yep. You can say that.” Her phone starts to ring. Grabbing it out from her bag, she irritably silences the call and shoves it back in. “Amaretto Sour, please.” She orders a drink from the bartender as she tucks a stray hair behind her ear.

“Want to talk about it?” I ask.

“I’d rather not.” Her response is sharp.

“So, why am I sitting here instead of Grace?” I lean on the bar and slightly turn my body to face her.

She lets out an audible groan. “Because my best friend is in her little bubble at the moment, thinking that she loves this guy named Russell who she’s seeing, but really, we all know she’s still completely hung up on her ex-fiancé, Michael.”

Just like I thought. She’s going to make this about someone else yet again, deflecting like a pro. Instead of pushing her, I let her be. She clearly needs to clear her head, and I want to help her do exactly that. “Bartender, pour us four shots of tequila.” I hand over my card to him. “Put the rest of our drinks for the night on my tab.”

“What are you doing? I’m only having one drink,” she says, and I can feel her eyes on me as the bartender begins to pour our shots. Taking one, I hold it up as if to fake cheers her and throw it back.

“I’m going to show you what *fun* looks like, little B.” I smirk, and she struggles to hold back her smile and rolls her eyes. She takes one of the shots from the bar and immediately scrunches her face after she drinks it.

This is going to be fun.

We finish our shots as we banter back and forth, then Billie begins to nurse the Amaretto Sour she ordered earlier. Feeling a slight buzz, I take off my jacket and place it in my lap. I feel her eyes shift to my arms.

“Nice tattoos. Do they mean anything?” Her face is flushed, and it’s cute how she thinks she’s succeeding in hiding it from me.

“Some of them do.” I take a sip of my whiskey. “Some of them were just on a whim.”

She smiles as she takes another sip of her drink.

“So, how long have you been doing MMA for?” Placing her drink down on the bar, she turns her body towards me. My eyes instantly drop to the top of her breasts which peek out of her silk top.

“Years. I kind of fell into it accidentally.” I look up at her, her grey eyes are plastered onto mine, waiting for more. “I used to get into a lot of fights as a teenager, and one of my school friends had an uncle who owned a gym and suggested I go there to train to let out my anger.”

“How much anger can a teen have?” She giggles.

“You’d be surprised.”

“Well, if it actually does help with anger, maybe I should try it.” Jokingly, she brushes it off.

“Why don’t you?” My focus entirely on her, I pick up my drink and throw the rest of it back.

She cackles and begins to play with her straw. “Have you seen me? What impact could I possibly have on someone larger than me in a fight?”

“I can teach you where and how to hit to have the maximum impact on someone three times your size.” And it’s true. It doesn’t matter how small you are. What matters is knowing where to hit and how to hit. That is the decider on whether you come out on top.

She considers it for a split second but shakes her head.

“Honestly, I barely have time to myself lately. My boss has been hounding me to meet these unrealistic deadlines. I can barely breathe when I’m at the office.” She finally admits something about her life to me. It’s a small victory, but I will nevertheless take it.

“How about you come down to the gym after work one day?” I try to bargain with her because the truth is I don’t know when I’m going to see her next, and I want to see her again.

She hesitates for a minute, unsure if she can make the commitment. She looks at me and nods.

“Fine. Okay, let’s do it.”

I smile at her, and she smiles back. She’s so attractive, and for the first time in a long time, I feel excited.

“How’s Noah, by the way?” she asks.

“The kid has amazing talent. He’s not the smartest in his school, but his ball skills are unreal.” Whenever I talk about Noah, I’m torn. On the one hand, I want him to succeed in his goal of becoming a professional basketball player, but on the other hand, I want him to stay here where I can protect him. To me, he’s still a little kid, my little brother.

“Wow, so does he want to pursue a career in basketball?” he says, taking a sip of her drink. “If he does, I think a colleague at work is currently working on a project for the Boomers.” She’s talking about the Australian men’s basketball team. “I can ask him if he knows any scouts from the US.”

“Noah would be thrilled, little B.” She smiles at her nickname and nods. She’s always wanting to help others but never looking out for herself. “Any plans tomorrow?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Not really, it’s Saturday. Does anyone really want to do anything on a Saturday after a working week anymore?”

She chuckles and tries to stand. Wobbling on one foot, she grabs a hold of me to steady herself.

I stand and slide my arm around her tiny waist to support her. “I think that last drink may have tipped me over.” If her death grip on my arm is anything to go by, she’s right. Pulling her close to steady her, I breathe in her perfume, feeling her body pressed into mine, the hairs on my neck stand up, sending a shiver down my spine as she stares up at me.

*Fuck*, she smells remarkable. I reach over to grab her bag and hand it to her. Waving the bartender over, I sign for our bill and take my card.

“I’ll call an Uber,” I say as I begin to guide her out the door.

“But what about my car?” She almost trips over her own feet in her heels. She’s positively over the limit.

Once outside, I bend down and begin to remove her shoes.

“Don’t worry about your car. It’ll be parked outside your apartment before you even wake up tomorrow.” I look up to her from where I am kneeling, her hand placed on my shoulder to stabilise herself. How does she look magnificent from every angle?

As if hearing my thoughts, she stares at me and her cheeks flush.

*Fuck, I love making her blush.*

Holding her heels in one hand, I offer her the other, and she takes it as we wait for the Uber.

“Just Pretend” by Bad Omens filters through the stereo of the Uber as we make the drive to her apartment.

“Thanks for tonight.” She looks over to me and smiles, her dimple appearing.

“My pleasure.” I slide my hand on her thigh, and she places her hand on mine, instantly sending a jolt through my body.

“No, really. I was having a shitty day, and I had fun tonight. Thanks for meeting me.” There’s genuine gratitude in her voice.

I watch as she licks her lips, her hooded eyes on mine. In this moment, all I want to do is lean over and take her seductive lips with mine, but I refrain. I know she’s drunk, and I don’t want her to regret kissing me in the morning. I want her to remember it when I kiss her, and I want her to feel it in between her thighs when she thinks about it after.

“Do you think you can be ready by eight tomorrow morning?” I ask, hopeful she’ll say yes.

She sighs. “But it’s Saturday...” She tries to protest, but I’m all over it.

I give her a sly smile.

“I promise you won’t be disappointed.”

She narrows her eyes. “Fine... but only because you asked nicely.” Smirking, she removes her hand from mine as that

beautiful rosy colour returns to her cheeks.

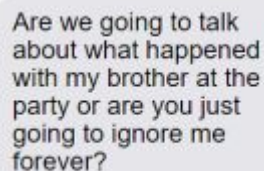
*Fuck. I'm in trouble.*

## BILLIE

Taking a deep breath in, I get ready as I wait for Nate to pick me up. He specifically told me to wear comfortable clothing, so I throw on a pair of black leggings and a jumper.

Tying the laces on my sneakers, I head over to my balcony and look outside. As he promised, my car is parked on the side of the road outside my apartment. I walk over to my small coffee machine and begin preparing myself a cup when I hear my phone buzz.

BESTIE



Are we going to talk about what happened with my brother at the party or are you just going to ignore me forever?

I love Grace like a sister, but sometimes she fails to see things from someone else's point of view. I wish she would just understand me sometimes.

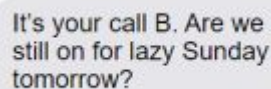
ME



I'm not ignoring you. I just don't want to see or speak to Finn.

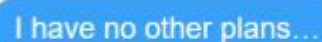


BESTIE



It's your call B. Are we still on for lazy Sunday tomorrow?

ME



I have no other plans...



BESTIE

SWEET. I'll be at yours at 11am, and don't forget the Maltesers this time!

Placing my phone in the small pocket of the leggings, I take a sip from my coffee. I have no idea what Nate has planned today, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't somewhat interested.

I hadn't been out in a while, and last night was the first night in a long time I really enjoyed just sitting and talking. It came so easily with Nate that I felt I didn't have to pretend to be someone I'm not. Contrary to when I am with Grace and her friends, when I feel like I constantly have to fit some type of mould... like be popular, funny, or have rich parents. I feel my phone buzz again in my pocket. Pulling it out, I read the message from Nate.

NATHAN

Outside.



“You still haven't told me where we are going,” I say matter-of-factly.

He smirks as he makes a left turn up a gravel road. We are surrounded by greenery and mountains since we have been driving for a few hours outside of Melbourne City. His eyes are hidden behind his aviator sunglasses, and he is looking extremely rugged and handsome today, wearing grey track pants and a black compression shirt that shows off his buff chest and abs.

How do someone's abs show even when they're sitting?!

I haven't been able to take my eyes off him this entire car trip, and let's not even mention the backwards cap.

“We're almost there,” he states, driving past a sign that said Carmichael Falls. “How are you feeling?” He licks his lips, and I immediately look away, feeling the heat pool in my cheeks.

“I’m pretty good, considering how many tequila shots we did.” Laughing, I reach for my phone in my bag to find ten emails in my inbox flagged as important.

*Everything is fucking important to everyone at this company.*

Sighing, I open one of the emails.

**Hi Billie,**

**Please see below email from our client wishing to change the advertisement. Can we please have this done by close of business Monday?**

**Many thanks,**

**Laura.**

Reading the rest of the email chain from the client, I frown. How on earth am I supposed to change an entire advertisement that completely deviates from their original brief by the close of business Monday?

Are these people smoking crack?

Feeling Nate’s eyes on me, I turn to glance at him.

“Are you seriously working on a Saturday?” His deep voice questions, and he’s right. I shouldn’t be looking at my emails because technically I’m on salary and don’t get paid to work on the weekends, but the more my deadlines inch closer and closer, the more anxious I am becoming.

I turn my phone off and shove it back into my bag, determined to put all my attention on having fun today with Nate, no matter what he has planned.

“Nope, my phone is off.”

“Good, because we’re here.” I didn’t even notice the car had stopped. Nate gets out of the car and stretches his arms above his head. We’re parked in a gravel parking lot in the middle of the mountains.

There’s one small takeaway shop serving hot dogs and the other looks like a souvenir shop. Getting out of the car, I throw my backpack onto one shoulder.



“Are we hiking?” I ask, noticing the walking trail that leads up the mountain.

He takes his backpack from the boot of his car and smiles. “Sure are.” I audibly groan. “It’s about time you got out into nature. When’s the last time you did something outdoors? You’re as pale as Casper.” I glare at him as he walks past me chuckling. “Come on, this way.” He begins walking up the trail, and I guess I have no choice but to follow.

It’s quiet, considering it’s a Saturday. Although, I do think today is a public holiday, so I’m assuming most are spending it with their families, having barbeques and drinking. Given Riley was invited to a buck’s weekend, I didn’t have any plans.

“And how long is this trail?” I’m already slightly breathless from walking up the small hill, which I am assuming is not the only one.

*Fantastic.*

“About an hour,” he answers.

“Are you joking?” I sigh, stepping over a large boulder. “Please tell me you’re joking.” Nate is walking the track like a pro, and I don’t even think I have seen a bead of sweat on his face yet. “You promised I wouldn’t be disappointed.”

He doesn’t respond, he just smirks.

“You know, when I think of fun, this is definitely not the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Oh, please, little B, do enlighten me then. What does come to mind first?” He turns to me and winks.

*Lord, can this man get any more attractive?*

Ignoring his obvious flirting, I tell the truth.

“Books.”

“What kind of books?” I can’t tell if he’s insinuating something.

“All kinds, really. Romance, mystery, horror, thriller.” I stop to catch my breath. Nate turns to face me as he takes his

backpack off, reaches inside, and pulls out a protein bar.

“Here, it’ll give you some energy to tackle the upcoming hills.” He holds it out to me. Taking it, I sit on a large tree branch, tear it open, and take a bite.

“Do you come here a lot?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Sometimes...” He pauses as he takes a drink from his water bottle. I watch his throat work as it bobs up and down. “I come here when I’m in a battle with myself. The fresh air and exercise always helps to clear my head.” He sits beside me. “I thought maybe bringing you here would help you, too.”

That’s what I like about Nate, he cares. On the outside, he may look all mean and scary to someone who doesn’t know him, but he really does care about the people in his life.

Smiling, I reach out and place my hand on his thigh, feeling his strong leg underneath my palm.

“That’s really sweet...” I smile up at him.

He grins. “Don’t thank me yet, little B. Not until you see what’s up that hill.”

He nods in the direction we were walking in, but all I can see are his perfect lips moving and his magnificent emerald eyes staring into mine.

Right, the hike... I need to pull myself together. Hastily, I stand and brush off the crumbs left on my leggings from the protein bar.

“Okay, well, let’s go see what is so amazing about this place.” Pulling on my backpack, we begin walking up the never-ending hills, and my thighs begin to burn as sweat pools on my forehead and upper lip. Great, now I’m paranoid with how I look given the amount of exertion needed to climb that beast of a hill. We come up to two signs which only have arrows on them, one pointing left, which looks like another trail, and one pointing right, which looks like it leads into the thick forest.

“This way.” He pushes through the bushes, turning right as he makes a path for me to follow.

“Uh, are you sure this is safe?” We walk through the forest, surrounded by trees and singing birds. I hear a scurry come from my right, and I yelp, latching onto Nate’s backpack.

“Relax.” He laughs and continues through the thick shrubbery. “It was only a possum.”

Looking around, I notice we are quite deep into the forest. I don’t know how long we’ve been walking for since I turned my phone off, not that I would even get any service out here anyway. We come across a large hedge. Nate parts the hedge and nods for me to go through.

“We’re here.” He laughs when I hesitate. “I’m right here. You’re safe, I promise.”

I step through the hedge hesitantly, the branches scratching me from every direction. I can see the other side but only partially. Reaching my arms out, I part the branches and step through. My lips part as I’m about to berate Nate for making me go through the hedge just as I look up at the most breathtaking view.

I stand in front of a secluded waterfall surrounded by large rocks and plants. The sound of the water crashing into the small pool beneath fills my ears. Walking closer, I notice Nate is now beside me.

“Wow,” is all I can say. I can’t even remember the last time I saw a waterfall. I look over to Nate as he begins to take his backpack off, followed by his shirt. He turns to me and looks me up and down.

“Don’t tell me you worked that hard to get up those hills and you’re not going to jump into that pool.” He smirks at me with his devilish good looks.

I watch him take his pants off, revealing his black boxer briefs underneath. My mouth goes dry as I take a second to marvel at his exquisite physique. His legs are strong and toned, his back muscles flex as he reaches up and removes his

cap, letting his dark curls free. I can now see he also has tattoos on his back, too, covering most of his skin. He didn't tell me to pack swimmers, so I guess underwear it is. I place my backpack on a large rock next to me and proceed to strip down to my sports bra and G-string. Watching Nate, I walk over to the edge of the pool where he is standing. His eyes graze over my body, sending tingles through my spine as he reaches out for my hand. Taking his hand, I step beside him. The rock feels slippery and cold beneath my feet.

"It's deep, so we have to jump." He doesn't give me time to prepare when he grabs the bottom of my thighs, lifting me up to straddle him. I squeal as he pushes off the rocks, and we land in the pool, the cold water immersing us.

Coming up for air, I run my fingers through my hair. After a beat, Nate comes up and tosses his head from side to side, water droplets flying from the short strands of his hair.

Treading water, I laugh nervously when Nate swims closer to me. His arms wrap around my waist as he pulls me closer to his body. I wrap my arms around his neck as we both look into each other's eyes. His strong jaw flexes as his eyes move down and linger on my lips. My heart rate rises as his lips move closer to mine. Closing my eyes, I move my fingers through the base of his hair as his lips meet mine. They're surprisingly soft for such a masculine guy. His hand moves down to grab my ass as he deepens the kiss, slipping his tongue into my mouth. I relax into him as my hand moves down to rest on his shoulder, my heart thumping beneath my chest. Breaking the kiss, his lips trail from the side of my jaw to my neck. I feel his warm breath create goose bumps on my neck as he whispers into my ear.

"I wanted to kiss you so badly last night," he admits, and it has my heart doing a summersault because I so badly wanted the same thing. Holding his face with both hands, I kiss him again. He grabs my ass harder when I bite his bottom lip.

"I'm certainly not disappointed after all," I say, resting my forehead against his.



# Chapter Five

## Nathan

**M**y hand throbs with pain, still clenched into a fist. I'm covered in someone else's blood as I stand over a man I've never met before, his face bloody and bruised, pools of blood dripping from his mouth.

"I swear I never said anything to anyone! No more, please!" he begs as he cowers behind both his hands.

My fist comes flying into his jaw again as he yells out in pain. I look at my purple knuckles and step away, wiping them clean against my shirt.

"Stop running your mouth," I say as I hear him sob on the floor behind me.

"Is he going to kill me?" he gulps, and I hear his body shuffle on the floor. I turn to face him,

"He won't if you work for him." Joe doesn't like to work with people he doesn't trust, and if he trusts you, once that trust is gone, unfortunately so are you. This *errand* is running a lot longer than I had hoped. I still have to stop by the gym for a training session with Riley. Wrapping it up, I toss him a phone.

"Call Joe now and tell him you're switching teams."

This guy currently works for Joe's competitor, and by competitor, I mean the other big-shot drug dealer in the city. He's got new customers who charge him half the price of import which is why Joe wants him on his team.

What better way to do that than to scare him within an inch of his life and then butter him up with the promise of protection from the other guys? He picks up the phone and begins to dial. My part of the job is now over.

I exit the building and get into my car. Cracking my neck, I grab the steering wheel and squeeze, my knuckles going white.



“Where have you been, man? I’ve been waiting for twenty minutes.” Riley walks up to me as I enter the gym. Noticing the blood on my shirt, his eyes go wide. “No. Nate, Coach will fucking flip his lid if he sees you looking like that.”

I don’t respond as I walk past him and make my way into the locker room. Taking off my shirt, I shove it into my gym bag and walk over to the sink to clean my hands. I look into the mirror and instantly feel disdain at the sight of my face.

Dropping my head, I begin to scrub my knuckles until the skin feels raw. I don’t enjoy hurting people. That’s not why I do this. The thing is, the amount of money I get from a job like this is equal to six months wage for someone working in an excellent-paying job. Plus, it’s not like I can just get a job anywhere. No one will hire me with my record. I can’t blame them.

Who would want an ex-con working for them? After washing my face and scrubbing the skin off my knuckles, I remove my blood-stained pants and pull on my training shorts. Grabbing my hand wraps out of my bag, I begin to wrap them around my hands and head into the gym, ready to let out my frustrations.

It’s empty here at this time, but I can see Riley is waiting in the ring talking to Coach Tyson about his next match.

*Here we go.*

Jumping into the ring, I can feel the atmosphere is tense. Coach Tyson has given his entire life to this gym and his students. His passion for martial arts is unmatched and has been from the moment I walked into his gym as a scrawny teen.

“Boys, the upcoming match is against Jenkins. Riley, you will be sparring with Nate to prepare,” he explains as he exits the ring.

Nodding, I move to the centre of the ring and bring my arms in guard position. Riley does the same. He swings, and I

duck, swiftly jabbing him in the ribs. Riley is a great opponent, he's honest, but he hasn't been doing this long enough to anticipate his opponent's next move.

"Riley! Put your guard up!" Coach calls from outside of the ring. Jabbing him again on the other side, I move forward and get a kick in on his thigh.

"Fuck!" He swears as he goes down, and Coach blows the whistle. Coach enters the ring as I grab my water bottle from the post.

"You gotta be quicker, mate. You can't let your opponent know your next move, and you definitely can't defend through an entire match. You need to attack," he explains to Riley. Lifting up my bottle to my lips, Coach turns to me, and his face falls. Snatching the bottle from me, he points to my hands which are wrapped in my white hand straps, my blood seeping through.

"What the fuck is that?" I look away from Coach to Riley and don't respond. "You're a grown-ass man, and you're still using your fists to get what you want? Pathetic."

Hmm, partially true.

He paces the ring, visibly angry. "What did I tell you the first time you walked through those gym doors, Nate?"

I sigh. I know he's right in everything he says, but how am I supposed to explain to him that I get paid to hurt people in order to make enough money to save up for Noah to move to the US? Nothing, there is absolutely nothing I can say, so I stay quiet not knowing how else to tackle the situation.

"Let me remind you." He grabs my shoulder and squeezes. "You can have talent and strength, but the most important is determination." He quotes Lyoto Machida.

I didn't know what it meant at the tender age of fourteen when I walked into his gym for the first time, but now it makes complete sense. Nodding, I apologise because that's all I can think to do.

"Son, I know you don't fight with grown-ass men outside of the ring, so my best guess is that you're mixed up in some



other shit, but you need to decide if you're determined to become a gangster or a world MMA champion."

Looking from me to Riley, he points at the door.

"Now both of you, get the fuck out. This sparring session is over."

I gather my things from the side of the ring and begin walking to the locker rooms with Riley on my heels. Entering the locker room, I begin to unwrap my hands, blood beginning to pool from the open cuts on my knuckles.

Riley doesn't say anything as he gathers his things, and just as he is about to leave, he pauses. "Think about what Coach Tyson said."

We're the same age, but Riley is the better man. He owns his own construction business and has been managing a team since he was twenty-four years old. Again, different upbringing, but I do take his advice seriously when he shares it. "Don't waste your fucking talent on some gangsters. Use it to your advantage in something you can be great at."

With that, he turns and exits the gym leaving me and my disdain for myself to grow.

Like a tumour.



My jaw is whipped to the side as a fist cracks into my jawbone. The crowd roars as they stand on their feet, watching as the match progresses, and the only cheering I can hear is for the other guy, not me.

I stare at Billie on the side of the cage, behind the barricade with Riley and Grace, worry etched onto her face as she watches me lay on the floor of the ring. Gritting my teeth, I get up and take my stance. The other guy is similar to my size and weight, but what he doesn't have is my fire, my wrath, my rage. This is the first punch he's gotten in since the match began, and it'll be the last.

“Take him down!” Coach Tyson bellows from the side of the ring.

I feel my heart pounding beneath my chest, the sound of it filling my ears as I focus on my opponent. I’ve been studying his moves and tactics since the beginning of the match, and I’m confident he will throw another jab with his left for his next move. He favours his arms more than his legs. Still not confident enough to throw a kick, but I am. My left leg throttles through the air and lands on his thigh as he is about to lean forward to punch. He buckles and falls to his knees, then the whistle is blown for break.

“Fuck yeah!” I hear Coach Tyson call as I walk over to him. He sprays water over my face and into my mouth.

Gulping, I breathe heavily, and my eyes lock with Billie’s once again. She smiles and bites her bottom lip. *Have mercy. She is so fucking gorgeous.* I wink at her then feel Coach Tyson slap me on my cheek.

“Hey, focus! You haven’t won yet, Nate,” he says.

Pulling my focus back into the ring, I watch as my opponent nods to say he can go on. Fire bellows within me, this is the last few minutes of the match and I need to make them count.

I need to show them how much damage I can do, that I *belong* in this ring. My opponent lazily swings his arm, I dodge it and move to my left, circling him like a lion does its predator. He keeps swinging, and I keep dodging. His moves are sluggish now, showing his lethargy. I take my opportunity in both hands as I throw a hook that connects to his jaw. I follow through with a firm headlock as his body convulses, trying to escape my death grip.

*No chance in hell I’m letting you go, mate.*

I tighten my arm around his neck, cutting off his air supply, forcing him to make a decision, either pass out or tap out. In what seems like forever, he finally taps my glove, the ref calling it as the whistle is blown. I let myself lay there and bask in the glory of the win.

“Good match. You really put up a fight.” My opponent taps me on the arm and exits the ring.

Standing up, the ref raises my arm, and the arena goes wild. Clapping, whistling, and cheering coming from every corner of the ring. I look over to where Billie stands, she’s cheering along with the crowd, and a smile forms on my face. I’m not used to having support, and it feels good.

After the fight, I manage to take a shower in the locker rooms as Billie waits for me outside. I hear Coach Tyson from outside the showers.

“This is the new bar of expectation, Nate, you hear me?” he says, and I just know he’s got his arms crossed.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way, Coach.”

I let the hot water run over my neck as I stand there, savouring the feeling of winning. There is a certain high that you get when you win, and I wouldn’t trade anything for it.

I hear Coach exit. Turning the shower off, I wrap my towel around my waist and exit the shower, walking over to my bag. Avoiding the bruises on my face, I put my clothes on and head out the door to find Billie patiently waiting for me, sitting on a bench as the crowd walks past her.

“So, what did you think of your first MMA match?” I ask as I get closer to her.

Her eyes smile as she watches me extend my hand. Taking it, she stands.

“Well, it was different than I had expected,” she admits as we walk together, her hand laced into mine.

“*Good*, different, I hope.” I wink at her, and she blushes.

“Honestly, it’s bloody brutal.” She cringes.

I laugh as we walk to my Jeep. “It’s not for everyone, but it means a lot that you came.”

“Well, it was either this or work at home in front of the TV with loads of chocolate.” She laughs. “So, I chose the lesser of two evils.”

“Mmhmm... sure, keep telling yourself that.” I smirk as we reach my Jeep.

She rolls her eyes at me as she reaches for the handle of the passenger side door. Sliding my arm around her waist, I whisk her around to face me.

“Don’t act like you didn’t want to see me again.” My lips hover over hers as she looks up at me with her beautiful, grey, stormy eyes. She grabs at my shirt and pulls me in, her lips taking mine. I grab her waist with both hands, sliding one up her back and into her hair. Pulling gently, I expose her neck as I break the kiss, swirling my tongue on the soft skin of her neck. She pants as her grip tightens on my shirt, almost ripping it. I let go of her hair, and she smiles as she looks into my eyes.

“Truth is, Mr Rizzo, I couldn’t stop thinking about you.” She smirks.

*Fuck me.*

*I could fuck her right here, right now on top of my car.*

Something inside me flurries as I look into her eyes, and for the first time ever, a warmth encircles me from within.

I want her to want me, and I don’t want anyone else to have her.

*I want to stake my claim on her.*



# Chapter Six

## Billie

The drone of the team meeting numbs my brain as I go over the events that happened last week with Nate. I squeeze my thighs together at the memory of his hands on my skin, falling deeper into the daydream.

“Billie...” Someone’s voice echoes through my ears as I’m pulled back into the meeting room. “Will you have the advertisement finished today since you didn’t complete it on Monday?” I shift in my seat.

“Yes, sorry, yes I will.”

“It’s critical to this project, Billie. We need to have it finalised and back to the client by the close of business today.” Fiona stares at me through her glasses.

I nod, looking around the room.

“It’ll be done today.”

“Great, now are there any other updates we should be aware of or any roadblocks?” Fiona stands from her chair and walks to the whiteboard, ready to brainstorm. No one talks. These work-in-progress meetings always drag on forever, and I think everyone would much rather have the time back in their diaries to get actual work done. “Perfect, I guess you’re all excused.” We all gather our things and walk back to our desks. Looking at the time, I now realise I only have six hours to get the final ad to the client.

*Fuck.*

I really should have done some work on it over the weekend, but when I got home after hanging out with Nate, I was too tired, and all I wanted to do was sleep. There was no way Grace was letting me work during our lazy Sunday session either. Come Monday, everything piled up, and there were just so many things due at the same time, that I completely spaced and forgot about the ad. Fiona is not happy

with me, and given she is my boss, I kind of need her to be happy with me. Sighing, I get started on all the changes as requested from the client.

Checking the time, I hit Send on the email which has all the changes linked to our supplier with Fiona copied in. I skipped lunch so I could get it finished, and by the skin on my nose, I scraped through. Five thirty on the dot. Now all my other tasks are pushed to tomorrow. I unplug my laptop and gather my things, getting ready to make the drive home when I feel my phone buzz in my bag. Answering the call, I make my way to the elevator.

“I can’t tonight,” I say as soon as I put the phone to my ear. Grace immediately protests.

“Come on, B! It’s just going to be a small gathering. Five people, that’s all.”

“Nope.” I don’t give her the chance to go further because, let’s be real, Finn will most definitely be there, too.

“So, is it just going to be like this all the time? You afraid of going to parties because my brother *may* be there?”

“Grace, I’m falling behind on work. I almost had my hand whacked with a ruler today by Fiona because I completely missed a deadline without an explanation. I’m going home to work, but maybe we can catch up tomorrow night?”

She audibly groans.

“Ugh, you’re so stubborn. Fine. I’ll let you know about tomorrow night, though. I might be seeing Russell.”

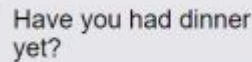
“Great, just send me a text.” I end the call.



Unlocking the door, I place my laptop and bag on the kitchen counter and remove my heels. My feet ache terribly from being squashed all day. Laying on my lounge, I look up at the ceiling and sigh, feeling overwhelmed with how many things I need to do for work. I turn my TV on and decide to procrastinate by selecting the next episode of Bridgerton.

Almost two hours pass before I realise I'm still in my work clothing. Pausing the episode, I take a shower and pull on an oversized Metallica shirt. I head into the kitchen and open my laptop. Just like I suspected, thirty emails have come in from the time I left the office until now. I cringe. Glancing at my phone, I see it light up with a notification. I smile when I see Nate's name pop up.

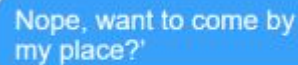
NATHAN



Have you had dinner yet?

I look at the time, and it's almost eight p.m.

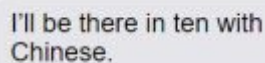
ME



Nope, want to come by my place?

My finger hovers over the Send button, hesitating before I send it. He would be in my apartment, in my space. Brushing off the jitters, I press Send.

NATHAN



I'll be there in ten with Chinese.

Butterflies flutter in my belly at the thought of him in my home. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe I shouldn't have kissed him in the waterfall or after the match. Something had come over me, something primal. I just want to feel his body against mine and feel his lips against my skin. I feel safe when I'm with Nate, comfortable, like I can say anything, and he won't judge me for it. We've been texting constantly since we kissed, and it has been easy with him. Not to mention, he is an excellent distraction from my current dumpster fire of a life.

I start tidying up the apartment, shoving clothes in my wardrobe and jamming the door shut. I'm not generally a messy person. I just have not had the time to get my life in order.

Speedily I make my bed and look around the room, admiring my handiwork. I feel the anxiety poking through my brain as I think about how I should be working on my ever-



growing task list for work, but I squash it down and ignore it. I'm excited to see Nate again. With that thought, there's a knock at my door.

*Shit.*

I forgot to put pants on. I look down at my bare legs, my oversized tee grazing my thighs. Shrugging, I walk to the door and take a breath before I open it.

Nate stands at my door as fine as ever in his white V-neck T-shirt that hugs his perfectly muscular torso, with his black distressed denim jeans.

His eyes sweep over me and land on my bare legs. I notice a smirk forming on his lips as he stands there, eating me with his eyes.

“Wow, I didn't realise delivery boys bring the food to your door when you live in an apartment.” I crack a nervous smile at him because I somehow have forgotten how to talk like a normal person.

*Yeah. Good one, Billie.*

“Ha ha,” he mocks as I step aside to let him in. Grabbing the takeaway from him, I begin taking out a couple of plates from my kitchen cupboard. “Uh, what are you doing?” He looks at me like I've grown two heads.

“What do you mean? I'm grabbing us some plates,” I say.

“I can see that, but why?”

“So, we don't have to eat from a cardboard box?” *Duh.*

He smirks. “Or so that you can have some of *my* food.” He chuckles when I smile knowing well that I will steal some of his food.

Emptying the contents of the boxes onto the plates I gesture for him to sit at the breakfast bar and begin to dig into my chow mein, and it tastes sensational.

“Do you have any food throughout the day? It's not fucking normal how you demolish your food every single time. Slow down a little.”

Chewing the food currently in my mouth, I shrug.

“Aw, that’s cute. Are you afraid I’ll choke?” I say with my mouth full.

He looks up at me, and I immediately regret what I just said.

“I can give you something else to choke on,” he says, completely unfazed and serious, which almost does make me choke.

“I had to skip lunch today. I legitimately did not have the time to eat,” I confess, ignoring the sudden pulse between my thighs. He picks up his chopsticks and begins to eat his fried rice when I notice the back of his hands are bruised and scabbed.

“Did that happen at training?” I question as he looks down to his knuckles. Something floats through his mind as he pauses then nods. “Aren’t you supposed to wear gloves or something?” I know Riley does, so I’m confused why his hands look so battered.

“It’s nothing. I was training alone with a bag and forgot my hand wraps.” He continues to eat without looking at me. Changing the subject, I bring up Noah.

“I spoke to my colleague; you know the one who works with the Boomers?” His eyes immediately meet mine, and I smile. “He spoke to his contact from the US, and they will be here next month with a few scouts. He gave me their number so I can forward it on to you.”

He stops eating and looks up at me with big eyes, those big, beautiful, green eyes.

“Billie, that’s...” He puts his chopsticks down and stands. “That’s fucking amazing. Noah is going to be so happy.” I smile as he walks around the counter, putting his arms around me. I hug him back, feeling his hard chest on my cheek. Pulling back slowly, he looks down at me. “This means a lot to me. Thank you.”

“Please, I did nothing.” My cheeks begin to heat as his eyes fall to my lips. My lips part as I move my hands down to

his chest, feeling his hard muscles underneath my skin.

“Don’t do that.” He breathes, and our eyes lock.

“Do what?”

“Don’t look at me like that, little B.” His hands begin to slide lower down my back as he moves in closer. “I can hardly control myself around you, and it makes it ten times harder when you look at me that way.”

The way he is so honest with his thoughts just makes me like him even more. The need to feel him closer grows more and more as I squeeze my thighs together trying to create some friction, feeling needy for his touch. It’s ridiculous how attracted I am to this man, when three months ago, he was just my brother’s friend.

We look into each other’s eyes, and my heart pounds beneath my chest.

*I want him.*

*I want him so bad.*

Feeling the adrenaline coursing through my skin, I swiftly wrap my arms around his neck as our lips collide. He groans, lifting me up by my bare thighs as I lock my ankles around his waist.

The kiss grows deeper as his hands slide up my thighs to my bare ass. I’ve got nothing but a G-string under this oversized shirt, and by the way his hands are grasping me, I think he likes it.

My breathing accelerates as he walks us over to my bedroom, laying us down on my freshly made bed, and he moves his hand up underneath my shirt. A moan escapes me as his large, masculine hand grabs my breast. I feel his hot breath on my neck as his tongue swirls on my skin. His hand travels down and slides into my G-string, sending a zing through my entire body.

There’s a knock on my door as he continues to kiss me, his hand down my pants, massaging my clit, ignoring the

intrusion. Just when I think they've gone, another series of knocks rumble on my front door.

I groan in frustration at the intrusion as Nate lets out a chuckle.

"Maybe you should get that," he says, standing and adjusting himself.

*Whatever or whoever this is better be good.*

I stand and my shirt falls back down to my mid-thigh as I run my fingers through my hair and stomp to the front door. I wasn't expecting anyone, so I am genuinely curious as to who could be at my door right now.

The wind is completely knocked out of me as my eyes land on the very last person I would have expected to see. I immediately slam the door shut in a panic and turn to look at Nate who is now standing in the doorway of my bedroom with a confused look on his face.

"Is everything okay?" he asks as he begins walking over to me.

*No, no, no, this cannot be happening.*

I squeeze my eyes shut to force myself to wake up from this nightmare, but it's no use. My heart thunders beneath my chest as there's another rumble at the door followed by Finn's voice.

"Billie, please open the door. I need to talk to you."

Nate looks to the door and looks at me, waiting patiently for me to make a decision.

*Why in the world is he here!?*

*What is not clear about 'don't contact me again?'*

Turning around, I grip the handle, steadying my shaking hand, I slowly open the door.

"What do you want?" I ask, my voice stern. His business shirt is untucked, blazer flung over his shoulder. His eyes are slightly heavy, making it obvious that he's drunk.

“B, I need your help.” Even in his drunk state, he looks perfect, which makes me mad.

“You’re drunk, Finn, go home.” I begin to close the door when his hand flies out and stops me, slamming the door back into the wall.

“No, B, you don’t understand. I need your help with the business.” He barges in straight past me and stops dead in his tracks when he sees Nate. He turns to look at me with visible hurt in his eyes as he realises what he just stepped into.

“You didn’t tell me you were seeing anyone.” There is hurt in his voice, but what I can’t decipher is why?

“Finn, I asked you not to contact me. *What the fuck* are you doing here?” I’m getting impatient now for him to leave.

“Me? What the fuck is *he* doing here?!” He points to Nate.

“Okay, I think it’s time you went home, Finn. You’re drunk,” Nate intervenes when Finn raises his voice at me.

Completely ignoring Nate, Finn continues. “You won’t even talk to me, but you’re sleeping with Nate?”

*Is he for real?*

“It’s none of your business.” My tone is sharp.

What is it to him who I sleep with? After all this time, he cares *now*?

“I miss you, B.” My brows furrow as I look to Nate and back to Finn. When neither of us speak, Finn persists. “More than you know.”

Tears begin to sting the back of my eyes, and I fight so hard to not let them fall because the truth is, I think I miss him, too. I just don’t want to admit it to myself. Admitting it to myself would mean to forget the radio silence, the no contact, nothing, and I *can’t*.

“Get out,” I say through gritted teeth, hoping the tension in my jaw will stop me from falling apart.

Nate grabs Finn’s arm and walks him out the door. Finn shrugs him off, the tension between them rising like a storm.

“Go home, Finn,” Nate says as he stands in front of me, facing him, leaving me completely frozen in place, unable to move.

“I won’t fight you, Nate. I have more class than you.” Slurring his words, he begins to head down the stairs.

Nate closes the door and walks over to me, wrapping me in his safety. He cradles me in his arms as I begin to sob. Each time I see Finn, I’m reminded of what once was, how much we loved each other, how much we did together, and how well he knew me.

*Every part of me.*

How can someone’s night begin with such promise only to end in renewed pain?

Why can’t he just let me live my life?

After a while passes with me blubbering into Nate’s shirt, I eventually stop to look up at him. Worry dances in his eyes as he looks into mine. Unsure of what to say, I bite the inside of my bottom lip. I’m completely embarrassed by everything that has unfolded before him.

“We don’t have to talk about it right now.” He finally speaks, and it’s like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders because what would I say to him?

“Thank you,” I manage to say as I nod.

He helps me up off the floor where we ended up after I let myself be completely vulnerable. Smiling, he wipes the tears off my cheeks and gives me a small kiss.

“Don’t worry, I still find you attractive even if you are an ugly crier.” He smirks as I let out a small laugh and push him playfully. “I better go,” he says as he turns towards the door.

“Nate,” I call out, and he turns back to face me. “I’m really sorry about tonight.” And I am more sorry than he knows.

Nodding, he opens the door and leaves. Just like that, I am left with an ugly feeling inside my chest. I can’t help but feel that I should have told Nate about Finn. At least to some extent he should’ve known what to expect. I honestly did not

expect Finn to show up at my door. Harass me via texts and calls, yes, totally did expect that, but him showing up at my door came completely out of left field, considering he didn't know where I lived.

I shake my head.

*Grace.*

Of course. I understand how she would be feeling. Her brother came back from living overseas for years, and she wants everything to go back to normal.

I don't think we could ever go back to what we were before, so she thinks sending her brother to try and 'mend' things with me would help. Unfortunately, I don't see my friendship with Finn ever blossoming again.

I've burned that garden to the ground.

*Or so I tell myself.*

Walking to my bedroom, I plonk myself face first onto my bed and groan... ready for this night to be done.





# Chapter Seven

## Billie

**B**illie - Aged 15

*I watch Finn playing volleyball with his friends as I lay on the beach with Grace next to me. Getting up, I brush the golden sand off my skin and announce I'm heading in the water. Finn calls out to wait for him, and I look back to see him running in after me as I enter the water in my tiny bikini. I swim out into the ocean, feeling the sun's rays shine down on my body as I float on my back.*

*"Are you trying to get all my friends to chase you, B?" Finn asks sarcastically as he unapologetically runs his eyes over my body. "You know Cole already has a crush on you, right?"*

*Truth is, I don't want his friends. I want him, but I'm too afraid to say it.*

"They only had small cups." Grace walks over to me, handing me my coffee. We met at a local coffee shop because she texted me an SOS text. Generally, with Grace, anything can be SOS.

"Are you going to explain what happened?" I ask as we sit at a small table inside the shop.

Throwing her hair back over her shoulder, she bites her lip. "Don't judge, okay."

Rolling my eyes, I sigh. "When have I ever judged you?"

"Okay, okay. Michael called."

"...andddd..." I wave my hand for her to continue.

"He wants to meet." She hesitates. "Tonight."

I stare at her blankly, waiting.

"I'm scared if I say yes, we are just going to fall back into the same trap. The sex is great, it's wonderful, but I'm terrified

that we're going to end up like my parents, B," she confesses. "I don't want to be living separate lives while still married, how fucked up is that?!"

There it is.

Her true feelings as to why she broke off her engagement with Michael. Grace's parents run a huge law firm, and ten years ago, her father set his sights on opening another law firm overseas, hence why he went to live there. Her mum chose to stay in Australia and raise her daughter, as well as take care of the law firm here in Melbourne. Both being lawyers, they were used to not spending much time together, but Grace always found it quite unsettling in her younger years, and I guess it's manifested in an irrational fear or trauma. I would also hate to live a separate life while still being married to someone, so I see where she is coming from.

"Is that really a reason to avoid someone you love?" I take a sip of my coffee.

She looks down at the table. "It shouldn't be. I just don't want to mess it up again. If I do, he'll never forgive me."

"Then do everything in your power not to mess it up. Go all in." *Yeah, I'm one to talk.*

She thinks for a moment and shakes her head. "Anyway, I'll figure it out." Sipping her coffee, her eyes timidly meet mine. "What happened with Finn?"

"I can't believe you gave him my address, Grace."

"You need to speak to him. Although what's happened in the past has happened, it's in the past. Leave it there and move on." She's right, and god, I hate it when Grace is right. "I believe he has something important to ask of you anyway. So please talk to him?"

Sighing, I nod. "Fine. I'll talk to him."

"Great!" She smiles and waggles her eyebrows. "Now tell me about Nate."

A small blush fills my cheeks as I think back to a couple of nights ago where we almost had sex but were rudely

interrupted. “There’s nothing to tell really. We just started hanging out, and I feel comfortable around him.”

“Yeah, I bet. Comfortable enough to fuck him?” she says openly.

“Grace!” I look around the café hoping no one heard her.

“What? He is so fine. I’ve been telling you to talk to him ever since Riley introduced him to the group. I’m glad you’re having fun again. You need it, you’re always bloody working.” Her phone rings, and she swiftly answers it as she gets up and excuses herself to walk outside.

Is that what I am doing, though?

Having fun with Nate?

I’ve had some fun with other guys before, so it’s not like I don’t know what to expect, but it feels different with Nate. Maybe because he knows my brother and my friends? Unsure of this feeling in my stomach, I take another sip of my coffee and wait for Grace to finish her phone call.



Thank God it’s Friday because I have just about had enough of this week. Picking up my phone, I text Finn.

ME

A blue speech bubble containing the text: "Meet me at the Bond on Flinders after work at 5:30pm".

Meet me at the Bond on  
Flinders after work at  
5:30pm

Instantly, the phone buzzes in my hands.

FINN

A grey speech bubble containing the text: "Done. See you there.".

Done. See you there.

Great, one last hurdle to jump until the weekend. I’m about to put the phone down on my desk when I see Nate’s name flash on my screen alerting me to a text. The same ugly feeling I felt that night returns. I really should explain to Nate everything that went on, but is it even relevant if it happened ten years ago?

NATHAN

How does dinner sound baby?

My heart picks up speed at him calling me baby.

Call me old-fashioned or whatever, but it just makes me *melt*.

I should probably go back to the office after I meet with Finn to finish off some work that I have been putting off for way too long. I consider it for a moment, but I would much rather be anywhere else than here.

ME

Are you teaching at the gym?



NATHAN

Yeah, my classes finish at 7:30pm

ME

I'm ready to take you up on your offer.

I hesitate for a minute when I don't see him replying. Putting my phone down, I notice Fiona making a beeline towards me.

*Fuck.*

The photo shoot.

I was meant to put together all the collateral for our client after their photoshoot, and I still haven't done it. It was due a week ago. She's going to eat me alive.

"Is everything okay, Billie?" She stands at my desk as the other people in the office look over at us, interested in what the next gossip is going to be. Newsflash: Me. The gossip around here is always me.

“Hi, Fiona, yes, everything is fine,” I manage to say through the anxious pit in my stomach.

“Then why haven’t you sent through the collateral? It’s been over a week.” Her face is stern.

“I’ll get onto it right now.”

My phone buzzes as a text from Nate comes through. I can tell she’s pissed because she takes one look at my phone and walks off without a word.

NATHAN

Finally came to your senses. I'll see you at 7:30pm



The moment I enter the Bond, my heart soars, threatening to crack through my chest, and run into Finn’s hands as I lock eyes with him. He has always been good-looking. Even when we were teenagers, he couldn’t cross the street without having all the girls turning their heads to steal a glance at him. Looking extra fabulous today in his form-fitting black Armani suit, he stands immediately as he pulls out a chair for me to sit. Taking off my jacket, I take a seat.

“What are you drinking? I’ll have the waiter come over and take your order.” I can tell he wants me to be comfortable around him, but the truth is, I’m still hurt, and the longer I am around him, the harder it is to control the feelings I’ve tried to mash down into the black abyss. It’s like driving past a house you lived in for years, all the memories you made were there, the good and the bad, and each time you drive past, you can’t help but sneak a look as your heart reminds you of all the wonderful things you experienced.

“I came to talk to you because Grace asked me to. I don’t plan on staying long,” I admit.

Looking down at the table, he reaches for my hands when I instantly pull away, afraid that if I let his touch linger for too

long, all those familiar feelings and memories will flood through their hidden gates.

Grimacing, he begins to talk. “My father needs your help.”

I look up at him in shock. “What?”

“We need someone to help with our marketing collateral, and he knows you studied design and currently work in the industry, so he wants me to ask you to help with a full brand refresh.” He looks at me expectantly.

I’m stunned. “Mr. Mackenzie has a world of designers to choose from. Why me?”

“You have talent, B.” He sits back in the chair and waits for my response. I don’t know what to say because there are one million questions that are running through my mind.

“Something like that can take a while to produce. It’s not a one-woman job.” I declare.

He nods. “I realise that, which is why I have put together a team at the firm to assist you with whatever you might need.”

Then it dawns on me. “Will you and I be working together?”

His eyes square with mine. “Yes.”

My breath shakes. This is not what I expected at all. I fully expected Finn to start apologizing and explain why things went so wrong between us, but he wants to talk about work. Work that would mean us being around each other over an extended period.

“I don’t know,” I confess.

Sighing, he reaches over for my hands again, and this time I don’t pull back, my hands fitting in his perfectly, just the way I remember.

“I know we have our issues, B, but I promise to make this a professional thing. I won’t bother you anytime outside of work. You have my word.” He shifts in his seat. “You will also be handsomely compensated for your time, given that you

already have a full-time job, and this would be something on top of your current workload.”

The way he worded that last sentence has something inside me sink. He sounds so professional, like nothing ever happened, like we weren't best friends since childhood, and it fucking hurts, but this is what I wanted, right?

*Right?*

I know I will have to give this some thought, but how can I say no? It's Mr. Mackenzie that's asking. Practically my second father, who raised Riley and I when our father passed away.

Sighing, I nod. “Okay, I will help. On the condition that the only communication that happens between us is strictly professional.”

He gleams with appreciation as he nods.

“Cross my soul.” He shoots me a look, raising his eyebrows because he knows what that means to me.

*To us.*



I quickly stop by my place to change into gym clothing. I am not about to rip a perfectly good pencil skirt for the sake of learning MMA. When I get to the gym, there's hardly anyone here. I look around and spot Riley's coach.

“Hey, Tyson.” I greet him as I walk over.

He turns, and his face instantly lightens. “B!” I'm engulfed into his big bear arms as I feel his beard scratch my head. Tyson is older than the boys by about twenty years, I think, but wow, he looks phenomenal for his age. His bare skin glistens under the lights, showcasing his chiselled chest. “It's been too long since you came down here. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

I look over to Nate who is in the weight section, on the bench-press machine. “Nate promised to teach me self-

defence. So, here I am for my first ever lesson.” I smile politely.

“Ah, I see. Why have you never asked Riley?” Valid question, Coach.

“You know how Riley gets; I didn’t want him to chat my ear off about the entire history of the sport. I just want to learn how to kick someone where it hurts.” Truth is, I’m just going by what Nate said. I have no idea if it is true or not, but my suspicions are confirmed when Tyson’s laugh bellows through the entire gym, getting Nate’s attention.

“Well, you’re in good hands, B. Nate is one of our best.” And with that, he pops on a singlet, grabs his stuff, and heads for the door. “It’s good to see you, Billie.” He says as he walks out the door. Nate wipes his forehead with his towel as he walks over to greet me.

“Hey.” His aura is a little different since the last time we saw each other, slightly more... distant.

“Hi.” I give him a small smile. I know I have some explaining to do, but thankfully, Nate asks me to warm up. I jump on the treadmill and put it on an incline, but within four minutes of walking, I am puffed. I stop to take a sip of water, watching Nate squat with a bar and what looks like heavy ass weights. I don’t know what I like better, his careless ripped denim looks or this sweaty, raw, extremely masculine look. He catches me staring and smiles. Instantly looking away, I resume walking. I am so unfit. I really need to start exercising more. After what feels like an eternity passes, Nate waves me over to the mats. It’s a section of the gym which is entirely covered in mats, even up the entire wall.

“Okay, so I’m thinking we will learn the basics today.” He begins to form his fighting stance.

“Oh, what a shame, I was ready to kick your ass in a good sparring session.”

He chuckles.

Good, so he doesn’t completely hate me.

“We’ll get to that. Eventually.” He smirks.



*Hmmm, so he thinks this will continue?*

*Interesting.*

“Okay, you want to make sure your thumb is on the *outside* of your fist when you punch.” He proceeds to stand in his fighter’s stance and throw a jab out into the air. I copy his stance and hold my arms up, throwing a punch of my own.

“Not bad. Make sure you use the strength in your shoulder to punch and not from your elbow.” He demonstrates again, and I copy. “Okay, that was better.” After practising punches and kicks for a while, we break to have a drink.

“So, are you still up for dinner after this?” I ask.

Looking up from his bottle, he smiles. “As long as we get burgers.”

“You read my mind.” Putting our bottles down, we head back onto the mats.

“Okay, so let’s talk about what you can do if someone grabs you.” He proceeds to grab me from behind resulting in me letting out a loud squeal. I feel his breath tickle my ear as he chuckles. “What is your first instinct?” He whispers into my ear, and there’s something so erotic about how he is holding me from behind, his warm breath tickling my neck. I proceed to try to pull away from him, but it’s no use. His arms are too strong and have an iron grip around me, making my insides squirm with need for him.

He lets go and comes around to face me.

“Let me show you, wrap your arms around me.” He turns his back to me, and I happily oblige, snaking my arms around him as tightly as I can. “First, you want to move to the side, so you have an advantage with body weight. Then you want to place your left foot behind their right at the same time you push your elbow into their sternum, and with all the force you have, throw them back so they fall. Then you run.”

Letting go of him, he turns to face me. “In any situation, you run. Doesn’t matter if you are a black belt or a white belt. You always run. But if you were to ever be in a situation like this, do what I showed you.” Nodding, I let him grab me from

behind again and do exactly as he showed me. To my surprise, Nate lands on the mat with a thud.

“Oh my god, I can’t believe that actually worked.” I smile, proud of what I have just learnt.

Nate chuckles. “See, your size doesn’t matter. You just need to *know* how to fight.”

We continued practising a few other self-defence moves and decided to call it a night when Nate noticed I was getting tired. After showering in the locker rooms, we drove separately to my house in our own cars because I need to be at Finn’s law firm super early tomorrow.

Nate went to pick up the burgers, so I have a few spare minutes to make my house semi-presentable and change into one of my oversized band shirts for comfort. When he knocks on the door, I am STARVING. Letting him in, I immediately grab the bag off him and start to reach for the plates in my cupboard.

“No, really? For burgers, too?” He chuckles at my eye roll.

After scoffing down my food, I rub my belly and groan. “I think I ate too much.”

Nate laughs as he finishes the last bite of his burger. “Exercise truly does work up an appetite.”

I can read the suggestive tone in his voice, and I’m relieved he doesn’t hate me from the other night. Clearing our plates and throwing the rubbish away, we both settle on the couch in the lounge room.

The air is suddenly a little tense.

Sighing, Nate speaks first. “Is there something I should know about you and Finn?” he asks me, and my heart clenches at the mention of Finn’s name. I grab my cup of tea and hold it in both my hands, feeling the heat radiate from the cup.

“Will you judge me if I tell you?” I ask, unsure of how to begin.

He smirks. “Depends. Did you murder someone, and did he cover it up?” I roll my eyes as I sarcastically make a

laughing face.

“Finn, Grace, and I have been friends since childhood.” I begin to talk, and I don’t feel uneasy like I thought I would. It comes naturally. “We were inseparable as kids, and we did almost everything together. At an early age, I had a huge crush on Finn. We spent every waking moment together from primary school to high school, and after my father passed away, Mr. Mackenzie took Riley and I in as his own.” Nate listens intently, his eyes locked onto me.

“At the age of sixteen, I knew I wanted to be with Finn. At least that’s what I thought at the time. I thought I loved him, and I thought he loved me back. Like I said, we spent so much time together that it was almost impossible not to know each other so well.” Sighing, I pause as I take a sip from my cup of tea.

“We used to go to the movies, go to mini golf, and do all that corny teenage stuff together, and I thought maybe we could actually make it work and take it further. He knew me so well, knew everything I liked and disliked, it just made sense to me.” Nodding, Nate looks down at the table then back to me, sensing where this is going.

“So, when I turned eighteen, I decided I wanted my first time to be with Finn, because I loved him.” With a shaky breath, I continue to reveal my soul to this man who I have only known for a few months. “After sleeping with me, he didn’t contact me again. Then after a week, I heard from Grace that he was leaving the country with his father with no return date.” A tear rolls down my face, and I wipe it away with the back of my hand like lightning. I don’t want to cry a second time in Nate’s presence. Once was quite enough. “Within the last ten years, he never contacted me once.” With that, Nate raises his eyebrows and nods.

“That must have been tough on you at a young age.” He says, and I can tell he wants to ask me something, but he holds back.

“It was. I couldn’t come to terms with how he could just leave and ice me out like that. Not when we grew up together.”

“Do you think you’d ever hear him out?”

His question takes me by surprise. “I don’t know.” I lie through my teeth. “It’s been ten years, and I don’t want to hear an explanation because no explanation will be good enough.”

Nate shrugs. “Maybe he has a solid reason as to why he did what he did.”

I can’t believe Nate is backing up Finn.

“What?”

“No, you misunderstood. All I’m saying is don’t judge someone for doing what they may think was the right thing to do at the time.” He looks sombre as he looks down to his hands.

Nodding, I confess something else. “Mr. Mackenzie asked me to do a full brand refresh for his firm.”

Nate looks back up to me, smiling. “That’s kind of a big deal. Did you agree?”

“Well, I felt like I kind of had to because of all he did for me and Riley.” I bite the inside of my bottom lip.

“I have to work with Finn,” I say, and his jaw clenches. “He promised he will only communicate with me on a professional level, so I agreed.” I can’t tell if he’s annoyed by this fact or if he doesn’t think anything at all. Nate is a little hard to read at times.

“If that’s what you want, you should do it.” He smiles. “About the other night.”

Oh god does he mean the night we almost fucked?

“I’m just going to come out and say it.” He speaks, and I hold my breath as I wait for him to finish. “I like you, Billie, and I want to pursue whatever it is that’s happening here. If you tell me you have feelings for Finn, I will back out and let you work through it with him, but if you’re done with the past, baby, I’m ready to give you a future.”

*Fuck.*

I was not expecting this guy to come out of nowhere and declare how into me he is. I mean, I knew he liked me, but I have never had someone tell me point-blank that they were ready to pursue a future with me. I hesitate for a moment. Placing my cup of tea back on the table, I move closer to him so our bodies are almost touching.

“I really like you, too, Nate.” Looking into his eyes, I sense a palpable desire emanating from them. “I’m done with the past.”

Well, it’s half the truth. I mean, I don’t want to be with him anymore, but I can’t help but force some of the resurfacing feelings I had for him down into my belly. He smiles that crooked smile I love so much and swiftly grabs me by my waist, pushing himself on top of me. I squeal when my back lands on the couch.

“Good.” His hand grabs at my hip as his lips crash down on mine, sending a zing of electricity from my mouth to between my legs. “Because I want to do things to you that friends certainly don’t do to each other.” My mind buzzes with the images of Nate doing dirty things to me, and *God, I do want him to do the dirtiest things to me*



# Chapter Eight

## Nathan

Her skin feels like butter under my calloused hands. The more they roam, the more I want to bury my dick inside her. Her arms begin to roam my chest, causing my cock to twitch against my jeans. The way this woman makes my dick hard is not normal. I could see her in a paper bag and still get a raging hard-on. Grabbing the hair at the nape of her neck, I tug and begin trailing my tongue down from her mouth to her neck. She whimpers as I begin to suck and twirl my tongue down to her collarbone. Climbing on top, she straddles me as one of my hands travels under her shirt to cup her supple breast. She grinds her hips over my hard cock, teasing me beneath my jeans, which sends me into overdrive. Letting out a groan, I rest my head on the lounge and squeeze my eyes shut as her hands trail beneath my shirt, sending heat pulsing through my skin underneath her touch.



“How are you this attractive?” she whispers in my ear as her pussy grinds on me once more. That’s it, I can’t take much more of this torture. Groaning, I grab both of her ass cheeks underneath her shirt and stand, her legs firmly wrapping around me, and I walk us into the bedroom.

“Baby, you have no idea what you do to me.” Pressing her against the wall, she briskly removes her shirt, revealing her beautifully perky breasts. Pretty pink nipples stare at me, and I take one in my mouth, making a popping sound as I suck and tease it.

A moan rumbles through her throat as she grabs the hem of my shirt, tearing it off me. Her head now back against the wall, eyes closed, breathing heavy as I reach in between us and drop my jeans and boxer briefs. Her eyes open as my cock touches the thin, wet fabric between us.

*Fuck.*

I can feel the heat radiating from her pussy, and it's making me impatient to feel her swallowing my cock. Her mouth crashes into mine as her tongue slips inside my mouth. I tear her G-string off and push myself inside her warm, wet pussy, her body shuddering at the intrusion. Groaning, our lips part.

"I love how wet you are for me, baby." I continue moving in and out of her, her whimpers growing into throaty moans as my hips collide against hers.

*She feels as amazing as she looks.*

Her inner walls squeeze and swallow my dick whole. Her hands claw my back and shoulders as I plough into her, her breasts bouncing from the force of my thrusts.

*I could fucking do this all day.*

I could be inside this woman all day and watch her perfect tits bounce in my face without a complaint in the world. There is not another thought in my mind right now, other than giving this woman pleasure, and watching the way her body responds to mine.

"Harder." Her eyes are heavy as she bites her bottom lip.

*Fuck me*, I think I'm going to blow from her sexy voice alone.

Doing exactly as she says, I thrust into her harder, her nails digging deeper into my skin as I hungrily grab her petite hips.

"Fuck!"

Her eyes roll back as her pussy clenches around my cock. Thrusting a few more times, my cock twitches as I empty myself inside her, letting out a throaty groan into her neck. My lips meet hers again, caressing her tenderly. Pulling her away from the wall, I walk into her small en suite bathroom and turn on the shower, placing her down on her feet. I watch as my cum drips from her pussy down to her knee, and the sight alone has me thirsty for more of her.



“Do you want to stay over?” She smiles, her cheeks flushed, and hair in disarray.

“I won’t leave unless you ask me to, baby.” I walk us both under the hot water as I watch the water droplets stream down her breasts, causing my cock to harden once again.



Sweat rolls down my forehead as I continue punching the bag in front of me. My muscles coil with tension as I release each punch.

I wasn’t surprised when Billie told me about her history with Finn, as I sensed there was something going on there anyway, but I had no idea it was to the extent that she explained last night. Truth is, I don’t know how I feel about it, not yet anyway. I’ve only seen Finn twice, so I have no idea who the guy is, but considering the family he comes from, he probably has everything he ever wants or needs in life to succeed. Something about Billie working with him makes me feel uneasy, so I try to ignore my intrusive thoughts and swallow the tension, forcing it down inside me as I see Riley from the corner of my eye making his way to me from the weight section.

“Everything okay?” He has genuine concern in his voice, and I can’t blame him. I was punching that bag like it owed me something.

Wiping the sweat off my brow, I nod. “Yeah, just got a lot on my mind.”

Sighing, he looks down and then back up at me. “Bro, tell me you’re not doing dodgy shit again.”

Riley and I met at the gym, but we quickly became close when I saw how much of a hard worker he is. He works hard so he doesn’t have to owe anyone anything in life, and the best quality about Riley is that he is about as honest as you can get. I always hope Noah grows up to be that kind of man and nothing like me.

Disgust builds like a storm in my stomach as I think about all the people I have hurt working for the underbelly of Melbourne.

“I need the money.” I don’t bother sugarcoating it. There’s no point.

“Come work for me then, brother. I can pay you a good wage. I have a large company who I have just signed a contract with for a whole year. Guaranteed work.” Like I said, the most honest and genuine person you could ever meet.

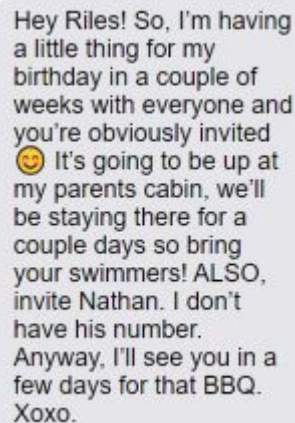
I begin unwrapping my hands. “I don’t mean to be rude when I say this, but it’s still not enough. Not for what I need and when I need it.”

Shaking his head, he almost looks disappointed, and after a beat passes, he finally responds. “The offer is still there if you change your mind.” He forces a smile.

I couldn’t work for Riley even if I really wanted to. Legally, he wouldn’t be able to hire me, and I wouldn’t put him in that position anyway. Riley pulls out his mobile and seems to read something on the screen.

“Holy shit.” He chuckles and shows me the text he just received.

GRACE



Hey Riles! So, I'm having a little thing for my birthday in a couple of weeks with everyone and you're obviously invited 😊 It's going to be up at my parents cabin, we'll be staying there for a couple days so bring your swimmers! ALSO, invite Nathan. I don't have his number. Anyway, I'll see you in a few days for that BBQ. Xoxo.

“Cabin?” I raise an eyebrow.

Riley chuckles as he slides his phone back into his pocket. “More like the triple M.” He laughs. “The Mackenzie Mountain Mansion.”

I wonder if Billie is going. Am I stupid? Of course she is. It's her best friend's party. Well, that means Finn will be there, too.

*Wonderful.*

“You're coming, right?” Riley looks to me expectantly, but I don't know what to say because I should run this by Billie first, shouldn't I? She asked me not to tell her brother we've been hanging out and now *fucking*.

“I'm not sure yet,” is all I say.

“What about the words ‘mountain’ and ‘mansion’ did you not understand?” he says sarcastically.

Grabbing my water, I begin to walk towards the lockers as Riley follows.

“Well, are you coming to the barbeque?”

Grace sure loves parties. I think it distracts her from her life. Although I have no idea what's going on in it, that much is obvious. She just wants distractions.

“I'm not sure,” I say as I head to my gym bag in the locker room.

Sitting on the bench beside my bag, Riley's brows furrow. "Are you sure nothing else is going on, man?" He runs a hand through his hair. "You seem *off*."

"Nah, just tired from work," I say, and think about how I'm going to tell him I'm seeing his sister.

"Right." Clearly not believing a word I am saying, he picks up his bag and heads to the exit. "Let me know about the BBQ. Later."

"Later," I call out after him.



# Chapter Nine

## Billie

After Nate left this morning, I felt oddly happy and satisfied. It was a strange feeling considering I usually curse everyone and everything if I wake up earlier than midday on a weekend. I spent my entire morning smiling like I slept with a hanger in my mouth as I got up, threw on some clothes, and made my way to Finn's law firm. I hadn't slept with someone in quite a while. I mean, I just never had the time.

*Sure, B, let's use that excuse.*

I arrive and park my car in the visitor's spot out front of the firm. The building looks like it has a billion floors, which makes my head spin as I look up. Making my way inside, I step into the elevator, clutching my laptop in one hand and my bag in the other. My pulse quickens when I realise the last time I was here was when I was eighteen.

Shit.

Maybe this was a bad idea. I don't have time to think as the elevator doors ding open into the large, modern reception area. I'm greeted by an older woman who gives me a genuine smile.

"Hi dear, how can I help you?" she asks as she looks at me through her glasses.

"Uh, hi, I'm here to see Finn Mackenzie, please." I briefly look around the reception area, noticing how little has changed since I've been here. They still have the same Monstera plant, although it has grown comfortably into its space near the floor-to-ceiling windows. The paintings are still the same, and the wall behind reception still houses the large 'Mackenzie Law' sign.

"May I have your name?" The nice lady smiles expectantly.

I fumble my words from how nervous I am.

“Oh yes, sure, sorry. Billie. Billie Quinn.”

She ushers me into a meeting room and tells me it won't be long before the team will join me. I begin unpacking my bag and plugging in my laptop when my phone rings. Fumbling through my bag, I finally find it.

*Fuck. It's Fiona.* Taking a steadying breath, I answer the call.

“Hi, Fiona, is everything okay?” Since she *never* calls me on the weekends, I know there must be something I didn't do or something I did incorrectly.

“Billie, we need you to come in this afternoon. Our automotive client needs some changes to be done urgently to their website.” I stifle my groan.

“I'm currently busy, unfortunately. Is Laura available?” I hear her sigh over the phone.

“Can you please put half an hour in my diary on Monday? We should have a chat.” With that, she hangs up and leaves the pit of anxiety burning a hole in my chest.

Placing my phone down on the large boardroom table, I hear the door open. The breath is squeezed out of me as Finn walks in, clean shaven, Calvin Klein suit hugging his perfect masculine figure. Keeping his distance, he smiles that heart-melting, panty-dropping smile I remember from years ago, although now it's a lot less boyish.

“Thanks for coming,” he says in his husky voice.

“You know, I'm usually very busy over the weekends. So, you should feel especially lucky that I've allocated time to help you with this.” My mouth twitches as I try to keep my smile from creeping in.

He smirks.

“Again, thank you. Your time means everything to me.” He walks over to the seat next to me and takes a seat. I do the same. “I thought I could run you through what we're looking for first, before I introduce you to the team, so you're not

going in blind.” Nodding, I open my laptop and begin a new page on my note-taking app.

“We’ve got the marketing team and general manager brainstorming on what the new brand refresh will look like, but I want your input on those, too. We’re expanding to include pro bono clients in our clientele, so we want the rebrand to reflect that type of work, too,” he explains.

“That’s amazing, Finn.” I look up at him. Have his eyes been on me this entire time? It’s too easy to get lost in his stormy blue eyes so I look away and focus on my notes.

He pauses, which makes me look at him again, and when I do, boy, do I regret it.

The obvious longing in his eyes is unmistakable. He licks his lips and continues.

“I want your input as much as you’re happy to give, and I want you to take the lead on the designs for all marketing collateral.” Nodding, I begin to make notes.

After a few minutes of explaining in detail what Mackenzie Law is looking for in their brand refresh, he leans back in his chair and fiddles with his pen which looks super expensive. “I know I promised you a professional relationship, but I need you to know that I never forgot about you, B. I thought about you every single day. I don’t think I could ever forget about you.”

What comes out of my mouth surprises me.

“Then why didn’t you call?” Quickly backtracking, I shake my head. “Don’t answer that. I shouldn’t have asked. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

He turns to face me in his chair and turns me to face him, his hands on the armrest of my chair.

“It does matter.” He sighs. “I should have called you. I should have messaged you. I should have done *something* to let you know I didn’t just leave and that you weren’t just a one-night stand.”



Tears threaten to fill my eyes hearing the confession from him, but I force them back.

“It’s too late, Finn, I’ve moved on.” I lie through gritted teeth, hoping to God he doesn’t see through me. “I don’t want to talk about the past.”

His brows furrow, and to my dismay, he calls me out.

“Bullshit.” His eyes bore into mine, analysing every secret I have ever told, or so it feels like it. “You still care about me, about us.”

“Us? There is no us. To be honest, I’m not sure there ever was.” Sighing, I look down at my hands, feeling exposed at how well he can read me, even after a decade.

“Don’t do that, B.” Slipping his finger underneath my chin, he tilts my head up ever so softly, my eyes meeting his. “Don’t ever look away from me.”

I feel my heart in my throat as thoughts turn to mush inside my brain. I can’t think, the ability is gone. I’m frozen in time.

*Why does he smell so fucking good?*

He leans in, and my body betrays me as my hand reaches out to caress his strong jaw

*NO, NO, NO. What the fuck are you doing!?*

I turn away before I keep going any further and begin to pack my things. “This was a mistake. I should go.”

“B, please. Don’t go,” he pleads as he reaches out to me.

“Please ask your marketing manager to email me. I can work out finer details about another meeting with them.” Shoving my stuff inside my bag, I waste no time making a beeline for the door when his strong hand grabs me by my elbow.

“I miss you. Fuck, Billie, I miss you so much it’s turned me into someone I’m not.” His eyes bore into mine as I look up at him. “Why won’t you just hear me when I say that?” My legs are stuck, tangled in the moment.

“You hurt me.” My voice comes out all squeaky. “You were the last person on this earth who I thought would hurt me, and that’s exactly what you did when you left.” Tears well up in my eyes, and I lose the battle as they flow down my cheeks. “I fucking loved you, and you left without a goodbye. Did you not once think about how much it would affect me?”

He winces at my confession as he caresses my cheek, wiping away my tears.

“I had my reasons, B. Please give me the chance to make it right. Even if you don’t want to be with me anymore, I understand. Just give me the chance to explain,” he pleads.

I should just move on. Nothing good could come of this anyway. It’s been a whole decade. I don’t *truly* know who he is anymore.

He could have changed for the worse.

He could have become someone I can’t be with anymore.

Do I even want to be with him?

What about Nate?

Oh god, Nate. No, just because he wants to explain himself doesn’t give him the instant right to date me. That card is in my hand, not his. At the end of the day, I truly like Nate. He’s a fantastic guy, and my god, he is a great fuck, but that’s not all I want him to be. I know we can have more, but this thing with Finn will never truly go away until we can be in the same room as each other. I feel a pang of guilt when I wrap my arms around Finn’s neck as he pulls me into his embrace, his strong hands caressing my back.

I did miss him, I missed him so much it was a constant ache in my chest whenever I would think about him. It feels like home in his arms, a place I thought I would never get to experience again.

Pulling myself together, I wipe my tears off my cheeks and gather my thoughts before I speak.

“Okay,” I manage to say.

“Okay?” He smiles softly.

“We should talk.” I nod. “But not here.”



My phone rings as soon as I open the door to my apartment, and I put it on loudspeaker.

“Billie! Oh my god, you will never guess who I ran into today.” Grace’s voice fills my apartment.

“Let me guess, Hugh Jackman?” I chuckle, knowing that she would absolutely die if she met Hugh Jackman in person.

“I wish! I bumped into Jess from high school. I was at the salon getting my nails done, and she walked in. I couldn’t believe it.”

“What? I thought she moved to the UK with her parents when she was sixteen,” I ask.

“Well, it turns out they’re back now and living in Sydney. They’re in Melbourne for a couple weeks for her dad’s job or whatever.”

“Oh, okay.” Grace can sometimes go on tangents and be a little bit of a gossip. She doesn’t mean it in a nasty way, but sometimes she can chew your ear off. “Anyway, do you want to come over later, or are you going to another party of yours?”

“No party tonight sadly, but I will come over. I need your help planning my birthday party!”

*Fuck.*

Her birthday party, where Nate and Finn will be in the same house with me. Fun.

“No worries, come whenever. I’m home now.”

“Did you speak to Finn?” Her question leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

“Can we talk when you get here?”

“Yeah, of course. I’ll come now, see you soon!” She hangs up.

I place my stuff on the kitchen counter and immediately change into something comfortable. Plonking myself on my lounge, I turn on the next episode of *Bridgerton* and continue to binge the show until Grace gets here. My front door flies open because, of course, Grace is not at all graceful in her entrances.

“If you break that key, I’m not giving you a new one.” I smirk from the lounge as I watch her haul her multiple shopping bags inside.

“I’ll have to break your door down then if I don’t have a key. Your choice.” Shrugging, she crosses her legs on my lounge. “Oh, he’s so cute!” By *he*, she means the actor playing Anthony Bridgerton. “How are you so far ahead of me already? You just started watching the show.”

“I don’t party every chance I get.”

“That’s why I’m the fun friend,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Sure.” I nod sarcastically, and we both laugh.

I twiddle my thumbs as I consider telling her about everything that went on with Nate and Finn the past few days, but before I can speak, she does.

“What’s going on with you, B? I feel like we haven’t spoken properly since the bonfire night.” Right, the night I was caught off guard.

“I slept with Nate,” I blurt out, and her eyes go wide, her smile even wider.

“What?! That’s fucking great!” She moves closer to me on the lounge. “Does he have a big one?”

“Grace! What the fuck is wrong with you?” I chuckle as I playfully push her shoulder.

“Oh, come on! It’s not like you weren’t wondering the same thing when you first met him! You told me yourself!” She’s totally right.

I sigh. “Yeah, okay, fair, but I’m still not saying anything.”

“So, it’s big then?” She whistles.

I give her a look that says drop it, and she does, swiftly changing the subject to her birthday party. “Okay then, should we plan for a cocktail bar or a gin bar? I’m kind of leaning towards the gin bar because no one really orders gin. I feel like it’s such a misunderstood spirit because everyone thinks it’s too bitter...”

I zone out when she babbles on. The only thing on my mind is what just happened this morning with Finn. How could I be so stupid to think we could keep it professional when in reality, the history there is just too strong? The ugly feeling inside my belly grows as I think about Nate and how wonderful last night was. Not just the sex, but the closeness, the way it was so easy for me to open up to him.

What am I going to do? They will both be there at the cabin in a couple of weeks.

No, there is nothing to do.

I’m pursuing things with Nate.

I’ll talk with Finn and straighten out the crinkled edges, but that’s all it will be... a platonic friendship.

“Are you even listening to me?” Grace’s voice interrupts me, slapping me back into the apartment.

“Yeah, just do the gin bar. I think everyone will appreciate trying something new.” I try to give her a smile, but it comes out as a twitch.

“Okay, what happened?” she asks, crossing her arms.

“Hmm?”

“Tell me why your mind is halfway across the ocean.” She leans back into the lounge, waiting.

I sigh, giving in, I tell her everything that happened between myself and Finn this morning. Looking away, she purses her lips.

“I’m going to ask you this once, B. Do you still love him?”

The question catches me off guard.

“What?” I get up off the lounge and begin tidying the kitchen to distract myself from her searing gaze. “Of course not, it’s been a decade, Grace.”

“Good. Then I suggest you focus on where things could go with Nate. As much as I love the idea of my best friend and my brother being together, I am not about to stand idle and watch you two tear each other apart because of something that happened so long ago.”

She’s right. Nothing good will come of it.

“Yep,” is all I can muster.



# Chapter Ten

## Billie

Music booms through the club as I sit next to Nate inside our usual booth, thanks to Grace. This week was surprisingly not too bad at work. I thought I would completely hate it, given that Fiona almost gave me a coronary asking for a meeting first thing Monday morning. Turns out it was for an opportunity to land another big client, and she gave me the spiel on their initiatives and their vision. Another client to add to the ever-growing list. Sometimes I wonder if working a salary job is worth it. Sure, you get sick leave and annual leave, but you're pretty much working like a dog. Maybe someday I will have the balls to quit and start my own thing.

“SHOTS!” Grace shouts at the top of her lungs in her red minidress as she downs another shot.

That was probably her fifth? Wait, no, sixth shot. I'm not much of a drinker, but I know Grace likes to have fun, so I don't really say anything as I take a sip from my cider. Nate leans in to speak into my ear because of how loud it is in here.

“Does Grace know?”

I know he means, does she know about us? And by us, I mean us sleeping together the other night. I nod to confirm. He smiles, and his eyes grow dark. Did that confirmation just make him happy? “So does that mean we're a thing?” He kisses my cheek.

Blushing, I lean into him. “Do you *want* us to be a thing?”

His hand slides between my thighs, the smirk growing on his lips.

“I want the world to know you're mine, baby.” He squeezes my thigh. “I want everyone to know that if they lay a hand on you, they'll have me to answer to.” He looks into my eyes as he licks his lips. “I don't care if they believe in god or not, I will send them to their maker.” He clenches his jaw as



his eyes fall to my lips, my heart pounding in my chest at his words.

I see Riley coming back to the table with drinks, and I quickly swat Nate's hand away to sit up straight. Yes, I know. I'm an adult, and I can date or fuck anyone I want, but it's Riley's friend! I feel awkward about it, and I have no idea how to tell him. Grabbing Grace's hand, I lead her to the dance floor, wanting to get away from the table for a little. I let my body move to the beat of the music, swaying my hips. I'm starting to feel a little tipsy given I've already had a few drinks. Grace leans into my ear for a moment.

"When are you going to tell Riley?" she asks.

I shrug. "When there's something to tell."

She raises her eyebrows questioning me as if to say, "You know as well as I do that when you fuck your brother's friend and see it going somewhere, you need to let him know before he finds out from someone else."

Yes, I should, but not tonight.

The crowd on the dance floor parts for a millisecond, and I swear I spot Finn leaning against the bar, staring straight at me. My body freezes for a moment as I blink a couple more times to make sure it's him. Grace said he wasn't coming tonight because he didn't want to make me uncomfortable, but there he is, leaning on the bar, his eyes never leaving me for a moment. Turning to Grace, I let her know I'm going outside for some fresh air and speedily move through the crowd. Once I reach the balcony of the club, I take a deep breath in, calming the noise in my head.

Spotting a few smokers, I ask for a cigarette off a tall blonde woman in a white dress. Without hesitation, she smiles and hands me one, lighting it for me, too. I've needed this. I'm not a full-time smoker, but sometimes a cigarette just hits the spot when I'm feeling stressed. Blowing out a puff of smoke, I feel a strong hand slide onto my hip.

"Never took you to be a smoker." I smile when I hear Nate's voice behind me.

“I needed one. It helps when I’m not in the right headspace.” I take another drag and offer him a puff when I turn to face him.

He shakes his head. “I don’t smoke.”

Nodding, I take another puff and put the cigarette out on the floor. “Listen, there’s been something I’ve wanted to ask you.” His brows furrow for a moment.

“Yeah, what’s up?” I ask as I face him.

“Grace’s party. I assume you’ll be going?” His hands are now firmly on my hips, mine resting on his forearms.

“Of course. She’s my best friend.” I smile. “And you’re coming, too, right?”

He raises his eyebrows. “Do you want me to?”

“Well of course I do. Why would you think otherwise?” I ask.

He sighs. “If we go to this party together, I want us to go *together*,” he admits, but it doesn’t surprise me.

My heart is in my stomach. I know what he’s asking, and I know I can’t say no. No, I don’t *want* to say no, but that means I must tell Riley.

“I want us to go together, too.” I bite the inside of my bottom lip, thinking about how I should approach the topic with my older brother. Reaching into my bag, I text Riley to meet me on the balcony, and sure enough, a few minutes later, I see him walking through the glass doors, the deafening music filling up the night as the doors open, then close.

*Here we go.*

“Hey, what’s up? I thought you were with Grace.” He looks around for her.

Sighing, I stand next to Nate and thread my fingers through his. Riley’s eyes immediately fly to the action. “Riley, I don’t know how to approach this topic, so I’ll just say it. Nate and I are seeing each other.” His eyes widen as his brows lift, and I almost think he’s about to swing at Nate. A moment

passes before he says anything, and I look at Nate, his gaze focused on Riley.

“O-kay. When?” He clears his throat. “When did this happen?” He gestured between the two of us.

“We hung out after the bonfire and continued to spend time together after that.” I shrug.

Nodding, he places his hands on his hips. I never expected him to jump up and down at the news, but I didn’t expect this either. Riley is usually an understanding person, so when he takes this long to respond, it has me thinking why?

“Are you going to say anything?” I ask Riley when he just stares at Nate like he wants to hit him.

“What’s there to say? You’re an adult. You can do what you like.” He stares at Nate the entire time he talks.

*What the hell is happening?*

Nate’s jaw clenches as he stares back at Riley.

*Am I missing something?*

## NATE

If Riley swings at me right now, I’d probably let him hit me. He has every right to when he knows I haven’t been truthful to Billie about what I do. Instead, he walks off back inside the club without another word. I wish I had it in me to follow him and explain myself, but what am I going to say?

Hey, sorry I fucked your sister and didn’t tell you about it?

“What’s with him?” Billie looks at me and is confused about her brother’s reaction to her news. I, on the other hand, am not.

“I think he just needs some time to adjust to the news.” I try to comfort her. Sighing, she leans into me. Her warm body presses against mine as I hold her close.

“So, do you want to ditch this party and go back to yours?” She peers up at me with those big, beautiful eyes, and I feel the blood rushing down to my cock as I imagine her pretty mouth around my dick.

We haven't been back to mine yet, so I nod as I escort her back to the table to say our goodbyes. Riley has a furious look on his face, and I know for a fact it's directed at me. Escorting Billie out of the club, we make our way to my Jeep and make the drive to my place.

"Where's Noah?" She looks around the open-plan kitchen and lounge. "It's quite late. Shouldn't he be home?"

I chuckle. "He just turned eighteen. He's probably out partying in the city." I grab her by her petite waist and pull her close to me. "I was hoping it could be just the two of us."

She smirks.

"That's a shame. Noah's pretty cute," she adds playfully.

Ignoring her sarcastic remark, I push my erection into her. The seductive way she bites her lip has my dick twitching. She begins unwrapping me like a present. Jacket—gone. Shirt—gone. Pants—gone. Briefs—gone. I'm stark naked in front of her with a raging hard-on. She kneels in front of me, and I think it's probably the best sight I have seen in years, her grey eyes hooded with lust, looking up at me.

My jaw clenches. I want to fist my hand in her hair and pull her mouth onto me, but I let her take the lead. Her hands rest on either side of my hips as she takes the head of my cock in her mouth, forcing a groan from my lips. I love the way her warm tongue feels as she slides her mouth over my throbbing cock. My hips begin to move on their own, sliding my dick deeper inside her throat.

*Fuck me, it feels incredible.*

She urges me deeper when I reach out to stop her. I don't want to finish so quickly. I help her to her feet and lift her so she sits on the kitchen island bench. I take a step back and admire her in her little black dress, if you can call it that. It barely covers her ass and her beautiful, perky little tits. Sliding the straps of her dress down, I let it pool at her hips, revealing that she was not wearing a bra.

She's trying to drive me insane I'm fucking convinced.

I place my hand on her chest and gently push her onto her back, then I remove her dress along with her G-string. Her pussy is glistening when I slide my tongue over her clit and down to her entrance to taste her. She moans, her hands twisting in my hair. I slide one finger inside her as I suck on her clit, her walls clenching as I add another finger. My dick hardens at the sound of her throaty moans. Pulling her hips slightly off the counter, I align myself at her entrance. Both of our moans fill the air as I slide into her. I know we've done it before, but it still feels as good as the first time we slept together in her bedroom. Her scent seizes my senses as I bury my face inside her neck, slowly moving my hips.

“Fuuuuck, yes, keep going just like that.”

“Just like that?” I tease. “Or maybe a little more?” I thrust harder into her, earning me louder moans.

“Yes! *Oh fuck.*” She begins to pant as I slide my hand between us to rub her clit. I stifle her moans as I bring my lips to hers, her nails digging into my chest. She grabs my hand and places it on her throat.

*Holy fucking shit.*

I could probably come from just the sight of her slightly parted lips, breathing heavily as I bury myself inside her repeatedly. Her eyes roll back as her pussy clenches around my dick, making my balls tighten. I groan as I let go... panting, as sweat rolls down my chest. Is this what obsession feels like? Because all I want to do is fuck her senseless in my bed, in my shower, and on every surface in my house.

After showering and getting into bed, Billie snuggles up close to me and sighs. I glance down at her inside the crook of my arm and notice her brows are furrowed. “Was something not to your liking, baby?” I joke, hoping it'll get her to talk.

She purses her lips before she speaks. “No, everything was perfect. You're perfect.”

I scoff.

“Nobody is perfect, and I sure as hell am not.” I clench my jaw at the thought that I'm still not being truthful to her, but I

force the thoughts into oblivion when she speaks.

“I’m just thinking about Grace’s party. Are you sure you will be okay with Finn there?” She looks at me now with a hint of worry in her eyes, but I can’t tell if the worry is for me.

“As long as you’re okay with it, then so am I,” I try to reassure her, but the truth is, I think I’m trying to comfort myself. She pauses for a moment and nods softly.

“Okay, well now that Riley knows, I guess we can stay in the same room.” Her fingers lightly stroke my chest. “Unless you have a problem with that?”

Smirking, I roll her on top of me and grab her ass with both hands. “You’ll hear no complaints from me, little B.” I give her a soft kiss. “As long as I have you in my arms, I don’t care where I am.” That’s the truth.



# Chapter Eleven

## Nathan

I rouse from sleep as something tickles my neck. Turning my head, I find Billie snuggled up on my chest. I breathe in her deliciously fruity scent, and a pang of guilt slices through me when I look at her innocent sleeping form. I feel like a dick for blind siding Riley, but it was Billie's decision to keep it from him. Slowly, I make my way off the bed and into the kitchen for a glass of water. Checking my phone that's been on charge, I notice I have a few missed calls, all from unknown numbers. I was meant to complete a job tonight which I declined because I wanted to be with Billie. My phone starts vibrating in my hand. Unknown caller once again.

“Speak.”

“You're needed here. I don't care where you are or what you are doing, drop it.” Joe's voice is stern.

The thing is, I'm not the least bit intimidated by him because I have been working for the man for years.

I know all his weaknesses. On the other hand, I know even if I wanted to, I couldn't just drop this life and leave. They would eventually find me and cut my head off or lay waste to anyone I've ever loved. Unease settles in my stomach at the thought.

“Not tonight, Joe.” I hang up before he can speak again. I meant it when I turned the job down. I don't want to work tonight. I hear small footsteps enter the space, and turning around, I see Billie. She looks heavenly in my shirt which is three sizes too big for her.

“Who was that?” she questions, rubbing her eyes.

“No one of importance.” Walking over to her, I thread my fingers through her hair. “Has anyone told you how fucking gorgeous you are?”



She chuckles, her eyes smiling into mine. “Who knew you were such a romancer, Nathan.”

“For you, I’d be a fucking clown if I had to.” I smirk.

### **BILLIE**

Sweat pools in my palms as I wait for Finn to answer the door. Once again, I have come to hear him out like I promised I would, and this time I really hope he gives me what I want.

A proper explanation.

Grace opens the door and pulls me into a bear hug.

“I’m so glad you guys are working things out.” She cocks her head to the side and smiles. “I can’t wait for things to go back to the way they were.”

“Baby steps, Grace.”

I walk into the huge lounge slash kitchen area and see Finn in a tight white T-shirt with grey sweats. I don’t think I have ever seen him in anything but a suit since he has returned. No, wait. The bonfire night, that’s right. How could I forget the washboard abs? Blinking the image out of my head, I take a seat on the white leather lounge.

“I’ll let you guys talk. I’m going to see Michael,” she squeals. “I think we might be working things out.”

I give her a genuine smile. “I’m so happy to hear that, Grace.” And it’s the truth, I am. She deserves happiness. Hell, everyone does.

“Okay, now please, don’t kill each other.” She points between Finn and I. Turning, she grabs her keys off the counter and leaves, closing the door behind her. Finn takes a seat dangerously close to me, so I shift slightly.

“I don’t know how to start or where to start,” he confesses without beating around the bush, and I appreciate that he’s willing to try. Sighing, I bite the inside of my bottom lip, a terrible habit I’ve picked up. “Please believe me when I tell you I never meant to hurt you.”

You know what? A part of me really does believe him. Call me stupid or ignorant, but I do.

“Why didn’t you at least send me a text? Or a call? Something.” I clench my jaw shut as I try to control the rush of emotions threatening to pummel through the dam. His shoulders slump as he runs his hands through his hair.

“I honestly thought it would have been better for you to hate me. Easier for you somehow.”

I flinch. “Easier? You thought that made it *easier* for me? We knew each other for so long, and then straight after we slept together, you took off for Europe and didn’t say goodbye to me, nor did you contact me ever again after that... and you thought that was *easier* on me?” My breath hitches as tears threaten to break through. I hold them back with everything I have got.

“I’m so sorry, B. I should have come straight to you and told you what was going on. It was absolute cowardice on my part, and I apologize. You didn’t deserve that.” He holds my hands in his.

“I was young, I had no fucking idea what I was doing. I thought if you’d hate me, you could move on a lot quicker.” Sighing, he continues.

“My father said we were moving to France and building another law firm from the ground up. Building, staffing, everything from scratch. It would take us years, so I knew we would be there for a while. I didn’t want to string you along with false hope.” He bows his head.

“I’m a fucking idiot. I could have mended this thing between us so much earlier, but I never had the guts to face you. Then I thought maybe if you saw I had moved on, it would urge you to move on, too.” His eyes are red, likely from working long hours.

“I never, ever wanted to intentionally hurt you. Everything I did, I thought of you. I never *once* stopped thinking of you.” He looks almost broken when he speaks next.

“I loved you, Billie. I *still* love you.” The confession catches me off guard. Unsure of what to say, I pull my hands from his, shifting uncomfortably in my seat.

“You don’t have to feel the same way. I would not expect you to after everything.”

“I need time,” I finally say after a few seconds pass between us.

He nods in understanding.

“I need to process all of this.” I wave around at nothing.

The reality of the situation is I know I feel something for him. I know it’s been years, and hearing him declare his feelings doesn’t help in the slightest. It just made everything so much harder.

“Take all the time you need,” he says.

“I just have one question.” I purse my lips, unsure if I should ask, but I decide to anyway.

“Did you ever see us together? Like if you didn’t move to another country?”

He sighs, and for a moment, my stomach does a summersault, afraid of his answer.

“You were my future, B.” Tears begin to roll down my face as I quickly gather my things and head for the door, refusing to let him see me break down again. It was a mistake asking him that question because after all, what would it fix?

Nothing.

Absolutely *nothing*.

Without looking back, I walk out wondering if that last question was necessary. My mind rattles with confusion as I begin to imagine what life would have been like if he never left.

I allow myself ten minutes inside my car to cry. How could I not after Finn just told me he loved me and saw a future with me all those years ago? Maybe things would be different if I

wasn't so stubborn and just did whatever I could to get into contact with him.

Did I give up too easily?

Was it my fault things turned out this way?

*No.*

I'm not about to blame myself for someone else's mistake, and that's exactly what this is. Finn's mistake. I'm done mourning something that could have been. Guilt stabs into my heart when I remember I lied to Nate about where I am. I didn't have to lie, after all I wasn't doing anything wrong but something about meeting Finn to discuss the past felt... off. I'm sure if I told Nate that I wanted to hear Finn out, that he would understand completely.

So why didn't I say anything? I groan.

Why the fuck am I the way I am?

"Fuck!" I yell in utter frustration, banging my palms on the steering wheel.



I haven't spoken to Finn for ten days since his 'explanation.' I don't really have anything to say. After processing the information, I kind of understand why he did what he did.

I'm not about to forgive and forget, though. I don't think I could *ever* forget.

We were young and had no idea how to be emotionally mature. We felt things deeply and had no idea how to act accordingly based on our emotions, so I get it. That doesn't excuse the act, but I understand him.

Thank God Friday seemed to roll around quickly this week because I am almost out of willpower to continue faking a smile at work. My ever-growing to-do list keeps piling up, Fiona keeps riding me, and I'm so close to quitting that I almost sigh in relief as the clock ticks over to five thirty.

I've spent my days at the office, working my full-time job, and a few hours at night working with Mackenzie Law's

marketing team to get things going for their new brand refresh. To say I'm exhausted is an understatement. I've also been crashing at Nate's quite a bit over the past few days. He's been helping... get my mind off things, plus I think I'm honestly starting to see my feelings grow for him. The way he cares for me, no one has ever cared for me like this before.

Grace's party inches closer and closer with every day that passes, and I'd be lying if I said it didn't cause me some anxiety. It shouldn't, considering there's nothing to be anxious over, but I can't help but think about how things might go down between Nate and Finn, given that one of them professed his love to me and the other just might.

I spend the whole drive to Nate's house listening to my current favourite song on repeat. "Die4u" by Bring Me the Horizon blasts through my speakers as I soak in every single beat, every single lyric. There's nothing quite like metalcore to get your mind off things for a while.

Driving up to Nate's house, I haul my stuff out of the car, walk in, and dump it on the lounge.

Nate takes a look at my duffel bag on the lounge and smirks. "I don't remember asking you to move in."

I roll my eyes at his sarcastic comment. "You know as well as I do that a woman needs way more things than a man. So don't get me started."

He walks up to me, and his eyes drop to my pencil skirt.

"Maybe I *want* to start with you." He's not wearing a shirt; his perfectly sculpted muscles and intricate tattoos are on full display. I let my gaze linger for too long, feeling myself involuntarily squeeze my thighs together just at the sight of him.

"Do you have to walk around shirtless? I've seen your cupboard, and you own plenty of them."

I wave at his bare torso. He wraps his arms around me, pressing himself into me.

"I just love watching you admire me, thinking about all the ways I can please you." He presses his erection against my

stomach. I hear footsteps coming from the hall as we are interrupted by Noah's voice.

"I'm coming out! Everyone's clothes must be on!" he yells, and I giggle as I place my hands on Nate's chest.

"We're decent!" I yell back.

Noah's head pops around the wall, then he walks into the living room and plops himself on the lounge, scrolling through TikTok. I give Nate a peck on the cheek and tell him I'm going to shower and change into something comfy. He agrees and lets me know he'll have dinner ready by the time that I'm done. Music to my ears. I am starving!

After showering, I quickly throw on some comfy clothing and head back out into the living room. Nate and Noah are now sitting at the large dining table, waiting for me. Nate laughs at something Noah has said, and he's still bloody shirtless. "What have I missed?" I smile, taking a plate and filling it up with the lasagne Nate has prepared.

*Yes. He indeed does cook, too.*

"I was just telling Nate about my math teacher and how I saw her at one of the clubs I was at last week." He snickers.

I cringe on his math teacher's behalf. "Really? How old is she?"

He shrugs. "She's pretty young, kind of hot, too."

Nate laughs as he takes a bite of his lasagne. "Get your head back in the game, mate. The US scouts will be here next week to watch you play."

"Aw, are you doubting me, brother?" Noah smirks.

"Just saying, don't fuck it up." His tone is playful, but I can sense he means a little of what he says.

Cutting in, I ask, "Have you thought about it all, though? I mean, moving to another country without anyone there with you will be a huge change." I don't want to discourage him, but at the same time, I would hope Nate has spoken to him about things like this.

“Yeah.” He begins to nod.

“I have thought about it, and I know it’s going to be hard at first, but I think once... *if* I do end up moving, I’ll be doing something I truly love, and that means so much to me that I’m prepared to be on my own.” He glances at Nate.

“As much as I love my big brother, he does get annoying sometimes.” He snickers.

Nate taps him softly behind the head, and I laugh. We talk more about Noah and his obsession with basketball. He says he can’t wait to meet all of his heroes, and Nate says something about “you should never meet your heroes.” After dinner, we clean up and get cosy on the lounge. Noah disappears, saying that he’s meeting up with a friend in the city, so it’s just me and Nate.

We put on a movie, and a quarter of the way through, Nate shifts in his seat, facing me. “We need to talk about Riley.”

The way we left things with Riley really didn’t sit well with me either, but I mean, there’s only so much I can say. I don’t completely understand Riley’s reaction, so I have been meaning to talk to him about it, but I’ve just been so busy with everything else that’s going on that I completely forgot about it. I feel like a horrible sister. “I know. It didn’t sit right with me either.”

“He hasn’t shown up to training since the night at the club.” Concern is etched in his beautiful green eyes.

“That’s really unlike him. I’ll call him tomorrow and find out what’s going on.” I can tell Nate is worried, and I feel like an ass for making him lie to his friend for me.





# Chapter Twelve

## Nathan

I am taking a big swig of my water when I notice the front door to the gym open and close, letting in the cool night breeze. Riley enters and makes a beeline for the locker room without even taking a glance around the gym. I know he's still pissed with me, and I feel like a total dick about how things went down. Heading to the locker room, I enter to find Riley already in his gear, wrapping his hands.

"Riley, can we talk?" I say in the calmest tone I can muster.

He stares at me for a moment then shoulder barges straight passed me without saying a word. I knew I fucked up, but man, is it that bad?

*Yes, you fucking idiot, of course it's that bad! You're working for the underbelly of Melbourne, and you're fucking his sister.*

Sighing, I turn around and block the exit so he's forced to speak with me.

"Get out of my way, Rizzo." Yep, he's *definitely* mad if he's surnaming me.

"Can we just talk like adults?" I try to reason with him.

He folds his arms across his chest. "Talk then, go ahead."

"Billie asked me not to say anything to you when I asked for her number. I couldn't go against her wishes," I confess.

"Nate, I don't care about that petty shit. Have you told her about your *side hustle* or not?" He cuts to the chase, and once again, a pang of guilt rises like acid in my throat. I clench my jaw, unable to say anything.

"That's what I thought."

I move out of his way as he walks out. Turning back, he gives me a look of warning.

“Tell her, before she finds out from someone else.”

I can't tell if he's threatening me. I know I must tell her, and I need to do it real soon. The window of opportunity is closing fast.

My phone starts to ring inside my gym bag in the locker room. Rummaging through the bag, I answer, putting the phone to my ear.

“Don't you dare turn this job down. This is your last warning, Nate.” Joe's voice comes through stern, and I know he's angry from all the jobs I've been recently turning down.

“Fine. What's the job?” I begin to unwrap my hands as I hold the phone between my cheek and my shoulder.

“Corporate lad. Owes me a lot of money. He's chewed up over two hundred thousand dollars in gambling debt.” He pauses for a moment.

“I want you to bring him within an inch of his life, until he submits to working for me.”

Disgust piles up like bricks inside my chest at his words. This is what they do and how they steal people's lives. Make you owe them money, then when you can't pay, work you like a dog on their every whim.

“When?” My mouth forcibly opens.

“Next week, he should be alone in his office. I've had Kieran watch him for a few days, and his routine is the same. He goes from his home to the office and works until the early hours of the morning, then returns home. I want him scared, Nate. I want you to go down to his office to let him know we know everything about his life.”

“Anything else?” I try my best to keep the sarcasm from my tone.

“Don't fucking kill him. I need him.”



BILLIE

I'm looking forward to Grace's birthday. It's been a hot minute since we all gathered our things and headed up to the cabin. I miss it.

Reminds me of all the good times we had trekking through the mountain, swimming in the lakes, and just being carefree teenagers.

Nate's Jeep is all packed and ready to go. I decided to head up to the cabin with Nate because it just makes sense to go in one car, and given his car is a lot newer and more comfortable than mine, he had no choice but to be the driver.

I don't think he minds, though, and I think he needs a break, too. He's been working long hours at the gym between time caring for Noah. I think he deserves a break.

The drive up to the cabin is filled with laughter as I share my playlist with Nate. I feel like he began to judge me slightly when I played "Bring Me the Horizon." Say what you will about that band. They are diverse, and the lead singer's voice has come such a long way.

Once we pull into the long, bumpy driveway of the cabin, Nate's eyes go wide, and to be fair, if it was me seeing the Mackenzie cabin for the first time, I would probably have that exact same look on my face.

"Are they *that* loaded?" His brows furrow as he takes in the huge one-story home, sitting on acres of land, surrounded by mountainous landscape, large trees, and lights illuminating the front porch.

I laugh as he gawks at the property. "You can say that, I guess."

"The house looks like something out of a magazine. I never even knew you could buy land in this part of the mountains."

"Well, they are the Mackenzies." I shrug as he parks the Jeep.

I begin to walk up the stairs of the front porch when Nate grabs my elbow and twirls his fingers between mine. His smirk has me wishing I could do dirty things to him right now.

Holding hands, we walk around the porch that wraps around the entire home and out towards the back where I hear music playing. Instantly, everyone's eyes fall on us as we approach the circle they have formed with outdoor lounge seats.

Grace's squeal fills my ear as she stops talking with Jess and rushes over to me.

"Oh my god! You made it, and you're holding hands!" she exclaims. "Does this mean it's official?!" I smile at her, and in an instant, that smile is wiped away when I see Finn staring at us from across the space, in front of the old hammock.

Blinking abnormally fast, as if to pull myself out of a trance, I immediately look to Nate when I speak to Grace.

"Yes... yes, I guess it is."

Grace squeals once again and hugs us both.

"Come, take a seat. The boys have gone to get some meat from the local butcher before they close for the long weekend." I take a seat, and Nate offers to get me a drink.

"Anything with gin will do." I flash a smile, and he winks at me as he turns and heads towards the gin station. I see Riley talking with a few of Finn's colleagues, and I think I recognise one. Yes, his name is Greyson. He works within Finn's marketing team. I think I met him on a call recently and believe I have another meeting with him this week about the new collateral we are designing. He looks like your average bloke, average build, average height, short hair with glasses. Riley notices me looking in their direction, and I see him walking over to me. I smile as he gets closer.

"Are we talking again?" I joke.

"Don't be stupid." He snickers as he takes a seat next to me.

"How can I not talk with my sister?" His shoulder nudges mine softly which puts me at ease.

"So, what's your problem with Nate? You've never had an issue with anyone else I've dated."

“It’s not my story to tell, B.” He shakes his head. “You’ll have to ask Nate.”

What? That catches me off guard because I totally thought he would say something along the lines of “he’s too old for you” or “he’s a fighter and doesn’t have a real job.” I purse my lips unsure of how to reply to that when Nate hands me a drink.

“Riley.” He nods, almost cold and unattached.

“Nate.” Riley nods back and walks back over to the others.

“What the hell was that?” I look up at Nate as he watches Riley. “If a stranger had seen that interaction, they would’ve thought you were enemies or something.”

His expression changes from unattached to what I can only describe as sad. Taking a seat next to me, he raises the cup to his lips. “Nate, is there something I should know?” My voice takes on a more serious tone. He swallows, his throat bobbing up and down.

“There is, but now is not the time or place to have that discussion.” He places his hand on mine. “I promise I will tell you. Let’s just enjoy this weekend first.” Unease creeps inside me, wondering about all the things it could be. I give his hand a little squeeze and smile.

As the night sky grows darker, the bonfire is lit, and we’re all surrounding the fire seated in our chairs, toasting marshmallows on sticks, a classic favourite amongst our little group.

It looks like tonight is not just our regular group, though. Finn has invited some of his colleagues, and Grace has invited a few of her work friends, too.

Some of which I don’t even know. Goes to show how rarely I go out with her. Everyone’s quite tipsy or borderline drunk after the few shots of tequila that Grace made us do. I don’t know how this woman has this much energy. Sometimes I wish I could be like Grace, not having a care in the world about anything and doing whatever I wanted, whenever I

wanted. Nate excuses himself as he makes his way inside. Finn immediately seizes the opportunity to speak with me.

“I didn’t know you and Nate were a thing.” It is the first sentence he has said to me all night.

I shrug. “I didn’t know I had to tell you every little detail about my life.”

“Come on, you know that’s not what I meant.”

“So what if we are? I like Nate.” It doesn’t sting as much as I thought it would to admit my feelings for Nate to Finn.

He nods solemnly. “I just thought...” He pauses. “Never mind.”

“I don’t owe you anything,” I say as I look up at him, the heat from the fire ricocheting off his beautifully smooth skin.

He purses his lips. “No, you don’t.” He takes a drink from his beer, almost downing it in one go. Almost tripping over a rock, he walks over to Grace, who’s now under a huge blanket, lying on the old hammock.

Sighing, I get up and make my way inside to find Nate. I feel like I’ve searched the entire house when I see the top of his head outside through the large window out the front of the house, standing next to his Jeep. It looks like he’s on the phone.

Not wanting to interrupt, I grab myself a cider from the fridge in the kitchen when my eye catches an old photo of me, Finn, and Grace, probably about fourteen years old.

I remember this photo. We were camping out in the woods together when it started to storm in the middle of the night, so we were forced to pack up the tent and our belongings and come back to sleep in the cabin with Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie. Finn is drenched from head to toe in the photo, his hair sticking to his face. Grace and I are laughing because we stood under a large tree as he packed everything up so we wouldn’t get wet. I can’t help but laugh at the memory.

I must have been engrossed in that memory for a bit because I feel Nate’s strong arms wrap around me from

behind. “Want to go for a walk?” He breathes into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine.

“It’s dark, and who knows what’s in the woods at this time of night.” I place my hands on his as they caress from my stomach down to my hips. I feel his erection press against my ass.

“You don’t think I could protect you?” he whispers into my ear between planting soft kisses on my neck.

Turning around, I wrap my arms around his neck and plant my lips on his. His tongue hastily slides into my mouth, hungrily tasting me. I whimper as his masculine aura engulfs me. Grabbing his hand, I lead him out and into the woods. We’re just far enough from the bonfire that we can hear the music still booming through the woods but not close enough for anyone to notice.

“Chokehold” by Sleep Token booms through the speakers as Nate reaches out to tuck a stray hair behind my ear. Pushing his body against mine, he backs me into a tree, the bark scraping against my back. Placing his hand on my cheek, he leans in to whisper in my ear.

“This has been on my mind all day.”

He slips his hand between us and cups my pussy over my jeans, sending a flutter straight to my clit. An involuntary whimper leaves my lips as he places some pressure. Adrenaline fires like a rocket inside me as I reach out to unbuckle his jeans, hungry for the only thing that could satiate my thirst. Kneeling, I pull down his jeans along with his boxer briefs, his cock springing out to greet me. His pretty, big, and long shaft stares directly at me. Taking it in my hand, I give it a little squeeze and am awarded with a groan from Nate’s throat. Taking just the tip inside my mouth, I tease the bottom sensitive area with my tongue. His eyes blaze as he looks down at me, one hand in my hair.

“Holy fucking shit,” he breathes, his head back looking up at the sky, and I can’t help but feel a sense of pride. I’m making him feel this way.

Me.

Taking him completely into my mouth, I move my hand against his shaft up and down. He pulls my hair, forcing me to stand up and turns me around to face the tree. Lifting up my skirt, he pulls aside my undies and pushes into me.

We both moan from the instant he slides into me, there is nothing but need, lust, and want in the way we fuck right now. I brace myself with both hands against the tree as he wraps one hand around my throat, pulling me deeper into his body. Every thrust sends my body jerking against the tree, making me wetter and needier. With his other hand, he reaches down between my legs and begins rubbing my clit.

“You look so fucking sexy, pressed up against this tree, taking it like a good girl.” I lick my lips as my nails dig into the bark. “*My good girl.*”

The intensity of the sensation of feeling full of his cock and being stimulated with his fingers begin a tornado of pleasure rising inside my belly.

“Nate,” I say through heavy breathing.

“Yes, baby?” he breathes in my ear, and I think it almost sets me off. I moan at the way he calls me baby. His dick moves in and out of me hard and fast, leaving me breathless. His hand presses on my clit, and I completely come undone, waves of pleasure surging through me.

“I love when you come all over me, baby.” He pushes into me once more as he buries his load into me, groaning with pleasure.

After taking the time to clean ourselves up and put our clothes back on, we hold hands as we head back to the party. Everyone is visibly drunk now, strewn about in the chairs, listening to music, and passing around weed. My eyes catch Finn’s as he looks at us, his jaw clenches. Visible anger whirls around inside his piercing blue eyes.

“Oh, look who decided to join us after a quick fuck in the woods.” He gestures to us, as my eyes widen in pure mortification.



What the hell is wrong with him?

“Maybe we should go inside,” I say to Nate as I begin to head inside but he doesn’t budge, his gaze fixed on Finn. “Nate, he’s obviously drunk. Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, Nate, listen to your girlfriend like the little bitch you are.” Finn stumbles up to his feet as Riley quickly follows him, positioning himself between Nate and Finn.

“Nate, he’s severely drunk. Don’t engage.” Riley is now directly in front of Nate. My heart feels like it’s lodged in my throat, cutting off my air supply.

Nate’s fists are clenched at his sides. He’s practically vibrating with anger. Ignoring Finn’s remarks, he begins to turn away and heads in my direction.

I’m relieved, because as much as Finn looks like he can handle himself, Nate would absolutely ragdoll him in a fight. I hear Riley speaking to Finn, telling him to stop.

“Finn, what the fuck are you doing, man? He will flatten you. Don’t say another fucking word.” He pushes him down into the seat.

Once inside, I apologise profusely. I can’t believe Finn would do something like that.

“You have nothing to apologise for. It’s Finn who should be apologizing.” He points outside, and I see the visible anger in his eyes, in the way he has one hand gripping the dining chair, his jaw clenched.

“Maybe this was a mistake.” I sigh. “Maybe we shouldn’t have come.”

“We could always leave.” He shrugs, digging the keys out of his pocket and dangling them from one finger. I take another look outside and see Finn heading towards us. Nate follows my line of sight and places his keys on the table. Bile rises in my throat at the thought of what will happen next, and I’m completely frozen, unable to move.

“You can’t take her from me!” Rage is plastered all over Finn’s face as he barges into the dining room. Riley firmly on

his tail. Nate is quiet, waiting for Finn to continue. “She is the love of my life, and you’re just a temporary good time for her.” Finn clenches his fists.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, but I’m very much invested in this relationship with Billie.” Something about Nate’s calmness has me unfreezing and putting myself between them.

“B, you shouldn’t be with him. You should be with me. I promise you I will never hurt you again. I’ll treat you the way you deserve.” His brows furrow as sadness takes the place of rage.

“Finn, you’re drunk. You don’t know what you’re saying... stop embarrassing yourself.” Riley begins to pull him outside when Finn breaks out of his hold, and in what seems like a millisecond, he presses his lips to mine before he’s yanked off by Riley, who pulls him outside with Nate closely on his tail. Five other guys come rushing to hold Nate back, their bodies thumping into him as fury drives him to push them off him, one by one.

Everything happens in a blur.

“Nate!” I yell for him to stop. Riley tries to defuse the situation by getting between them and telling Nate to back off, and I truly think Nate would have already swung at Finn if it wasn’t for Riley. I run as fast as I can next to Riley, facing Nate. “Nate, please, let’s just go.” Grabbing his hand, I pull him inside the house and out to the car. Grace runs out to the car door.

“What the hell just happened?!” Her blonde hair blows in the cool night breeze.

“I think it’s best if we just leave. Riley can fill you in,” I say as I climb into Nate’s Jeep.

Without another word, Nate pulls out of the driveway and onto the winding mountain road. We drive in silence for a while until we’re almost halfway home.

The embarrassment I feel is nothing compared to the anger radiating from Nate right now.

I know how much it took for him not to engage with Finn, and I'm glad he didn't, but at the same time, I'm upset he had to go through that. It is unfair to him.

Breaking the silence, I place my hand on his. "I'm so sorry."

His jaw tenses, his focus unwavering from the road. I think he won't say anything after a beat passes.

"I need you to be honest with me. Do you still have feelings for Finn?"

The question takes me off guard, and I feel a little attacked by the accusatory tone in his voice, but I can't lie to him, so I stay quiet. Truth is, maybe this thing with Finn will never truly go away, maybe it will be there, like a nagging migraine, slowly chipping at me.

"He wouldn't have kissed you if he didn't think you felt something for him." He sighs.

"I understand it must be difficult for you with Finn returning after so long, but I'm not convinced you feel nothing for him," he says.

My brows furrow as I remove my hand from his. "I think maybe you should just drop me off at home." Crossing my arms, I stare out into the dark night sky.

"I saw the way you shifted when Finn asked about us seeing each other. I'm not stupid. I noticed." He runs his hand over his face. "I'm into you, Billie, really fucking into you, but I will not stand in the way of what you truly want, and if that turns out to be Finn, I will step aside. All I'm saying is maybe you need to think about what you want."

A pang of guilt stabs me straight in the stomach because I know he's right. Maybe I did rush into things with Nate because I still have unresolved feelings for Finn. Except now, I really like Nate, maybe even love him. I don't know because I don't want to open that door.

I don't want to let a tsunami of emotions ruin me.

Not again.



# Chapter Thirteen

## Nathan

Last weekend went a lot differently than I had hoped. It started off great with the excitement of finally having a few days off work and spending time with Billie, but that quickly ended when Finn laid his dirty fucking lips on my girl. I grit my teeth at the memory. Things have been a little tense between Billie and I, given the circumstances. I haven't seen much of her this week because she's been busy or she fucking hates me for saying what I said.

"Hey, are you still driving me to the game?" Noah interrupts my thoughts as I gather my things.

"Yeah, make sure you have everything you need." I throw his jersey to him. "Get in."

We drive in silence, both having a lot on our minds, I guess. Noah's focus is solely on basketball, and I wish I had the same focus he does for MMA.



Instead, I piss it all away on stupid, meaningless big bad wolves of the underbelly. Even if I wanted to get out, could I? Is there a chance to get out without them shooting you in the chest?

Highly fucking unlikely.

My heart sinks at the thought as I grip the steering wheel tighter.

*You don't deserve her.*

I grit my teeth as images of Billie and Finn flood my mind, making me shift in my seat.

"You okay, bro?" Noah clearly notices the tension in me. I give him a quick nod. "Is that why you have a death grip on the wheel?" He raises his eyebrows.

Sighing, I release my hold on the steering wheel and run a hand through my hair. “Just shit going on with Billie.”

“Hmm. Well, I can’t exactly pretend to know what I am talking about since my last girlfriend broke up with me because my number one priority in life is to play professional basketball. However, why don’t you just speak to her? Depending on how tonight goes, you may need to thank her.” He’s right, and although he’s young, he is very intelligent. I’m so proud of the man he’s becoming, a better one than me.

“I’ll think about it, Noah.” I give him a small smile as we pull into the driveway of the indoor courts.

We make our way inside, and the atmosphere is buzzing, all the seats are full. I spot Noah’s coach on the sidelines talking to the boys, probably preparing them with the game plan and giving some elaborate motivational speech. Fuck, I think I need one of those, too, right now.

I look around the court and notice two middle-aged men with baseball caps on, holding clipboards. They must be the scouts. Slapping a hand on Noah’s shoulder, I whisper in his ear, “Give ’em hell, Noah.” Then I make my way up the stairs, picking an available seat somewhere in the middle of the spectators.

If Noah plays well and catches the eye of the scouts, he’s got a one-way ticket out of here, straight to the US. I feel a sadness creep into my chest as I realise I may not have much time with him left. Growing up, I always thought we would be two brothers against the world, just me and him, and now that he’s all grown up, has his own ambitions and dreams, I almost feel alone. Maybe the only way out of the double life I live is to follow Noah across the world and start a new life with him there. My fists clench when I think of moving. What about Billie?

*What about her? It’s not like she loves you back, you saw how she reacted to Finn.*

My hands clench tighter, the muscles on my forearms rippling, but I force the thoughts out and put all my focus on Noah tonight. He’s the priority right now.

The first half of the game goes by in a flash. Noah played well, and considering one of their players is still recovering from an injury, they played well as a team. Noah shined through the last five minutes of the half, scoring three-pointers. This will most definitely get the scouts' attention. I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket.

BILLIE

Hope Noah's game goes well tonight.

I don't respond. I don't know what to say after how we left things.

It's nice of Billie to message for Noah's sake, though. One thing I love about Billie is how selfless she can be with others; she always has been from the moment I met her. Stuffing my phone back into my pocket, I spot Noah on the sidelines taking a big gulp of Gatorade.

He finds me in the crowd and gives me a thumbs up with a stupidly big grin on his face. I know he's jittering with nerves right now, but he hides it super well. Second half of the game begins, and I'm starting to get nervous for Noah. The teams are head-to-head with only one point separating them in favour of The Guardians, Noah's team.

There are eight minutes left on the clock when Noah dribbles from one side of the court to the other and makes a slam dunk. The whole place is up on their feet, cheering and whistling as am I. His team surrounds him and picks him up, one guy placing him on his shoulders. Their coach is probably telling them not to celebrate too early as he waves Noah down. The Guardians end up winning the game by five points. It was a close game through and through. I make my way down to Noah as the team celebrates their win. I see one of the scouts talking with their coach near the entrance and try my best to hear what they're saying or read their lips somehow, but it's no use.

"Good game, man! Well done!" I give him a bro hug, slapping his shoulder.

Noah's face is visibly anxious. "Do you think they saw something in me? Something worth pursuing?" He wipes the sweat off his forehead.

"I don't doubt it for a second, little brother."



Music plays through my headphones as I pump through my set in the gym. It's leg day, and I usually fucking despise leg day, but today, the pain is welcome. I'll do anything so I don't have to think about how much I fucking miss Billie.

Maybe I should have fucked Finn up for kissing her, show her how much she means to me.

Maybe I shouldn't have given her space because let's face it. I'm not rich, I don't come from a respectable family, and I sure as hell don't abide by the law, let alone fight alongside it, so what chance do I really have with a woman like Billie?

Sweat rolls down the side of my face, dripping from my jaw to the ground as I stare at myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. I'm such a fucking disappointment. I should have listened to Coach Tyson all those years ago when he offered to get me out of the enforcer scene, but I didn't.

What the fuck was I supposed to do?

I had a little brother who had no one but me to rely on. I had to do what I had to do, and I did. I gave him a life I never had and what he deserved. Soon he will be living his dream, and that's all that fucking matters, so fuck that I must sacrifice my life for his.

I'll do it ten times over just so he never knows the struggles I went through.

Maybe the best thing to do is leave the life we lived behind and move to the US for a fresh start. Maybe I should be taking a page out of Noah's book. I see my phone light up on the floor, and my blood instantly curdles. It's midnight, and the only person who could be calling me right now is Joe. Reluctantly, I answer.



“Speak.”

“Tomorrow night, he will be at the office. Wait for him to leave, then fuck him up.” He hangs up the phone without saying anything else.

I guess tonight is the last job I do for this prick.



I wait outside in the darkness, leaning on a column outside the office building. *Fuck*. I’m pretty sure this is where Finn works, given the huge sign out front reading *Mackenzie Law*. I grit my teeth. Maybe today will be my lucky day. Maybe Finn is the one with the gambling issue. Let’s fucking hope so because I would love to give him a broken nose or arm. Joe never gives much detail about the person. It’s always about getting in, fucking them up, and getting out.

It’s almost one thirty in the morning, and my patience is wearing thin. When the fuck is this guy going to appear? Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the large glass doors opening.

*Here we go.*

Two people walk out, the man that Joe described, average build, dark hair, but there’s a woman with him. *FUCK!* I know that body, those legs.

*SHIT!*

It’s Billie. What the fuck? Why is she here so fucking late? My heart hammers in my chest as I weigh my options, quickly realising I don’t have any. I have to go through with this. Joe will fucking hunt me down and kill me if I don’t. Clenching my jaw, I walk up to them, my mouth going dry. Billie’s expression softens when she sees me.

*I’m so sorry.*

The guy next to her opens his mouth to speak, but before he can, I punch him straight in the throat, and Billie’s screams echo through the empty streets, her eyes plunging out of her head like she’s not believing what she is seeing. The guy falls

to the ground like a sack of flour, spluttering and coughing. I kick him in the stomach twice.

“What the fuck are you doing?! STOP!” she yells as she claws at me to stop.

Shrugging her off, I continue. Pulling him up by his hair, I throw him against the wall of the building.

“Pay up, or they’ll never stop.” My voice is calm, almost too fucking calm for what’s unfolding right now. I knee him in the stomach, blood flying from his mouth, and he drops to his knees. Billie rushes to his side and looks up at me. Her expression cuts me deeper than a fucking knife, and I know this is it. It’s done. I’ve lost her for good. There’s no coming back from this. I turn and walk away without a single word, regret pooling in my stomach like bile, slowly rising to the surface.



# Chapter Fourteen

## Billie

*Earlier that day*

“Today we launch new software for our clients...”  
Fiona’s voice fades into the distance as my thoughts consume me.

There are about fifty people in this meeting room, and every single person looks like they hate their job except for Fiona. I feel like she fucking lives for this. Anytime I send her an email after hours, I receive a reply almost instantaneously. It’s messed up how dedicated to her work she is. I mean, there’s dedication, then there’s complete *workaholic-ness*. The number of hours she puts into her job when you sit back and work it out against her pay, it most likely doesn’t work out in her favour.

Who am I to judge? I hate my fucking job. I would quit tomorrow, but the fear of the unknown and the fear of losing a stable income paralyses me.

I sigh when I check the time. It’s only half past ten in the morning. Should I message Nate? Should I call him? I messaged him last night to say I hope Noah’s game goes well, but I never received a response. An empty feeling settles in my chest. What if I never should have gotten out of his car or asked him to take me home? I should have just worked it out with him that night instead of letting my pride get the better of me.

I miss him.

I’ve been working with Finn a lot this week, trying to crunch through the finer details, and it’s been terribly awkward between us. We still haven’t spoken about what happened at Grace’s party, and it’s eating at me. Grabbing my phone from my pocket, I message Finn.

ME

I think we need to address what happened at the party.

FINN

I was hoping we would.

ME

I'll meet you at the firm after work.

The meeting ends, and everyone is back at their desks. I look at my inbox, and dread seeps into my bones.

Two hundred unread emails. How will I ever get through these emails by the end of the day *and* complete my task list?

Truth is, I probably can, but I really don't fucking want to.

I hate this job, I hate the people I work with, and I absolutely fucking hate this place.

It's like subjecting yourself to toxicity every single day for the next forty years. I groan at the thought that I probably won't be able to retire until I'm seventy. What a waste of a life, sitting behind a desk, taking orders.

"Don't you just love donut day?" Laura's smile grows as she watches the delivery guys bring boxes of donuts into the kitchen.

*Yeah, cause donuts make up for all the unpaid overtime we work and the minimal holidays we get.*

"It's the best." I give her a sarcastic smile, although I doubt she catches on as she grabs her mug and makes her way into the kitchen.

The rest of the day drags on as I slowly make my way through my emails and task list. I'm nowhere near finished as five o'clock creeps up. Grabbing my stuff, I make my way to my car and drive the short drive to Finn's office. Everyone besides Finn has left by the time I arrive. He's waiting for me as soon as I step through his office doors.

"Hey." He smiles and gestures for me to take a seat.

“Hi.” I place my things on the floor, the silence between us deafening.

After a long couple of minutes, he apologises.

“I want to apologise for my behaviour that night. I’ve thought about it, and it wasn’t right how I acted. I don’t want to use the excuse of being drunk, so I won’t.” I purse my lips at his apology. “But I won’t apologise for loving you. I won’t apologise for wanting to be the only man for you, the *best* man for you. I won’t apologise for wanting you all to myself, and I sure as hell will not apologise for trying to win you back.”

Sighing, I pick at the skin around my nails as nervousness jitters below the surface of my skin.

“You cannot tell me that you don’t still feel something for me because I feel it. I feel it in the way you look at me, the way you push me away,” He continues.

“But...” I start to speak, but he doesn’t let me finish.

“But you love Nathan.” He finishes my sentence for me as my eyes drift to his.

“I do, but...”

“But you also love me.” He reaches across his desk and places his hand on mine, sending a tingle from my fingers to my chest. My breath hitches as my eyes find his.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone.” Tears well up in my eyes at the impossible decision looming above my head.

“I can’t speak for Nathan, but I will always love you, B.” He brings my hand to his lips and lays a soft kiss on my knuckles. “You will always be a part of me, whether I am on this side of the earth or the other, it makes no difference. You will always have my heart and my soul.”

Standing, he walks over to me. Holding my hands, he helps me up out of the chair.

“You deserve someone who knows you, who can take care of you. I can be that for you and so much more.” His scent crashes into me like a tidal wave, our bodies mere inches away from each other.

His eyes are soft, caring, almost yearning as they hover over my lips. Slowly, I place my hands on his chest, feeling his hard muscles underneath his button-up shirt. My heart beats stupidly fast as he leans in, pressing his lips on mine, his arms wrapping around my waist to pull me in. I close my eyes, my arms wrapping around his neck, hands intertwining in his hair. Parting my mouth, his tongue slips inside and tastes just like I remember it.

Sweet, like the summer air you breathe, like home.

He kisses me hard, and I pull him in, not wanting this kiss to end. Our bodies flush with one another as we devour each other like it was the first time we've ever kissed. Our tongues tangle for dominance, fighting a war inside our mouths. Warmth spreads through my chest, sending a zing of fire to my cheeks. My mind feels foggy as I feel his mouth move against mine.

Breaking the kiss, his forehead falls onto mine.

"I've waited a decade to taste these lips once more," he whispers but as soon as we stop kissing, all I can think about is Nate. All I can see in front of me is him, and I know I need to speak to him to tell him everything and just be honest with him.

*Who the fuck am I?*

*What the fuck am I doing?*

My mind is like a million puzzle pieces scattered about on the floor. I'm probably the most confused I have ever been. I feel the knot in my stomach tighten as I think about how much I need to talk to Nate, especially about what just happened. Grabbing my phone, I dial his number, but it goes straight to voicemail. I still have this sinking feeling that he's avoiding me.

## NATE

There's a slight knock that filters through the gym, and when I look up to my surprise, I see Billie standing there waiting for me to open the door. I take a deep breath as I reach the door and pull it open for her. She enters, her perfume

wrapping around me like a warm summer breeze. I inhale her scent, savouring it, saving it in my memories.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. Her hair falls effortlessly down her chest, reaching the top of her hips.

“You haven’t been answering my calls, so I thought I’d check if you were still alive.” She looks around and nods. “Nice to know you’re not dead. Now is there any reason you’ve been ignoring me?”

My mouth goes dry as she crosses her arms.

“Look Billie, maybe we shou—”

“What? Stop seeing each other?” she interjects, her voice sharp.

I look at her, unable to say the words that I should say. I should tell her I want to be with her, lift her off the floor by her legs, press her against the wall and show her how much she means to me, but this thing she has going on with Finn. I can’t be the one to get in the way. I can’t stop thinking about what the future would look like for us, me constantly making sure she’s safe from Joe or constantly being on the run.

No. I don’t want that for her

“I didn’t say that... it’s just...” I sigh, running a hand through my hair, thinking of how I’m still not being completely honest with her, *or myself*.

She looks to the floor

“I kissed Finn,” she blurts out as she looks at me, and her eyes fill with tears.

My fears are confirmed. Something inside me tears, rips, shreds into tiny little pieces as I stand there and look at the only woman I want to spend my life with. My jaw clenches at the image in my head of her and Finn. Looking away, I harness all my willpower into keeping myself calm, reminding myself that what I have with Billie now could never compare to something they shared so many years ago... before me.

“When?” I ask.



“Tonight.” She wipes a stray tear from her cheek with the back of her hand.

*Fuck!*

*I could kill him.*

*I really think I could kill him.*

I take a deep breath, turning, I slam my fist into the plaster wall, my fist flying through it, hitting the timber behind. I ignore the shooting, sharp pain in my knuckles as I turn to face Billie again. Her mascara is running down her face now as she wraps her arms around herself.

“I think you should leave.” I don’t dare look at her, because if I do, it’ll make me question my decision, and right now, I need to believe I’m making the right one.

“Nate.” She reaches out to me.

“Billie, I need you to leave. Right now.” My voice is firm, and I am pointing at the door.

She sobs as she whispers, “I’m sorry.” She turns and walks out the door, leaving me to pick up the pieces of my shattered heart.



## **BILLIE**

“Is something wrong?” Felix questions as he looks back at me with a whiteboard marker in his hand. It’s late into the evening, and we have been working on this page of the website for hours. I’m tired, and I want to go to sleep.

“Everything’s fine. Do you think maybe we could wrap this up? It’s been a while since we’ve been working, and it’s almost one thirty in the morning. We can pick this up on Monday.” I gather my things and place them inside my bag.

Felix yawns and nods.

“Probably for the best, I’m wrecked. I’ll walk you to your car.”

We exit the elevator on the ground floor and walk out the large front doors. Stopping, I feel around my pockets because I just remembered I may have left my phone in the office upstairs. I check inside my bag and sigh in relief when I see it.

“All good?” Felix questions.

“Yeah, I thought I left my phone upstairs, but it’s in my bag.” I smile. I see a familiar figure emerge from the shadows, and my smile grows slightly bigger when I realise it’s Nate.

His face is set in stone as he approaches, and my smile is ripped off my face in almost an instant as his fist meets Felix’s throat. Horror, shock, and fear descend on me like a waterfall crashing into a river. My screams tear through the dark night as he beats this man senseless.

“What the fuck are you doing!? STOP!”

I try to pry him off Felix, but it’s no use. He’s three times my size. He shrugs me off like I’m an annoying fly on his shoulder. Picking up Felix by his hair, he slams him into the wall and says something to him I can’t make out. From the blood rushing through my ears, I can only hear my thoughts. I don’t understand what’s happening. Nate catapults his knee into Felix’s ribs as blood flies out of his mouth. Rushing to Felix’s side, I look up at Nate. I want to scream, I want to fight, but I stay here, like an immovable object, completely immobilised.

Why would he do this? Felix would never hurt a fly.

What the fuck is going on?

By the time I manage to dislodge the knot in my throat, Nate is walking away, back towards the shadows he emerged from.

“STOP!” I yell as I pick myself up and run after him, turning the corner of the block. I spot Nate turn around, a sombre look on his face. Both my fists meet his chest, but he doesn’t budge.

“What did you just do!?” I yell as his jaw clenches, looking away from me. “What the fuck is wrong with you!?” My voice breaks. “I was *so* wrong about you.”

“Yes. You were.” He finally speaks, his voice calm. How can he be this calm after he beat the shit out of Felix? I feel like I’ve been betrayed, robbed of the wonderful moments we spent together. He is not the man I believed him to be. He sighs as he turns to walk away.

“Don’t walk away from me!” Hot tears sting at the back of my eyes, an uneasy feeling settling into the pit of my stomach.

“Fine!” He turns to face me, visibly upset, the veins in his throat popping out as he yells. “I had to do it because it’s what I fucking do!”

Confusion laced with hurt filters through my blood that’s already overflowing with adrenaline. “What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that I lied to you, okay? I’m not a full-time instructor at the gym. I work for extremely dangerous people. I’m not who you think I am.” He points in Felix’s direction.

“That guy on the street clutching his organs has a massive gambling debt, and the person wanting that money back sent me to do his bidding.” He runs a hand over his stubble, clearly frustrated with this conversation or himself. I can’t be sure which one. “It means... that I’m not good for you. I will never be good for you, B. I’ve been in the underworld since I was a teenager, and guess what? You can’t leave this world without a bullet in your chest, so this is me, baby... claimed by the darkness and forever tainted by it.”

“I—”

He cuts me off before I can speak. “I love you, Billie. That’s why I have to be fair to you. I can’t be selfish with you, and I have been up until now, but that ends.”

“What? You can’t just decide *for* me!” A lump forms in my throat. “You can’t just quit...” My breathing is erratic. “... I...I thought...” I stumble over my words, my brain working overtime to catch up to everything he has said.

*He loves me.*

“I’m moving to the States with Noah,” he blurts out.

Shock washes over me as tears run down my cheeks. I bite my lip to stop them, but they keep coming. A beat passes before either of us speaks again. “So that’s it then?”

“Noah got a full scholarship with Stanford University in California.” He sighs as his hand twitches as if he was about to reach out to me.

“When?” I manage to say through the cracking in my chest.

“Tomorrow.” The crack splits my entire chest in two, making it hard to breathe, the tears making it hard to see.

“I can’t stay here and be the man you need me to be. My past will not allow it, and I could never forgive myself if something happened to you because of it.” He reaches out, placing a hand on the side of my face, his thumb wiping away my tears.

“I’m so sorry, baby.” He places his lips on mine, kissing me tenderly.

“I wish things were different. I wish *I* were different,” he whispers, and with that last kiss, I watch as he walks away into the night, taking a piece of me with him. My body feels numb as I’m immobilised once again.

My knees feel weak. I feel like I might throw up. I place a hand on the brick wall of the building beside me to steady myself. After I’ve called the ambulance and watched Felix being taken to hospital, I make my way home feeling completely numb. I stand in the shower and let the heat of the water wash away the night that clings to me like a disease.

I guess this was inevitable, right?

Nate leaving me was bound to happen whether it happened now or sometime in the future. I fight back tears as I think about the first time we kissed. I know it hadn’t been long that we had been seeing each other, but it felt like years. He made it feel like I could be whoever I needed to be, do whatever I wanted to do, and now that’s gone.

He’s gone.

How can you lose a part of yourself when that person hadn't even been a chapter in your life?

I wrap my arms around myself to stop from falling apart as the water washes away my tears. I feel betrayed, lied to, but I know why he did it. I know it was for Noah... there cannot be another reason why he would sacrifice this much of his life, and for that, I can't fault him.



# Chapter Fifteen

## Billie

*One Month Later.*

Piece by piece, I collected the broken shards of my heart and managed to get on with my life. Nate was gone. There was nothing I could do about it. It was time to move on. There had been no contact between us for the month since he left, but I did receive a heartfelt email from Noah telling me he was grateful to me and owed me for helping him with his career. I had sent him a congratulatory box of donuts, so he knows I still care for him like a brother. I'm happy he followed his dreams; he deserves every happiness.

Grace's laughter seeps through from the other room as I lay on the couch, waiting for Finn to return from work. Michael appears in the doorway and rushes into the kitchen with a robe, grabs a glass of water, and rushes back to the other room.

I'm glad they sorted things out. I've never seen Grace happier than when she's with Michael.

Since Nate left, I've spent all my time working in the office or working with Finn on his father's request. I promised Finn I would get it completed within a couple of weeks, and that's what we did. Together we worked so many late nights I began to lose count, but it's almost finished. We're near the end. I explained to Finn what happened that night, and he was the most supportive he's ever been, giving me space or comfort when I need it. I hear the front door open as Finn enters, removing his blazer and dropping his briefcase to the floor.

"Long day?" I shut the TV off and sit up.

"Too long." He smiles. "But I guess we get to binge the last season of Peaky Blinders tonight, so I feel better about it already." He kisses me on the cheek, his stubble tickling me.

“I need to shower first.” He removes his shirt, and I see a few scars in the shape of little circles on his back.

“I’ll get the popcorn.” I head to the kitchen and shove a bag of popcorn into the microwave. Once it’s done, I pour it all into a big bowl and take a seat on the lounge, preparing the next episode of the show. After a few minutes, Finn appears in the doorway in nothing but sweats. My palms become clammy at the sight of his bare chest. He sits next to me and places an arm around me. “Press play. I’m dying to know what happens to Tommy Shelby.” We’re engrossed in a few episodes as we polish off the popcorn together.

“Want to stay over, or should I drive you back home?” My car is in for repair because I got into a little accident on my way to work the other day.

“I should go home. I have so much work to finish tomorrow for Fiona.” Gathering my things, I clutch my laptop in my arms as Finn throws on a shirt. He starts the engine of his Mercedes as I practically pretzel myself just to get into the car.

“I’ve never understood why they make these cars so stupidly low,” I grumble as I click on my seat belt. Finn chuckles as he drives down the driveway and out of the estate.

“So, I have a question.” He stares out onto the road, debating if he should ask me.

“Go for it.”

“My father wants me to return to France for a couple of months after the rebranding project is complete.” He purses his lips waiting for my response. I don’t know what to say, so I don’t say anything. “Will you come with me?”

Laughing, I look out the window, the moon’s luminosity shining into the dark sky.

“Don’t be absurd.”

“Why is it absurd?” he asks, his piercing blue eyes boring into mine.



“Because I have my life here. I have a job. I can’t just leave.” It’s the truth. I can’t leave on a whim. I’ll have to quit, then how will I have any income to survive off?

As if reading my thoughts, he smiles.

“Don’t worry about money. I will support you.”

“No, that’s the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard.” I laugh.

“You don’t have to answer now. Just think about it.” His face is solemn as he stares at the road.

I stay quiet, thinking about his offer. Sighing, I trace my fingers on my thigh absent-mindedly. I feel Finn’s hand on top of mine, and warmth spreads through me.

“Are you okay, B?” Worry laces his voice. “I know you had feelings for Nate, and him leaving abruptly made you quite upset, but are you okay?”

I nod, pursing my lips. “I’ll be okay.” I give his hand a little squeeze as a thank you. He’s as sweet as I remember. Always looking out for me, caring for me no matter what. I guess he’s not convinced by my answer because he keeps his hand on mine as his jaw clenches.

“I hate seeing you upset, and to think I caused you pain when I cut you off causes my chest to tighten like it might fucking implode. I’m so sorry.”

I bite the inside of my bottom lip unsure of what to say.

“There’s no sense in living in the past anymore. Let’s put it behind us and move on.” I force a smile and look over at Finn. His strong jawline prominent under the shine of the moon floating in through the car windows. I closed myself off to any possibility of being with Finn for so many years that it feels foreign to even let the thought enter my mind, but it does, and when it does, it makes me feel hopeful that maybe there is a chance we can still find happiness together.

Maybe there is a chance we can create new memories together and learn about who we are now. The rest of the car ride home is silent, his hand never leaving mine for a minute.

Once Finn drops me off, I crawl into bed and fall asleep feeling hopeful for the first time in weeks that things might pick up and change for the better.

*Billie - Aged 6*

*“Ninety-nine, one hundred!” I tiptoe quietly through the house, attempting not to make a sound in case they can hear me coming. I check all the rooms in the house, but Grace and Finn aren’t hiding in them. I look out the huge windows into the backyard and see our parents having tea and laughing. Sneaking into the kitchen, I start opening the cupboards one by one. The last cupboard door looks like it’s ajar. Swinging it open, I see Finn hiding with his hands over his face.*

*“I found you!” I giggle. “You’re next!”*

*Finn smiles. He loves being the seeker.*

*“Where’s Grace?”*

*“I don’t know. I found you first.” Finn slips his hand in mine and pulls me towards the garage.*

*“Shh, she loves to hide in here.”*

*Opening the door quietly, we enter, tiptoeing inside.*

*I look around the garage and see Mr Mackenzie’s sports car in the middle and lots of boxes on one side against the wall. On the side of the boxes, I see shoes sticking out. Excitedly I tap Finn on his shoulder and point over to the shoes. His grin widens as we sneak over to where Grace is hiding behind the boxes.*

*“BOO!” we both yell as she screams and runs inside the house. Finn and I laugh hysterically seeing the look on Grace’s face when we scared her.*

*Mr Mackenzie and my father are at the garage door, looking cross with us. “How many times have we said no scaring Gracie?” Mr Mackenzie said.*

*I looked at Finn who was still grinning, even when he was in trouble. He didn’t really let that spoil his fun, and I loved that about him.*

*He made life fun, exciting. Every day was a new adventure with Finn by my side.*

*“Sorry, Dad!” Finn says as he grabs my hand, and we rush past our fathers and into the backyard. We were both playing with Grace in the sandpit, building sandcastles when Grace walks over to our mothers. Finn turns to me. “Billie, will you promise me something?”*

*I smile. “Sure!”*

*“Promise we will be friends forever?” he asks.*

*“I promise,” I say, with not a doubt in my mind.*

*“Cross your heart?” he asks.*

*“Cross my soul, Finn.”*

### *One Month Later*

Things at work have taken a turn for the worse. Fiona is constantly on my back about everything, and I can hardly take it anymore.

I left work early yesterday simply because I couldn't take much more of that place. It makes me want to tear my hair out just being in the vicinity of the office. I've started researching what I might need to do if I want to pursue being self-employed, but when I get too deep into the research, it scares me, and I chicken out.

Finn, Grace, and I have spent almost every day together the last couple of months just like old times. We've stayed at the cabin twice and been to the beach many times together. I missed spending time with my friends so much. It has felt like a memory from our childhood but... different.

Finn and I have plans tonight to see a band in concert, although he won't tell me who, and I somewhat feel like a teenager again.

Getting ready, I put on my best all-black outfit and sigh at my reflection. I'm wearing a skirt with a high split up the side of my thigh, a black cropped tank, and black military boots.

I consider changing into something more age appropriate but decide against it.

What's "age appropriate" anyway?

Just because I'm in my late twenties, why does that have to dictate what I wear? I shrug and put on the finishing touches of my makeup and head outside to wait for Finn to pick me up. Things have been different between us since that kiss.

I feel it when he's near. I feel my heart beat slightly faster than normal, my hands become sweaty, and my mouth becomes dry.

He makes me nervous, just like when we were sixteen. I watch as a white Mercedes pulls into my street, coming to a stop at the curb in front of me. The passenger window winds down revealing Finn's gorgeous face. His eyes scan from my exposed thighs all the way up to my eyes as he smirks. Opening the passenger door, I take a seat and click my seatbelt in.

"Are we going to a concert, or would you rather sit here and ogle me?" Sarcasm coats every one of my words.

He chuckles as he pulls away from the curb. "I could watch you forever."

I roll my eyes in exaggeration as I try to keep my smile at bay. "So how is Mr. Mackenzie?" I change the subject.

"You know you can just call him Rob." His first name is Robert, but I have been calling him Mr. Mackenzie all my life. It feels weird to call him Rob now. "He's very happy with your work, B. I was going to tell you this after the concert, but he wants to offer you a full-time job with us at the firm." Mr. Mackenzie has always been sweet, taking care of me and Riley, but I can't accept the offer. My pride will not allow it.

"That's sweet of him. I adore him, truly, but I can't accept it." I shake my head.

"Why not?" he asks.

"I would feel like I'm taking advantage or something. It's fine honestly. I've considered going out on my own anyway," I

confess.

“Really?” He raises his eyebrows. “You should. You have the talent.”

“Every time I explore the idea, I basically slam my laptop shut and curl up into a ball. The amount of work involved in creating a business... it gives me a headache just thinking about it.” I rake my fingers through my hair.

“You wouldn’t be doing it alone. I can help you,” he offers.

I shake my head.

“It’s probably best if I keep working where I am. It’s a steady income. A lot of people would give anything to be in my position.”

Finn sighs. “I don’t agree with your thinking on this. If you are not happy where you are, you should leave and find something that makes you happy. Life’s too short to work somewhere you despise.” His words ring true, but the paralysing fear will never allow me to make such a drastic change in my life.

“Maybe someday,” I say.

Once we arrive at the stadium, we park in one of the large parking lots and make our way to the entrance. Reaching the front of the line, the security guard scans our tickets and lets us through. Our tickets are general admission so we’re in the standing zone, and there are already so many people crowding the front of the stage, singing along to the opening band’s song.

“So, are you going to tell me who is headlining?” I ask. Finn smiles with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Just be patient.” He throws his arm around me as we walk closer to the stage.

After a few songs, the opening band leaves the stage as the sun sets, creating an orange hue in the sky. The whole stadium is now full. A few people in the crowd start chanting something, but it’s hard to make out as it’s not loud enough. Then almost everyone joins in, and I cannot believe my ears.

They're chanting for Slipknot. My eyes go wide as I look at Finn, a huge grin plastered on his face.

"*Slipknot?!?*" I yell over the crowd.

He nods so fast I laugh at his excitement. It was always our dream to watch Slipknot live together. Grace never liked our type of music. She's more of a Swift fan than a Slipknot one, not that there's anything wrong with that, but like I said, we like different things.

I throw my arms around him as he takes me in a bear hug.

"This is fucking amazing!" I'm practically vibrating with excitement. I kiss Finn on the cheek and look to the stage, then to the crowd filling the entire stadium, chanting our favourite band's name. The sound of thousands of people's voices booms through my chest.

I feel Finn's hand in mine as he intertwines his fingers with mine.

Electricity buzzes from my fingers through to my toes when I see the lead singer take the stage as the crowd roars.

"How the fuck you all doing tonight!?" Corey Taylor yells into the mic, which earns him another roar from the crowd. Holy fuck, is this happening right now?

Am I truly at a Slipknot concert?

I swallow as I take in the atmosphere around me. So many metalheads covered with tattoos surround us as the band plays their first song of the night.

Some may be afraid to be where we are right now, but to me, this is home.

These are my people. Finn and I sing along to every song, and I literally had to stop him from jumping into the mosh pit because I was too scared for his safety. I close my eyes and tilt my head back, letting the music in, feeling every note, beat, and drum in my soul.

My eyes almost pop out of my head when I hear the intro to "Snuff." I listened to this song almost every day when Finn left. It reminded me of him, and I didn't want to let him go. I

refused to at the start. I feel my heartbeat thump against my chest at the reminder of the many days I spent in bed crying, blasting this song in my headphones. Looking at Finn, my vision blurs as tears well up inside my eyes. Sensing my eyes on him, he turns to me, concern etched in his face. Leaning in, his hot breath tickles my neck.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him into me. He slides his arms around my waist as he hugs me back. Pulling away slightly, our arms still wrapped around each other, I run my fingers through his short hair.

“I listened to this song almost every day when you left,” I confess.

His brows furrow as his eyes close for just a moment.

“I missed you so much.”

A part of my heart cracks even further when I think about half my heart belonging to Nate and the other half to Finn. It kills me that Finn knows this, and yet it still doesn't change a thing for him.

Sighing, he places his forehead on mine.

“You have no idea how many times I thought of buying a plane ticket and coming here, knocking on your door, taking you in my arms, and never letting you go again.”

His words send a tear rolling down my cheek. He wipes it away with his thumb, placing his hand on my cheek.

“It physically hurt me to be away from you. I couldn't bear the thought of you being oceans away from me. I hated that I hurt you, and I hated everything about my life for so long because I wasn't with you. You were my other half, my better half. Without you, I felt like I lost half of me, Billie.”

Sobs rack my chest as I let go of all the pain.

“I have loved you as long as I can remember. You were all that I dreamed, all that I wanted. You knew everything about me, sometimes even better than I knew myself. I felt so alone when you were gone. I felt betrayed by the person who I

thought would never betray me.” Finn squeezes his eyes shut as if my words cause him physical pain.

“Then I met Nate, and things started progressing so much quicker than I ever anticipated. I never thought I could open myself up to someone again, but I did.”

“I’m glad you did. Even though it fucking burned me seeing you two together, I’m happy he brought you out of your shell and showed you how to love again. I will forever owe him that, for fixing what I broke,” he admits.

“I know you still love him, and that probably won’t change for a while, if ever. He made you feel alive, and I get that, but I will not lose another moment of us being together because of someone else. I don’t care that you love him because you also love me, and I know the love you have for me has never faded from your heart.” His words cut me deep, but they also plant flowers in the grooves of my broken heart.

“Sometimes people are only meant to be in our lives for a season, but me and you were never meant to be apart. I’m here now, and I promise I’ll never leave you again. You’ll never have to be alone again.”

He places his lips softly on mine. Threading his fingers through my hair, he deepens the kiss as his tongue explores my mouth. His hand grips the hair at the base of my neck as he pulls me closer into him, our bodies pressed up against each other. Breaking the kiss, he looks deep into my eyes as my breath shakes.

“Cross my soul.”

His last words send a flutter of hope into my chest, and each time he kisses me, holds me, it makes me feel less broken.





# Chapter Sixteen

## Billie

Smiling to myself, the ice in my glass clinking as I mix my iced coffee, I think about the concert last week. I can't believe I got to see Slipknot live with my best friend, my first love. All these years later, and he still knows me better than I know myself. I watch as Finn smiles at me from across the island bench. He stayed over last night after work. We had some dinner and some wine, watched too much TV, and eventually ended up falling asleep in each other's arms on the couch.

"What are you thinking about?" He sips his coffee as he studies me as "Sugar" by Sleep Token filters through my TV on Spotify.

My smile grows wider. "Corey Taylor."

He chuckles.

"Ah, right." He nods. "Of course."



I laugh. "I'm thinking about the concert." Smiling, I bring the straw to my lips. "I had so much fun."

"Still the Billie I remember." He walks around the island bench and leans in for a kiss. Hovering close to my lips, he whispers, "Still a hardcore metalhead." He mocks as his lips softly cover mine as I smile.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I stand as he presses my hips into the island bench. I thread my fingers through his hair and pull him closer to me, our bodies flush with one another. His mouth crashes into mine, sending a jolt of electricity through to my core. I pant through the kisses as our hands explore each other's bodies like it was the first time we had ever kissed. His hand travels up my oversized shirt, landing on my naked skin, the warmth of his hand sending

shivers down my spine. Instinctively I remove his white T-shirt, revealing his perfectly untouched skin. My hands roam his hard chest, down to his abs, and down further to the hem of his sweats. Finn freezes and pulls slightly away from me, resting his forehead on mine.

“Are you sure?” he whispers. “You said you wanted to go slow.” I know what I said, but with the way I’m feeling now, I don’t care. I need him. I’ve been waiting for this moment for so long, practically half my life. I can’t wait any longer.

I bite my lip as I nod against his forehead. “I’m sure.”

He lets out a shaky breath as he lifts my shirt above my head, revealing my bare breasts. He bites his lip as he squeezes his eyes shut.

“Fuck, Billie.” Opening his eyes again, they meet mine.

“I don’t have the words to express how stunning you are.”

His lips fall to mine as my hand slowly slips inside his pants. He groans as I find my way down and begin to stroke my palm over his already hard cock.

I press my thighs together as I feel him harden even more underneath my touch, imagining what it would feel like with him inside me. He grabs me by the back of my head, crushing his lips onto mine.

His hand travels down into my underwear as he cups my pussy. I let out a moan as his lips travel down to the side of my neck, his tongue swirls as he sucks. I begin to feel dizzy with the heat radiating off our skin. I brace myself on the island bench as he bends down and slips my underwear off.

He raises one of my legs so my foot is resting on the chair, and within seconds his mouth is on my pussy, like he’s been starved for me. His tongue moves hungrily over my clit, flicking, licking, and sucking. My eyes roll back as he looks up at me from between my legs, a devilish look swimming in his beautiful blue eyes. He devours me like he hasn’t had a meal in weeks, flattening his tongue over me in slow motion whilst his hands grab my thighs. I moan from sheer pleasure, just watching him between my legs is enough to send shivers

down my spine. In one swift move, he removes the rest of his clothes, standing completely naked in front of me.

My breath hitches at the sight of him.

He looks just like I remember and yet so different at the same time. His chest is a lot more defined than when we were teenagers, his face hardened by the years. My eyes cascade to his cock, thick and long jutting out from his pelvis.

My mouth goes dry at the thought of him inside my mouth, but before I can move, his body presses up against me as he lifts me up by my thighs. My pussy throbs with need as I wrap my arms and legs around him, kissing him fervently.

He walks me into my bedroom and places me gently on the bed, his body hovering over mine. I lick my lips in anticipation as he reaches between us, aligning himself at my entrance and slowly pushes inside me.

I savour every moment, every inch that he gets deeper and deeper. Committing this very moment to my memories. He groans as he buries himself deep within me, resting his head on my collarbone. Our hearts beat in tandem, his hot breath tickling my neck as he whispers.

“I love you, B.” He begins to move, creating a steady rhythm as I thread my fingers through his soft hair. A tear rolls down the side of my face as he kisses me. Our worlds collide once again after the many years of being on separate parts of the earth, and it feels nothing short of phenomenal. It feels right, like this is exactly where I am supposed to be at this point in time. Our bodies move with each other as his lips plant passionate kisses from my jaw to my neck. I place one hand on his chest, feeling the thump beneath his chest matches my own. The pressure continues to rise within me as he hits the sweet spot between my legs over and over again. I bite my lip to stifle a moan when his mouth closes over my nipple. We both let go as we come undone, shattering together. He slumps on top of me, crushing me beautifully with his weight.

“I never stopped loving you.” I sigh into his strong neck. “I tried. I tried so hard... but I couldn’t.” He lifts his head, his familiar ocean-blue eyes burning a tunnel through to my soul.

“You’re it for me,” I admit.



I never realised how much of a large void had grown inside me with Finn’s absence until he returned. I swept my feelings and everything in between under the rug until the rug was no longer inconspicuous. I always knew when we were just kids that Finn was one of the biggest lights in my life, and now I know that light shines brighter than I would have ever imagined.

The sun shines down on the gorgeous backyard at the Mackenzie estate, illuminating almost every blade of grass. I watch a shirtless Finn watering the grass as I stare shamelessly out from the second-story balcony. It’s been a couple of weeks since we slept together for the first time, and ever since then, we can’t seem to keep our hands off of each other.

Finn looks up to the balcony and winks when he catches me staring. I give him a small smile as I relive the past few weeks filled with sex, laughter, and talks of hopes and dreams. I’m yanked from my blissful thoughts as Grace plunges through the door, almost stumbling over her own feet.

“Oh my god, you’re not ready yet?!” Her eyes are bigger than saucers as she stares at me, still dressed in my pjs. I open my mouth to speak, but she doesn’t give me the chance.

“The makeup lady said she’s going to be late, then the hairdresser cancelled at the last minute, and now my best friend is not even dressed for my engagement party!” Her voice is laced with anxiety as she paces the room.

I walk over to her and gently pull her down to the small couch in the room.

“Breathe...” I inhale and motion for her to do the same. Then we both exhale as I push her hair from her face.

“Everything is going to be okay.” I smile.

“I’ve already called the makeup artist. She is ten minutes away, and as for the hairdresser, she just messaged me saying

she will be here in half an hour.” Her body visibly relaxes as she slumps back into the couch.

“I don’t know if I can do this.” Her eyes squeeze shut as her hands raise to cover her face.

I gently peel her hands from her face and place them on my lap in mine.

“You can, and you will. You love Michael.”

She sighs. “I do. I love him so much.” She sits up. “But what if I fuck it up again?”

“You won’t.” I can sense her nerves getting the better of her. Giving her a big hug, I reassure her that she owes it to herself to follow her heart, and if her heart says Michael, then she should listen.

“You won’t end up like your parents,” I reassure her. “You are not your mother, and Michael is nothing like your father.”

She shakes her head and stands. “You’re right. I deserve to be happy.” She turns to me and gives me the biggest smile. “And so do you. Now hurry up and get ready, preferably *before* the guests arrive.”

I throw a pillow at her retreating body as she just makes it out the door laughing.

The rest of the morning is slow. Patty, Grace, and I get ready in the upstairs sitting area as Rob, Riley, and Finn arrange the setup for the party outside on the lawn. Patricia Mackenzie, Grace’s mother, is the most elegant person you will ever meet. She just exudes elegance and poise no matter where she is or what she is doing. Her long blonde hair, so similar to Grace’s, falls just above her hips as she sits typing something on her phone while the makeup artist applies her foundation, and I can’t help but admire her dedication to her job.

“Billie, darling, we’re so thrilled about you and Finn.”

She looks up from her phone to me. I feel myself blushing as heat burns my cheeks.

“I don’t know what happened between you two, but I’m glad you both worked it out.” She smiles a genuine smile.

“Yeah, me, too.” Grace raises her champagne glass to me, and I raise mine back at her with a smile.

“Thank you. It was silly, but we worked through it,” I admit.

After our makeup is complete, we each have our hair done, and I slip on my black mid-length dress in my room. Well, Finn’s room. A large king-size bed sits in the middle of the room with a small couch where the floor-to-ceiling windows are. I hear the water running in the en suite bathroom. Finn is probably taking a shower just before the party. I decide to wait for him, taking a seat on the couch.

I place my laptop on my knees and open up my emails. I find myself sifting through hundreds of emails from clients which starts to make me feel dizzy. I don’t know why I do that to myself. It’s a Sunday, and yet I’m looking at emails, making myself anxious before Monday even comes.

I shut my laptop with a loud thud just as the bathroom door opens, and Finn steps out in a towel wrapped around his hips. His masculine body has me clenching my thighs, thinking about the things he has done to me.

“I’ve been catching you staring at me a lot lately.” His voice interrupts my dirty thoughts as the corner of his lips lifts in a smirk.

I shrug, trying to play it cool. “I mean, you’re no Chris Hemsworth...”

He acts hurt, mockingly placing a hand on his chest.

“But you’re nice to look at.”

He laughs as he removes his towel, my breath immediately grinds to a halt. Damn, he is so fine. He may not be Chris Hemsworth, but he sure as hell can get me to clench my thighs together in an attempt to alleviate the throbbing between my legs.

“Maybe we should have a quickie before we join the guests.” He chuckles and waggles his eyebrows at me as he crowds my space, his freshly showered skin still slick with water.

Placing my hand on his chest, I giggle. Only he can bring out a giggle in me. “I’ll ruin my makeup.”

He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me in, his erection now pushing into my stomach.

“I love when your makeup runs down your face, the only thing missing from that picture is my dick in your mouth.” His words send a jolt of electricity straight to my core.

We’re interrupted by Grace’s loud knocks on the door.

“You guys better not be fucking! The guests are already here. I expect you both downstairs in less than five minutes. You hear me, Finn!?”

Finn’s eyes never leave mine as he traces a finger from my lips down to the middle of my breasts. Breaking our contact before things get too heated, I yell out to Grace.

“We’ll be down in a couple minutes!”

Making our way outside to the yard, my mouth falls open at the sight in front of me. There’s a large marquee in the middle of the yard, surrounded by various-sized lanterns. Fairy lights dance in the trees surrounding the marquee, tables scattered about the lawn, filled with guests. Music filters through the speakers from the stage on our left, the band singing a mellow tune. Finn’s hand slides into mine, his fingers lacing with mine.

“This is so beautiful,” I say, mostly to myself.

He leans into my ear.

“Ours will be better someday.” His smile is contagious.

We walk over to where Riley, Grace, and her parents stand. Grace looks absolutely stunning in her pink lace dress, showcasing her perfect hourglass figure. Riley smiles as his eyes land on our hands locked together in a tight hold.



“You look great, Billie,” Riley says.

“Thanks, Riles.” I give him a small smile as Finn lifts our hands and kisses the back of my hand.

Michael comes up behind Grace and lands a small kiss on her cheek. She blushes at the sight of him, and I can’t help but smile at them. They are so head over heels in love with each other, it is obvious to anyone who sees them together. The way they look at each other, the way he drinks her in like she’s the one who determines if he breathes or not.

“I don’t think I’ve had the chance to thank you yet, Billie,” Mr. Mackenzie says as he hands me a glass of champagne.

He’s an exact copy of Finn, only years older, with a beard.

“I’m confident with your assistance we have the best marketing assets for the new direction our company is taking.” I feel a small sense of pride in my chest. Rob has always been like a second father to me, and to hear him say that means so much to me.

“No, thank you, Mr. Mackenzie. It allowed me to work things out with Finn, and I also gained a lot of insight into what it would be like if I were to start a freelance marketing business.” I take a sip of my drink, the bubbles coating my throat.

“That’s great. Let us know if you need anything to get started. I’ll be happy to help you in any way I can.” He smiles as he looks from me to Finn. “I knew you would both find your way to one another again.” For a moment, I think I see his eyes water, but before I can be sure, he turns to Riley to ask about his business ventures.

The majority of the night is filled with lots of food, drinking, and dancing. As the party goes on, a few of the guests begin to leave, saying their congratulations to the couple and departing.

I’m seated on a stone bench under my favourite tree since we were little, sipping my drink as I see Riley approach me. Finn had gone to get us more drinks. I wonder to myself for a

moment how he's doing. I haven't really spoken to him much since the whole Nate thing.

"Hey." He takes a seat beside me, watching everyone dancing on the makeshift dance floor under the marquee.

I lean into him, placing my head on his shoulder. "Hey."

He sighs. "You seem happy."

"I think I am." I smile to myself. Maybe I really am, but I can't help but wonder about Nate now that he crossed my mind. "Have you heard from Nate?" I sit up and look at him, waiting for an answer. He nods in confirmation, unsure if he should explain. "It's okay, you can tell me."

"He left his life behind here to set up his brother's life in the US." He looks at me. "He's doing well for himself now, a completely changed man. Got a job, a *legal* job." My heart skips a beat thinking about Nate. I'm happy he's doing well and that Noah is following his basketball dreams. I nod and place my head back on his shoulder. "He asks about you." My heart constricts and twists inside my chest. "He tells me how you helped him become the man he's always wanted to be. Honest and trustworthy." A tear rolls down my face at that image in my mind.

"I'm happy I could do that for him," I say as I wipe the stray tear from my cheek. "Anyway, how are you doing? I feel like we haven't spoken in a while."

He takes a sip of his beer. "Pretty good. I met someone, actually."

I sit up again to look at him in complete shock. "What?!" I give him a little slap on the shoulder. "And I'm just hearing about this now?"

"I wanted to make sure she was the real deal before I said anything." He chuckles.

"Well, I demand to meet her, and soon!" I say.

He smiles as he nods at my request. "Are you happy, Billie? With Finn?"

“I love him.” I sigh. “I’ve loved him since we were little,” I confess, although I’m pretty sure my brother already knows the feelings I’ve harboured for Finn for years.

“I just don’t want you to get hurt again.” He puts his arm around me and pulls me in for a side hug. “You’re my only sister, and I feel protective of you since Dad died.”

I squeeze his arm to reassure him. “I’ll be okay, Riles. Finn loves me.”

We stay there in that exact spot until Finn returns with our drinks. They both share a laugh about something that happened in sports last night, and I smile, watching my brother and my first love exchange thoughts about their favourite teams.

I hope it’ll be like this forever, all of us making memories to look back on when we are all old and grey.



# Chapter Seventeen

## Nathan

*Present Day*

**M**y muscles flex as I lift the large beam over my head with the help of a couple of guys working on site. I was meant to take a day off today, but I decided to go anyway because there's nothing else to do at home besides eat, and ever since I moved to the States, that's all we seem to be doing. The food portions here are insanely larger than back in Australia. I couldn't believe my eyes when we ordered a meal on our first night here.

I managed to purchase a house close to Stanford University, so Noah didn't have to spend money for accommodations on campus. Plus, I put the house in his name because all I have wanted was for Noah to be set up in life, so now I can finally let go a little.

He's here, in the States, with a full scholarship at Stanford. I ended up having to tell him how I got him here and what I had been doing back in Melbourne to earn as much as I did, and to say he didn't take it well was an understatement. He couldn't accept the sacrifice I made for him, and he made me promise I would focus on my own life now, do things that make me happy, but the truth is, I have no idea what makes me happy anymore. I don't think I ever knew, even back in Melbourne. I was always focused on making enough money so we would be comfortable and that one day I could put Noah through college in the States so he could follow his dream of being part of the NBA.

"We'll break in ten!" Jack calls from the top of the frame.

Carpentry is quite easy. I picked it up quite quickly after starting with Jack. I do miss MMA, but to be perfectly honest, I feel better about myself now more than ever in my life. I'm earning a living through honest means, and no one is getting hurt because of me. It's easier to sleep at night, and my hands

remain bruise-free. Jack walks over to me and hands me a bottle of water.

“The wife is having a couple of friends over tonight. You’re more than welcome to join us for dinner if you’ve got nothing going on.”

Jack’s always inviting me over ever since I spent one poker night at his place and wiped their table clean. He’s fit for his age, but you can tell he’s one of those guys who doesn’t really take care of himself, and the only reason he’s not obese is because of his job. He scratches his beard speckled with grey hairs as he waits for my response.

“I’ll check with Noah if he will be home or not and let you know.” I nod.

“No problem.” He takes another swig of his water. “I still don’t know much about you, Nate.” He takes a seat on a makeshift stool. “Did you have a missus back in Australia?” His question strikes a nerve I almost forgot existed. I grit my teeth and shake my head.

“Ah come now, a good-looking fella like you, surely you had one special girl.” He waggles his eyebrows, and I take a big breath, steadying my mind.

I pushed Billie to one corner of my mind, locked her up, and only ever allow myself to look inside at night when I am alone with my thoughts. I haven’t even spoken to Noah about her, but it’s all he talks about. Every day he tells me I should call her, to thank her, but I don’t have the balls. If I hear her voice, it’ll make me want to go back, and if I go back, Joe will know and cut me up into little pieces, then feed me to his dogs. I can’t ever go back to the life I had in Melbourne; it just won’t be possible for me.

“Nah, she loves someone else,” I manage to say.

He looks sympathetic as he removes his hat. “That’s too bad.” He pauses. “Noah says she played a big part in him getting a scholarship here. She must have felt something for you to do that for your brother.”

This conversation is beginning to frustrate me. Why does he care anyway? “Yeah, she did, but things didn’t work out between us. Plus, I couldn’t leave Noah by himself.”

“Noah’s a grown adult, son. I’m sure he can walk the talk now.” His eyes focus on me again. “Maybe you should find yourself a nice woman and settle down before it’s too late.”

For fuck’s sake, I need to shut this down before I lose my temper.

“No thank you. My priority in life is my brother, and that’s not going to change.”

Sensing my frustration, Jack stands and claps a hand on my shoulder. “Priorities change in life, Nate. No one’s life is completely balanced, and it’s up to you to choose your priorities every single day. From what I see, you’ve done your duty to Noah, and now is the time to re-evaluate.” He gives me another sympathetic look. “We learn things about ourselves in every stage of life. I’m in my fifties, son. I have lived and loved, and I only tell you this so you don’t waste a moment of yours hanging onto a false belief.”

He returns to work and leaves me to mull over his words. Deep down, I know he’s right. Noah is completely set up in life. Sure, he may need my guidance here and there, but the majority of my efforts have paid off. Like Jack said, I’ve done my duty to him as a brother and a caregiver, so maybe it is okay to re-evaluate. Maybe it is okay to think about me. The question is, what do I want?



Sliding on my leather jacket, I stare at my reflection in the mirror. The weird thing is, I don’t feel sick to my stomach when I look at myself anymore.

My palms begin to sweat as I think about the blind date I’ve been set up with tonight. I haven’t gone out with a woman since Billie, and part of me doesn’t want to, but I owe it to myself and to Noah to at least *try* to move on. If we’re going to live here, I need to move on.

Grabbing my keys off the counter, I drive myself down to the small Thai restaurant she picked. I take a seat at the reserved table by the window as I wait for her arrival, but she is not what I am thinking about. I look to the door as I imagine Billie walking through it.

Her long dark hair bouncing off her curves in a tight black dress. Her smiling ear to ear as she notices me sitting by the window, waiting for her. Her scent floated across the restaurant, surrounding me in florals.

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I shake my head, telling myself to get a grip.

“Hi, uh, are you Nathan?”

My head shoots up as I look into a set of blue eyes.

“Yeah, I’m Nathan,” I reply.

Her smile instantly takes over her face, she extends her hand. “I’m Charlotte.” Her short blonde hair frames her round face.

I reach out and shake her hand. She takes a seat across from me as a waiter comes over to ask if we would like to order drinks. “I’ll have water, please,” she replies as she looks to me.

“And for you?” she asks.

“I’ll have a whiskey, please. Straight.” I look at the waiter, who nods and walks away.

“Whiskey, huh? I guess you do kind of look like a whiskey person.” She eyes me up and down.

I chuckle. “What does a whiskey person look like?”

Her smile grows as she cocks her head to the side. “You.” She opens her menu and studies the first page scrunching her nose as if she can’t decide on what to have.

Desperate to make conversation, I think of something to ask.

“What do you do for work?”



“Oh, I’m in human resources.” She smiles. “So, I pretty much babysit adults all day.” She gives me a soft smile. “What about you?”

“I work in construction... I’m a carpenter.” I pick up the menu and sift through it absentmindedly.

“That must be a hard job, physically demanding on your body.”

“Yeah, but I’m used to it. It’s honest work.” I shrug.

“Hmm.” she nods as her eyes squint as if she’s trying to decipher a code I just read to her.

Her gaze makes me uncomfortable, making me shift in my seat. “What?” I ask.

“I know this may seem a little judgemental, but you don’t really fit the description of an ‘honest’ person.” She gestures to me, her hand moving up and down as if to say, “look at yourself.” “I know society paints a dark picture of things like people with tattoos covering their entire bodies, etc., and it’s shameful of me to stereotype you in that way, so I apologise.”

Her words surprise me. People rarely ever say what they’re truly thinking, so I appreciate her candour. A small smile tugs at the corner of my lips, and I begin nodding my head.

“That definitely is a big assumption,” I say.

“You’re not offended?” she asked, surprised.

“I’ve been judged more times than I can count, so I don’t blame you, nor am I offended by it.”

The waiter brings our drinks, and I take a sip of my whiskey, the alcohol burning the back of my throat. “I admire your courage, though, to say exactly what’s on your mind... especially to someone you’ve just met.” She smiles as she places the menu down on the table.

“I’ve always been told it’s my worst quality... you know... scares people off.” She fiddles with the fork on the table. “But I always think people would be a lot happier if they just said what they were thinking, instead of harbouring it inside themselves like a huge secret.”

Her words get me thinking, and it's true what she says. Why do we always filter our words like others are made of glass? Purely for their sakes, we shelter them, almost walking on eggshells, because we are afraid to say something that offends or hurts them, and there is something truly freeing about being able to say whatever comes to mind.

We talk about her life in America and how she moved here from the Netherlands when she was two with her parents and her older brother.

She talks about how she doesn't remember life outside of America because she was just a baby. She asks me about my life, but I don't want to give her too much, so I say Noah and I moved here due to his desire to become a professional basketball player, which is true.

The night goes on as she mostly talks about herself. I smile and nod at some things but my interest in this date begins to fade, bringing my thoughts back to Billie.



# Chapter Eighteen

## Billie

Billie – Aged 16

**B** My books tumble out of my hands and sprawl over the floor of the hall in the school building as the jackass laughs.

“Watch where you’re going, you freak.” He chews his gum like an arrogant prick as he kicks one of my books, making it slide further away from me. Connor is known as the school bully. He did it purely for fun, and since he is the biggest and tallest boy in school, no one really fights back because they are too afraid. Sighing, I kneel and begin placing my books on top of each other, gathering them from the floor. As I reach out to grab another book, he kicks this one as well, catapulting it.



further away from me. Others hastily walk past, not wanting to be his next victim, not even giving me a side glance as I kneel on the floor. His friends all snicker behind him as they watch me get up and walk over to grab the books he’s kicked. I pick up my stack of books and begin to turn away from him, but he pushes me from behind. My foot gets caught on someone else’s as I trip, plummeting to the floor. I feel a wet, warm stream of blood on the side of my mouth as I sit up, wincing at the pain. God knows how many people Connor has hurt. The school’s principal never seems to expel him, even with the amount of shit he’s put people through purely because his parents are powerful, and he comes from a well-known family. I look up and see Finn at the bottom of the stairs. His eyes widen as he no doubt sees the blood trickling down my chin. Rushing up the stairs, he helps me up and asks me if I’m okay. I nod as I gather my things while Connor and his friends laugh, as if they had just told the funniest joke ever. Finn’s jaw clenches in rage as he looks over to Connor, guessing exactly what’s happened.

“Find someone your own fucking size to pick on Connor.” He pushes him against the wall.

“Isn’t this a bit basic for you?” Connor’s eyes fill with anger at Finn’s opposition. He reaches for his collar and rams Finn into the wall. I try to get between them as I yell for them to stop but Connor’s friends pull me back.

“Don’t you know what happens to people who cross me?” Connor punches Finn in the ribs. Finn immediately hunches at the impact, but he doesn’t let out a sound.

My arms burn as Connor’s friends hold me back. Finn gathers his composure and headbutts Connor, causing him to topple back and fall on his ass.

Connor reaches for his mouth and covers it with his hand, blood rushing out of his mouth, down to his chin.

Shrugging out of their hold, I rush to Finn’s side and check him, making sure he’s okay, and there are no visible signs of hurt.

“I’m fine,” he says as he holds my hand. He centres his gaze on Connor.

“Quit being a fucking prick. No one likes you. Don’t mistake people’s fear of you as respect because they don’t respect you either.”

He gathers my books and throws an arm around my shoulders as we walk out into the quad. Finn has always protected me, even when we were little. Once when we were ten, he built a sandcastle around me, trying to shelter me from the water because I feared the possibility of a jellyfish stinging me. He’s always been my protector since we met, and it makes me adore him even more for standing up to my bullies and trying to protect me from the world.



The waves crash onto the sand as Finn’s fingers curl into mine. We sit as we admire the beauty of the ocean under the sparkle of the moon, the sand between our toes. He pulls me in closer to his side as the wind picks up speed. We used to come here

in the summer as kids, build sandcastles, run on top of the slippery rocks when our parents constantly told us not to. The memories make me smile as I look beyond the water to the horizon.

“I think I want to quit my job.” I sigh. “I’m beginning to see that it makes me a bitter person.” Finn’s hand grips me tighter.

“I’m happy for you, B. If that’s what you want to do, I will support you.” He traces his thumb back and forth over my hand.

“I never thanked you... you know... for the times you protected me or stuck up for me.” I breathe in his scent, the sandalwood from his perfume filling up my lungs.

“It was unspoken. You didn’t have to...” He looks at me, and I look back at him, his blue eyes swallowed up by his enlarged pupils. “...and I’d do it all over again if I had to.” I smile, warmth filling my chest as I look at my best friend and first love.

“Do you think it’ll be hard? To change at this point in my life and career?” I sigh, and my breath trembles slightly at the thought of beginning a new chapter in my life.

He smiles. “There’s never a point where it is too late if that’s what you were thinking. Sure, there’ll be a point where it gets hard, but that’s with anything in life...you just have to push through it to achieve the end goal, right?”

I nod. “I guess I just don’t want to fail.”

“Failure is certain in life, B. We all fail at some things, but what matters isn’t that you failed. It’s what you do after you fail that determines the outcome.” He places a small kiss on my forehead, his warm lips leaving an imprint on my mind and soul. “If you simply give up, you’ll always wonder what could have been. You’ll always have a nagging voice in your head about what may have happened had you tried harder. Yes, we’re given a path to follow, but we aren’t given a guide on how to follow that path... it’s up to us to write that ourselves.”

I sit and ponder his words for a moment, taking a big breath of fresh ocean air.

“Do you believe in fate?” I ask.

He looks out to the ocean, and his face changes as if I’d said something to upset him. “Yes... and no.” I wait for him to explain as I watch his jaw tense. “Sometimes things do happen in our lives which we have no control over. I will admit that... but we do have control in how we respond to those events, which can alter the course of our ‘fate.’” He looks at me. “Do you believe in fate?”

I thought about this many times over the years, thinking that I was fated to live a mediocre life in the small city of Melbourne, but now, I’m not quite sure. “I think I did before, but now, I’m not so sure. I want to believe that we have a purpose but maybe that purpose is different for everyone. Maybe your fated purpose can change or shift as you grow.” He gives me a small smile as he brings his lips to mine, delicately kissing me. My breath is stolen when his tongue forces entry into my mouth as he pulls me on top of him, my legs straddling his waist. He kisses me urgently, as if we were running out of time, like teenagers as if we were late for curfew, not wanting to part ways.

He pulls away gently, and I place my forehead on his.

“One thing I know for sure, I was always fated to come back to you,” he whispers, closing his eyes, and I know that the moment we are in right now, is right where we are supposed to be. My chest booms with the ever-growing love I have for this man as my lips find his, my fingers swirl in his hair, and I feel him growing beneath me as our breathing picks up in tandem.

Letting the rush of adrenaline take me into its riptide, I grind over his pants, a moan escaping from his lips. Looking around, I make sure we are the only ones on the beach. Seizing my opportunity, I reach between us to unbuckle and unzip him until his cock is freed. His hand reaches beneath my dress, pushing my underwear aside. My thumping heart vibrates in my chest as I lick my lips, the taste of his lips still lingering on

mine. Raising my hips, I wrap both arms around his neck and lower myself onto him. His head falls back as his eyes close.

“Billie...” he whispers as one of his hands steadies himself on the sand, the other resting on my hip. He takes in a shaky breath as I slowly move my hips forward and back, the feeling of fullness creating a rising heat inside me.

He sits up, placing one hand on the side of my face, the other wrapping around me, pulling me closer into him. His lips brush over my neck and make their way to my ear, the warmth of his breath sending a shiver down my spine.

“...I love you.” Happy tears threaten to flood the gates behind my eyes.

“I love you, too,” I whisper before my lips crash into his.

Our hips move together in rhythm, a moan escaping my lips, travelling into his mouth as I feel the euphoria edging to be liberated.

His hand threads through my hair at the back of my head, pulling my head back, my eyes meeting the stars in the night sky above as he lightly traces his teeth on the side of my neck, his other hand travelling up my dress to cup my breast. Sweat pools on my back as my breathing hitches, the euphoria taking over me, bursting through my pores.



My focus is interrupted when Laura peeks over my shoulder, reading the email I'm writing to my client. I'm trying my best to stick it out until the end of the month. That's when I'm considering giving Fiona my four weeks notice. I feel a pang of guilt when I think about some of the lovely clients I have worked with and how much I'll miss working with them, but I'm quickly reminded as to why I need to quit. This place is not good for me. I'm not cut out for a corporate job, working unpaid overtime for a business that could easily replace me as a number as soon as I walk out that door. So, I shove that guilt right back into the abyss and continue writing my email.



“No, don’t say that. I think it’s not professional enough.” Laura grips her coffee mug as she leans on my desk beside me.

It comes out like word vomit. I don’t mean to say it, but I do anyway.

“Maybe you should write it then.” My tone is a lot harsher than I meant it to be, perhaps from the years of her just bossing me around.

Her brows pull in as she stares at me, unsure of what to say. I never speak like this at work. It’s always yes, please, and when.

“Pardon?” she asked in almost a whisper.

Turning to her, I repeat my words.

“I said... if you don’t like it, maybe you should write the email, Laura.” She places a hand on her chest like I’ve shot her.

“Where is this hostility coming from?” Her face is all scrunched up.

“I’m not being hostile... I’m standing up for myself.” Finally. Fiona grips her laptop in one arm, a coffee in the other as I watch her walk past our desks to her large corner office.

“Perhaps you could take up my hostility with Fiona... you know... since you like to basically live up her ass.” Locking my laptop, I grab my coffee mug and walk to the kitchen to refill it, adrenaline coursing through my veins. A sense of pride grows within me, watering a newly sprouting branch of courage. Filling my cup with coffee, I mentally prepare myself for my performance review with Fiona. Out of all days and times she could choose to set up a performance review, she chose five o’clock on a Friday afternoon. I walk back out to see Laura now sitting at her desk, pretending like she doesn’t see me, which is completely fine with me. Grabbing my laptop in one hand and my coffee in the other, I head over to Fiona’s office.

“Come in,” she says as she types away on her keyboard. Closing the door behind me, I take a seat in a chair in front of

her desk. She turns to me with the fakest smile plastered on her face.

“So, how’s Billie? What’s been going on with you?” I want to throw up at her false pretence of giving a shit about her employees.

“Good, I’ve been trying to catch up on Gilly’s.” A project we’re currently working on for a retail business who sells fishing supplies.

“Mm, yes. Laura’s been telling me how she thinks you’re a little distracted with your life outside of work.” She purses her lips, and I feel actual fury awaken from its deep slumber within me.

Is she fucking serious?

I pause for a moment before I respond, biting my tongue.

“Do you think you could shift your focus back onto your responsibilities here? Because we all need to be team players and—”

“Fiona,” I cut her off before she finished that sentence and sends me into a hulk rage.

“My life outside of work does not concern you, nor does it concern anyone else in this office. Your focus as a manager should not be whether or not I can fulfill my responsibilities by shifting my focus back onto them, but rather what is actually going on in my life that is hindering my ability to meet my KPIs because that’s what a real manager would be worried about, the wellbeing of their employees. I’m not going to sugarcoat things for you because as an adult, I feel you need to hear this and reflect on it if you are to be a better manager. You need to stop and realise that the people who work here are indeed people. They have their own lives, their own families. Some work weekends just to get their never-ending tasks completed because you keep throwing them more work instead of hiring new people to save money.

You don’t make money like that, and you lose good people.”

Her face is as white as a ghost.

“I’m giving you my four weeks notice.” I say.

She raises her hands. “Whoa, whoa, let’s slow down a bit. Let’s not make any hasty decisions.”

I shake my head. “My mind is made up. I no longer want to work for this company.” I feel an immense sense of relief as I utter the words I have been waiting to say for years.

“B-but...” she stutters.

I gather my laptop and my mug and give her a smile.

“I’ll summarise notes for my clients before my notice is up. Have a good afternoon, Fiona,” I say before walking out of her office, feeling that sense of pride and courage continue to grow.

I’m finally taking my life into my own hands and controlling the outcome, just like I imagined for so long. Maybe I need to pinch myself in case this is a dream and all this is happening inside my head.



# Chapter Nineteen

## Billie

*One Month Later*

I breathe in the salty ocean air as I sit across Finn at our favourite bar, drinking our beers. I've never felt freer in my life. He smiles at me as his eyes dance with pride.

"I did it...I'm free." I beam.

He chuckles as he places his hand on top of mine, leaning forward. "Told you that you had it in you." He winks and gives me that heart-stopping smirk. "How's your research coming along? Do you need my help with anything?"

"It's coming along. I've got my business name set up and am slowly beginning to find clients who want to work with me." I take a sip of my beer. "But you know what the best part is?" I pause to give a dramatic effect, Finn hanging on the last bit of my sentence.

"A couple of the clients I was working with left Fiona and want to work with me." I squeal, still not truly believing it myself.

Finn laughs as he leans back into his chair.

"As they should." He smiles, but that smile quickly fades as something else crosses his mind. I wait for a minute to see if he will share it with me.

"B, I have to tell you something." My heart picks up speed at those words, the words no one wants to hear.

Shit, did he do something?

Did I do something?

Sighing, his eyes meet mine, and I can't decipher the look on his face. It's somewhat tinged with sadness or maybe regret?

“I’ve been wanting to tell you since I came back, but there was never a good time.” We’re interrupted by his phone ringing as I glance at it on the table. I notice Grace is calling. Fuck, we’re late for her rehearsal dinner. Grace and Michael decided they didn’t want to wait, after all. They had waited long enough to realise they were supposed to be together, so they decided to get married a month after being engaged. Finn answers his phone as we both grab our jackets and make our way to the car. He promises her we are on our way, then hangs up and opens the passenger door for me.

“I guess it’ll have to wait a little longer,” he says as he kisses me on the cheek.

We begin driving the short distance to the restaurant. Stealing a glance at Finn, I notice for the first time since he’s been back that he’s lost a bit of weight. Maybe he just hasn’t been working out as much because we’ve been together all the time. He catches me staring and smirks as he places his hand on my thigh.

“The suspense is eating me alive,” I confess.

“What do you need to tell me?” Turning into the street of the restaurant, he parks the car and turns to me.

“Not here, Billie.” Lifting my hand up to his lips, he places a soft kiss on my knuckles. “I promise I will tell you, but not now.”

We walk inside the restaurant, and I spot Grace in her beautiful lacy pink dress. Smiling, I leave Finn to talk with Mr. Mackenzie and walk over to her to give her a big hug.

“I can’t believe you’re getting married next week, Gracie.” She holds back tears and hugs me again.

“I know, I can’t either.” She sniffles as Michael walks up to her and takes her hand in his.

“You need to forgive this one. She’s been emotional since the engagement party,” he says with a chuckle as he wipes a tear off Grace’s cheek.

“I’m happy for you guys, truly. I’m glad you worked it all out and came to your senses.” I poke fun at them because ever

since they've been together, they've been joined at the hip.

"Thank you, Billie." Michael smiles. "Congratulations on quitting your job! I'm surprised you lasted that long to be honest. The way you would talk about it had me hating your job." He laughs, and we all laugh together.

"Yeah, thank you, it was time." I nod as I feel Finn's arm slide around my waist.

"She's her own boss now..." He looks at me and winks. "It's a huge turn-on."

Grace makes a gagging sound. "Save it for the room, Finn. Honestly, it's disgusting." I feel heat rise to my cheeks as he kisses me tenderly.

"You'd better get used to it, Gracie," he says as he looks deeply into my eyes.

"Excuse me, I'm going to go throw up." Grace excuses herself, and Michael laughs, following her.

"Let's maybe keep the PDA to a minimum around the family?" I say with half a smile. Finn grabs me by the waist and kisses me passionately, with tongue and everything.

"After the years we've spent apart, I will always hold you close. I don't care who is around," he whispers in my ear, sending a tingle down my spine.

"Come on, you two love birds, let's take a seat." Mr. Mackenzie gestures for us to sit. We take a seat around a large rectangular table located in the middle of the restaurant. We mingle with the guests, talking to people we have known most of our lives, catching up on life and everything in between. The entrées and mains are served as we all eat, drink, and laugh together. When the mains are finished and the table cleared by the restaurant staff, Mr. Mackenzie stands and raises his glass.

"I want to make a toast." He stops and looks around the table. Everyone quiets down and focuses their attention on him.

“Thank you all for being here tonight to celebrate my daughter, Gracie, and her soon-to-be groom, Michael.” He pauses for a moment as he looks at Grace.

“My dear Gracie, you’ve grown into such a wonderful, smart, and caring woman. I couldn’t be prouder as a father. I want you to know that you will always be my baby girl, no matter how old you are. I will always see you as the little girl who clung onto me when she saw a spider or a mouse.”

The guests laugh as he continues.

“I will always be there for you in the good times and the bad, no matter the day or the time. If you need me, I will be there but now, so will Michael. I’m overjoyed that you have found such a strong and intelligent young man to call your partner in life... one word of advice from a seasoned father to the young couple, don’t expect marriage to be fifty-fifty.

Marriage will almost always be one person giving more than the other. Some days it might be you, Gracie, giving more, and some days it’ll be you, Michael. Every morning you wake up, you have a choice, and that choice should be your partner. Every day, you need to choose your partner. Marriage takes work, and it’s easy to forget to put in that work when life gets in the way.” He raises his glass.

“Congratulations to you both on the next chapter in your lives as a couple... to Gracie and Michael!”

Everyone cheers as the chatter returns, filling up the restaurant once again. Finn’s fingers lace through mine as I take a sip of my champagne. I look over to Finn, who is now pulling at his tie, and I notice small sweat beads rolling down his temple. Worry floods through me as I turn my body to face him.

“Are you okay?” My voice is laced with concern.

“I think I just need some air,” he utters. I helped him up as we both walked outside into the small garden. His hands reach out and grabs on to the post nearby to steady himself, the worry swirling like a whirlpool in my stomach.



“Should I call someone? What’s wrong?” I rub his back as he loosens his tie even more and shakes his head, slumping over.

“No, no, I’m fine,” he says through shaky breaths.

“You don’t look fine, Finn.” My mind races. “Should I get you a glass of water?” I ask.

“No...” He grabs on to my hand. “Don’t leave me.” His plea sounds almost desperate. He tries to stand up straight, and, in that moment, the blood drains from my face as I watch him fall to the floor in front of me.

Dropping to my knees, my hand rushes to his cheek.

“HELP!” I scream as loudly as I can, panic pooling like thick blood in my throat.

“SOMEONE, HELP!” I turn to the restaurant and wave to grab someone’s, anyone’s, attention, not wanting to leave Finn’s side.

Mr. Mackenzie spots me and immediately rushes outside, phone in hand, already dialing 000. There are now multiple people standing around, watching with hands covering their mouths, faces etched in concern. I place my two fingers on his throat and sigh in relief as I feel his pulse still beating.



# Chapter Twenty

## Billie

The dried tears mixed with mascara have formed hard valleys on my cheeks as I sit here with my head in my hands, leaning forward on the hospital floor in the hallway outside of Finn's room. Finn's parents are currently in the room with him, Grace, and Michael, too.

My stomach churns as one word continues to float through my mind, laying poison into every corner it touches.

*Cancer.*

Tears, there are none left.

My entire body is numb, the only thing I can feel is the cracks in my heart ripping apart once more. All my emotions mould into one like a tumbleweed.

How did I miss this?

How could they not tell me?

How could *he* not tell me?

I clench my jaw and swallow, pushing down the bile waiting in the pit of my stomach.

“Darling... Billie...” My head flies up as I watch Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie walk out of Finn's room. I jump to my feet. “Can I see him?”

They nod softly as I brush past them and walk into the room. Grace is seated beside Finn, Michael standing behind her with his hand on her shoulder. My lip wobbles as I see Finn lying on the bed with multiple machines hooked up to him. He turns his head to the door, and his eyes meet mine, pooling with tears. I rush over to him, taking a seat on the chair beside his bed and place my hand in his.

“We'll give you both a minute,” Grace utters as she and Michael walk out.

His hand grips on to mine tightly as a tear rolls down his cheek.

“I’m so sorry for not telling you sooner, B.” Fresh tears sting the back of my eyes as I fight hard against them.

“Relapsed...” I shake my head in disbelief as the doctor’s words continue to ring through my ears. “You relapsed.” I weep as the words leave my mouth. He doesn’t say anything, instead he grips my hand tighter. “How long?” I finally ask through the sobs.

Sadness overcomes his face as he takes a steadying breath.

“I was diagnosed at twenty-two,” he says as my chest tightens at his words. My knuckles go white as I squeeze his hand as if he was slipping away from me. Letting the sadness take me, I whimper as sobs rack through my body.

I place my forehead on our joined hands, and his other hand caresses my hair. That was years ago. Years he has spent fighting a battle that I knew nothing about, and here I was so angry at him for what seems like nothing now.

“Don’t cry, B.” Once my breathing evens out and I gain my composure, I crawl onto the bed with him, resting my head on his chest, feeling his heart beating against my cheek.

“Did Grace know?” I ask.

“Don’t blame them, Billie. I asked them not to say anything to you.” He traces his finger over my arm as a moment passes between us, the silence deafening.

“What happens now?” My breath shakes as I think about what the future holds.

He sighs. “They don’t think I have much time, B.” He pauses. “They told me that ten to twenty percent of survivors relapse... I guess I’m part of that statistic.” He kisses the top of my head as I close my eyes, refusing to accept this is reality.

“It’s called *acute lymphoblastic leukemia*. I did four rounds of chemo in France when I was diagnosed, and they said I was in the clear following a few tests, but I guess we don’t know

how life will turn out in the end, do we?” He lets out a small chuckle.

I chew the inside of my bottom lip to stop from shaking.

“But I just got you back...” I whisper as a tear rolls down my cheek onto his chest.

“Hey...” He lifts my chin so I’m facing him. “We still have time; we just have to make the most of it.” I taste my salty tears on my tongue as he kisses me gently.

“How can you be so okay about this?” I sniffle. “Why aren’t you angry?”

“I’ve had time to accept it... I accepted the reality of death when I was diagnosed. Then when I got better, I knew I had to make things right with you, to come back to you and win you back.”

He sighs. “That was the only thing I truly wanted... you... and I thought to myself that I was lucky enough to be blessed with another chance at life to do things differently.”

He laces his fingers with mine.

“I don’t care if I die tomorrow or the next day because I’ve felt your love once more, and I will take that love with me to the next life. The only thing that makes me not want to leave is that I won’t be able to give you the life I know you want and deserve. A marriage... a family.”

“Why did you hide it from me?” I ask, and I can’t help but feel hurt, a small hint of animosity in my voice. “You had every opportunity to tell me... and you chose not to.”

“It wasn’t your burden to bear.” He doesn’t hesitate. “I would have never burdened you with it, knowing you were halfway across the world and would feel helpless just like I did. I wanted to protect you because I still loved you.” I don’t know what to say as we lay here together. “Billie, I only have one request.”

I look up to him as I stroke his cheek. “Yes?” I whisper.

“I don’t want my last moments on earth to look like this. I don’t want to sit here and wait for death.” He pauses as his

eyes bore into mine. “I want you to come with me to France.” I give him a small nod, not having to think about it because I would do anything at this point to make him happy. “You should go home and get some rest.”

“No... I’m not leaving you. Not for one second.” I cling onto him like I’m clinging on to the hope that if I hug him tight enough, I can stop the cancer in its path, and we could have more time together. He caresses my face with his hand.

“It’s going to be okay, B. I promise you’re going to be okay,” he whispers. How can he be so bloody calm about this, and comfort me, and tell me I’m going to be okay? I should be the one comforting him. The minutes tick by as I lay here, breathing him in. I fight against sleep, but my eyes give in to the tiredness, pulling me into a deep rest.

When I wake an hour later, I leave a sleeping Finn and find Mr. and Mrs. Mackenzie outside in the waiting room, holding hands. Mrs. Mackenzie gives me a small smile as she heads back into Finn’s room. I take a seat across from Mr. Mackenzie, his eyes red with both sadness and tiredness.

“I’m sorry you had to find out this way, Billie.” His voice is soft. “Finn wouldn’t allow any of us to tell you because he feared hurting you. I didn’t see it as a problem because he was healthy. He had fought the cancer in France and was in remission for so many years.”

His breath hitches, and I move seats, now sitting beside him. I place my hand on his.

“He fought really hard to beat the cancer, and all he ever talked about was how he wanted to be the healthiest version of himself to come back to you.”

My eyes water as I think of a young Finn fighting this battle alone. “We all thought he would remain healthy and that the cancer was finally out of his body...”

“When did he relapse?” I ask with a shallow breath.

“Just before Gracie’s engagement party,” he confesses, my skin going cold as ice. “We all told him he needed to tell you, and he promised he would.”

“I want to be there for him... I want to go with him to France,” I announce.

“Are you sure you’re up for this, Billie?” He places his other hand on mine. “It’ll be hard to watch.”

“He spent years fighting a battle I never knew about. I want to be there with him now. I *need* to be with him now,” I reply.





# Chapter Twenty-One

## Billie

The green trees sway softly in the breeze above us as Finn and I lay on deck chairs under the sun's rays, drinking in every moment we get to spend together. After we got to France, we immediately saw Finn's oncologists in the hopes that there was something else we could do to stop the cancer, maybe more rounds of chemotherapy... or something... just something. I hate this feeling of being helpless. I feel like I'm drowning in a dream, and I can't wake up. After a couple of weeks of spending time in the city, Finn showed me all his favourite places to eat.

We went to the Louvre, the Eiffel Tower, and did all the touristy things you're supposed to do when you travel to France. He said it was important to do them, but all I wanted and thought about was being with Finn. Being in his company, loving him from a place of purity.

He made me promise we would spend whatever time we had left together as a happy couple who had a lifetime ahead of them, so we travelled into the countryside and spent most of our days amongst the lush green vineyards and fragrant lavender fields. Finn's parents, Grace and Michael, travelled with us to their château in the country, not wanting to be apart from him either.

"Do you want to hear something funny?" Finn's voice is laced with humour as he speaks. "The first time I went on a date with some girl from the city back when I was young, we went to a restaurant, and the date was so bad that I asked the waiter to spill a drink on me so I could leave." He chuckles at the memory, and I laugh with him.

"Why was it so bad?" I question.

He smiles, looking at me. "She knew almost everything about me, of course everything I posted on socials."

"No... you had a stalker?!" I gasp.

He chuckles to himself again. “She was fucking crazy, B. She went to the same university as me. I met her in my Intro to Law class, but I never would have guessed she used to stalk me in her spare time.” We both laugh together, looking up at the sky.

“I mean, you are very ‘stalkable,’” I jest.

Finn’s hand reaches over to mine as we lace our fingers together, our hands dangling between the two deck chairs. The sorrow returns to feast on my mind like a rabid dog.

“It’s okay, you know.” He squeezes my hand. “To laugh.” I wipe a tear from my cheek, not wanting him to see me cry. “I don’t want you to think you can’t be happy because of this... yes, it’s shit... but it is what it is.”

I sigh, not knowing how to respond. “Don’t let this be the end.” I turn my head to look at him, his eyes closed, his body beginning to deteriorate right in front of me. “Finish what you started, B. Don’t let anyone tell you it’s not possible to live a life you love.”

“I won’t,” I say through the lump in my throat.

“Promise me.” He tightens his hold on my hand.

“Cross my heart,” I say, and he turns to smile at me.

“I remember when you first said that to me... it meant more to me than a promise ever could, and still, to this day, my thoughts haven’t changed,” he admits and pauses for a moment. “I want you to be happy, Billie. When I’m gone, I don’t want you to spend the rest of your life alone. I want you to find someone who loves you just as much as me, if not more.” The last thing I’m thinking about is someone else right now.

“I don’t want to think about it, Finn. Please, don’t make me think about it right now. I’m holding myself together by a thread, and I cannot think about being without you.” Silent tears roll down my cheeks as he continues.

“I want you to be prepared, because when I’m gone, I don’t want you to sit around and mourn me until you die. You’re not even thirty yet. You still have a full life to live, and

I'll be damned if I won't do everything in my power to help you see that." He stands, pulling me up with him.

"All I've ever wanted to do is to protect you from all this pain, the helplessness you feel right now in your chest. I felt that when I was first diagnosed. I don't want that to consume you. You have far too much talent to waste it away mourning someone whose fate is already written."

I wrap my arms around him, letting the tears fall as he hugs me into him. "I'm scared, Finn. I don't want to lose you twice."

"I know, B." He caresses my hair as he kisses my temple. "But I want you to know, I'm not scared at all, not of dying, because this won't be our final goodbye."

We spend the rest of the day out in the sunshine, reading, talking, and writing. Finn writes something on his laptop, and as I try to sneak a peek, he throws me a disapproving look.

I spend the rest of the afternoon building my business, writing to different companies, and setting up meetings with them. I made Finn a promise, so I need to follow through. We all gather around the dinner table in the evening, joking and laughing as Mr. Mackenzie shares stories about their time in France together. Riley joins us just before we have dessert.

"How was the flight, Riles?" Grace asks as she hands him a small pot of crème brûlée.

"Rough. I get why people choose to stay a day or two at their layover destinations," he jests as we all chuckle.

"It's quite long, isn't it?" Mrs. Mackenzie says with empathy in her voice. "Well, dear, make yourself at home."

"Thank you, Mrs. Mackenzie." Riley nods and takes a seat next to me at the large table. He gently places his hand on mine and gives me a sympathetic look.

We spend the rest of the night huddled together in the family room watching feel-good Christmas movies, like when we were kids, even though it's not Christmas.

We had a tradition where we would have to do a dare every time someone cries but over the years as we got older, we changed the dare to shots.

Nothing felt better than being surrounded by my second family, in the arms of my first love. As the clock ticks closer to midnight, almost everyone retires back to their rooms. I glance over to Finn, his eyes closed, softly snoring. I gently wake him, then help him upstairs into his bedroom and slide underneath the covers of his bed.

“Good night, Billie...” he whispers as he struggles to keep his eyes open. “I love you.”

My heart pinches as I watch him give into sleep. “I love you, too,” I whisper back, pushing the short strands of his hair off his face, and close my eyes.

I feel a cool breeze on the nape of my neck as I rouse from sleep. Turning, I see Finn sitting by the large French doors outside on the balcony with his laptop resting on his knees, typing away. He notices me sitting up and smiles that familiar boyish smile I love so much.

“Go back to sleep. I’m almost finished.”

I lay back down and let sleep take me into its familiar hold once more.



# Chapter Twenty-Two

## Billie

*Two Weeks Later*

**M**y knees shake as I grip my brother's arm, steadying myself. He wraps his arms around me, holding the broken pieces of my soul together. We stand, surrounded by guests dressed in black, watching as Finn's coffin is lowered into the dirt. I let the grief take me into its riptide, as my chest is racked with sobs. Once again, I say goodbye to the boy whom I loved, the man I dreamed to be with for the rest of my life, my best friend, my first love, my twin flame.

This isn't goodbye forever, B. Only until we meet again in the next life.

I remember the words he constantly repeated during the last week we spent together. Riley rubs my back as I weep through the shattering of my heart. No one said it would be easy, but I hadn't imagined the pain to be this deep, this cutthroat. I never once had let myself think about this moment, even though I knew it would come, because I wanted to be there for him, to be present for him in the last moments we had together. I didn't want to imagine my life without Finn. It hurts to breathe as I take shallow breaths between sobs.

At the end of the service, the guests pay their respects to the Mackenzies and leave. We held the funeral in France because it was Finn's wish to be buried in the countryside.

The car is silent as we all wallow in our own sorrows, sharing our grief together and separately, as we drive back to the château. Kicking off my heels, I walk into Finn's room and climb into his bed. The sheets still smell exactly like him. Riley knocks on the door and asks if I want him to stay, but I shake my head, needing to be alone tonight. I hear the click of the door as he leaves, leaving me to my thoughts of Finn. I go over every memory I have of him, from when we were little, to the day we spent on the beach. I fill every inch of my mind

with him until I fall asleep, hoping that he visits me in my dreams.



Standing outside, I stare at the lavender fields with a mug of coffee in my hand, watching the glow of the sun illuminate the sky as it rises beyond the horizon. I feel someone slip a blanket over my shoulders and turn to see Mr. Mackenzie standing beside me.

“He loved you with every fibre of his being,” he utters as his eyes water. “I’ve never seen someone so determined to make themselves better for someone else’s benefit.”

I give him a small smile as I turn to watch the sunrise. “I miss him, but I know he’s still with me.”

Mr. Mackenzie sighs and pauses, almost like he doesn’t want to say what he is about to. “Finn asked me to give you the letters he wrote you.” He places a hand on my shoulder. “I was going to keep them because I was worried they would make you even more upset, but I thought you deserved to have them.” He hands me Finn’s laptop. “They’re saved in the folder named Billie. He also asked that I let you keep his laptop.”

My hands tremble as I take the laptop from him. Taking a seat on a deck chair, I place the laptop on the table. I hear Mr. Mackenzie head back inside as I open the laptop. My breath hitches as I watch the screen light up with a photo of us at the beach, the widest smiles spread across our faces. I open his Spotify account and begin listening to the last song that was playing. Atlantic by Sleep Token filters through the speakers as I hesitate, the cursor hovering over the folder with my name on it.

Drawing in a shaky breath, I open the folder and dive into some of the letters.

***Letter to Billie from Finn – aged 18***

*Dear Billie,*

*I won't ever send you this letter because I don't want you to live with the false hope of me ever returning to Australia. It's clear that my father wants me to stay and study here, live here, but all I want to do is jump on a plane and come back to you, tell you I love you and that I have loved you since we were little. I want to be selfish and tell you no one else can have you but me. No one else deserves you but me. That night we shared together will forever be the best night of my life, a night my best friend trusted me with her heart. I'm sorry I broke it by leaving, but I didn't have a choice. I'm so angry with my dad for dragging me across the entire world, away from you. I miss you so much, Billie. I promise to find my way back to you someday, even if we're fifty and living completely different lives. I will find you, and I will win you back.*

*Cross my soul.*

*Finn.*



***Letter to Billie from Finn – Aged 19***

*Dear Billie,*

*Everything is different here, and I hate it. I hate not being able to laugh about silly things with you, not being able to simply be in your company. I miss you terribly. Everything seems off here, like it's wrong. I got into Paris-Panthéon-Assas, the most prestigious law university here in France, but I don't care that I did. I don't care if they offer me a silver platter through law school because none of it matters without you here by my side. It feels wrong experiencing the next phase of life without you. You're probably wondering if I have made any friends, truth is none of them compares to you. I can't be myself with them, I can't say what I feel, truly feel. I heard from Grace that you got into the University of Melbourne with the highest marks in our grade. I'm so proud of you, Billie. I know you will do great in whatever you pursue.*

*Wish you were here.*

*Finn.*

## ***Letter to Billie from Finn – Aged 22***

*Dear Billie,*

*These last few days have been the hardest without you by my side. I don't have anyone else I can share my inner darkest thoughts with, and there hasn't been a moment I wished you were by my side more than this one right here and now.*

*Today, I was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia. It even feels bizarre to write it down. The last year has been a rough ride, filled with hospital visits, countless needles, and tests. I'm tired, Billie, and I don't know if I will make it through this. I'm terrified. I don't want to die.*

*Part of me thinks if you were here, you would know what to say, you would make me get through it. You would tell me not to give up and keep fighting. I wanted to reach out to you so many times just to hear your voice, but like a coward, I didn't.*

*What if I die? I couldn't do that to you, I couldn't reach out to you now and throw your life upside down only to waste away in front of you.*

*The only thing that is giving me hope is the thought that I may get the chance to see you again someday in the future. I'm going to try, I'm going to give it my all, for you, for the possibility of us.*

*Everyone is telling me things will get better and that I will beat this, but I feel like I'm at the end. I don't want to give up, but my body is tired, sore, and my chest aches with the thought of never seeing you again before I die.*

*I love you, Billie. I promise to love you forever.*

*Cross my soul.*

*Finn.*

***Letter to Billie from Finn – aged 22***

*Dear Billie,*

*This week has been difficult, mostly because I'm deliriously tired from the chemo. I miss your scent, the delicious taste of your lips, and your genuine light of happiness. God knows I truly need it today. I'm angry, Billie. I'm angry at my father, I'm angry at the universe, and I'm angry with myself. Some nights I want to end it, just to feel like I have some control in my life. I hate feeling helpless, I hate feeling like I'm stuck and at the mercy of others. The drugs make my mind foggy, and I hate that I struggle to remember things, to remember us. I hate that this thing is taking me away from myself, taking my memories, like my body wasn't enough to satiate its thirst.*

*I miss you, Billie, more than you will ever know.*

*Finn.*

***Letter to Billie from Finn - aged 22***

*Dear Billie,*

*I haven't been able to get out of bed for two days. The nurses have been by my side tending to my needs like I'm on my deathbed. One even brought me a porn magazine because she thought I would want to pull myself off once more before I die. I laughed for a good while after that happened, but the truth is I'm still sad, still vexed and still fighting. I've just finished my third course of chemo today, and I feel somewhat hopeful that maybe there is a chance the universe may want us to be together again. I have a break after this round. Dad thinks I should go on a trip with my friends. He thinks it may bring my spirits up, but all I want to do is lay here and work my mind down to its last cell thinking of you, so I don't forget. I don't want to forget the outline of your lips, the way they curve when you smile or the way you purse them when you're upset or mad. I'm afraid of forgetting, Billie.*

*I long for you, B. Since the first day I landed in France, I have longed for you since.*

*Finn.*

### ***Letter to Billie from Finn - aged 23***

*Dear Billie,*

*I finished my last round of chemo today. I made it to the end. I feel hopeful that the universe will allow me to right my wrong. I should have never cut you off when I left, it was stupid and naïve of me to think it would be 'better' for you. I realise now that everything in life happens for a reason, but we have choices within those reasons. We are given what we are given, and it is up to us to make of those gifts as we will. I don't want to live with regret anymore, B. I want to be with the woman I love, the girl I have loved since I was a little kid. The only thing that got me through all those gruelling rounds of chemo was the tiny bit of hope that if I did, I could change my fate, that I could be with you once again. The doctors say that I must wait a few months to see how my body is going to respond, and after some tests, they will determine if I'm in the clear. I'm coming back to you, Billie, I know it. I've been given a second chance; I feel it in my chest.*

*I love you, B. Forever and always.*

*Finn.*

***Letter to Billie from Finn – aged 27***

*Dear Billie,*

*It's taken a while for me to get back to myself. I've been working on myself so I can come back a brand new me, a better me, for you. I've finished law school and have been looking after myself. I go to the gym now and lift weights every day. I eat like a rabbit as well; the doctors say I need to keep myself active and healthy to stop the cancer from coming back. They're confident in me and say I'm in the clear now. I'm coming back to you, a brand new me, Billie. I can't wait to see you.*

*I miss you.*

*Finn.*

## **Last Letter to Billie from Finn – Aged 28**

*Dear Billie,*

*I'm not quite sure how to start this letter so I'll start by saying how hard I have loved you these past few months. As I lay here with you sprawled on my chest, I can't help but apologise for leaving you not once, but twice in one lifetime. I'm sorry these were the cards we were dealt with in this life, and I'm sorry for not seizing the multiple opportunities I had, to have your love a lot earlier on in our lives. These past few months have been nothing short of amazing having you by my side, hand in hand. I hope one day you can move on and find someone who will love you just as much as I did. I hope they love fiercely, just as we did. If you feel at all guilty for the times you couldn't be there for me, don't. You are the best friend and lover anyone could ever want. Please go easy on yourself, follow your dreams, and make them your reality. Happiness is a journey and not a destination, so do things that exhilarate you and don't accept a subpar reality. That is not who you are, who we were. I'm not ready to say goodbye, but this isn't goodbye forever. Only until I see you on the other side.*

*I love you, Billie. Forever, and always.*

*Cross my soul.*

*Finn.*

My eyes water as I think about how much he had been through already, and my heart breaks thinking about how alone he felt, so far from home. I wrap the blanket around me tighter and hold myself together as I watch the sunrise, thinking about where Finn would be right now in the next life.





# Chapter Twenty-Three

## Billie

*Five Years Later*

I throw another pair of pants into my suitcase and zip it up. Standing back, I admire my work. Three suitcases all filled with my entire life. Looking around the room, I take in all the fond memories I have had here with my friends and family. The apartment looks bare, paintings stripped from the walls, furniture taken out, no coffee machine, and no electronics. Thanks to Riley's help, I've moved most of my things over to his place for him to store them for me until I get back... well... whenever I get back. The business has taken off, so much so that I have had to hire an assistant to manage the admin workload. I can't help but feel proud of myself for achieving something I thought was so out of reach for me, but now I get to travel the world and work from any corner of the globe that I wish.

I've made plans to travel, chasing all my favourite bands on tour around Europe and the States, and I feel so much excitement about what the future holds for Qu-inn Media and myself personally. There's a soft knock at the door, when I answer I see Harriet clinging onto Riley, then as soon as she sees me, she runs into my arms.

"Aunty B! Aunty B!"

I smile as I cuddle her in my arms.

"Oh, my goodness! You are getting so big!" I pretend to lift her and put her back down as she laughs.

"Are you ready, B?" Riley interrupts, walking through the door and helping with the suitcases. I nod, with a smile on my face, my heart beginning to beat faster at the promise of adventure. "Don't forget us here when you're chasing your bands around the globe, yeah? Come home once in a while," he jests.

“I promise.” I smile back. “How can I forget my favourite niece?” I softly pinch Harriet’s cheek as she giggles. “How’s Georgia doing?” Riley and Georgia hit it off and decided they wanted to get married as soon as possible. Once married, they announced they were pregnant with Harriet, giving me my one and only niece. She’s now expecting again.

Riley makes a face that screams “don’t ask.”

“She’s thirty-six weeks pregnant, and I truly believe she’s the devil incarnate right now.”

I laugh as I take one suitcase, rolling it out the door.

“That bad, huh?”

“You have no idea. She’s crazy.” He chuckles. “Don’t tell her I said that.”

I laugh as we all enter the elevator and go to the ground floor. “You better be helping her.”

“I do my best to help her, but it’s like I do everything wrong, and she just does it herself anyway.” He shrugs. “Devil. Incarnate.” He raises his eyebrows towards Harriet. “And she’s ninety-nine percent her mother.”

I burst into laughter at his last words.

“Well, you will have your hands full with a girl and a boy once Georgia gives birth.” I slap him on the shoulder. “Good luck, big bro. You’ll need it,” I jest.

We make our way to the car. Riley loads the suitcases into the tray of his dual cab Ute, and I buckle Harriet into her car seat.

“But Hayhay doesn’t want Auntie B to go.” Harriet frowns as I hand her a bunny she uses to cuddle in the car. She calls herself Hayhay because she can’t say Harriet yet.

“Don’t worry, baby. I’ll be back. I won’t be gone forever.” I give her a gentle kiss on her forehead, and she smiles.

The drive to the airport was filled with laughter as we reminisced about our younger years together. All the silly things we’d done, the pranks we pulled on each other. “Do you

remember when we egged the Francis house?” He laughs. “Finn ran like lightning from their front yard when he saw the lights turn on in the house.” His laughter diminishes as he stares at me. “Shit, sorry, B.” I shake my head. “No, don’t be sorry.” I smile. “It’s a funny memory... and I want to remember Finn this way.” I look to Riley. “I want to remember him in all the good times we had together.”

He reaches over and places his hand on mine. “I’m so proud of you.”

My heart swells at his praise.

“Dad would be proud.” He smiles as we turn into the drop-off bay at the airport.

Gathering my three suitcases, I hug Riley and give Harriet a kiss on the cheek.

“Send me lots of photos of the baby!” I yell out to him as I walk into the terminal. He nods as he waves goodbye, Harriet clutched to his leg.

The flight was rough, as any Europe-bound flights are. That is one reason I hate living in Australia. It just takes forever to get anywhere else. Once I arrive in London, I make my way to my hotel room, have a quick shower and plonk myself into the bed. My body is so exhausted that I cannot keep my eyes open.



My heart skips a beat when I watch the lead singer of Bring Me the Horizon run across the stage, screaming into the microphone. Bodies surround me as I look up to the stage, holding on to the barricade in front of me.

“Sheffield! Let me hear you fucking scream!” He points the mic to the crowd, and the crowd roars; my chest vibrates at the sound of the music flooding the arena.

This is my happy place, surrounded by my people. A memory of the Slipknot concert enters my mind, and I smile, knowing this is what Finn meant, to enjoy everything I never got to enjoy in my twenties. You can work all you want and

chase the money every single day of your life, but is that really living? Is that enough to say you have truly lived? Because when the time comes, hopefully in the distant future when I am old and wrinkly, I want to be able to say that I've had the best experiences.

I don't care whether you like to spend your time bird watching in the forest, or playing golf with your friends, the point of life is to do the things you love before your time runs out, before you cannot anymore. I'm thankful to Finn for showing me how much of my life I did not like, teaching me that I can indeed do the things I love whilst still making a living without being confined to a desk, surrounded by four walls. I'm grateful that we got a chance to experience this together, even if it was for a short while.



I spent the next two weeks following band after band around London, Berlin, Amsterdam... the list goes on. I watch the trees rustling in the wind through the window of the taxi as we drive past the Mackenzie château. I thought it would be hard to be back here, but it isn't. I feel... calm... at ease. Getting out of the cab, I grab my bag and walk down the stone path, leading towards the lavender fields. In the distance, I spot Finn's tombstone, slightly weathered from the rain and wind. Once I reach his grave, I place my things down and sit cross-legged on the grass. Taking a deep breath in, I look around, the sun beaming down on my face. My lips curve into a small smile as I place my hand on top of his grave, feeling the blades of grass between my fingers.

"Hey, Finn..." I look up into the sun and sigh. "I miss you." I feel the breeze push my hair behind my shoulders. "I've been travelling around Europe for the past couple of weeks... and I thought of you at every single concert I went to." I pause, taking a shaky breath. "You would have loved it." I take out an envelope from my bag, the paper beginning to yellow from the years it has spent inside a drawer. "I brought you something... I wrote it the week after your passing, not

knowing if I would get the chance to come back.” My hands tremble as I open the envelope, unfolding the letter.

*Dear Finn,*

*As I stand here beside your tombstone, reliving the best moments of our lives in my mind, my heart crumbles at the fact that I must now live through the grief of losing you.*

*The reality of life without you dawns on me. It closes me in and confines me into a corner of sorrow. There will never be anyone who understands me like you did. You were my best friend, my twin flame. They say a twin flame begins as one soul, then splits into two bodies. That's what we were, halves of one whole. Spiritually, we were always together, always yearning for the other to be near when we were apart, and with you gone, there will always be a piece of me missing, taken with you into the next life.*

*I promise you I will do my best to live my life with no regrets, to chase my desires and aim for happiness in every corner of my heart. I owe you for pulling me out of my fears, for helping me see that life is fragile, it's never constant and that we must seize all the opportunities we are given, for tomorrow is not promised. I vow to live my life on my own terms from now on. I promise to disregard the trivial things in life and focus on those that truly make me happy. I hope you're watching from above because I'm going to make you proud to see that I'm living my life to the fullest, just like you asked me to. Like you said so beautifully, it's not goodbye forever, only for now until our halves fuse as one again in the next life.*

*I love you, Finn, always and forever.*

*Cross my soul.*

*Billie.*

I feel a tear trickle down my cheek as I fold up the letter, place it back inside the envelope, and hold it close to my heart. “I’ve held on to this letter for years because I felt if I let it go, I would let you go with it”—placing the envelope on top of Finn’s grave, I wipe away my tears with the back of my hand —“but I’m ready now, just like you made me promise. I have

mourned you, and now I think I am ready to live again.” I look up into the sky as the clouds move peacefully together.

“Honey? Billie, is that you?” I hear Mrs. Mackenzie’s voice from behind me, and when I turn around, I see her walking towards me through the grass. “Oh, honey, we’ve missed you so much.” She takes me into her warm embrace as I smile and wrap my arms around her.

“I wanted to visit Finn first before I said hello,” I say, pulling back out of her embrace. She puts her arm around my shoulders and guides me back to the house.

“How are you doing?” She rubs the side of my shoulder as we walk together.

“Honestly, I’m doing really well.” I look at her and smile.

“Grace tells me you’ve been travelling all around Europe to follow some bands?” She looks down to the grass. “Finn would have loved to be with you.” She sighs and shakes her head. “I hope you haven’t made reservations for accommodations... you’ll stay here with us.”

“I haven’t,” I admit.

“Perfect. I’ll make up Grace’s room for you—”

“No,” I cut her off. “If it’s okay with you, I want to stay in Finn’s room.”

She smiles and nods. “Of course, honey.”

We sit together the rest of the afternoon and chat about work and family. Mrs. Mackenzie talks about her grandson Harry, telling me about how much he has grown since I last saw him, and I smile at the pure happiness in her eyes as she talks.

“How’s Mr. Mackenzie doing?” I ask.

“He’s doing just fine, love. You know how he is... he dives into his work when something troubles him, and ever since Finn’s passing, that’s all he’s wanted to do.” A sombre look covers her face.

“I guess we all have our own ways of coping.” I give her a small smile.

Mrs. Mackenzie wanders off to do some gardening in the backyard. She’s been in France a lot more now than in previous years, and I believe she wants to work at her marriage with Mr. Mackenzie more than ever since the passing of her son. Heading upstairs, I make my way to Finn’s room. His door is closed as I reach it.

I haven’t been here, in his room since his passing, and the moment I step through the door, I’m transported back into the past, the memories of our last few moments together flooding my imagination. Everything still smells exactly like him, the familiar scent filling my nose as I lay on top of the bedsheets. Taking a moment to myself, I smile about all the wonderful things we got to experience together. Previously in my journey of grief, the only thing I could think about was how I would survive without him, but now that I’m laying here, on his bed, without him, the only thing I’m thinking about is how he made my life better... made *me* better.

Without him, I wouldn’t have had the guts to quit the job I hated so much for such a long time. I wouldn’t have been able to set myself up with my dream job and travel the world as I work from different countries around the globe.

Out of all the things I’m feeling right now, grateful is at the very forefront. Taking my laptop out of my bag, I open it to sift through my emails and reply to all my clients. Then I notice an email from an unfamiliar address. Opening the email, I read through it.

*Hi Billie,*

*My name is Francesca, and I work with the Golden State Warriors as a marketing coordinator. Your previous colleague has kindly shared your information with me, I hope it is okay that I am contacting you directly. We would love the opportunity to work with you on our upcoming marketing campaign with our players to raise awareness and build our fan base even further.*

*The campaign will run for roughly three months, and we will require a couple months of your time and expertise for building and reviewing.*

*If you are interested in the opportunity, please give me a call, or reply to this email.*

*Francesca*

My heart skips a beat as I take in the reality of my life right now. Covering my mouth with one hand, I force myself to re-read the email multiple times in case I somewhat imagined it. Golden State *Warriors*? If I can land this client, they will be my most famous and largest client I've ever worked with. I press Reply and immediately accept the opportunity and propose a meeting in the next week.





# Chapter Twenty-Four

## Billie

The hustle and bustle of the busy café fills my ears as I try to regain my focus and write this email to Francesca. I landed in San Fran yesterday. After we spoke on the phone a few days ago, she wanted to meet in person as soon as possible to talk through the finer details. I manage to regain focus and ask Francesca to meet tomorrow at noon. Resting my back into the comfy couch chair, I watch as people come and go, ordering coffees, meeting with friends, and chatting. I admire the simple things in life now, the things we usually wouldn't stop to look at, the things we are always too busy to notice. Like how people almost always blow on their coffee before the first sip, or how the breeze carries leaves into the air.

Glancing out the large window of the café, I notice a mother on the sidewalk, zipping her son's coat and placing a beanie on his head. He smiles when she says something to him. He clings to her hand as they both walk away, and it makes me wonder if I will experience that someday. I've been thinking about it a lot in the past few weeks, what it would be like to be a mother, but I don't think I'd want to do it alone. I can't help but feel my time for that phase in my life is slowly running out. My chest tightens at the thought.

My phone dings, snapping me back to the present. Riley has sent me a photo, and my eyes well up as I open it to see my first nephew, Jamie, just entered the world. It takes a lot for me to start missing home, but at this moment, the homesick feeling stabs me directly in the heart.

Glancing outside again, I notice a familiar figure in the distance, approaching the café. As soon as he enters the café, my heart almost stops, and I need to remind myself to breathe. I'm not sure if he has noticed me yet... or maybe he doesn't recognize me. I feel paralysed, unsure if I should approach him. The years have been kind to Nate, his features haven't changed all that much. He's still tall, slightly larger framed,

and he's grown a slight beard. He's wearing jeans with a brown overcoat and black boots. I guess the leather jacket era must be over for him. Walking to the register, he places his order and waits as the barista prepares his coffee.

This is my chance... but what would I say?

Would he even want to see me?

The barista hands him two coffees, which stops me dead in my tracks.

What if he's with someone?

He must have found someone over the years. I watch him walk out, the window of the opportunity for reunion closing with every step he takes.

I watch as he walks down the sidewalk, his frame getting smaller and smaller as he walks into the distance.

*No, fuck this.*

Gathering my things, I almost sprint out of the café, following the direction he went. I see him approach a vehicle and almost take a tumble as I stop, watching the beautiful blonde step out of the car. Nate hands her a coffee, and she smiles. My heart pinches watching them walk together further down the street. I don't know what I expected, but I didn't expect to see Nate at all.

I spent the rest of my afternoon working in the apartment I'm currently renting. I don't mind the apartment. There's really nothing to complain about. So many people would love to be able to live in San Francisco and have the opportunity to work with the Warriors. Did I mention they're covering the cost of my rent? Yeah, epic... I know. I glance at the time and notice I've been working for a few hours which comes as a shock to me. Back when I was working in an office, every hour felt like weeks, but now, the hours feel like minutes. I guess it's true what they say, when you do something you love, you don't work a day in your life. I open my emails to see if I need to respond to any other urgent ones when another comes through, this one from Noah.

*Hi Billie,*

*I know it's been a while since my last email to you. You'll have to forgive me, it's been quite hectic these last few weeks. As you already know, The Warriors decided to give me a chance.*

*Yeah, I know, I can't believe it either... but I must have done something right because they literally love me over here. I hope you're doing well. I miss your pessimistic view on life sometimes. It was a breath of fresh air. These Americans all have endless motivational speeches, and it gets kind of repetitive and expected after a few times.*

*So, I have some news... I'm getting married... to my college sweetheart. No, she's not pregnant, before you start getting any ideas. We met the first day I moved here, and she helped me through the change. We grew quite close, and I truly love her... I can't imagine my life without her. Anyway, I really hope you can make it to the wedding. I know it seems quite rushed, but I have to be in New York for a game in a couple of weeks, so we want to tie the knot before then and extend our stay in New York for a honeymoon. I've added the link to our website in this email, so have a look and let me know when you can.*

*Noah.*

I click on the link, and it takes me to Noah and Cassie's wedding website. The background image is of them, a young, vibrant, happy couple. I smile as I scroll through the website, looking at how happy they seem together.

Cassie is a short blonde with the most luscious lashes I have ever seen. I hover over the RSVP button, hesitating for a moment. Obviously, Nate is going to be there... but will that be uncomfortable for him? To see me there... after so many years? My phone rings, causing me to flinch at the loud ringtone.

“Heyyyyyyy... oh my god I miss you so much. Harry is driving me up the bloody wall. Sorry if you can hear his screams.”

I chuckle. “Miss you, too, Grace. How's things going?”

“It’s good, B. It’s really, really good. How are you doing?”

“Well, I think I might be signing to work with the Warriors tomorrow.”

She gasps. “The Golden State Warriors?! Oh my god, B, that’s huge!”

“It’s surreal... I can’t believe it myself.” I say

“Congratulations, you so deserve it.” She pauses. “So, you’re in San Fran right now?”

“Yeah, they’re paying for my rent here in an apartment in the city.”

“Wow, that’s crazy. I still can’t believe you get to travel the world and do your job on the go.”

I sigh. “I guess dreams do come true if you work at them every day.” There’s a pause on the line, and I can sense she wants to ask me something, so I tell her anyway. “I saw Nate today.”

“I heard from Riley that he’s in San Fran for his brother’s wedding.”

“Yeah, they’re having it at the Golden Gate Club.”

“Gosh, that’s so fancy. I would love to be there as your plus one if I could... How is Nate?” she asks.

A beat passes before I answer. “I didn’t speak to him.”

“What? Why?”

“I saw him at a café, and when I followed him out, I saw him walking together with a blonde... I assumed it was his partner or wife or whatever. So, I couldn’t bring myself to say hi.”

“I understand...” She trails off for a moment. “Will you go to Noah’s wedding?”

I pause for a moment, debating whether I should or not, then I move my cursor on my laptop and click ‘yes’ in the RSVP section.

“Yes, I will be there. I want to be there to support him on his special day.”



# Chapter Twenty-Five

## Billie

The cab reached the wedding venue in less time than I had anticipated. Paying the driver, I step out of the car and watch the cab drive off. Staring ahead at the venue, I take a long breath in, preparing myself for the night ahead. The venue is beautiful. Large trees surround the white building, floor-to-ceiling windows providing a clear view into the reception. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend the ceremony as I had a meeting with Francesca, but here I am standing outside the reception venue, and I can't bring my feet to move. I'm nervous. My palms sweat as I stare down the building. I'm sure he knows that I'll be here. I mean, it's his brother's wedding after all.

Gathering all my courage, I take a step towards the venue and head into the reception. The reception is beautiful. Flowers adorn every table with perfectly placed crockery and glassware. Finding my name card, I take my seat at the table and pour myself a drink. Others mingle about their tables and around the bar.

My eyes scan the room, looking for the one person I know I will see eventually, but he's not here. A little disappointment bubbles to the surface. People start filtering in through the doors. A few more take their seats at my table, and I smile politely. I don't know any of these people. A few minutes pass, and then it happens, the moment I had been waiting for.

Nate appears in a black tux, striding through the doors. I hold my breath as I take him in from across the room. He's possibly the most handsome person I have ever seen. I chew on my bottom lip as I nervously take a sip of my drink, waiting for him to notice me.

Then it happens, his eyes lock onto mine, and he smiles. My heart pounds inside my chest as I smile back. There are so many things being said without having to say them. I'm about



to get up and walk over to him when he tips his head forward and nods to me in acknowledgement.

Breaking our eye contact, he walks over to a few people crowded around another table and begins talking with them. That's all I get? A nod? I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't a nod. Feeling a little annoyed, I make my way over to the bar and order myself a cocktail.

I watch him talk with the guests, and I notice the same blonde I had seen with him last week come up behind him and place her hand on his arm. I can't help but feel a little bit jealous of her contact with him. I know I have no right to. We probably don't know each other anymore, and it's been years since we've spoken. Sighing,

I turn back around to the bartender and watch him mix my drink.

*You have no right to feel upset,* I think to myself.

I grab my drink from the bartender and head back to my seat. The MC asks everyone to be seated as the bride and groom will be making their entrance soon. I make a mental note to myself to try and enjoy this night for Noah. I make small conversation with the people at my table and learn that they are all Noah's friends from college, and my heart warms knowing he had good friends to support him through schooling and his dreams of becoming a professional basketball player.

The music stops, and the MC asks everyone to stand. "Allow me to introduce to you for the very first time, Mr. and Mrs. Rizzo!"

The wide reception doors open to reveal Noah in a beautiful blue tux and Cassie in a gorgeous sparkling ball gown, both with the widest smiles on their faces as they make their way through the guests to the dance floor in the middle. The music begins again. "Breathe Again" by Sara Bareilles fills the room, and I watch as they begin to slow dance. Gazes locked on each other, oozing nothing but pure, unconditional love.

Dry ice streams across the floor, creating a perfect cloud beneath their feet, as if they were dancing on fluffy clouds.

I glance around the room and see everyone else's eyes on the happy couple. They share a gentle kiss as Noah places his forehead on hers and whispers something to her, only for her to hear. Tears sting the back of my eyes as I watch them, beautifully wrapped in their love for each other.

I grab my drink and slowly make my way out of the reception room into the garden out front. A knot forms inside my chest, the emotions of a love lost mixing with a healing, grieving heart. I place my drink on the nearest bench and wrap my arms around myself.

My thoughts are at war with each other.

I know what I promised Finn, to move on with life and find someone to grow old with, but what if there is only one person who is meant to be that for you in your life?

Could there be another?

If so, is it possible to meet that person at the wrong time in your life?

My thoughts are interrupted when I hear someone approach from behind me. Whirling around, I watch as Nate stands there, watching me. The wind forces my hair back behind my shoulders, sending a chill down my spine. We stare at each other, both of us just drinking each other in.

Nate breaks the silence first.

"I'm sorry about Finn." The tears I had been holding back flood through me, crashing into me like a tidal wave. I let them fall silently, although there is a raging river thrashing inside me. Pressing my lips together, I nod, words evading me.

"You look great, B." He gives me a small smile, cocking his head to the side.

I manage to give a small smile back as I steady my breath. "So do you. I don't think I had the chance to see you in a tux before."

He chuckles that familiar husky chuckle, creating tingles in my fingers.

“First for everything, I guess.” He runs a hand through his hair, his eyes locking onto mine as he moves closer to me. My mouth goes dry as he reaches up and brushes a strand of hair away from my face. I close my eyes and breathe in his crisp perfume, savouring this moment, saving it in my memories.

“How are you?” he asks.

“I’m fine...” I wipe away the tears left on my cheeks. “I’m actually working in San Fran for a few months with Noah’s basketball team.”

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“Yeah, I know. I finally ended up leaving my dreadful job and opened up my own business.”

“That’s great, B.” He smiles. “I’m happy you finally took that step. I know you weren’t happy there.”

“How are you?” I ask.

He takes a deep breath and sighs, his eyes dancing from my eyes to my mouth. “I’m a completely different person than I was before.” He sighs. “Five years it’s been.” He pauses, placing a hand on my cheek, his thumb resting on my lips. “And yet, you still stir something in me.” I’m taken back by his confession, my brows pulling together. He moves closer, our bodies almost touching. I can practically feel his body heat emanating through his tux. His eyes darken with desire as he stares into mine.

“I’ve been waiting for this moment ever since I left Australia...”

My heart pounds inside my chest, threatening to escape.

“The moment where I would get to see you again... touch you again.”

I swallow, unsure of what to say.

“*If* I were to get that opportunity again, I promised myself I would take it without hesitation,” he breathes as he leans

forward, his other hand sliding around my waist, sending an electric current through my entire body with a single touch.



# Chapter Twenty-Six

## Nathan

She still looks as beautiful as ever before, her wavy dark brown hair flowing freely down past her shoulders. Those beautiful lips beckoning to be kissed. Her hand comes between us, and she places it on my chest. “Wait.”

Stopping, I pull back.

“Aren’t you with that blonde?”

Confused, I shake my head. “What blonde?”

“The one I saw you on the street with the other day outside a café... the same one who was talking to you inside the reception.” It’s cute how she’s clearly a little jealous, even after all this time. She may still feel something for me. Truth is, since her, I haven’t really been interested in anyone romantically. It’s always just been sex and nothing more. Purely to satisfy an itch. Wait a minute... she saw me that day?

I chuckle. “No, she’s Cassie’s mum.”

Her eyes go wide. “But she’s so young.”

“She had Cassie at a young age.” I smirk. “Am I crazy, or was that a little bit of jealousy I sensed in your voice?”

She blushes. “Even if it was... I don’t have a right to be jealous. It’s been five years; you deserve to find someone else who makes you happy.”

I can’t focus on anything she’s saying right now. “You saw me at that café, and you didn’t say anything. Why?”

She turns away from me, pulling out of my hold, she tries to walk away, but I don’t let her. I grab onto her wrist, pulling her back into me. Her eyes meet mine, the blue in them swirling, pulling me into them like a magnet. “I saw you, and I considered saying hello, but I didn’t know if you’d want to see me after this long. Then I chased after you down the street like

an idiot, but I saw you helping Cassie's mum out of her car... and I just assumed you were together, so I didn't want to make it awkward or whatever," she blurts out.

She chased after me? My heart picks up speed at her confession.

"Noah didn't tell me he was inviting you... so when I saw you inside, I didn't know what to do," I confess.

"Well, that explains the awkward nod," she jests, but her face falls. "I don't expect the feelings to still be there, you know... I mean, we were only together a short time, and then..." She pauses, considering her next words.

I finish them for her. "And then you found out who I truly was." I slide my arm around her waist once more and pull her into me.

"Listen to me, and hear me when I say this... that night at the cabin, I saw the connection between you and Finn.

I saw the undeniable pull you both had on each other and when I thought about what happened that night on the drive home, I knew I had to let you go. I knew he was your best friend and first love, which is why I didn't stand a chance, and I didn't have it in me to make you choose, because you would've chosen him. I also had Noah to think about and our future... it made sense for me to move. I couldn't stay in Melbourne, not after all the things I had done, the people I had hurt." She places her hands on my chest and looks up at me through beautifully thick lashes.

"Riley told me how much Finn loved you, in the short time you had with him, how much he cared for you and pushed you to become a better person... how he helped you quit the job you absolutely despised. I'm happy you got to spend that time with Finn, to be there for him, and love him while he fought. I understand first loves are ones that will always be with us forever." A tear slides down her cheek, and I brush it away with my thumb, resting my hand on her face.

"If you will let me, I will be your last love. I will give you everything and anything you want. I may be slightly older, but

the feelings are still there, the desire is still there. If you let me in again, I can show you I am the only man you will ever need from this day on.” My heart hammers inside my chest as I speak.

“I know I’m nothing like Finn was, and I don’t want to be, but I promise that you will never have to question my love for you. You will never have to live without it because as long as my heart beats on this earth, baby, it beats for you, for us.”

She takes a deep breath, her eyes lingering on my lips.

Without thinking, I capture her lips with mine with five years worth of yearning and desire for her, billowing through me like a fire, sucking up all the oxygen around us.

Her soft lips open, allowing me entry to her mouth. I taste her, pulling her into me, her arms reach around my neck, our mouths moving together. Over the years, I thought about this kiss too many times to count.

She breaks the kiss, her arms resting on my shoulders. “Why didn’t you contact me?” I knew she would ask this, and she has every right to.

“When I heard about Finn’s illness, I wanted to wait for you. I know it sounds selfish, but I hoped you would find your way back to me someday, so I wanted you to be ready when that day came,” I admit.

“I don’t know if I am,” she says, her voice barely a whisper.

“If you weren’t ready, you wouldn’t have come tonight.” I place both hands on her hips, and it takes all my willpower to keep them from roaming her body. Her thin, black satin dress clings to her curves so perfectly under my grasp. “You wouldn’t have chased after me at that café.” I watch her considering my words as she fights internally with herself. “What are you thinking? Please, B, let me in.”

She reaches up and runs her fingers through my hair, sending goose bumps down my back. “I’m thinking about keeping the promises I make.”



My brows furrow with confusion. “I made a promise to Finn that I would pursue everything in life that could make me happy... and I have done that in every aspect of my life besides love.” She sighs. “I think you’re right. Maybe I am ready to be loved again... maybe *I* am ready to love again.”

I let go of a breath I didn’t realise I was holding. “I will choose you every single day of my life, if you let me. I will be there in every way, to love you, to hold you, to carry you... to lift you when you need me to... if you let me, baby, I will *be* anything for you, *do* anything for you.” I give her my word, and I mean it.

“I loved you, Nate, and I never got a chance to say it back then because I was so confused, but I’ll say it now. I don’t want another moment passing us by without letting you know I love you. I kept you in my heart all these years that had passed, wondering how you were and if you ever thought of me,” she says, her lip quivering as she speaks.

“I kept wondering if maybe the universe made a mistake, if we met at the wrong time...” She hesitates before she speaks again. “The question was always there, in the back of my mind... what if...?” She pauses, biting her lip to hold herself together.

“No more what-ifs, baby. This is it,” I whisper.

She pulls me in for another kiss, her lips lingering for a moment before pressing onto mine. Although we haven’t seen each other in years, the chemistry remains unchanged. I feel it in my entire body when she’s near. I hold her tight, close to me, in case she might slip away again, in case I will lose her again.

The kiss grows hotter, deeper... I feel her desire building, radiating through her body, into mine. Sliding my hands a little further down, I almost lose it as my hands rest on her ass, feeling the sensual curve. Her hands roam my chest. Every inch she touches feels like it’s being set on fire. She breaks the kiss, her breathing heavy.

“We should probably go back inside,” she pants.

“Not yet...” I feel like a teenager again, the erection in my pants growing with every second I spend with her. “Go on a date with me.”

She chuckles. “When?”

“Every day, for the rest of our lives... starting now.” I watch as her eyes move to the venue, and she begins to pull away from my hold. Then we are interrupted by none other than my little brother.

“You found each other,” I hear him say joyfully as he approaches Billie, taking her in a hug.

“A heads up would’ve been nice. I had to improvise a whole speech,” I joke as they both smile and laugh.

“Yeah... well. Don’t take this the wrong way, Billie, but I didn’t want him to be disappointed if you didn’t end up coming.” He scratches the back of his head.

“I’m not offended.” She smiles. “You were just looking out for him.”

Noah looks at me. “Well... are you two going to join the party or what?”

I slide my hand into Billie’s, her fingers interlocking with mine, and something inside my chest bursts. I never want to let her go. I want her hand in mine forever. Noah smiles at the sight of her hand in mine as we all begin walking back to the venue. “You know she thought I was seeing Cassie’s mum?” I tell Noah.

His laughter bellows through the air. “That is beyond hilarious... not because she’s my mother-in-law, but because in the whole time we’ve been in the US, I have never had him introduce anyone to me, B.” He pauses. “I was truly concerned for him at one stage... all he ever did was work.”

Billie turns to me and gives me a sympathetic look. “Did you not pick up MMA when you settled here?” she asks.

I shake my head. “I didn’t really want to... I wanted to focus on working and earning a *legal* income. You know, becoming part of society,” I jest, but she doesn’t smile.

“I’ll see you both inside. My wife is waiting for me... we’ll catch up properly soon, Billie!” Noah jogs over to Cassie waiting for him on the balcony of the venue as I turn to Billie.

“You didn’t give me an answer.” I search her eyes for one.

She hesitates only for a moment before smiling.

“Is there a Five Guys here in San Fran?”

I smirk at her response, remembering our very first dinner together. There is absolutely nothing that can stop me from being with this woman, nothing. I would tear through any obstacle in my path if it meant I could reach her at the end. I’ve waited for this moment for a long time, and now that it’s finally here. I won’t fuck it up. I’ve worked too hard at becoming a better man, a part of society who earns his living and pays his taxes, that I won’t do anything to jeopardize the possibility of us.

When I heard from Riley that she was with Finn all those years ago, my rage took over. I worked every day, seven days a week just to be away from my thoughts. Just because I had expected that to happen doesn’t mean it hurt any less to lose her. When I had heard about Finn’s illness, a part of my heart broke... for Billie. He was too young to be taken. Ripped from the earth, from his love. I can’t lie and say I never wanted Billie to myself, but I wanted her to have the opportunity to live out what she had imagined since she was a teenager because only then would she return to me, ready to be loved again. What we had before was good, but I know it will be better now, because *we* are better. The things in our lives had to happen to bring us here to this moment in time... We needed to experience our personal struggles to make us better people. Everyone’s lesson in life is different. We can’t judge people based on their past... who they’ve loved, what they’ve done or haven’t done, because their journey is not the same as ours. The only person we can judge is ourselves, as we aim to achieve the ultimate goal in life... to love and be loved.

No matter which stage of life we are in, we all need love.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### Billie

“Ready?” Nate stands at my doorway, dressed in black jeans, a white shirt, and a red plaid jacket. Seriously, the older this man gets, the more attractive he becomes... how is that even possible?

“Ready.” I smile as we head out the door and walk towards his black Chevy Ute parked on the side of the road. Nate opens my door as I slide into the passenger seat. He doesn’t take his eyes off me as he walks around the car and gets into the driver’s seat.

“Why do you keep staring?” I can’t help the wide smile covering my entire face.

“Because you look absolutely stunning.” He starts the car and leans forward, placing a kiss on my cheek and lingers close to my ear. “You have no idea how much I missed you.”

My cheeks heat at his suggestive tone, and he smirks at the effect he has on me. Pulling away from the curb, we make our way to the restaurant.

“Are you sure you want to go to Five Guys and not a fancy restaurant?” he asks.

“Yes, I am sure. I haven’t been back since we went there together, and I am craving their burgers,” I admit.

“I’m just saying, this is our first date, and I don’t want you to think I won’t take you somewhere fancy... ’cause, baby, I would knock you off your feet with the amount of fancy shit I would do for you.” He smiles, proud of himself.

I let out a small laugh. “Wow, is this the new romantic, fancy Nate?”

“Whatever it takes to hear you laugh again, B.” He grabs my hand and places it on his chest. “You feel this?” I look at him as he drives, one hand on mine and the other on the wheel.

“This is yours, and it would do anything for you.” I don’t know what to say to that, so I just smile.

I wonder about his past, and I can’t help myself. “How did you get involved with the underworld back in Melbourne?” I ask.

His lips purse as he brings my hand down and intertwines his fingers with mine. “I fell in with the wrong people at a young age. My parents were addicts and abusers, so I had to make a lot of money and quickly, so... I started selling.” He sighs, clearly uncomfortable talking about his past. “Then I got in deep when I met Joe, the big bad wolf as they call him. He saw me fight a few guys off, and the rest was basically history. He asked me to work for him as an enforcer, and... well... the money was too good to pass up. I had Noah to look after and put through school, so I took the easy way out.”

“That must have been hard for you.” I think of a young Nate, trying to make ends meet all while trying to raise his younger brother.

He shrugs. “It’s done now, baby, we all have better things to look forward to in life.” He brings my hand up to his mouth and plants a gentle kiss on the back of my hand. “Tell me about you.”

“Well, it was hard after losing Finn, but I have him to thank for my success,” I admit.

“Partly,” he interjects.

“Partly?” I question.

“He didn’t do all the work *for* you. He supported you and gave you the push you needed... but you did all the work and look at you now... self-employed... travelling the world.” He smiles. I guess he is right. I do owe a lot to Finn. Without his push, I wouldn’t have pursued the self-employed life, but I did it all. I worked hard at getting my own clients, setting up the back ends... everything.

“You’re right.” I smile. “I’ve been travelling, been to most parts of Europe following my favourite bands on tour.” I reach over and place my hand on the nape of his neck, my fingers

folding between the strands of his dark hair. “You know, I had imagined you with someone else since it had been so long. I for sure thought you would have found someone else.”

He sighs. “I did try, but I couldn’t. Every time I got close with someone or tried to get close to them, I would imagine them as you. It happened almost every time, and I just had to end it.”

His confession saddens me, knowing that he wasn’t able to find someone, because of me.

“How’s Riley doing? Two kids now, huh?” he asks with happiness in his tone.

I smile, thinking about my niece and nephew back in Australia.

“Yeah, Harriet is so cute, you can absolutely tell that she will grow up to be headstrong. She already is.”

“Just like her aunty.” He chuckles.

“Do you want kids?” I ask, holding my breath.

“Absolutely,” he says without hesitation. I smile as I imagine a mini-Nate with his eyes, his dark curly hair, and strong jaw. “Do you?”

“I fear it may be getting a bit too late for me.” I sigh. “But yes, I do want children.”

“It’s never too late for anything.” He pulls the car into the parking lot. Exiting the car, we begin walking towards the Five Guys building, our hands locked together. “Do you know what you want?”

“Oh yeah, I knew what I wanted since last night.” I chuckle as he laughs. Once we order, we take a seat and wait for our number to be called. “So how long are you in San Fran?” I ask.

“I have a week off work. I wanted to make sure Noah had all the support he needed for the wedding.” I nod. “But he’s leaving for New York tomorrow to get ready for the upcoming game, I was going to leave with him, but... I’d much rather be where you are.”

I smile. “Where are you staying?”

“Some hotel near the city.”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “Do you want to stay with me?”

He hesitates for a moment before speaking. “Are you sure?”

I nod.

“I would love nothing more, baby.”

Butterflies whirl around in my stomach as I watch him stand and head to the counter to collect our food.

A part of me feels guilty, like what I am doing is somewhat an insult to Finn’s memory, but I remind myself of my promise to him, my promise to myself.

I did love Nate, and I think deep down that didn’t go away, it’s still there, and with each passing minute with him, it grows, like a flower being showered with sun. He returns with our food, and my mouth instantly salivates as I smell the deliciousness of the cheeseburgers. I scarf mine down within minutes, and Nate looks at me equally impressed and shocked.

“I guess you can still put away burgers, huh?” He chuckles.

“Stop it... don’t make fun of me.” I smile, embarrassed as I wipe the corner of my mouth, then take a sip of my drink.

“I’m not... I love that about you,” he admits, his face turning serious.

“And I love that you love that about me.” Heat rushes to my cheeks. “It’s not my best quality, but it’s an honest one.” I chuckle.

“When you’re finished, we’re going for a walk,” he says.

“Jeez, it hasn’t even been a minute, and you’re already trying to get me to exercise.” I roll my eyes playfully.

“We’re going to take a *romantic* walk, not a hike.” He chuckles at my defiance.



We finish up with our meal and head out the door. I begin walking towards the sidewalk, but Nate pulls me back. “We have to drive to where we will walk.”

I shrug. “Okay.” We get in the car and begin driving back in the direction of my apartment.



The lights of the cars twinkle as they cross from one side of the bridge to the other. Nate’s hand in mine, we stand on Marshall’s Beach as we stare up at the Golden Gate Bridge. The stars in the night sky shine almost as bright as the moon. I close my eyes as I feel the night breeze tickle my face, pushing my hair back.

“It’s magnificent,” I say, opening my eyes to find his staring into mine.

“I wanted you to remember this date. Although there will be many more, this one will be the most significant.” I turn to him as he pulls me into him.

“How so?” I lick my lips, watching his move.

“This date is the date you returned to me. This one is the one where you decided to give us a second chance.” He places his hand on the side of my face, his thumb lightly rubbing my cheek. “Because this one will always hold a place in my heart.”

“Oh, Nate.” I wrap my arms around his neck, and our lips eagerly collide against each other. Our hands begin to roam, mine to his chest and shoulder, his from my back to my hips. I move my hand into his hair, gripping it tightly as his mouth moves down to my neck, leaving spine-tingling kisses. A moan escapes my throat as he pulls me in tighter, grazing his teeth from my neck to my ear.

My thighs clench as he breathes into my ear, a grumble leaving his throat as his hands grab my hips, almost bruising them. My chest heaves at his touch. I can feel my nipples harden underneath my clothes as he takes my lips once more. I feel feverish, the heat rising in my body.

Pulling away slightly, my voice barely a whisper. “Take me home,” I say as we both struggle to keep our hands off each other.

The entire car ride is silent as “Mount Everest” by Labrinth plays through the radio in Nate’s car as we exchange glances of desire. I stare at him driving, watching the way the muscles in his hands tense as he grips the steering wheel. The air is tight with sexual tension as he pulls into a parking bay outside of my apartment. He places his hand on mine, looking me in the eyes.

“Come upstairs with me,” I whisper.

He licks his lips, and the sight of it has me shifting in my seat, itching to taste him again. “We don’t have to do this if you’re not ready,” he says.

“I haven’t been with anyone else since Finn.” I take a deep breath. “It’s been five years... I’m ready.”

We walk up to the apartment. Reaching the door, I unlock it, and once it’s closed, I throw my bag, not caring where it lands. My hands are on him, tearing his clothes off, one by one. The jacket is the first to go, then his shirt, revealing his irresistibly muscular pecs. His lips devour mine as if they were at war with each other, his hands working quickly, removing my jacket, then my shirt. He pulls me into him, reaching behind me, he pulls at the back of my bra, causing it to snap off completely. He takes one of my breasts in his mouth, his hot tongue sending a jolt of pleasure between my legs. My hands travel down to unbuckle his belt, undo his pants, and push them down. He steps out of them without taking his mouth off me, his hands reach down to undo mine, I push them down and step out of them. He steps back an inch, his eyes admiring me from top to bottom. My cheeks flush as I watch the flame of desire burn through those emerald-green eyes.

Within seconds, he’s on me again, his hands reaching down and ripping my lace underwear. I watch as he puts two fingers in his mouth, sucking them before bringing them down, slowly sliding from my clit to my entrance.

The pleasure pools inside me at his touch. I grip onto his neck as his fingers enter me, a moan slipping from my mouth. My hips move on their own accord, begging his fingers to move, to create friction, and he complies, moving them in and out slowly.

His mouth comes down on my neck, sucking, licking, kissing. Reaching down, I grip his shaft, and he immediately hardens at my touch, letting out a groan.

We move together, stepping over our clothing as I pull him into my bedroom impatiently.

My body is on fire like I've drunk poison, and the only cure is him. We reach the edge of the bed. He gently helps me down onto it, kissing me. I feel him right there as he looks into my eyes, the green in his eyes so dark it almost looks black. He watches me as the tip of his shaft enters me slowly, one hand on my hip, the other in my hair.

The heat inside me swirls at every single touch. Placing one of my hands on his chest, the other on the side of his neck, I whisper, "Make love to me."



# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Nathan

I slide myself deeper inside her, the inside of her walls clenching on to me. Sweat rolls down my back as I move in and out of her slowly. Her beautiful blue eyes are heavy as she rests her head back. Taking her lips with mine, I move against her faster, her breathing becoming heavier as our bodies writhe with each other. Her arms roam my back, her fingernails leaving trails in their wake. Her touch sends electricity convulsing through me as her hands land on my ass and squeeze. I move faster, stronger, as I slam into her. My hand moves between us to play with her clit. Her mouth opens in an O shape as she clings onto me, her head back. The sight of her beneath me like this almost sends me off the edge, but I hold on, determined to make her finish first.

“Nate,” she whispers my name.

“Yes, baby?” I whisper back.

She pants, her eyes rolling back, letting out a loud moan as she clenches around my cock. I keep moving inside her, my dick becoming harder with every passing second.

She takes a hold of my face and brings me down to her lips, devouring me, sucking my soul out of my body and into hers. Grabbing her, I turn her around so she's on her stomach with her ass up in the air. Her round, plump ass is just begging me to grab it. I feel my cock throb at the sight, and I pounce on top of her like a hungry lion about to devour its meal, sliding myself inside her once again, and within minutes I collapse on top of her in a heaving, sweaty mess. We lay there for a moment, both panting with the pleasure still surging inside of us.

“I love it when you call me baby,” she admits as she brings my hand up to her lips and lays a gentle kiss on the back of my hand, making me smile. “That was phenomenal.”

I catch my breath. “It truly was.” She rolls over and rests her head upon my chest.

“Let’s do it again.” Her mischievous eyes find mine as I stare at her swollen lips.

I chuckle.

“Give me a minute, baby. I’m not in my twenties anymore.” She pouts, and it’s the cutest, brattiest thing I’ve seen her do. We lay there together on her bed, staring into each other’s eyes. I trace small circles on her side while she absentmindedly runs her fingers through my hair and sighs, her eyes glancing down to my chest. “What are you thinking about?” I ask.

“How much our lives have changed.” She studies me. “Do you think we can make this work?” she asks, and a slight sense of panic crumbles its way into my chest.

“I do.” I place a gentle kiss on her lips. “But we both have to want it.” She considers my words as I search her eyes. “Do you want this?” I ask. The anxiety and anticipation of her next words have me on edge. I hope she does. I hope she wants this just as much as I do, and I hope I didn’t fuck it up by sleeping with her too soon.

“I do want this,” she admits, and I let out a breath I didn’t realise I was holding onto. “But I don’t know how it will work —”

I interrupt her before she can say anything else. “We will *make* it work, because we *choose* to.”

She sits up, and I follow.

“What’s really holding you back?”

Her lip quivers before she speaks, and it breaks my heart. It makes me want to take away all her pain, her hurt. “Do you think it’s selfish to want two great loves in one lifetime?” She places her hand on my face, and I lean into it. “When I imagine our future, I see a great love, just like I had with Finn.” Tears begin to fill her eyes. “I can’t help but feel selfish for wanting a life with you.”

“Come here.” I pull her into my embrace as her tears fall onto my chest. “Everyone deserves a happy ending...” I caress her hair, kissing her gently on her head. “It baffles me that you somehow think it’s selfish that you want one for yourself. Do you think people who leave this life wish that the people they left behind continue to suffer alone with their grieving?”

She doesn’t say anything. Instead she takes a deep breath.

“We’re all human, and we all need love. It’s normal to feel selfish for wanting another great love, especially after the passing of someone who meant so much to you, but you shouldn’t deny yourself of it.”

She wipes her tears from my chest and smiles up at me through her reddened eyes. “Wow, such big words from a tradesman.” We both chuckle. “How did you get so wise?”

I give her a small peck on the cheek. “Life experience, baby... life experience.”



The morning light cracks through the small window in Billie’s bedroom, illuminating everything in its path. I look over to Billie, sprawled out on the bed with the sheet barely covering her and smile to myself. The way she sleeps has not changed a bit, still very much chaotic. Slipping out of the bed, careful to not wake her, I make my way to the small kitchen. I look through her fridge to find... nothing. There’s nothing in her fridge at all. Well, I guess I’m going to have to make a quick trip to the café. I pick my clothes up off the floor and dress myself, stealing another glance at Billie. I grab my keys and walk out the door.

When I return, I place the two coffees and two bagels on the counter and walk into her room. I gently stroke her cheek with my knuckles, and she begins to open her eyes.

“Morning, baby.” I kiss her on the forehead as she groggily stretches and reaches out to hold my hand.

“Morning.” She smiles.

“Coffee and bagels are waiting in the kitchen,” I say as her eyes widen. Jumping out of bed, she throws on the first thing her hands land on which happens to be a band T-shirt, *surprise surprise*, then she bolts into the kitchen. I watch her as she takes the first sip of her coffee, her eyes closed, she smells it first then brings her lips to the cup.

Pausing, she turns as if feeling my eyes on her. “Can you not be creepy and just stare at me from the doorway?” She focuses her attention back on the coffee and takes a sip as I chuckle and walk over to her, grabbing a bagel off the counter.

“I’m not being creepy... I’m just admiring you.” I smirk because I know it makes her feel self-conscious.

“You can admire me, but don’t do it when I’m eating... it’s weird.” She tries to hide the smile behind her cup, but I see it clear as day.

I shrug. “You’ll get used to it.”

She unwraps her bagel and takes a bite, her eyes rolling back. “You know what I love about America?” she says, covering her mouth. “The cream cheese.”

I laugh at her confession. “There is so much more to America than their cream cheese.”

“No, you don’t get it... it tastes superior to Aussie-made cream cheese,” she explains, and I just nod my head. “Don’t mock me.” Her eyebrows furrow as she takes another bite.

“You’re so passionate about food... maybe you should give up this self-employed life and become a food critic,” I jest, trying my best to put on a serious face. She rolls her eyes and takes another sip of her coffee. Watching her do the most mundane tasks is like watching my favourite movie on repeat. We both finish our bagels and continue to sip our coffee. “Do you have much on this week?” I ask.

“I have a few meetings with Francesca, but otherwise I’m free.” She smirks. “What did you have in mind?”

I wink at her. “I have a few things up my sleeve,” I say with a cockiness to my voice.



As soon as we're both dressed, we leave the apartment, jump in the car, and I take her to the first destination. I'll admit, most of these things I have planned are quite touristy, but given she hasn't been here long, I want her to have someone to experience them with, and mostly, I just want to be in her company. The day rolls on as we visit the Painted Ladies, ride a cable car, and visit some of the places where *The Princess Diaries* was filmed. Now *that* one was not on my list, but Billie insisted... so I couldn't say no.

"How does a heavy metal-loving woman also love *The Princess Diaries*?" I exaggerate my confused expression, and she smiles.

"Hey, just because I like heavy metal doesn't mean I don't have a heart. Have you listened to the lyrics of some of those songs? Honestly, they probably have a deeper meaning than some of the music you listen to." She raises her eyebrows.

I pretend to be hurt. "Are you judging my taste in music, baby?"

"Not at all, I'm just saying... it wouldn't kill you to *actually* listen to the lyrics." She focuses her attention back onto the road as we drive to our last destination. "So, where to now?"

"I think I'll keep it as a surprise." We listen to the radio as she types away on her phone. Pulling into the free parking space on the street, I walk around to her side and help her out of the truck. We walk a couple of blocks before we stand outside Cioppino's.

"I have never heard of this place." She looks at me with an unsure expression.

"Do you trust me?" I slide my hand into hers as she nods. "You're going to love it. Just promise me when you eat their signature dish... you won't make the same face you do when you orgasm."

She gasps as her hand lands down on my shoulder in a hard slap. I laugh as her cheeks flush. "Excuse me, I do *not* make any sort of faces when I eat."

“Whatever you say, little B.” I smirk, and she rolls her eyes. The waitress shows us to our table, and we take a seat. She places her phone in her bag which she had been holding the entire time. “I’ve been meaning to ask you...” My heart picks up speed again before I ask her. I lick my lips, my mouth feeling suddenly dry. “Will you come to Noah’s game in New York with me?” I don’t want to be away from her, and I want her there with me.

She smiles. “Actually, I’ve already bought my ticket.”

I almost choke at her words. “What... when?”

“When we were driving here. I was going to tell you, but you beat me to it.” I cannot remove the goofy grin from my face. Did she plan to be there for Noah already? Or maybe she has to be there for work? It doesn’t matter, what matters is that she will be there, with me. “But there’s one problem...” She pauses, causing me to hold my breath, preparing myself to hear the worst. “I haven’t made any hotel reservations... because I was hoping we could stay together.” She smirks, knowing she had me on the edge of my seat.

I shift in my seat. “I’m not sure I’m ready for that commitment.” I try my best to hide my smile, but I fail miserably.

“Please... who was the one on their knees last night?” She raises an eyebrow, and it makes my knees weak just thinking about my head between her legs.

“I’m a man of my word, baby. I’ll do or be anything you want me to, and if you want me on my knees, I’ll gladly give you what you want.”

Her cheeks flush as she reaches up to tuck her hair behind her ear. The waitress interrupts as she takes our order. I state that we must get their signature dish. Billie also orders a side of french fries. As soon as the waitress is no longer in earshot, I lean over the table.

“I’ll get on my knees every day if that’s what you desire.”

“Stop...” she whispers as her cheeks go redder than a tomato. She looked around as if to make sure no one was

listening.

I chuckle as I sit back. “Leave the hotel to me. I’ll book it.”

The rest of the night is filled with conversation as we talk about how much we had missed out on in each other’s lives. She tells me about her journey with Finn, and I tell her about my journey with myself. It’s not as hard talking about the past with Billie now, knowing she would be a part of my future. I will do anything and everything to secure that.



# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## Billie

I watch as the birds fly in the sky through the hotel window overlooking Central Park. Nate's arms are wrapped around me from behind, his long, muscular body pressed up against my back. I link my fingers with his on my bare stomach. We spent a couple days doing all the touristy things... as you do, like seeing Rockefeller Center, The Empire State Building, Central Park, the Brooklyn Bridge... and today, all I want to do is lay here and be naked with this gorgeous man. For the first time in years, I feel at ease. The clouds in my mind have disappeared, replaced by clear blue skies. I revel in the feeling. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, capturing this moment in my mind. Nate's hand begins moving, lightly sliding the tips of his fingers from my stomach to the middle of my chest. Turning around to face him, his eyes still closed, I give him a small kiss.

"Good morning." My voice is croaky from just having woken.

He opens his eyes, and I'm swallowed up by the deep green around his irises, contrasted by the crisp whites surrounding them.

"Morning, baby." He slides his other arm underneath me and pulls me on top of him. He kisses me softly before gliding his hands down my bare skin to my ass.

"I really don't want to do much today... can we just stay in and order takeout?" I run my fingers through his hair, pushing the curly strands back.

"Thank God! I don't think my legs could take much more walking." He chuckles, and I laugh.

"What happened to the old Nate? The one who went on hikes and forced me to do a few lessons in MMA?" I jest, and he rolls me onto my back, his body on top of mine.

“Woman, don’t start with me.” He playfully bites at my neck, and I can’t help the giggles that escape me. “Seriously, it’s too early for your sassiness.” He smirks knowing that won’t stop me.

“I’m just saying, maybe you’re getting too old for hiking.... or walking around for long periods of...” He grabs my arms and holds them above my head while looking straight into my eyes.

“Is that what you think...” His mouth crashes into mine, stealing the air in my lungs. He slowly moves down, his tongue following, swirling over my body. Down the middle of my chest, to my stomach, between my legs. I yelp as he swiftly pushes my legs up, knees bent, and places soft kisses on my inner thighs. Goose bumps travel from my thighs to the back of my neck. My breathing hitches as his tongue licks me ever so lightly, making me want more. Craving more. I buck my hips in an attempt to reach his tongue, but he pulls away.

“Stay still, B,” he commands as he forces my knees apart, his entire mouth closes over me between my legs, and my eyes roll back at the warm, spine-tingling sensation.

His tongue dances on my clit as I struggle to keep my moaning in check. Letting go of one of my legs, he pushes one digit inside me, and I grip the sheets in fear that if I don’t hold on to something, I will melt away under his touch. He pushes another finger in and moves them expertly in and out of me. My mind scrambles as the pleasure takes over me, creating waves in my bloodstream.

Grabbing his hair in my fist, I rock my hips back and forth on his face, needing the release to come right now. His mouth and fingers leave me, and I groan at the emptiness. He chuckles at my frustration as he turns me over, his hand coming down on my ass hard causing a tingling sensation on my skin as I yelp. Grabbing my hips, he pushes into me, fast and hard.



Come nightfall, we both get ready to attend Noah's game. Pulling on my black denim jeans, I pair them with a band shirt and a leather jacket. Pulling on my boots, I grab my bag and turn to find Nate lost in thought, his eyes on me.

*Am I not dressed appropriately for a basketball game?*

"What?" I ask as I look down at my outfit. "Should I change?"

He chuckles as he stands off the bed, his naked muscular body walking over to mine, his tattoos completely visible to me. "You're perfect." He kisses my forehead as he begins to get dressed himself.

"Hardly perfect." I laugh. "But I try."

He smirks at me while he pulls on his boxer briefs. "I wouldn't have you any other way, baby." I feel the heat rise to my cheeks as I watch him dress. He slides on a pair of whitewash denim jeans, a white Henley long-sleeve, and his tan boots. "Ready?"

"Yep," I say as I walk out of our hotel room. He walks out with me, then turns back.

"I forgot something, wait here." He slips back inside and is out in less than a minute. "Okay, let's hope we can get a cab. Otherwise we will be taking the subway."

I groan audibly as we begin to walk to the elevator together. Luckily, we were able to secure a cab and get to the venue in fifteen minutes. There was a bit of traffic, but I guess that's New York. I've never been to a proper NBA game before in my life, not being into the sport myself. I am excited to see what it will be like. Noah was able to get us courtside tickets, and as we walk into the arena, I am astonished by the sheer size of the place. This is unlike anything we have back in Australia. Our arenas don't even hold half the size of these in the US. My mouth hangs open as I look around, taking it all in. I watch as fans dressed in team colours wave their signs and chant. The atmosphere here is like no other. The energy is on another level, and I'm completely drawn in. The entire arena goes dark as the large screens light up and begin the

team introductions. Smoke machines go off as the crowd roars when Noah appears on the screen, and I join in. Once the introductions are done, the teams make their way onto the court and begin playing as the crowd chants for the Golden State Warriors. My heart thumps as the crowd roars at the first basket of the night. I would have never thought sports games would be this exhilarating. They're almost as much fun as a concert.

*Almost.*

"Are you having fun?" Nate says into my ear.

"Are you kidding me?" I smile from ear to ear. "Look at my face. I look ridiculous."

He laughs as he slings one arm over my shoulders and focuses on the game, watching his brother living his dream, and I wonder about his.

I turn towards Nate. "You gave your brother this, you know. You did this for him. He's here because of your sacrifices." His face visibly relaxes at my words.

"I did what I had to do."

"Noah is living his dream, Nate..." I pause. "But what's your dream?"

He looks up at the screen as the entire game is paused, following his eyes, I am mortified to see myself and Nate up on the large screens. Everything happens in slow motion as I watch him kneel on one knee in front of me and pull out the most elegant diamond ring I have ever seen. I watch as I hold my breath. Noah runs over to Nate and hands him a microphone.

*Holy fucking shit, is this really happening?!*

*What the fuck?!*

As soon as Nate begins talking, I forget where I am. It's just me and Nate.

"Baby, meeting you was the best point in my life. You made me realise I needed to change, to become an honest man, not just for Noah but for me. We have both lived a portion of



our lives separately and have grown into better, stronger people. I love that you have achieved all that you have wanted for so long. I am so proud of you for following your true desires. I love the way you pout when you don't get your way... the way you get excited right before you eat, and I absolutely adore the way you care for others in your life. When I look to the future, all I see is you.

You are my dream, baby, a life with you, kids with you... grandkids with you. I want it all... with you. Marry me, Billie. I love you more than I love anything else in this life.”

The entire stadium is silent, waiting for my reply, and I let out the breath I was holding, tears begin streaming down my face as I nod, covering my mouth with both hands.

“Yes, yes... yes... a billion times yes!” I shout as he rises, and I throw my arms around him, the whole stadium cheering and roaring.



## EPILOGUE

The mid-April blue skies are clear above us. Looking up, I breathe in the fresh spring air, seeing the light shine through the large branches of the trees. I run a hand over my growing belly and close my eyes.

*I did it, Finn. I hope you're proud of me. I hope you're looking down and watching as I make good on my promises to you. To live out my life the way I was supposed to, to become a mother. I miss you more than words can describe, but I'm happy. Nate makes me happy, and I am so lucky to have found someone who loves me just as much as you did. You will always be in my heart, until the day I die. We were just kids when we fell for each other, and I will always remember the way you used to protect me... the way you used to love me. Wherever you are, I hope you are at peace.*

“Baby, we have about ten minutes before we have to go.” Nate’s worried expression consumes his face as he looks at me. “Are you sure you’re up for it?” I love this Nate, the one who is worried if I move too quickly that I might hurt myself or the baby. Ever since I fell pregnant, he’s been the most attentive. Not to say he wasn’t previous to the pregnancy, but this has just amplified it by a hundred.

I chuckle as I look up at him from our picnic blanket. “Please relax, I am fine!” He reaches out to me, and I grab his hand as he helps me up off the blanket.

Today is my nephew’s third birthday, and they have decided to travel all the way to the States because I wanted to host it for them.

I miss them. Ever since I moved here and began a life with Nate, I haven’t had much opportunity to see them.

“They’re going to be here in a bit... everything is done and ready, so don’t go doing stupid shit like putting balloons on the ceiling,” he warns with a stern look.

“Okay, okay. I’ll just hand out drinks.” I say.

“Absolutely not.” He shakes his head. “You will sit down and look pretty.”

I groan audibly as we walk into the house. I ended up moving in with Nathan since his house was far nicer than my small apartment. The place looks fabulous. It’s smaller than the houses back in Australia, but it’s cute. It’s homey. I hear the front door open as Noah greets Riley, Georgia, Harriet, and Jamie.

“Aunty B, Aunty B!” Harriet comes running through the hallway to the back of the house.

“Hayhay!” I lift her into my arms as she gives me a little snuggle.

“She would not stop talking about you the entire ride from the airport.” I see Riley emerge, and he holds out his arms, tears well up in my eyes when I notice how much my brother has changed. Placing Harriet down, I wrap my arms around him.

“It’s so good to see you, Riles.” I hold on to him a tad longer than normal, but he doesn’t mind.

He chuckles. “I missed you, too, Billie.”

I take a step back as I notice his beard. He’s grown out his hair and is wearing *dad clothes*. My brother is a dad *of two*. So crazy how the only people who are with us for the entire ride in our lives are our siblings.

“Hey, Nate.” Riley smiles as Nate welcomes him into our home.

They hug, and we all gather around the table which has been perfectly set by Noah, Cassie, and Nate. There is an abundance of food and a huge jungle cake with a three on it in the middle of the table. Nate slides out a chair and nods to it, I sit in the chair and watch as laughter, smiles, and conversation fill the room. Harriet and Jamie are playing with the Legos Nate had bought earlier in the day to prepare for their arrival. Noah is stuffing his face as Cassie tells him to slow down. Georgia and Riley begin telling Nate about their experience with Harriet in the beginning, and I just watch.

I watch as the most perfect picture unravels right in front of me, and it takes me a while to realise this is my life... this is my family.



# THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading!

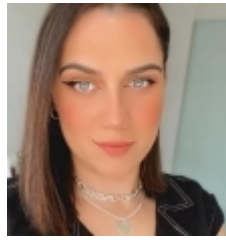
I hope you enjoyed Billie, Finn, and Nate's story, and don't worry, I have plenty more stories for you to enjoy.

Now, get ready for a filthy, explosive, dark romance, Mafia series coming 2024! Aries and Ezra's story is one about a marriage of convenience and forced proximity. Can you handle the heat that these two emanate?





# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Welcome to my corner of heaven, where the villains and heroes drop to their knees before strong women. My books will have you clenching your thighs and reaching for the bedside table for your best friend.

Diverge is my debut novel, and I currently have a dark romance mafia series in the works. If I'm not writing, you can find me chasing my favourite bands in concert, or curled up with a glass of red, reading a filthy book.

To be the first to find out about upcoming titles, you can sign up to my newsletter on my website.

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My best friend who recently came back into my life. I adore your friendship so much. No one will understand the cosmic connection between us, which we have shared most of our lives. High school was just a blip, but I will always remember you saving me from myself when my first love broke up with me. It seems so silly to think of right now given how much my life has changed, how I met my husband and started a beautiful family, but without you by my side, it felt like I was always missing that piece of me within. I'm so glad we reconnected and resolved our issues. Like we used to talk about in high school, even in death you'll haunt me, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

To my friend, I'm so thankful to have you on my team, always cheering me on, happy to lend a helping hand whenever I need it and always listening to me talk about my smutty books. Your support doesn't go unnoticed.

I am beyond grateful to have such a supportive team around me, always cheering me on to follow my dreams and desires no matter what they may be. I feel so very grateful to have had the opportunity to tell this story and look forward to where my author dreams will take me in the future.

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