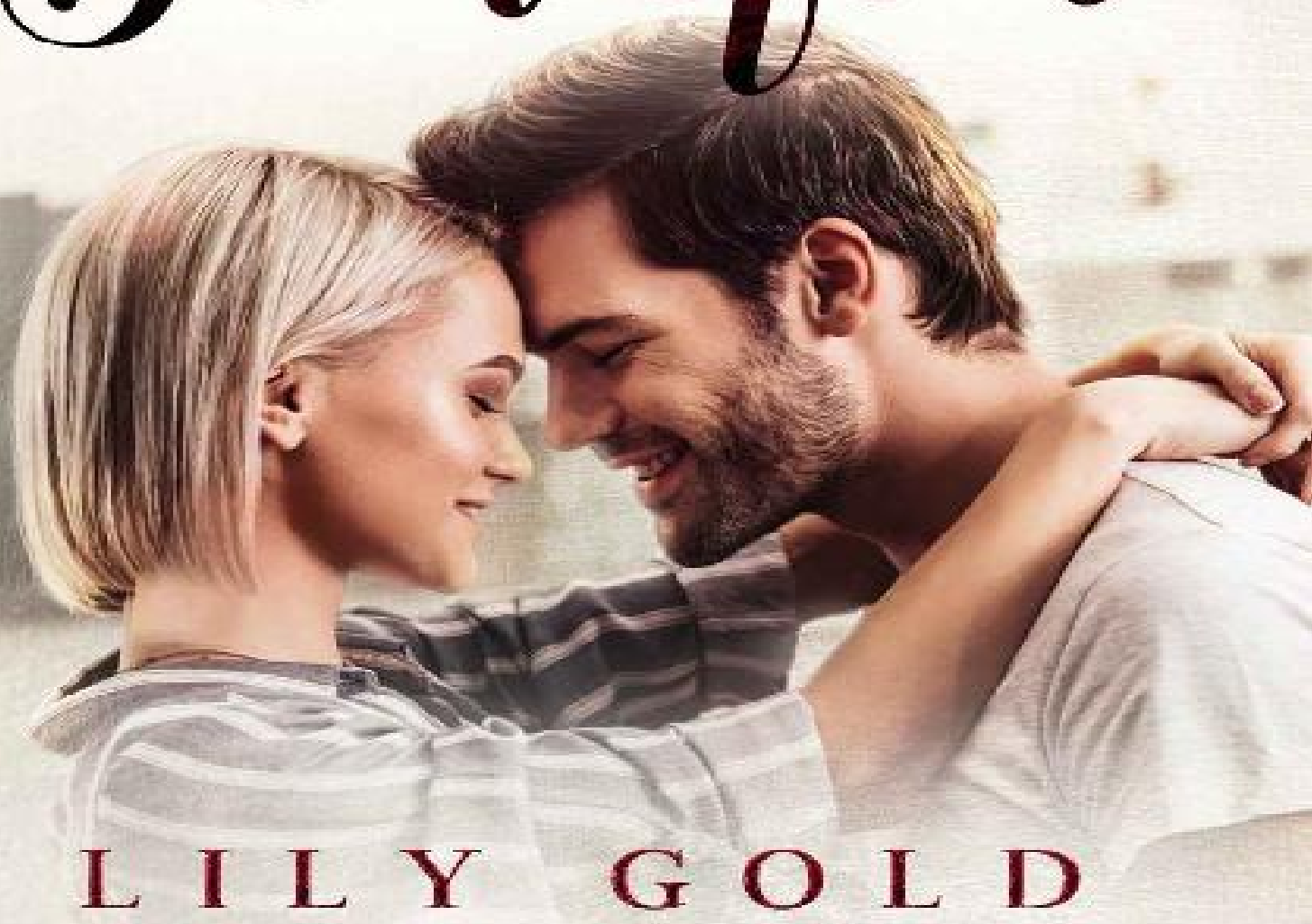




EAKING

WITH

Benefits



L I L Y G O L D

FAKING WITH BENEFITS

A FRIENDS TO LOVERS ROMANCE

LILY GOLD

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ONE

LAYLA

“I’d really want to be married by thirty,” I say thoughtfully, twirling my wine glass between my fingers. “I think that would give me the best shot at having children.”

“Ch-children?” My date echoes on the other side of the restaurant table, his eyes wide.

I nod, smiling at him as seductively as I can.

My date tonight is a guy called Mike Stonem. I met him on an app last night. Six foot two, handsome, and he works in an animal rescue facility. Right now, he’s sitting opposite me looking absolutely delicious in a fitted black suit, golden candlelight flickering all over his sculpted face.

He swallows, Adam’s apple bobbing. “So, you’re thinking about kids already, Layla?”

I nod. “I think it’s important to have a life plan. I know it can become a lot more difficult to have kids after thirty-five, so I should probably start soon. I think three is a good number, although I’d be happy with two. What do you think about—”

I trail off as he pushes out his chair and stands. “I, um. Need to use the restroom,” he mutters, not meeting my eye.

“Oh. Okay. That’s fine.” I wave him off, and he turns on his heel, marching towards the bathrooms.

Weird.

Shrugging, I lean back in my chair, taking a deep sip of wine.

I'm in the middle of my 120th date, and I'm starting to think I've finally gotten the hang of it.

The night is going really well so far. Mike suggested a really fancy restaurant; a Michelin-starred spot in central London. It's very posh and expensive, all minimalist white walls covered in weird modern art, and oddly-shaped lampshades hanging from the ceiling. He arrived early, kissed me on the cheek when we sat down at our table, and showed me pictures of a cute dog he operated on today. He didn't even stare at my chest when I dropped my fork and bent to pick it up.

I have a good feeling about him.

Glancing back to the bathroom door to make sure it's still closed, I reach for my handbag, unsnapping the clasp and pulling out my date notebook. Licking my finger, I flip through the pages until I find my list of first-date instructions, scanning down the first few bullet points.

- *Make good eye contact*
- *Ask him questions about himself*
- *Maintain open body language*
- *Touch his hand or arm*
- *Compliment him*

I nod, trying to memorise them.

It might sound a bit over-the-top to carry directions on dates, but I'm notoriously terrible at dating. I'm twenty-eight and I've never had a boyfriend. And it's not for lack of trying: I've spent the last two years on a mission to find a man who will put up with me. Every Friday night after work, I come home, sit on my couch with a glass of wine, and go on a marathon swiping session on my current favourite dating app. As soon as I find a guy I like, I invite him out on a date.

So far, it hasn't been going so well. I think maybe I come on too strong. Most of the guys who agree to meet up with me just look kind of scared. I haven't ever gotten a second date.

But tonight, I think my luck is about to change.

A few minutes pass, and Mike doesn't come back. Nerves start humming in my stomach. My work phone dings three times in a row — probably the shipping company updating me on my deliveries. I'm due to have a bunch of new pieces shipped in today for my lingerie web store. My fingers itch to answer the messages, but I force myself not to check the screen. Every WikiHow article I've read on What Not To Do On The First Date has been very clear that checking your phone is a big no-no.

Instead, I turn to my starter. We both ordered the House Special, which turned out to be a plate of miniature vegetables wrapped in gold leaf. I'm not completely sure it's actually edible. I roll a tiny beetroot over with my fork.

“Ma'am?”

I look up and smile at the waiter hovering nervously over me. “Hi,” I tell him. “Everything's fine, thanks.”

The waiter clears his throat. “I'm, ah, not sure how to tell you this, ma'am. But we just saw your date leave.”

“Leave?” I frown. “But he hasn't even eaten yet. Maybe he just went outside to take a call, or something.”

The waiter grimaces. “We found him, um, climbing out of the window in the mens' bathroom. So I don't think he plans on coming back.”

My mouth falls open. “Excuse me?”

“He paid the bill!” He says brightly, offering me the receipt. I stare at it. Somehow, that's even worse. At least if he hadn't paid, I could convince myself that he just came here for a free meal. Now, I know that the problem is me.

I stare at his plate. His stupid gold-plated carrots sparkle back at me.

“Right,” I say softly. “Okay.”

The waiter winces. “Um, do you want me to pack up your meal? I’ll throw in a dessert on the house.”

“I…” Part of me wants to say no. I’m embarrassed as Hell, but I don’t want to leave. I came here to eat dinner. I’m not going to run away just because my date went bad, for God’s sake — I’ve got more backbone than that.

I think.

Maybe not.

Luckily, before I have to make a decision, I’m interrupted.

“There’s no need for that,” a thick Northern accent says over my head. I blink as the chair opposite me is dragged out with an ear-piercing squeak, and my neighbour Zack heaves his massive, muscled body into Mike’s empty seat.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he says cheerfully, leaning over the table. I jump when he brushes his lips across my cheek, my lungs filling with his warm, honey-and-whiskey smell. “Sorry I peed for so long.” He sits back in his chair and grins at me. “Right. Back to the date. Where were we?”

TWO

LAYLA

I stare at Zack. He just winks back at me, his bright blue eyes twinkling.

Zack Harding (player nickname: Zack Hard-On) is a thirty-year-old ex-rugby player — but he looks more like a Viking. Massive arms, blonde hair usually pulled back into a man-bun, scruffy beard, and a barrel-chest the size of a fridge. He lives in the apartment opposite mine with two other guys. Since we live across the hall, we hang out all the time — which is how I know that he’s definitely not the man I am meant to be on a date with.

“Christ, man.” He shuffles a bit, then pulls a face at the waiter. “Ever think about buying a chair for us regular people? Not all of us are pipsqueaks like this lass.”

The waiter just stares at him, wide-eyed.

“Zack,” I say levelly. “What are you doing here?”

Zack looks surprised. “We’re on a date, babe. Don’t you remember?”

I roll my eyes.

The waiter looks completely flummoxed. “I’m sorry...” he trails off, looking behind him at the bathroom, then back at Zack. “Are you, um...?”

“I’m the same guy, yeah,” Zack says. “I just got really hot and buff all of a sudden. I would never abandon my gorgeous, stunning, slightly scary date.”

I kick his ankle under the table.

“No,” the waiter says hesitantly. “I mean... are you... Zack Harding?”

Zack beams. He loves being recognised in public. “Aye, the very same.”

“Like... *that* Zack Harding? Like, the rugby player? You were my favourite when you were playing for England!”

“Oh, aye.” Zack turns back to me. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’ve got a date with a lovely lady, and a tiny plate of...” he examines the meal in front of him, “mmm, delicious parsnips to eat.” When the waiter doesn’t make a move, he waves him off cheerfully. “See you later, mate!”

“Oh.” The man comes to his senses and turns, scurrying away. Zack settles down happily in his seat and picks up Mike’s glass of wine, as if he spends every weekend crashing his neighbours’ dates, and this is perfectly normal.

“You know,” I say slowly, “if you missed me this much, you could’ve just waited for me to get home.”

“I ain’t here for you. I asked a girl out for a drink.” He nods to the bar in the corner of the room. I glance over, spotting a crowd of modelesque women sitting on the barstools, sipping on drinks and chatting. Sure enough, one particularly beautiful girl in a very short dress is sitting alone, glaring daggers at me.

I raise an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t you still be with her, then? I doubt you’re getting laid at this rate.”

“Didn’t work out.” He studies the pile of golden vegetables on his plate critically. “She invited me to her sister’s wedding this weekend.”

“And that’s a problem?” I ask, watching as he picks up his soup spoon and carefully piles everything onto it.

He gives me a flat look. “Meeting the family isn’t top on my priority list, lass. I don’t come out looking for a wife. I saw you got ditched, so I came over to save you.” He shoves the bite into his mouth and frowns down at my plate. “Babe, you’ve barely eaten any of this. Why aren’t you eating? You nervous?”

I shrug. “I just wanted to get everything right.” Clearly, I failed spectacularly.

His lips press together. “You eat at all today?”

I shake my head. “I spent all day filling orders. And I can’t bring food into the warehouse with me.”

He tuts. “You know food and sleep are more important than selling stockings, right?” He bends and lifts up the tablecloth, making a big show of checking out my legs. “Although they are *real* pretty stockings, sugar.”

I kick him in the knee. “Not to me,” I say honestly.

Her Treat, my lingerie company, is the most important thing in my life. It’s taken six years of constant work to build it to where it is now — a moderately successful web boutique with thousands of customers a month. Six years of all-nighters, and paying off debts, and working eighteen-hour days. It’s my baby. It comes before everything else.

Zack scoffs, pushing the plate towards me. “You’re hopeless. Eat. Don’t want you passing out on me again.” Sighing, I pick up my fork. He sits back, appeased, and crosses his arms over his chest. “Go on, then. What happened? I was watchin’ your date from the bar. Looked like it was going okay.”

“You’re such a creep,” I mutter, chewing a mouthful of gilded carrot and pulling a face.

“It’s my job,” he reminds me, jabbing a thumb into the centre of his chest. “*Bona fide* love expert, right here.”

I snort. “I don’t think having a relationship advice podcast makes you a love expert. I don’t see a degree on your wall.”

“Maybe not,” he says smugly. “But I assume you’ve seen all the awards. Best Adult Entertainment Podcast three years running, baby.”

I smile slightly, stabbing a tiny cube of parsnip. Zack hosts a relationship advice podcast with his flatmates, Josh and Luke. It’s called *Three Single Guys*, and it’s very successful. Thousands of listeners tune in every week to hear the boys talk about everything from STIs to breath play.

To be honest, he probably could teach me a thing or two about dating.

“I don’t know what happened,” I say eventually, setting my fork back down. “I thought it was going well.” A wave of exhaustion suddenly washes over me. I’m so tired.

It’s been a shitty month. *Her Treat’s* sales have been down, and I’ve barely been sleeping for worrying about it. I have an upcoming collection set to release in a few months, and I’m struggling to keep on top of everything. And I’ve been dating for *so long*. I’ve been on 120 dates in the last fourteen months. And not one of them was successful. I’m trying not to let it get to me, but it’s starting to hurt a bit too much.

I think of the ten-year plan lying crumpled in my bag. The last unchecked box burns in my mind. *Get married.*

I’m a failure. And I hate failing.

“Hey,” Zack says softly. I look up at him. His bright blue eyes are full of concern. “You okay?”

I nod. “Just... I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

Zack studies me for a few more seconds, then nods to himself.

“Alright.” He reaches for the half-full bottle of wine sitting between us and picks up my glass, slopping in a generous amount. He pushes it across the tablecloth to me. “Down that, then get your coat on.”

I watch, bemused, as he throws back his own glass in one long gulp, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. “What are we doing?”

“We’re gonna enjoy your dumbass date’s expensive wine, and then we’re getting some real food. None of this piped wasabi and foam shit.” He stands, pushing out the chair. The waiter reappears behind us, and Zack blasts him with his megawatt grin. “It was lovely, mate.”

The waiter nods, looking dazed. “I’ll pass on your comments to the chef,” he murmurs, then lifts his notepad and pen. “Um, could you—”

“Autograph?” Zack guesses, and the man nods frantically. I tip back my glass and gulp down my wine as Zack scrawls his name across the page. “No

problem, mate. Thanks for letting my girl down gently.” He offers me his hand, helping me to my feet. “Come on, love. Your night’s about to get a whole lot better.”

THREE

LAYLA

It's almost midnight by the time we finally make it back to our building. Instead of getting food, Zack managed to convince me to stop at a bar on the way home, where I proceeded to take advantage of the Happy Hour two-for-one drink special. A few times over. My head is fuzzy as I stumble up the six flights of stairs to our floor, Zack's arm wrapped tightly around my waist.

It's not like me to drink a lot. Running my own business means I'm always on call, and my daily schedule is usually so packed that I can't afford to take much time off. I know I'm going to hate myself in the morning, but right now, I just don't care. I've had a terrible night. The humiliation over my date with Mike is a tight ball in my chest. I just want to forget about it for a while.

By the time Zack drags me up to our floor, though, I'm starting to regret the fourth round of mojitos. I stare at my locked apartment door and imagine climbing into my cold, empty bed. Again. My happy drunk glow suddenly fades away into sadness.

120 dates. I've been on 120 dates in the last fourteen months. And not one of them has worked out.

There must be something wrong with me.

"I like this," Zack rumbles over my head, thumbing at my red bralette strap. "One of your designs?"

I shake my head. "It's an *Anna Bardet*. She's one of my favourite designers."

“I like yours better,” he declares, looking up and down the long corridor. It’s dark and silent; all of the other tenants have obviously gone to bed already. “You got any food at your place, pet?”

I think. “Like. Maybe some granola bars?”

He tuts, pivoting me on the spot. He lives in apartment 6B, directly across the hall from me. His muscled arms band around my waist. I squeeze one without thinking, admiring his huge bicep, and he laughs. “C’mon. I’ll make you something full of cheese, and maybe you won’t feel like total shit tomorrow.”

I frown, wavering. “You don’t have to do that...”

“We have leftovers from this week’s meal kit,” he says temptingly.

I light up. The guys get a ton of free products from sponsors that advertise on their podcast. My personal favourite is Flavoroso, a company that sells weekly meal delivery kits with pre-cut ingredients.

“Tonight was like, four-cheese mac-n-cheese,” Zack says in my ear, making me shiver. “Brie and cheddar and gouda and shit.” I stare up at him, my mouth watering, and he snorts. “Yeah. That’s what I thought. C’mon, baby.”

“I’m not a baby.” I try to wriggle out of his grip.

He just laughs and kisses the top of my head, unlocking his front door and bundling me inside.



The guys’ flat is a larger, more manly version of mine. Instead of one bedroom, there’s three, but they have the same open plan lounge-dining-room-kitchen setup. Whereas my living space is papered in pink and filled with racks of product samples, the guys’ lounge is dark and neat. They have black sofas set up around a glass coffee table, facing a wide-screen telly. Above it, all their awards are lined up on a shelf: the red *English Podcast Award* plaque; the microphone-shaped *Elias Radio Popular Choice Podcast*; and my personal favourite, *Top Adult Podcast*. The trophy is made of hot-pink glass, and is engraved with little lipstick kisses.

Tonight, the room is a little messier than usual. The coffee table is strewn with *Three Single Guys* posters and markers. One of Zack's flatmates, Luke, is sitting on the sofa, scribbling his autograph methodically onto each poster.

Zack ruffles my hair and scoots past me to the kitchen, and I shrug off my leather jacket, leaning against the wall to drunkenly admire Luke. Maybe it's the beer goggles, but he looks especially gorgeous tonight.

Luke is turning forty this year, and he's the quintessential silver fox. Greying and handsome in a hot professor kind of way. He's dressed in his usual chinos, thick-rimmed glasses, and a soft-looking navy sweater. I want to lick him. "You look fit," I drawl.

Luke glances up at me, grey eyes crinkling slightly as he smiles. "Layla. I didn't know you were coming over tonight, sweetheart." He caps his pen and looks down at himself. "Ah, thank you. Zack made me buy these trousers."

"They make his bum look good!" Zack calls from the kitchen.

"Do they, Mr Martins?" I hang my jacket on the coat rack. "How interesting."

Luke's face darkens slightly. "I told you not to call me that."

"Sorry, sir. Force of habit."

"I didn't teach you long enough for it to become a damn habit," he grumbles, and I laugh despite myself.

Luke is my old Year Ten English teacher. When I was sixteen, I went to his class three times a week to learn Shakespeare and read *Of Mice and Men*. Just like all of the other girls in the school, I had a massive crush on him. I almost had a heart attack when I moved into this apartment building three years ago, and found him standing in the lobby, sifting through his mail. He didn't recognise me at first — when I told him that he was going to be living opposite one of his old students, he was openly horrified.

Which makes it extra fun to mess with him. I cross the room and slump next to him on the sofa, dumping my bag on the floor. "Good evening, sir?"

He gives me an aggravated look, and I smile, putting my feet up on the coffee table. He glances quickly over my fishnetted legs, then clears his throat. “I had an okay evening,” he says slowly. “I edited a bonus episode of the podcast, then signed posters until my markers ran out of ink.” He picks up a small cream card off the coffee table. “My ex sent me another wedding invite,” he adds drily. “This is the fifth one. I think she’s noticed me screening her calls.”

I reach for it, squinting at the swirly embossed font.

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I pull a face. I remember his ex-wife from high school. She was the school’s headmistress at the same time Luke was teaching me. She was a total bitch.

“Ew. Why does she even want you there?” I drop the invite into Luke’s lap and flop my head against the sofa cushions. Everything is spinning. “You should burn it.”

“I was just planning on recycling it, actually.” He frowns at me. “Are you alright? What did Zack do to you?”

“Hm?” I let my eyes fall half-shut. “Nothing.”

“You’re very flushed.” He reaches across and touches my cheek, and I turn into his palm automatically. He smells delicious. Like Earl Grey and old books. I want to nuzzle into him like an armchair.

He pulls his hand away like he’s been burned. “And... floppy. Have you been drinking?”

I stretch and yawn. “Yeah.”

His frown deepens. “Just for fun? Or is something wrong?”

Before I can answer, a door opens in the hallway. “Did I hear that right?” A low voice drawls. “Layla Thompson is *drunk*?”

I look up. The last occupant of apartment 6B, Joshua Tran, is standing in the doorway of his bedroom, looking at me through narrowed eyes. I glare right

back at him, even though tilting my head to look him in the eye hurts my neck.

The guy is tall. At about six-five, he's taller than Zack, with thick black hair, sharp bone structure, and cool, distant eyes. He's the quieter one of the group — unlike Zack, he doesn't burst into rooms and loudly announce his presence; he sneaks in like a black panther and glares around at everyone with judgmental eyes.

Which is exactly what he's doing now.

He leans against the doorway. "Tonight is date night, right?" He says. "Shouldn't you be getting it on with some rich hedge fund manager? What is it now? Date 120?"

"Keeping track, are you?" I ask, rubbing my eyes. My hands come away black with makeup. Crap. "Gosh, Josh. Anyone would think *you* want to date me."

"I would rather bleach my face in acid," he says conversationally, staring at me. Joshua has the darkest eyes I've ever seen. They're practically black, and almost scarily intense. Right now, they're scanning over me like lasers, snagging on my short dress and high heels.

I pick up the wedding invite and throw it at him. "Tell your brother it's weird for him to marry Luke's ex."

"I tried. Sadly, he's in love with her. You go all red when you drink."

"Piss off." I close my eyes again. "Leave me alone. 'M just here for cheese."

There's a pause as I snuggle into the sofa cushions. Then hands wrap around my ankles, and I jump, my eyes flying back open. Josh has crossed the room and is kneeling in front of me, pulling my feet into his lap.

"Take these off," he says gruffly. "They look painful." He runs his fingers across the buckle of my heeled boot. "I've never seen you have more than one drink."

"Hate being drunk," I mumble, wiggling my feet at him. "Don't wanna move. You take them off."

He finds the zip and tugs it down, freeing my foot. His thumb presses into my arch, and I practically melt into the couch. His lip quirks up. He takes off my other boot and lines them both up neatly by the sofa. “If you don’t like drinking,” he says slowly, “then why are you drunk?”

I blink, thinking about it. “I don’t know. I guess I’m... sad?”

It’s like a wave passes through the two men. One minute, they’re at ease, and the next, they’re both staring at me, concern written over their faces.

Crap.

FOUR

ZACK

“Jesus,” Layla says loudly, when the silence stretches on too long. “I said I’m *sad*. Not dying of a terminal illness.”

“You’re *sad*?” Josh repeats, like it’s completely unbelievable. Luke doesn’t say anything, studying the side of her face. I roll my eyes, stirring the pan of pasta. They’re both so dramatic.

“I do have emotions,” Layla says, looking annoyed.

“Yes,” Luke says quietly. “And in the three years we’ve known you, you’ve never, not once, admitted to being sad.”

“Leave her alone, she’s had a bad night,” I say, turning off the hob. “She tried to get a man to shag her, and he climbed out of a bathroom window and wriggled down the drainpipe to get away from her.” I start dishing up a huge pile of steaming macaroni. “And *then* she had to eat a plate of vegetarian roadkill. If she were anyone else, she’d probably be crying. Thank God she’s so brave.”

“I didn’t want him to shag me,” Layla argues, fiddling with the hem of her little silver dress. “It’s not hard to get a man to *sleep* with you.”

“Aye,” I agree, reaching for a fork in the cutlery drawer. “Not when you’re dressed like that, it’s not.” I glance sideways at her, running my eyes up her toned thighs. Dunno what was wrong with the guy she asked out. Layla’s a knockout. Tall and leggy, with high cheekbones and pale green eyes, and this sharp, shoulder-length hair that she bleaches white-blonde. It’s really hot.

“Zack,” Luke chides. “Don’t say that.”

“What? She’s in a short dress and heels. She could go to any club in the city right now and the guys would be on her like flies.”

Hilariously, Layla nods. “Yeah. But I don’t want that.”

Josh takes a seat in the armchair. “If you didn’t want your date to sleep with you, what *did* you want?”

Layla hesitates. “I just... wanted him to like me,” she says eventually. “I want a guy to have dinner with me, and like me enough to want to see me again. I want an actual relationship.”

I raise an eyebrow. There’s a thread of vulnerability in her voice that I’ve never heard from Layla before. She’s usually the dictionary definition of a *boss bitch*. I consider, then go to the fridge, pull out a huge block of cheese, and grate some extra on top of the pasta to cheer her up.

“Rejection hurts,” Luke says softly. “That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

She shakes her head. “It’s not the rejection that bothers me. I just don’t like that I’m so behind.”

“Behind on what?” Josh asks. “Dating?” He jerks his head at me. “We’re all older than you, and none of us are in relationships.”

“Yeah, but you don’t *want* to be,” she points out. “I do. It’s in my plan.”

“Plan?” I ask, making my way back to the sofa and handing her the bowl. “Is this another one of your weird lists? Because I don’t think you can schedule falling in love, babe.” I plop down at her side.

Layla is a real freak about schedules. She schedules every second of her life, from the moment she wakes up at the crack-ass of dawn, to the exact time she’s meant to go to sleep. I get that the girl is busy with running her own business, but no one needs to be *that* organised. Sometimes I’ll drop by her flat, and she’ll say some shit like, ‘hang on, I’ve got four more minutes of washing the dishes before I can talk’. Little weirdo.

“I *can* schedule everything,” Layla argues, scooping up a huge amount of melted cheese. “And yes, I have got a list. It’s a ten-year plan. I made it when

I graduated high school, to map out my twenties. *And* I'm already on the extended timeline. Originally, I was aiming to find my husband at twenty-five." She frowns and shoves the food in her mouth.

Josh makes a choking sound behind his hand.

Layla glares at him. "What?"

"Nothing. Nothing." He swallows hard. "Um, why twenty-five?"

She shrugs. "It seemed like a good age. Gave me long enough to sort out my career, but didn't leave it so late that my fertility started to decrease, or all the good men were taken." Josh starts coughing again, even harder. Layla fumbles in her bag. "Hang on, I'll just show you."

Luke's eyebrows shoot up as she passes him a crumpled bit of paper. "This plan is an actual *list*? That you've written down?"

She stares at him. "Of course. How else would I remember to do everything on it?"

"Of course." He clears his throat, studying the list. I peer over his shoulder to get a better look. The paper is worn and water-stained, like she's been carrying it around in her bag for a while. At the top, the words *Ten Year Plan* have been scrawled in loopy, teen-girl handwriting. A long, neat list is bulleted underneath, with items like '*Finish business degree (21yo)*', '*start a fashion web boutique (23yo)*', and '*Make first international sales (24yo)*'.

There's only one box left unchecked. '*Get married (30yo)*.'

"So, what?" Luke says. "You wanted to be married by thirty? You have a couple of years then, don't you? You're not behind."

Layla scowls at the macaroni. "Yes, but I was meant to start *dating* at twenty-five. No one ever finds The One on their first go. Well some people do, but it's statistically very unlikely. So I calculated I'd need to factor in a couple of years of dating before I found the right guy." She pokes at her pasta. "But I kept pushing it back. I kept telling myself it's more important that I work on the shop. And now I'm turning twenty-nine in a few months, and I've never had a proper boyfriend. And at this rate, I never will, because I don't even know how!" She flops back against the sofa, heaving a huge sigh.

I grin. I've never seen her this tipsy before. She's usually so uptight. "I love her," I say. "She's so cute. Oh my God."

She scowls. "It's not funny. People expect you to have experience by your thirties. They won't want to *teach* me." She shovels in another mouthful of pasta. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she mumbles. "I've tried so hard to find someone, but nothing is working."

Josh straightens in his seat, his mouth set in an angry line. "No," he says grimly.

"No, what?" She asks.

"There's nothing wrong with you. Don't say that."

She stabs another bit of pasta. "Yeah? How many twenty-eight-year-olds do you know that haven't even had one relationship?"

"It's not that uncommon," Luke says. "It's not the norm, but it's not odd by any means."

She throws up her hands. "And how many of those people go on two dates a week and never get a second one? You can't tell me that's *common*."

Luke doesn't say anything. Layla shakes her head, setting aside the pasta. "I want a family," she mumbles. "I want a husband. I try so hard to make people like me, but I can't. And now sales are down in the shop, and I've got so much more work to do on this new line, and no one *wants* me..." she runs her hands through her hair, tugging. "I just... want someone to go home to, I guess."

Josh's eyes widen. For a moment, we all sit in silence. She looks so worn down and tired, it hurts my heart. "Aw, jeez," I mutter, grabbing at her and tugging her into a hug. She stiffens for a second, then relaxes against me. "It's okay," I mumble, rubbing her back. "Look, pet, if this is bothering you that much, we'll help you."

She goes still in my arms. "Help me?" Her voice sounds odd.

"Aye. Maybe you ain't looking in the right places for men. We can probably hook you up with some good guys, or something." I try to pet her hair

comfortingly, but she pulls free, her face suddenly lighting up.

“You could!” She says. “*You* could help me!” She points over my shoulder at the shelf of podcast awards over our TV. “You have a dating advice show. You know how to do this. You can teach me how to date!”

Luke looks confused. “Do you want some books or something? I’m sure we can find you some good literature—”

She shakes her head. “Not books. I’ve read them all. Look.” Picking up her bag off the floor, she upends it. Three library books skitter out. I glance over the spines. *The Tactical Guide to Finding a Man. Dating 101. Attracting a Guy - Tips for Dummies.* Christ.

Josh looks at them, his lip curling. “Why am I not surprised that you tried to study dating?” He mutters. “Layla, this is BS. None of these books work. They’re full of sexist crap.”

“*I know,*” she emphasises. “That’s why I want lessons from you guys. *Practical* lessons. You could, I don’t know... take me out to bars or something. So I can practice!”

Josh goes very still. “*Excuse me?*”

She nods, her eyes shining. “Whenever I’m on a date, I go all weird and awkward, and I can’t think of anything to say. But I’m comfortable with you.” She turns to me. “Zack. You’re good at flirting. And making people like you. You could teach me, right?” I hesitate, and she puts a hand on my chest. “*Please?* I’ll pay you.”

I pull a face. “I’m not a hooker, lass.” Jesus, I know I sleep around, but seriously?

“Just this once? I really want your help.” I don’t say anything, so she turns to Josh. “Josh? Seriously, I have the money. I bet you’d be a great teacher—”

“We’re not taking you on fake dates for money,” Josh snaps. “You’ve drunk too much. You don’t know what you’re saying. Finish your food and go to bed.” Standing, he stalks over to the kitchen, turning away from us.

No one says anything for a few seconds. Layla carefully sets her bowl down on the coffee table and joins him, wobbling slightly.

“Josh,” she says quietly. When he doesn’t respond, she reaches up and pats his cheek clumsily. “Look at me,” she orders. He turns his head, meeting her gaze. “Have I hurt your feelings?”

“No,” he clips out.

“No?” Her hand is still on his face. She rubs her fingers over his stubble. “I like this. You usually shave.”

I wince.

Josh closes his eyes for a second, then wraps his hand around her wrist, gently pulling her away from him. “Don’t do that, Layla.” His voice is lower than usual. “You’re drunk. Go to bed.”

It’s like the reality of the situation suddenly hits her all at once. Layla jerks away, stumbling back and looking around the room with horrified eyes. “You’re right,” she says slowly. “Oh God. I’m sorry.”

“S’all good,” I tell her, patting the sofa next to me. “What’s some drunk propositioning between friends, eh? Come eat, honey.”

She blinks hard. “No, I... you guys were having a nice evening. And I came in, ate your food, offered you money to take me out, and then...” she turns to Josh, “rubbed your face like a total creep. I’m sorry.” Her cheeks are burning with embarrassment. “I think I should go,” she mumbles, bending to pick up her bag. “Thanks for the food.”

Josh frowns. “Hey. No. What’s wrong?”

“At least finish your dinner,” Luke says.

“You can have it. I’m fine.” She picks up her jacket, yanking her keys out of the pocket. Her breath hitches, but she tries to hide it with a cough. As she turns to the door, I see the tears streaking silently down her face.

My heart stops. I’ve never seen Layla cry. I never even imagined she could. I stand. “*Layla—*”

“L, come back,” Josh says, rubbing his eyes. “Shit. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not upset,” she mutters. “I, um... just... Sorry.”

Without another word, she steps out into the hall and lets the door swing shut behind her. Swearing under his breath, Josh strides after her, but Luke stops him.

“Let her go,” he says. “She’s embarrassed enough. Let her sleep it off.”

“I made her *cry*,” Josh says, looking anguished.

I sigh, slumping back on the sofa and picking up her bowl. “She’s gonna bloody hate herself in the morning,” I mutter, scooping up some more pasta. “Absolutely hate herself.”

FIVE

LAYLA

My first thought when I crack my eyes open the next morning is: *shit, it's bright.*

I don't usually wake up to daylight. I'm normally up and out the door on my morning run well before the sun has risen.

I groan and roll over. I feel like crap. My eyes are sandy and gritty. My head is pounding. My mouth feels like it's had all the spit sucked out of it by one of those saliva hoovers they use at the dentist. All I want to do is go back to sleep, but judging by the light spilling in from my half-open blinds, it's time for me to get up. Patting around my bedside table, I yank my phone off the charger and squint at the time.

Then I blink. Rub my eyes. Squint some more.

It's eleven forty-five.

"Shit," I mumble, rolling out of bed. My foot gets tangled in my phone charger, and I trip, catching myself on my dresser right before I fall. I feel fuzzy and uncoordinated, but I ignore it, stumbling over to my desk and thumbing frantically through my agenda. My eyes run over the neatly colour-coded appointments, my heart pounding in my chest as I read each one. Finally, my shoulders slump with relief.

Thank God. I have the morning off. The rest of my day is packed, though. I have a call with a supplier at one; at two, I have a two-hour meeting with my manufacturers to check that everything is going to plan with my upcoming

summer line. After that, I have three hours of paperwork scheduled, a quick dinner break, then a seven o'clock call with an online influencer to discuss her rates for a sponsored post.

But for now, I'm fine.

I check the time on my phone again — then frown. I have a ton of message notifications. I scroll through them with sweaty fingers. They're all from the guys.

ZACK: Hey, L, are you up?

ZACK: are u ignoring us now

*ZACK: *angry emoji**

ZACK: I know ur probably freaking out because of last night, but don't make it weird, babe. You don't have 2 b embarrassed

JOSH: I left some painkillers in your bathroom cabinet last time I was over. Come over if you want juice or anything

LUKE: I hope you feel better today, sweetheart. Drink a lot of water and try to take it easy. Our door is always open if you need to talk.

I stare at the messages in horror. What are they talking about? Why would I need to talk to them?

And then the memory of last night slams into me like a freight truck.

Suddenly, I remember it all. I remember the terrible date with Mike. I remember Zack finding me at the restaurant, comforting me, plying me with mojitos. I remember staggering into the guys' apartment, eating a huge plate of cheesy pasta, and sobbing all over them.

Oh God. I told them about all the failed dates. I showed them my stupid ten-year-plan.

I think I offered them money to *date* me.

"Crap," I groan, tossing my phone back onto my bed and stumbling to my little ensuite. I assess the damage in the bathroom mirror.

I'm a hot mess. My bleached-platinum hair is messy, falling down to my chin in jagged spikes, and I'm still wearing the silvery dress and fishnet tights I wore to my date last night. My pale green eyes are puffy and rimmed with smeared mascara, and there's lipstick smudged on my cheek.

Swearing, I turn on the cold tap, scooping up two handfuls of water and splashing it onto my face, methodically scrubbing the dried tears and makeup off my skin. Embarrassment is burning through me. What the Hell is wrong with me? Why did I drink so much last night? Why didn't I just come home, watch some TV, and go to bed, instead of wallowing in self-pity like a total loser?

And now I'm running late. Normally, by now, I've worked out, answered my emails, taken calls, scheduled my day, made and eaten breakfast, run a few errands —

Anxiety squeezes my insides and nausea rises in my throat. I grip the porcelain edges of the sink and force myself to take a few deep breaths.

It's fine. I'm fine. I haven't missed any appointments. I'm not going to be late for anything. The day isn't going to plan, but that's okay.

It is.

This is why I don't like to drink. It messes with my routines too much. And without my routines, my life turns into a hot, steaming mess.

Pulling myself together, I brush my teeth, spit, and then stagger back to my bedroom and stare longingly at my rumpled bed. I just want to crawl back into the sheets, order some breakfast, and spend the rest of the day watching Project Runway reruns and nursing my hangover.

Or maybe call my landlord, cancel my lease, and find a new place to live far, far away from my neighbours.

But I do neither of these things. Instead, I strip off last night's slept-in clothes, change into some workout gear, and grab a hair tie off my dresser, pulling my hair back into a ponytail. I need to get this morning back under control.



Twenty minutes later, I'm jogging through Hyde Park. It's a beautiful day. The sun is hot and bright, but the big, leafy trees spreading over my head throw cool, dappled shadows over the grit-covered running paths.

I'm flagging. Usually I can run five miles no problem, but my body is slow and sluggish from dehydration and exhaustion. I hate working out when I'm tired, but I hate breaking my routine even more, so I push through, pulling my phone out of the pocket of my running shorts. I'm going to need a distraction to get through the next three miles. Not slowing my pace, I load up the newest episode of *Three Single Guys* and press Play.

The familiar theme tune plays, and then Josh's low voice sounds through my headphones.

"Hello, everybody, and welcome to episode four-hundred-and-forty-two of Three Single Guys, a podcast where three single men give you dating advice. I'm Joshua, I just turned thirty, and I haven't had a steady relationship in years."

Luke chimes in. *"I'm Luke, ex-high school teacher, and the team's resident divorcee."*

"And I'm Zack, rugby legend, calendar boy, and the Best Shagger in Europe." Zack says lazily.

"No one has ever called you that." Josh says flatly.

"Aye, they do! I get around."

Josh sighs. *"We are Three Single Guys, and we're completely unqualified to give you relationship advice. As always, please remember this show is for entertainment purposes only. Do not take our advice."*

"And when you do," Zack chips in, *"send us a wedding invite."*

Despite my shitty mood, a smile spreads over my face.

I love *Three Single Guys*. The concept sounds stupid. Why should three men who aren't even in a relationship be able to dole out dating advice? But the

guys are actually really helpful. They all have their own specialities: before Luke divorced his ex-wife, they got a ton of couple's counselling, so he knows a lot about relationship psychology; Josh is so direct he's almost rude, so he has no problems telling listeners if they need to dump their partners; and Zack answers all of the sex questions. Plus, their chemistry together is incredible. They always start off each episode with a few minutes of banter, talking about their weeks — but my favourite part is when they answer listener emails.

“Okay,” Josh’s low voice says as I hit the last stretch of my run. “*Here’s an email that I think must be meant for Zack. It’s from the pseudonym ‘Moist in the Midlands’.*”

“Oh, this’ll be good,” Zack answers. “Hit me.”

Josh clears his throat. “*The last few times me and my girlfriend have slept together*’, he reads aloud, *‘she’s squirted. I think it’s great, but she’s horribly embarrassed every time it happens, and it’s really affecting our life in the bedroom. How do I convince her that it’s normal... and that I actually really like it?’*”

“*Drink that shit up,*” Zack says immediately. “*You gotta get in there and SWALLOW, man. You can’t just tell her you think it’s hot, you gotta show her. So get between her legs and go down like you’re at a damn watermelon eating contest. Trust me, she’s gonna know you think it’s hot when you’re licking her clean like she’s a melting ice cream cone.*”

I burst out laughing in the middle of the park. A passing woman pushing a pram gives me a nervous look and switches to the other side of the path. I try to push down my laughter, jogging over to a nearby bench to cool down. My phone has been dinging steadily through my run, so I pull it out and flick through the messages as I start stretching out my thighs.

They’re all from Zack.

ZACK: Yo L you up??

ZACK: we’re at the studio atm, but we’re getting lunch soon. Come join if you wanna talk about last night

I'm about to swipe the messages away, but then another text pops up.

ZACK: we're worried about you. Don't like to see you cry :(

Guilt twists me. Of course they're worried about me. I cried all over them like a little baby. They've never seen me like that before. I usually try so hard to be in control.

I have to apologise.

Sighing, I start typing back a message.

SIX

ZACK

“I’ve been dating my three lovely boyfriends for almost a year now,” Josh reads into the mic, his eyes scanning the email on his phone. I yawn, trying to stay awake. “And it’s going great. The only problem is, it’s almost impossible for all four of us to spend time together because of our schedules. We’ve got a baby girl, and I really want her to get quality time with all of her dads. How do we handle our clashing timetables? From Beth Ellis in London.”

“Dude, that’s such a mood,” I say into the mic. “We ain’t shared a girl in a couple of years, but back when we were all dating Monica, we used to share an online calendar, so we could see when everyone was free.”

Luke nods. “And we tried to be as flexible as possible, trading shifts at work and such. Honestly, the best thing you can do is—”

My phone bleeps in my jacket.

Luke sighs loudly, and Josh closes his eyes. I swear, fumbling to unzip my pocket.

We’ve been in the recording studio since nine this morning, and we have almost no usable footage. *Three Single Guys* releases eight episodes a month; one a week, with an extra weekly bonus episode available for people who pay to subscribe. Normally, we try to get the recording out of the way during the weekend, and spend the rest of the week editing and doing admin. But today, nothing is coming out right.

First, we couldn't find any of our mic covers. Then we recorded a full hour of footage, before realising that Luke's mic wasn't even on. Then we somehow lost the listener questions that Josh had spent all week selecting and filing. And now we can't get through a damn sentence without stumbling over our words, or dropping something, or saying something stupid.

None of us can focus, and we all know why. It's Layla.

I hook my phone out of my pocket, checking the screen. Layla's face pops up.

Finally.

"Quit texting under the table," Josh mutters.

I shake my head, thumbing open the message. "Hang on. It's her." I read the text aloud. "*Can you please tell the guys sorry? I'm so embarrassed.*"

Luke looks confused. "Why is she embarrassed? We're her friends. I've seen you get drunk and do much more destructive things than talk about your feelings."

"Uh, because she hates emotion?" I remind him. "Crying in front of people is probably her idea of literal Hell." I swipe to respond to the text. "I'll tell her we all suffered simultaneous traumatic head injuries and are now suffering from a very specific form of amnesia, yeah?"

Luke's mouth presses into a firm line. He looks grimly back down at his notes.

I think we were all shocked by what happened last night. It was so out of character for Layla. I've never seen her cry. She's usually so on top of her shit. I actually think that's why she can't find a guy — I reckon she's intimidating them.

Hell, when we first met her, I thought she hated me. It was the day she was moving into the building. I heard a girl was moving into the flat opposite, so *obviously* I went over to see if she needed any help. She refused me with a tight smile, disappeared into her flat, and avoided me for the next month.

I thought she was cold. Aloof. Kinda stuck up. The more I got to know her, though, the more I realised that she's not really any of those things. She's just shy. Some girls are shy and soft; Layla is shy and hard. Because she acts confident, and dresses like a supermodel, and makes a shitton of money, people interpret her social awkwardness as being rude, but she's really just a dork.

It took a hell of a lot of time for her to let down her guard around us, but when she did, it was worth it. She's great. She does what she wants, and she doesn't care what other people think of her. Hell, she models her own underwear designs online, for God's sake. Puts pictures of herself half-naked on social media, even though she gets a ton of creepy guys leaving gross comments on them. She doesn't care. She wants to model her stuff, so she does.

Which was why seeing her break down last night was so odd. I've never seen that side of Layla. I don't like the thought that she's been all sad and alone in her apartment, right at the other side of the hall.

"We should do something," Josh mutters.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Josh has been head-over-heels for Layla ever since they met, but he won't admit it. It's obvious, though. When she's happy about something, he's wandering around the flat, humming under his breath. When she's stressed, he gets all moody. He's filled our kitchen cupboard with all of her favourite snacks, and lights up whenever she texts him. Seeing her cry probably killed him.

"We could just... do what she asked," I point out. "Helping people with their relationships is literally what we do."

"We're not dating the girl," Luke cuts in, sounding exhausted. "And she doesn't need our help."

"Then why was she crying in our living room?" Josh snaps back. "You saw her."

"She was drunk."

"That doesn't mean that she wasn't really upset." He glances back down at the emails in front of him. "I think we should help her. Yeah, we can't accept

money, but maybe we could still... take her on a few practice dates, or something. Just to get her used to it.”

Luke stares. “You’re joking, right?”

“She said that she feels comfortable with us!” Josh argues. “That’s a big deal.”

Luke’s jaw stiffens. “Well, I don’t know if *I* feel comfortable telling a former student how to improve her love life.”

“You’ve got to get over this, man,” I tell him. “She’s not your student anymore. Come on, what’s the point of doing this job if we can’t even help people we care about?”

Before Luke can retort, there’s a knock on the door. “Guys?” Paul, our manager, calls through the wood. “Can I come in?”

I rub my eyes. I hate this guy. Ever since the podcast blew up years ago, we’ve been working for a media company. Buzztone. They produce a ton of podcasts.

I hate them. They can cut our pay whenever they want, they pick crappy sponsors, and we’re not even allowed to swear on our *own show*. And to top it all off, Paul is a money-hungry git.

“You may as well,” Josh calls tiredly, taking off his headphones. “We’re not getting anything done here.”

The door edges open, and Paul steps inside. Today, our squat little manager is dressed in a pinstriped three-piece suit with his hair oiled back, like an American car salesman. His face is grim.

“Let me guess,” I say flatly. “Numbers are down. Again.”

Paul’s mouth thins. “Worse. *Sweetheart Soulmates* have been making some comments about you guys overnight.” He slaps a tablet onto the table between us. “You need to see this.”

My fists clench. *Sweetheart Soulmates* is a rival relationship advice podcast that started getting popular last year. Normally, that wouldn’t bother me — I ain’t afraid of competition. But the advice they give is total crap. They tell

their listeners that it's a wife's job to stay at home and look after the kids. That new fathers shouldn't take paternity leave because they have to provide for the family. That giving teenage daughters birth control will just encourage them to sleep around. And the worst thing is, people actually *believe* them. I squint at the tweets.

*Spent this evening listening to @ThreeSingleGuys DISGUSTING latest episode, which promotes FEMALE PROMISCUITY under the label of 's*x positivity'.*

These men do not know what they're talking about and should NOT be allowed to give advice. We are DEEPLY concerned for the impressionable young girls listening to their programme.

Each one has over three thousand likes.

I scoff. "Yeah, well, at least we give people actual advice. Instead of just tellin' women, 'hey, if your man cheats, it's your fault, 'cause you ain't giving him enough blowies and sandwiches'."

"If you don't want people to take their advice," Paul says calmly, "maybe you should focus on bringing their listeners over to *Three Single Guys* instead."

"How?" Josh presses, scowling. "We haven't changed anything. I don't know how we're losing listeners."

Paul slaps a hand on the table. "*Exactly*. You haven't changed anything. You've been doing this for five years now; your content is stale." He plucks at the pile of printed listener emails. "There's only so many of these questions you can answer before you've said everything ten times before. You need to branch out."

"How?" Luke asks calmly. "Do you have any suggestions?"

Paul shrugs. "That's your job. But if you don't start bringing in more listeners, we're gonna have to cut your funding."

"*Shit*," Josh mutters, putting his head in his hands.

At Buzztone, budget cuts are a death knell for a podcast. I honestly don't care much if the show dies and we have to move onto something else, but *Three Single Guys* is Josh's baby. He started the podcast five years ago, when he was studying communications in uni. Luke joined after about a year, but I came in later.

It's a funny story. Growing up, Josh and I were best mates — we both lived on the same street and went to the same school. We lost contact for a bit when I started playing rugby, but after I tore my ACL and got kicked off the team, Josh found me again. I was a mess: drunk and depressed. He scraped me off the floor of my hotel, moved me into his apartment, and flat-out demanded that I join the show.

It was actually a really great move; I attracted a ton of new listeners to the podcast, and *Three Single Guys* has been doing pretty well ever since.

Until now.

"Figure something out," Paul orders, giving us one last stern look, then picking up his tablet and leaving the room.

I flip off the door as it swings shut. "I still think we should just go independent," I say. "We've been doing this long enough to work stuff out by ourselves."

As usual, no one listens to me.

Josh is frowning at the pile of papers in front of him. "Something fresh," he repeats. I can practically hear the cogs turning in his head. "That we've never done before. That will attract viewer engagement, and prove to people that we actually know what we're doing."

"You got something?" I ask.

He nods slowly. "I think so." He looks up at me. "Call Layla. Have her meet us at our place after she's done with work."

"What?" Luke asks. "Why?"

"I have an idea. But we're going to need her help."

SEVEN

LAYLA

“You... want to date me?” I ask later that evening, my stomach flipping.

“Fake-date,” Josh corrects quickly. “It would all be pretend.” Zack nods and grins, like that makes perfect sense. I squint at them.

This was not what I expected when Zack asked me to come over to their flat after work. I honestly thought it would be some kind of intervention. I spent the whole afternoon in my meetings mentally drafting my apology. When I finally made it back to their flat, all three men were at their breakfast bar, drinking beers and huddled over pages of handwritten notes. Before I could even open my mouth to say sorry, they’d sat me down, offered me a drink, and proceeded to pitch the stupidest-sounding idea that I’ve ever heard.

I look between the guys. Zack is beaming enthusiastically. Luke won’t look up from his beer. Josh’s eyes are fixed fiercely on me.

I bite my lip. “And you think you can actually teach me how to date?”

“Course, pet,” Zack says easily. “We’re love masters.”

Luke frowns. “There’s no way this is really necessary,” he says flatly. “You can’t be *that* bad at dating.” He waves at me. “I mean, look at you.”

I look down at myself. “What do you mean?”

Zack leans forward, a shit-eating grin splitting his face. “Yeah, *Mr Martins*. What *do* you mean?”

“I...” Luke runs a hand through his silvering hair, his cheeks flushing. “You’re a beautiful girl, Layla. You’re smart and put-together. Give it some time, and you’ll find the right guy.”

“I’ve given it plenty of time. If it was going to happen, it would have by now.” I turn back to Josh. “Okay. Assuming I did this, how would it work?”

Josh shuffles through the papers. “We’d take you on dates. Let you practice flirting. Get you comfortable with displays of affection. We can help get you acclimated to... romantic situations.”

“We’d basically be your boyfriends,” Zack says cheerfully.

“More or less,” Josh cuts in. “We can walk you through all of the things that you’re unsure about. Texting a guy. Inviting him round to your place. Apologising after a fight.” He tilts his head, his dark eyes drinking me in. “Do you think that will be helpful for you?”

Yeah, I think it will be helpful. Being able to roleplay with the guys, who I know won’t judge me when I mess up, is the most helpful thing anyone could possibly do for me.

It’s almost *too* helpful.

“What do you get out of it?” I say slowly.

“Content,” Josh says promptly. “I think we can turn the concept into a segment on our show. Like... a dating makeover. We take someone who’s romantically hopeless and teach her how to start a relationship. That way, we give the audience actual, practical tips, and we can prove our credentials to our listeners.”

“... okay,” I say. “Why do you need to do that?”

“Some knobheads have been saying online that we shouldn’t be giving advice,” Zack says, scowling. “But you could help us prove them wrong. We’d be your fake boyfriends, then at the end of every week, you’d come on the show for fifteen minutes and talk about what we taught you. Easy peasy.”

“Our numbers are flagging,” Josh admits. “It would be a great way of getting engagement. We can have listeners tweet in with date suggestions, answer polls, stuff like that.”

Zack nods. “Our production manager almost came when we pitched the idea to him.”

I dither. “What exactly would be my commitments? I’m pretty busy.”

“I know.” Josh flips through his pages of notes. “I’d ask for one formal date night per week, and three hours’ recording time on Sundays. We’ll also give you some homework.”

“I’m gonna teach you how to sext,” Zack says gleefully. “I already have a ton of material.”

“*Zack*,” Luke says sharply, setting his beer down hard on the counter.

I don’t say anything. I feel a bit giddy. Luke might not approve, but honestly, the idea is very appealing. The guys are actually going to help me.

“Okay,” I say. “I can do that.”

Josh nods, flipping a page. “There’s the issue of money. Whenever we have guests on the show, we usually give them a percentage of the episode’s earnings.”

I shake my head. “I don’t need money. You guys are doing me a favour. I’m doing one in return by being on your show. We’re square.”

“We can’t pay you in a favour, L. Not when you’ll be making us solid cash.” He twists the lid of his pen. “I thought, maybe you’d like to advertise.”

“Advertise?” It does make sense. The guys have a mostly female audience. I bet they have loads of listeners who would buy underwear. “Okay,” I agree. “An advertisement slot.”

Josh nods, making a mark on his paper. “How does thirty seconds sound?”

“A minute,” I counter. “And not just a repeated script during your ad break. I want an actual back-and-forth with you guys about my products. In every episode that I’m in.”

Zack whistles. “You drive a hard bargain, pet. God, what a chore. How on earth am I gonna talk with you about thongs for a whole minute?!”

Josh studies me for a moment, then nods, writing something down. “Done.”

Luke shakes his head. “This is ridiculous,” he mutters.

I turn to him. He looks more pissed off than I’ve ever seen him. He’s usually so gentle and mild-mannered. “You don’t want to do it?”

“No,” he says flatly. “I don’t want to take one of my former students on fake dates to entertain a bunch of strangers.”

Oh. “Then why am I here?” I ask.

“He doesn’t have a choice. We outvote him,” Zack says casually.

“Of course he has a choice. I’m not going to demand that he takes me out on dates if he doesn’t want to.”

Luke takes a deep breath. “I’ll narrate the segment, if you like. Handle the scripts and the social media. But I’m not joining in.” He stands, pushing back his chair. “And I think you should think very carefully before agreeing to this, Layla. There’s nothing wrong with you that these two idiots can fix.” He picks up his drink and leaves, heading for his bedroom. “Message me when you come to a decision.”

We all watch as he disappears down the hallway.

“Ignore him,” Zack says, when his bedroom door claps shut. “He’s been in a weird mood ever since his ex sent him her wedding invite.”

I wince, suddenly feeling bad.

I actually remember when Luke got divorced. It must have been about ten years ago. Back when he taught me English, he was married to the high school’s headmistress, Mrs Martins. He’d started the school year bubbling over with enthusiasm. He was one of the few teachers in the school who really cared about us. He bought us all books, took us to the theatre, stayed after class for hours to help struggling students. We were all in love with him.

Then, halfway through the year, he changed. I remember him coming to school haggard and tired-looking, his clothes crumpled. We had two months off for summer, and by the time we got back in September, Luke was nowhere to be found, and Mrs Martins was now Miss Jones.

It's been ten years, and as far as I know, he's not dated since. So I'm not surprised he doesn't want to fake-date me.

"Is it really fair to do this if he doesn't want to take part?" I ask.

Josh shrugs. "It's like he said. He doesn't have to get involved in the fake-dating part, if he doesn't want to." He sits a little straighter, flicking through his papers. "Alright. If you're happy to do this, we're going to draw up a lesson plan. When are you free for a first date?"

"Monday evening is good."

"Great. We'll record an introduction to the segment tomorrow morning, then on Monday we'll take you out to get some drinks, and see how you feel in a real-life date situation."

My mouth quirks. He's being so serious. It's hardly surprising —Josh takes everything seriously. Above everything else, he's a businessman. "Okay. Let's do it." I look over at the written contract Josh has been drafting. "Do you want me to sign, or something?" I reach for the paper, but Zack pushes it away from me.

"One more thing," he says, his voice suddenly serious. "And this is gonna make me sound like a prick, but I gotta put it out there." He smiles, his blue eyes kind. "This ain't going anywhere. Okay? We'll do the segment, get you nice and irresistible to men, and then release you into the wild like a baby bird. We ain't gonna end up dating."

I raise an eyebrow. "You do know that I'm not secretly in love with you, right?"

He grins. "Aye, I figured as much. But God knows how many times I've slept casually with a chick, and she ended up catching feelings. And it ain't her fault," he says quickly, seeing my expression. "You can't help your emotions. But, like. I love you, Layla. I don't want you getting hurt. Not by me, or Josh, or a stupid segment on our dumb podcast." He puts his big hand over mine.

“And if that thought enters your head, we’re gonna have to end this. ‘Cause I ain’t ruining our friendship.”

I nod slowly. “The same back at you. If you find yourself falling madly in love with me, we’ll call it off.”

“Nice.” Zack clinks our glasses together so enthusiastically his beer slops over onto the table. “This is gonna be epic.”

Josh smiles slightly and lifts his glass, but doesn’t say anything else. I take a deep breath, looking at the papers spread out in front of us. “So. Where do I sign?”

Josh taps the bottom of the paper. I pick up a pen and scrawl my signature along the bottom. Zack whoops as I set down the pen.

“*Nice*. Brace yourself, babe. You’re about to get the full boyfriend experience. Twice over.”

“But first...” Josh picks up the papers, stacking them together neatly. “You’ll have to record with us. We’ll see you at the studio at eleven.”

I nod firmly, trying to ignore the nerves squirming in my stomach.

EIGHT

LAYLA

Sunday morning is Podcast Recording day, and I am terrified.

The guys record their episodes in a media studio owned by their production company, BuzzTone. The room is small and snug. There's a round table set up with microphones and recording equipment, surrounded by four plush chairs, spaced as far apart as possible so our voices don't get picked up on each other's mics. Bottles of cold water are set up in each space, next to a pile of printed emails the boys are going to respond to. The room is oddly shaped: triangular, with a low ceiling and no windows.

"It's to prevent echo," Luke explains when I point it out, sliding into his chair and adjusting the height so his long legs fit under the table. "Parallel walls increase echo, because sound waves bounce between them more easily." He nods at the black egg-carton foam covering two of the walls. "Same with the acoustic foam. The protruding patterns absorb sound waves much better than a flat piece of foam would."

I can't help but smile, despite my nerves. "Thank you, Mr Martins."

He gives me an unimpressed look as I bend to set my bag on the floor, my leather trousers squeaking slightly. Even though we're just recording audio, I'm dressed up today, in a black crop top and sky-high boots. Fighting clothes. Nothing makes me feel stronger than being dressed like the hot villain in a superhero movie. And right now, I need all the strength I can get.

I barely slept last night. I couldn't eat. I spent all night relistening to old episodes of *Three Single Guys*, analysing the way the guys talk and joke as

they dole out their advice. No matter how hard I try, I just can't imagine my own voice fitting into that easy to-and-fro banter. I'm not funny. I'm not charming. I'm not witty. I can't even get a man to sit and eat dinner with me for an hour, for God's sake. I'm *that* unlikeable. I watch as Josh and Luke fiddle with the equipment, my heart in my throat. I'm going to screw this up.

"Hey, babe!" A low voice comes from the doorway. I turn to see Zack wandering into the room, holding a takeaway cup of coffee. He smacks a kiss on my cheek and gives my butt a light slap, making me jump. "Mm. Your bum looks great today."

I glare at him, twisting to slap his bum back. "Wish I could say the same to you."

He just beams, pulling out my chair. "Sit down and stop being so grumpy. Look, I got you coffee. Ain't I a good boyfriend?"

"We've not started the experiment, yet," Josh mutters, staring at his computer screen as Zack dumps the drink by my elbow and sits down next to me. "Say something into the mic, Layla."

"Babe," Zack corrects. "You gotta call her babe. Or honey. Or sweetbuns. Somethin' proper *romantic*." He frowns. "I wanna make an amendment to the contract. I want it *in writing* that I can call you whatever cheesy pet name I like."

"Say something, sweetbuns," Josh deadpans.

I clear my throat. "Um. Hey," I say into the mic.

"Something more," Josh says. "We need to test the mic settings."

"Sing an Adele song, muffin-face." Zack advises. "That's what I always do."

"Testing, testing?" I try.

Josh rolls his eyes, tapping at his keyboard. "Original. Okay, you go, Luke."

I watch as the rest of the guys test out their own mics, making adjustments to their chairs and mic stands. They're all so professional. Even Zack is serious, reading through his notes with his brow furrowed.

Cold sinks into my stomach. I have no idea what I'm doing. What if I screw up and hold up filming? Or I say something dumb, and hurt the guys' reputation? I don't know how to make myself likeable to an audience. Their listeners will probably all hate me, and the show's numbers will go even further down, and I'll get mean tweets, and the boys will lose their sponsorships and their audience and their jobs—

A light hand touches my shoulder. I look up at Luke. He's dressed casually to record, in a white oxford shirt and worn jeans. His grey eyes are kind behind his glasses as he passes me a bottle of water. "Breathe," he says quietly. "You're overthinking this."

I swallow and nod. "Always."

He smiles, squeezing my shoulder lightly. "What's stressing you out, sweetheart?"

My heart flutters. Back in high school, half of the girls in my year were in love with Luke. It's easy to see why, when he does his 'sweet, concerned professor' routine. "I've been listening to some podcasts for research," I admit.

His eyebrow arches, amused. "That doesn't surprise me."

"And the women are never... like me."

"What?" Josh looks up, frowning.

"They're all perky. And funny. And smart enough to say hilarious, insightful stuff right off the top of their heads."

"You're funny and smart," he argues.

"Not exactly perky," Zack adds helpfully, "but you've got a really hot voice, babe. Just yell at us like you usually do. You're great at that."

"Hang on," Josh says slowly. "Are you nervous? *You?*"

I twist my fingers together. "I think we have established that I do not like learning curves," I say stiffly. "Or being bad at things. Why else would I need to *practice* having a boyfriend?"

“Do you never try anything new?” Luke asks, studying me closely.

I shift uncomfortably. “Not if I can avoid it. Or I spend a few months privately learning in secret, so I’m not embarrassingly bad at it.”

“Why?” Zack looks genuinely confused. “I screw stuff up all the time. Doesn’t bother me.”

I snort. “You’re famous. People will fawn over you no matter what you do.”

“That is true,” he says sagely. “S’hard to mess up when you’re this hot.”

Luke is still examining me like a bug under a microscope. “There’s no shame in making a public mistake, Layla,” he says quietly. “Everybody does it.”

“Yes, well, I’ve been made fun of plenty in the past,” I say briskly. “I don’t want to give people an opening to do it again. Not when I can do a little research and make sure I know what I’m doing.”

Luke frowns.

Zack bellows a laugh. “People made fun of *you*? Did they ever regain the use of their fingers?”

I sniff, tossing my hair behind my shoulders. “I don’t know what you’re implying.”

“Can we please get started?” Josh asks, flipping a final switch and sitting back in his chair. “We need to get this done before our slot ends.”

Zack and Luke both nod, turning to their mics. I take a deep breath, bracing myself.

“Okay. Let’s do this.”

TRANSCRIPT

THREE SINGLE GUYS EPISODE 443: THE FAKE DATE EXPERIMENT

(Theme tune fades)

JOSH: Hello, and welcome to episode 443 of *Three Single Guys*, a relationship podcast by three guys who are absolutely not qualified to give you dating advice. My name is Josh...

ZACK: I'm Zack.

LUKE: And I'm Luke.

JOSH: We've got a pretty exciting show lined up for you today, so stay tuned for our thoughts on swinger parties, advice on how to politely tell your significant other that they need to shower more, and news about our upcoming liveshow at PodFest. But before we get into all of that, we have something special for you all — we're starting up a new segment. Something we've never done before. Zack, do you want to explain?

ZACK: Sure. *(Clears his throat)* I know that some people think that we're talking total crap on this show —

LUKE: Which we are, to an extent. We do not give professional advice.

ZACK: Right. Right. We're just three losers with a podcast. But we're three losers with a podcast and a wall full of wedding invites, because we're great at our job. We *have* helped people. A lot of 'em. And we don't appreciate being called 'disgusting' by a couple of sanctimonious snobs who think just 'cause they got married to the first kid who held their hand in primary school, the sun shines out of their backsides.

LUKE: Zack.

ZACK: (*ignoring him*) Here's a newsflash, to the pricks at *Sweetheart Soulmates*: being married doesn't make you superior to single people. And, considerin' most of your advice is basically '*women, try harder to please your man*', it obviously doesn't make you any better at giving advice, either. So you can take your 'deep concerns', and shove them down your—

(*Luke interrupts*)

LUKE: Rather than argue with our critics, we thought we'd take the high ground, and use this as an opportunity to test our advice skills — and provide you all with some first-hand entertainment along the way.

JOSH: We have a friend who's lived in our building for the past couple of years. She's loud, uses too much hot water, and is a generally terrible neighbor. If you ever heard muffled ABBA in the background of our quarantine episodes, that's her.

LAYLA: Hey!

JOSH: Wait your turn. Anyway, this friend recently came to us for some relationship advice. It turns out, she's terrible at dating.

LUKE: She's a beautiful girl, incredibly successful, and has loads going for her, but for some reason, she can't pay a guy to go on a

second date with her.

ZACK: She probably couldn't pay him to finish his first date with her. They tend to jump out of the restaurant bathroom's window before the first course is served.

LAYLA: That only happened once. For the record.

JOSH: Shh. So we've decided, in the name of charity, that we're going to help our friend out. And you're coming along with us. For the next few weeks, we're going to be conducting a dating experiment. Layla, can you say hello?

LAYLA: Hello.

(Long pause)

ZACK: Aww. My little pudding pop is shy.

LAYLA: I am *not* shy.

ZACK: Of course, you're not. Introduce yourself, dumpling.

LAYLA: Um. Hello. I'm Layla Thompson. I'm twenty-eight. I run my own clothing company. And I've never had a boyfriend. I'd love to have at least one relationship before I turn thirty, so I figured, if I have to share a wall with these three losers, I may as well use their dating expertise.

ZACK: I wish you guys were here in the studio right now, so you could see how hard she's blushing.

LAYLA: I'm not blushing, you hog.

ZACK: It's so cute. Her cheeks are bright pink. She looks like a little raspberry.

(A clattering sound, followed by a muffled groan)

JOSH: For the listeners at home, our guest speaker just kicked over Zack's chair.

LUKE: She's surprisingly strong.

LAYLA: Surprising?! Do I look weak?

JOSH: Can we get back on track, please? For the next six weeks, we'll be giving Layla the full boyfriend experience. We're calling the segment 'The Fake Date Experiment'.

ZACK: 'Cause we're gonna be her fake boyfriends, basically. So she can hone her non-existent skills.

JOSH: Exactly. We'll be taking her on dates, inviting her over for dinner, and giving her our best tips on flirting and body language — as well as how to progress dates to the next level.

ZACK: *Oh la la.*

JOSH: The goal of this segment isn't to find you a boyfriend, L. Frankly, we're not miracle workers. But if we can make you more comfortable dating, we'll have done our job. *(He pauses)* No matter what happens, it will at least be entertaining.

LAYLA: I'm glad to amuse.

JOSH: Alright, Layla. We'll catch up with you next week, when we have transformed you into someone men might possibly find mildly attractive.

LAYLA: The next time you do laundry, I'm gonna pour paint into the washing machine mid-spin cycle.

JOSH: I'm shaking, truly. Sign out before I unplug your mic.

LAYLA: Later, losers.

(Sound of papers shuffling)

JOSH: Okay, guys, moving onto your emails. We're starting with Charlotte from Arkansas, who wants to know how to tell her boyfriend that she's found his stash of dirty videos — and wants to watch them with him...

TWITTER

Buzz Tone Podcasts @Buzz_Tone_Media

Ever wondered what it would be like to date one of @ThreeSingleGuys? The guys are starting a dating experiment with one very lucky lady. Download the latest episode to find out more! 🎵

Rosie @R0zeanne92

I am frickin OBSESSED with @ThreeSingleGuys finally adding a girl to their show #girlpower #itsabouttime

Anita @Anni3Rhaman

Will someone please tell Zack that I am also very bad at dating and would LOVE to volunteer to be his girlfriend :)

Abby @Hot_Bi_Fiend

Is there a rule you have to be hot to be on this podcast?! I checked @HerTreatLayla's profile, the girl is fiiiire #girlcrush

Queen Dany @Dany_is_queen

I already ship Layla and Josh. Idk he just sounds happier when he's talking to her #teamjosh

Zilly @ZackHard0nForever

Twenty bucks they all fall in love.

NINE

ZACK

“Relax,” I tell Josh for the fifth time. “She’s coming. You’re not getting stood up.”

Josh glares at me, tapping the side of his pint glass impatiently.

It’s been a day since our recording session with Layla. The episode only went live about half an hour ago, so I’m not sure how it’s being received — I’ve turned off my phone notifications so I can focus on the task at hand.

Tonight, we’re having our first official date. I decided to pick familiar ground, and texted her to meet us at the pub opposite our apartment block at nine PM. Josh and I have been sat at a quiet corner booth for a few minutes now. Layla’s running late, and it’s driving Josh up the wall.

“I’m relaxed,” he insists, tugging at his collar. He’s dressed up for the occasion, in jeans and a black shirt I could swear is new. He’s done something to his hair, and judging by the minty smell drifting across the table, he’s doused himself in cologne as well.

Interesting.

I clear my throat. “You’re gonna break that glass, mate.”

Josh pulls his hand away from his water like it’s burned him, looking up as the door swings open again. His shoulders ease. “She’s here,” he breathes.

I catch Layla’s eye and wave her over. She said she was coming straight from the warehouse, but she still looks stunning, in a pair of tight black leather

pants and a red jacket. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and her eyes are made up smokey and black. It's hot as Hell.

"Hi," she says breathlessly, sitting down next to me. "Sorry I'm late. They evacuated the Tube after a drunk guy puked on the seats." She sets her handbag on the table, then glances between the two of us. Her cheeks are pink. "There's two of you."

"Is that a problem?" Josh asks. "One of us could leave, if you don't want to be seen with us both in public—"

"No!" She says quickly. "No, no. I, um, don't have a problem with that. I just didn't expect it. But I guess it's better, actually, right? I get like, two perspectives. Two fake boyfriends. Yes, that's good." She clears her throat, then reaches for Josh's water glass. "You guys look nice," she babbles. "Sorry, I didn't have time to change. I'd normally get my tits out on a bar date."

Josh looks like he's swallowed his own tongue. "You look fine," he manages.

Layla blushes deeper, her eyes flashing between us again. I don't think I've ever seen her so flustered before. "You alright, sugar?"

She squirms a bit under my gaze. "Yep. So, um. Do we just start now?" She reaches into her bag and pulls out a small notebook labelled 'DATE LOG' and a pink fluffy pen. "I brought this to take notes."

I try not to smile. "You won't be needing that, pet. Josh and I had a chat, and we decided that before we get started with the date, we want to set up a baseline. We gotta see what we're working with. This is an experiment, after all."

She nods, business-like. "Okay. How are we going to do that?"

"I wanna see you in action," I decide. "Go find someone to flirt with. We'll watch and analyse your skills."

Josh kicks me hard under the table. "Only if you're comfortable," he starts to say, but Layla just nods.

“Good idea. Do you have a scoring system in place? Hang on, I already wrote one.” Flipping through her notebook, she finds a page. “Here.” She twists the book around to show us. She’s drawn up a table with six categories, and boxes to score them out of ten. I read through them, trying not to laugh.

DATE SUCCESS INDEX:

- **Body language**
- **Eye contact**
- **Touching**
- **Conversational Flow**
- **Humour**
- **Phone number acquired? (Y/N)**

Josh makes a choking sound, covering his face with his hand. “Jesus, Layla.”

“You won’t be able to answer all of them, I guess,” she says seriously. “Conversational flow and humour are hard to tell from a distance. I suppose you can judge by how involved I seem to be in the conversation. Or how much I’m laughing.”

Josh closes his eyes.

I pull the notepad towards me. “Wow, you’re so bizarre. Okay.” I pick up her pen, waving the fluffy end at her. “Scoot. Go woo someone. You want me to pick a guy out?”

“Ew, no.” She looks around, scanning the bar, then points at a tall man standing by the fruit machines. “I want him.” She stands up, brushing down her pants.

“Nope,” I pull her back down patiently. She squawks when she lands in my lap. “He’s wearing a ring.”

She squints. “Oh. Right.” She shuffles back on my thighs and glances around, pointing to a couple of guys leaning over the pool table. “What about the guy in the hat?”

“In a relationship.”

“With *who*?”

I frown. “Um, with the guy who’s currently groping his bum? Jesus, you really are bad at this. I didn’t think I’d have to teach you how to identify single straight men.”

“Oh.” She slumps a little, surveying the rest of the room. Her eyes alight on the bar, focussing on a tall, skinny guy sitting alone, staring at his phone. “Him?”

I wrinkle my nose. The guy looks like a twat. “You think he’s hot?”

“Sure.”

I shrug. Who am I to judge if she has terrible taste? “Then go for it, pet. Go over there, see if you can get his number. We’ll be watching.”

She nods once, then stands back up and heads right over to the bar, little white ponytail bobbing. Josh and I both watch as she struts over to her target and taps him on the shoulder. The guy jumps and turns to look at her. His eyes flick up and down her body, sparking with interest.

She sticks out her hand for him to shake. “I’m Layla,” I hear faintly over the pub chatter. “Are you single?”

“Well, at least she gets straight to the point,” I mutter, making a mark in the ‘eye contact’ column. “Do you reckon she always shakes peoples’ hands in a bar? God, she’s such a little weirdo.”

Josh shifts. “Did we really have to do this?” He asks, watching as the guy pulls out the bar seat next to him.

I raise an eyebrow. “You know, maybe you shouldn’t have signed up for this if you can’t stand to see her flirting with other men. Whole point of the segment is to help her find a boyfriend, after all.” Josh grunts, and I glance across at him. “Seriously, man. Are you actually down to fake-date her? Don’t you think it might, like, hurt too much?”

Josh is silent for a moment, then picks up his drink. “What do you mean?” He asks coolly.

“You know what I mean, Josh. You like her.”

“So do you.”

“I think she’s hot and funny and kind. I don’t have a crush on her. You do.” We both watch as the guy at the bar waves over the bartender, saying something to Layla. Looks like he’s buying her a drink. So far, so good. “I don’t suppose you’ve told her, have you?”

“Why would I?” Josh says quietly. “It doesn’t matter.”

I stare at him. “What the Hell do you mean, it doesn’t matter? You think she would’ve agreed to this if she knew how you feel about her? You heard her — she said she didn’t want anything to get between us.”

“And it won’t.” Josh takes a deep breath. “This is about her, not me. She’s my friend. I’ll help her in any way I can.”

“She won’t want to see you get hurt—” I start.

“Well, I don’t want to see her crying on my couch,” Josh bites out. “Zack. Seriously. It’s not a big deal. Yes, I like her, but it’s not that deep. I can look past my feelings to help a friend.”

I study him. I’ve been best mates with Josh since we were both little four-year-olds in reception. Even back then, he was toddling around, handing out his sandwiches to the kid who’d forgotten his lunch, giving away his toys to the girl crying at playtime.

“That’s the problem with you,” I tell him. “You’re way too selfless. You put everyone else before yourself. Even if they don’t even want you to. You gotta grow out of it, man, it’s not good.”

Josh doesn’t say anything, running his finger along the rim of his glass.

I sigh and clap him on the back. “Look, I get it. You wanna help her. But if it gets too much, just bow out. I’ll take over for you.”

He shrugs my hand off him, his eyes narrowing on Layla. “She looks miserable.”

I follow his gaze and wince. I gotta admit, her body language is terrible. She’s sitting right on the edge of the barstool like she wants to escape. Her arms are crossed protectively over her chest, and she’s avoiding the guy’s

gaze, staring at the menu on the wall behind the bar.

“Maybe she doesn’t like him?” I guess.

“She doesn’t have to *like* him,” Josh points out. “Just sit and flirt with him for a few minutes.”

We both watch as the guy asks her a question. She gives him a tight smile and a short response, then they’re both silent. She sips her wine. Frowning, the man leans forward and tries again, asking her another question. She just nods, looking down at the bar. His face flushes with annoyance.

“Christ,” I say, drawing a zero in the ‘body language’ category. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen such shitty chemistry. Maybe he’s a total douche?”

We watch as the guy tries to ask another question and gets ignored again. Frustrated, he slams his drink on the bar and stands.

“I know what this is,” he announces, raising his voice so we can both hear. “You’re one of those girls who just flirts with guys to get free drinks, aren’t you?”

Josh starts to rise out of his seat, but I tug him back down. “She’s a big girl,” I remind him. “She can handle it.”

“I want to know what they’re saying.”

I consider, then gather up our drinks and hop along to the next booth so we can hear better.

Layla looks confused. “What are you talking about?”

“Sure,” the guy blusters. “You’ll sit and talk with me until I’ve got my credit card out, and now you just want to leave? Here’s a tip: next time you come out for a drink, bring your own damn cash.”

Layla stares at him. “*Okay*,” she says loudly. “For your information, I am perfectly capable of buying my own drinks. I was legitimately interested in you. But I’m sure as hell not anymore.” She stands, shoving the glass at him. “Here. Keep your drink, if you care about it that much.”

“I can’t drink *wine*, I’m a guy,” the man sputters.

The look Layla gives him could dissolve glass. Snapping open her clutch, she pulls out a crisp ten-pound note and drops it on the bar. “There. Enjoy. Prick.”

She tosses her hair over her shoulder, turns on her heel, and saunters back to our table. When she reaches us, she crosses her arms, looking between us. “Well? How did I do?” She drawls.

Josh and I exchange a look. I pat the empty seat at my side. “Sit,” I say slowly. “We’ve got a lot to discuss.”

TEN

LAYLA

My cheeks burn as I slide into the booth next to Zack. Humiliation is thumping through me.

That attempt of flirting went horrendously, even by my standards. The worst part is, I legitimately was trying. I wouldn't have agreed to do this if I wasn't going to give it my all. I just got really nervous.

Before I pissed him off, the guy seemed nice enough. He sat me down and offered to buy me a drink. He seemed interested in my work. We were chatting normally, and then he put his hand over mine, and I just froze.

Josh tilts his head, studying me. He's dressed up today, in a black collared shirt that brings out the gold in his skin. He looks hot as Hell. "Tell me what happened," he orders.

"I just... couldn't think of anything to say. My mind went blank."

"Was he a minger up close?" Zack asks loudly, his voice echoing through the dim bar.

"What?"

"Did he smell rank, or something?" He demands.

"No? I didn't notice how he smelled at all. Do you have to shout?"

"Then why were you looking at him like you thought he'd give you the plague?"

“What are you talking about?”

Zack points at the first item on my scoresheet. He’s written 0 next to the *body language* column. “You were sat like...” Zack pauses, then frowns at me. “Well. Like you are now, actually.”

I look down at myself. I’m sitting precariously on the edge of the leather booth. My arms are crossed over my chest, and my body is thrumming with tension.

Taking a deep breath, I force myself to relax. “I didn’t realise. I was definitely attracted to him.”

“That’s interesting,” Josh notes clinically. “This is something subconscious for you, then. Your brain is on the defense, even if you’re trying to be friendly.”

“I...” I blink. “Yeah. I guess.”

“It looked like the conversation started off well, though,” he adds. “Was there a moment where things went downhill?”

I think. “I guess when he got really close to me. He touched my hand and I just froze up.”

Zack frowns. “You don’t like being touched, pet?”

“I don’t think I have an issue with it,” I say honestly. “I don’t know why it suddenly bothered me so much.”

Josh ruffles a hand through his hair. “I don’t get it,” he says. “I’ve seen you bring guys home before. I’m assuming you must flirt with them. How do you pull when you’re just looking for a one-night-stand?”

I didn’t know he’d noticed me bringing guys back. I shrug. “I go to a bar. See someone I like. Go up to them and ask if they’re single. If they say yes, I ask them if they want to sleep with me.”

There’s a few seconds of silence. Both men stare at me.

I tense under the attention. “What?”

Zack flops back against the booth and howls with laughter. He laughs so hard he almost falls out of his seat. People at nearby tables start turning and staring.

I glare at him. “*What?* It’s effective.”

“Yeah,” he sputters. “I bloody bet. It’d work on me. God, you’re lucky you’re so damn pretty, cupcake.” He wipes at his face. “You’re *crap* at this.”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Did you just ask me out here to laugh at me, or are you actually planning on helping me?”

“Both,” he wheezes, slapping his thigh.

My cheeks heat. “Whatever.” I stand up, reaching for my coat. “Forget it.”

“Okay,” he gasps, grabbing my hand and pulling me back down. “Okay. Sorry, sorry. Let’s fix this. First off—body language.” He clears his throat, pointing to the space between us. “This is all wrong. If a girl sat next to me like this, I’d assume she thinks I smell bad.”

“You don’t,” I say, before I can stop myself. “You always smell great. Sort of... warm and spicy. I like it.”

Zack’s eyes twinkle. “See. You’re gettin’ better at this already.” He stretches out a huge arm. “Come cuddle your boyfriend, biscuit. Let’s see if we can get you used to some touching, eh?”

I shuffle closer to him, and he scoops me into his side, pulling me close.

I’m pretty sure he has an ulterior motive, here. Zack loves hugs. I don’t think I’ve ever gotten through a movie night at his flat without him wrapping his arm around me or laying his head in my lap. It’s hard to complain, though — he’s so big and muscly. Warmth radiates through his side as he cuddles me up close to him. “Aw, this is nice.” He pats my cheek. “You’re well soft. Aight, next up,” he points at my list. “Eye contact.”

“It’s important, right?”

“Aye, but you were starin’ that poor guy down like you were a snake about to gobble up a deer. You gotta make it *seductive*. Guys and girls tend to do this kinda differently.” He reaches up, nudging my eyelashes with the side of his

finger. “You gotta use these. Try this.” He dips his head demurely and looks up at me through his lashes.

I burst out laughing.

He grins. “Okay. I look dumb doing it, but you won’t. Give it a try. Just catch my eye, look down, and then look back up at me, all coy.”

Feeling like an absolute idiot, I do as he says. I hold his gaze for a moment, then drop my eyes, waiting a couple of beats before looking back up at him.

He pulls a face. “Again, but like. Try to look less like you lost a contact.”

I try it again, squinting through my mascara.

“That was even worse,” he says, sounding impressed. “Damn, doll. You really are bad at this.”

“How do you do it, then?” I demand. “You don’t bat your eyelashes at girls like a cartoon skunk.”

“Nah. I’m a man. I *smoulder*. Check it.” He takes a sip of his beer, then tosses me a side-ways look so full of heat my mouth goes dry. My insides knot as his icy-blue eyes fix on mine, then flicker down my body. Sparks prickle across my skin. He’s looking at me like he wants to peel my clothes right off me.

He holds my gaze for a few beats, then turns back to his pint. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to hypnotise you, lass. My smoulder is pretty potent.”

I swallow. “How did you do that?”

“I imagined my face between your legs,” he says casually, taking another sip of beer.

I choke on air.

A throat clears across the table. I look up to see Josh watching us both impassively. “This is supposed to be about Layla,” he reminds us. “Don’t you think we should be focussing on her?”

Zack dips his mouth by my ear. “Josh is so jealous right now,” he whispers, before raising his voice. “Alright. C’mon, mate. She’s got two sides.” He pats

the empty space on my right.

Josh considers. At first, I think he's going to refuse; but then he stands and moves smoothly out of his booth, joining our side of the table. As he sits next to me, his knee presses against mine, and my skin suddenly warms. Wordlessly, he lays his hand palm-up on the tabletop. After a moment, I thread my fingers through his.

"Perfect." Zack leans closer on my left, reaching for me. As his arm wraps around my waist, I immediately start to hyperventilate, blood thumping through me.

This is too much. I've curled up with Zack plenty of times, and I suppose I must have sat squashed next to Josh in a car, or something. But I've never been jammed between them like this. It's doing things to my insides. My belly feels heavy.

I glance around the pub. Can people tell we're on a date? They must be able to, right? This isn't how friends usually sit.

God. I can't catch my breath. My throat is tight and dry. I'm hot all over.

"Okay?" Josh murmurs, looking at me strangely.

"Yeah." I squeeze my thighs together and clear my throat. I don't know what's wrong with me, but I need to pull myself together. "So... what do we do now?"

"Now," Zack says, "we get you another drink."

ELEVEN

LAYLA

“You know what my problem is?” I ask, half an hour later. After a glass of wine and some aggressive cuddling from Zack, I’m feeling a lot more relaxed. Tucked between my two best friends under the dim red light of the bar, I feel warm and safe. Safe enough to talk about things I’ve never spoken about before. “I am too defensive with men,” I admit. “I don’t trust guys when they flirt with me. I don’t trust them when they show interest in me, or touch me, or try to get me in bed. It makes me angry to be flirted with. It makes me want to run away. I just hate every part of it.”

“Okay,” Josh says slowly, running his finger over my hand. My skin tingles as he absentmindedly strokes the inside of my wrist. “Why?”

I consider, leaning against his side. His cool, minty scent drifts into my lungs, calming me. “I can’t believe that they actually care about me. I always feel like they just want to use me.”

Josh stills. “Why? Has that happened to you before?”

I hesitate, then shake my head. “Nope. Never had a boyfriend, remember?” His laser eyes burn into mine, like he can see the lie in my face. I turn back to my drink. “I don’t know why I think that way. But whenever a guy flirts with me, I just freeze up. It happens every time.”

“Okay.” Josh pulls away from me, straightening. “Let’s practice. I’m sure you just need to get more comfortable.”

I perk up. “Really?”

“Really. Let’s do some role play. Imagine you saw me at a bar and wanted to hit on me. Zack will watch and give you pointers.”

“Okay. Good idea.” I stand up.

“Wait!” Zack says, grabbing my hand. “Don’t forget your costume.”

I squint at him. “What?”

He nods at the front of my jacket. “We’re doing a bar date role play. So go on. Get your tits out.”

I stare at him for a second. He grins back. I pluck an ice cube out of my water glass, grab his collar, and drop it down his back.

He yowls, his body arching as he tries to shake it out of his clothes. “Jesus! No need to attack me! I’m just trying to make it realistic!”

“You’re such a knob,” I say, trying not to smile as he finally bats away the ice cube. “Get into position, then.” I shuffle out of the booth.

“Nerd,” Zack mutters under his breath, as Josh turns back to his drink. I take a few steps back, fluff up my hair, and then brace myself, walking back up to the table.

“Hi,” I say, a bit too loudly. Josh looks up. Immediately, his eyes fix on me, flicking down my front. My pulse starts to beat a little harder in my throat.

“Hi,” he says softly. “Can I help you with something?”

His voice sounds different. Warmer and deeper. Is this what he sounds like when he’s flirting? My cheeks immediately heat.

“Are you... um, here alone tonight?” I manage.

He leans back in his seat, considering me. “Currently.”

“That’s pretty embarrassing.”

“I know. I’m mortified. Save me from the shame and let me buy you a drink.”

“Like a date?” I ask, then immediately curse myself. I sound like a middle-schooler talking to her crush.

Josh looks amused. “If you like.” He taps the leather booth next to him. “C’mon. Save me from a night of drinking alone.”

I sit, then hesitate, floundering for something to say. “I, um...”

“Just be honest,” Zack advises quietly. “You’re thinking too hard. Say whatever comes into your head.”

“Well, I have to warn you,” I tell Josh, “It might be a waste of your time. I’ve been on 120 first dates. They’ve never worked out.”

Josh shifts his weight. I suddenly realise how big he is. His body takes up most of the booth. He stretches his arm across the back of the seat and studies me. “You must be tired,” he murmurs. “All those first dates. Don’t worry. Mine can be your last.”

I crack a smile. “Smooth.”

“Stay in character,” he orders.

“Right.” I clear my throat. “I’m Layla.” I stick out my hand.

His eyebrow twitches. “How formal.” He shakes my hand firmly. “Joshua.”

I nod. “Well, Joshua. What makes you think you can do better than the 120 men who came before you?”

Josh shrugs a shoulder, his eyes not leaving mine. “I’m a hard worker.”

“You say that now, but I’m a pretty difficult girlfriend. I’m not sure you could handle me.”

Josh’s eyes spark. “I bet we have more in common than you think.”

“Doubt it.”

“Try me.”

I narrow my eyes. Well. Zack did tell me to be honest. “I’m a workaholic.”

“Me, too,” Josh counters.

“I’ve never had a boyfriend.”

“Me, neither.”

I snort. “I’ve been told that I’m high-maintenance.”

“I’d do whatever you wanted me to,” he says softly, and his low voice suddenly sounds so dirty that my insides clench. Jesus.

“How are you still single?” I blurt out. It is ridiculous that a man this hot hasn’t found a partner.

Something odd flickers over his expression. “I’m saving myself for you,” he informs me drily, leaning back in his seat. “Obviously.”

I have a feeling I’ve said something wrong, but I don’t know what. I can’t think straight. I’m starting to sweat under my leather jacket. Fumbling for the zip, I shrug it off, letting the cool air of the pub wash over my overheated skin.

Immediately, Josh’s eyes fix on the strap of my bra slipping out from my shirt. His Adam’s apple jerks. “I like this,” he says quietly, lifting his hand to touch the pink ribbon. His fingertip skims over my collarbone, making me shiver.

“Thanks. I made it myself.”

“Is that what you do?” He curls his finger in the loop of the tiny bow peeking out on my shoulder. Tingles cascade over my skin. Goosebumps pop up all over me. “You make clothes? I have a wedding coming up that I need a shirt for. Maybe I should come to you.”

“I design underwear, so no shirts, I’m afraid. Although I do have a beaded corset that you would look lovely in.”

Zack flashes me a thumbs-up.

Josh smiles, still focussed on the ribbon. “You’re like a present.” He says lowly, giving it the tiniest little tug. “Makes me want to unwrap you.”

My heart stammers. Heat flushes through me. Luckily, before I have to say anything, a man walking towards the bar pauses by our table. Josh glances up

at him, his face suddenly darkening. I stiffen as he winds an arm around my shoulders and tugs me into his chest, hiding me against his front.

“Fuck off,” he says over my head. I hear footsteps retreating.

“Wow,” I say, smushed into his shirt. “Joshua. This is indecent. We just met.”

He gently removes me from his front, his hand stroking down my back. I’m breathing hard. “Sorry. Some prick with a Rolex was looking down your top.” He picks up my jacket and wraps it back around my shoulders. “Let’s gift-wrap you again.”

“A Rolex?” I tease as he tugs the zip up to my chin. “Ooh. A rich man. Maybe I should go flirt with him instead.”

He stiffens, his hand still on my throat. “Don’t. I’ll end the night in a jail cell.”

I’m pretty sure he’s joking, but his voice is so rough it makes my insides jump. “A-are we exclusive, then? I can only practice flirting with you?”

He lowers his hand. “That’s up to you,” he says quietly. “This is only our first date, right?” His eyes meet mine, hot and dark. “If you were mine, I’d want you all to myself.”

My stomach drops like I’m on a rollercoaster. I open my mouth to respond — and my mind goes completely blank.

TWELVE

LAYLA

Josh waits patiently. Ten seconds pass. Then thirty seconds. I try to think of a single cool, seductive, funny response, but my brain is wiped clean.

“Would you like me to repeat my line?” Josh asks kindly, as my silence ticks over the minute mark. “Damn. I think I broke her.”

“*God.*” I give up and pull away from him, sagging in my seat. “I’m terrible,” I mutter. “This isn’t going to work. I’m useless.”

I should just focus on my work. Maybe one day, I’ll be rich enough to buy a husband.

Zack sits up, his usual easygoing grin swiping off his face. “Stop,” he rumbles. “Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re not the biggest catch in the bloody room.” His voice is stern. “You wanna know what I see when I look at you?” I don’t say anything. He tugs at my hair. “Gorgeous hair. Gorgeous eyes. Killer smile, when you actually let yourself do it.”

“You’re telling me to smile?” I ask, my voice hitching as he drags his big hand down to my waist. “Where’d you learn that line? The builders across the road?”

He shakes his head firmly. “You’re right. No smilin’. You’d probably start a stampede. Keep your smiles for me.” His hand slides down my hip. I swallow

as he gives my bum a squeeze. “You’re smart. You’re driven. You have the best backside I ever saw. You’re an absolute knockout, babe. So what if you’re shy? If people judge you for that, they don’t deserve you.”

Josh nods. “He’s right, L. It’s okay for you to be awkward. Just accept it. Don’t freak out and go cold when you can’t think of what to say.”

I sigh. “Okay.” I reach for my notebook, but Josh puts his hand on mine, stopping me.

“You don’t need that,” he says quietly.

I look down at his big, tanned hand on mine, then glance back up at him. His dark eyes drink me in.

For the first time in a long time, I really look at my two best friends. I see what every other girl in this pub is seeing.

I know they’re both attractive. When I first moved in, I was shocked at how hot they were. Josh, with his angular features, square shoulders, and inky black hair. Zack with his huge Viking frame, long blonde hair and easy grin. I’m not *blind*, but after I slowly became friends with them, I didn’t let myself think of them like that anymore. I haven’t had real friends since I was a kid. I didn’t want to mess it up.

“You’re not a smooth person,” Josh continues, curling his thumb into my palm. “That’s fine. Not everyone is. We live in a society that idealises hyper-confident extroverts, but really, they’re no *better* than people who are awkward or quiet or introverted. They just have a different set of skills. You don’t have to pretend you’re anything you’re not.”

“Aye,” Zack agrees, leaning closer. His warm breath fans over my face. “I personally find your inability to speak very charming.”

“Um. Thanks.” I shiver as he tucks some hair behind my ear. “Are we flirting, too, now?”

His eyes twinkle. “You’re blushin’, buttercup, so I would say yes.” He trails a finger over my cheek. “I’m getting jealous. It’s my turn to make you go pink.” Suddenly, our faces are very close. I can see all the pale blonde lashes framing his bright blue eyes.

He's close enough to kiss.

Nerves burst up in my stomach, and I turn quickly back to my drink. I haven't kissed somebody in years. I'll probably be crap at it. I've already embarrassed myself enough in front of the guys for one night.

I guess my thoughts must show up on my face, because Josh leans in, reading my expression. "You okay?"

"Hm?"

He touches the side of my face. "You look overwhelmed. We can give you a breather, if you want. Go outside, or whatever."

I open my mouth, then close it again.

Honestly, I *am* overwhelmed. Sitting here, sandwiched between them, is more than I can handle. Josh's gaze stays fixed on me as Zack leans closer, brushing a kiss over my temple. There's a sudden hot throb between my thighs.

Oh, God.

I'll take this secret to the grave, but this, right here, is what gets me off more than anything else. The idea of being shared. I don't know why, but there's something about being pinned between two guys that is sending my ovaries into overdrive. It feels safe, and warm, and... hot. I can't think straight. My heart is going so fast I can barely get a breath in. This is the kind of scenario that I think about when I'm in bed at night. My wildest, most secret fantasy. But in my daydreams, the guys have never had faces. They've certainly never been my best friends.

I look down at my drink. "I'm fine." I clear my throat. "You guys are good at this. Sharing a date."

"Well," Josh says. "We've done it before. We only broke up with Monica a while ago."

I roll my eyes. "Right. Of course. Monica."

The guys have this running joke on the podcast, about how all three of them once dated the same girl at the same time. Monica. They bring her up

whenever they answer a question about group sex. She's become an inside gag at this point; I've even seen fans draw art of her with all the guys.

She's not real. There's no way. They just made her up for the podcast. I can definitely imagine Zack having a four-way, but for Josh, it seems highly unlikely. And there's no way in Hell that Luke would share a girl with two other men. He's too polite. He probably only has very gentle missionary sex while he tenderly strokes his girlfriend's cheek and looks her lovingly in the eyes.

I blink away the image. Jesus. What's wrong with me? Why am I thinking about Luke in bed?

Josh is still looking at me, heat burning in his eyes. "How about I get you that drink?" He says smoothly. "I think we're overdoing it. You look like you're having a stroke."

"Such romance from my fake-boyfriend," I say weakly. "I'll have a water, please." I need to cool down.

He nods. "Back in a few." He stands, touches the top of my head lightly, then slides out of the booth. As he walks away from the table, for some reason, I can't stop my gaze from falling below his belt. Has he always worn such tight jeans? I can clearly see the lines of his thick thighs, leading up to his tight bum.

"D'you want me to bend over for you as well, creampuff?" Zack whispers in my ear, making me jump. "I'm getting jealous."

I turn and look at him. He gives me a hopeful smile.

I pick up another ice cube and slip it down the collar of his shirt, making him howl.

THIRTEEN

ZACK

It takes a few hours, but Layla eventually loosens up. Over a couple of rounds of pub food and beer, her awkwardness fades away, and she gets more comfortable. She's actually very good at flirting, which doesn't surprise me — she's got a sharp tongue and a good sense of humour. She keeps trying to make notes in her little book, so eventually I confiscate it, and the conversation gets much more natural after that. By the time the pub rings the bell for last call, she's cuddled between me and Josh, flushed pink and chatting up a storm. Josh and I both hold one of her hands as we walk her home, and by the time we get her back to our apartment building, she looks like most girls look after a date with me: horny.

Sounds like a knob thing to say, but she really does. Her cheeks are all pink, she's leaning into my arm, and her eyes keep flicking between my mouth and my biceps. I make sure to flex, so she gets a good show, and her cheeks get even darker.

Who'd have thought it? Layla Thompson isn't immune to muscles.

We pull up outside my door, and she pulls away from us, clearing her throat. "What now?"

Josh leans against the wall and looks at her silently. He honestly surprised me when he threw himself into the bar flirting role play — but now, he's clammed back up again.

"Well," I say slowly. "We end the date."

Her eyes narrow. “How do we do that?”

Josh shoves his hands into his pockets. “Guess.”

She glances at her bedroom door. “We just... go home?”

I roll my eyes. “I ain’t done that since I was eighteen, love. I don’t tend to walk women to their doors and then just drive off.”

Maybe if I actually dated, I would. But it’s not exactly how one-night-stands work, is it?

She tilts her head. “What do you do?”

“Honestly?” I rub my beard, looking at my door. “I’d usually pick you up, toss you on my couch, and have my face between your legs before the door even swung shut. But I ain’t sure that’s the best method for this experiment.”

“Oh.” She pauses, but doesn’t try to move away. Interesting.

“I think the gentlemanly thing to do would be to kiss you goodnight,” I offer, ignoring Josh’s glare. Layla immediately freezes, her eyes widening.

I frown. “Uh oh. Here’s something.” I wind my arm around her shoulders, pulling her in. She’s stiff, her body suddenly tight with tension. “Wanna tell me what’s wrong?” I ask. “I know that it can’t be *me* you have an issue with. Never met a girl who didn’t wanna kiss me.”

“I...” she licks her lips, glancing back at her own door. “It’s just...”

“C’mon.” I pet her cheek. “Tell us. You’ve got nothing to lose. We’re your best friends, we already love you.”

She sighs, her shoulders drooping. “I’m just not a good kisser.”

I stare at her. She stares back at me, her green eyes dark and dilated, her red-painted lips parted. She’s seriously standing here looking like every guy’s wet dream, telling me she’s a bad kisser.

No. No way. Nope. I’m not letting this slide.

I unlock the door to my apartment, gently pushing her inside. “In. We’re talking about this.”

“But—”

I shake my head. “I do not appreciate this kind of negative talk, Layla. There is no way you’re a bad kisser. We’re sorting this out. Now.”



Layla looks incredibly embarrassed as I march her towards the sofa and sit her down. Luckily, it seems like Luke is out — all the lights are off in the flat, so he’s probably at the library or something. I doubt he’d approve of what I’m about to do.

Slumping down by Layla’s side, I wait for Josh to sit in the armchair opposite, then wrap my arm around her waist. “Alright, pumpkin.” I squeeze her hip. “Tell your *favourite* boyfriend what’s wrong.”

She rolls her eyes, trying to shuffle away, but I hold her tight. “It’s like I said. I’m a bad kisser.”

Josh shakes his head. “No. There’s no way.”

“How could you possibly know that? You’ve never kissed me!”

“I know you have good dental hygiene,” he counters, “and I seriously doubt you try to lick the other person’s tonsils when you go in.”

She shudders.

“Exactly. So you’re not a bad kisser.”

“But I’m not a *good* kisser, either,” she protests. “I don’t like to do things *okay*. I want to get them right. But you can’t practice kissing on your own, and I haven’t kissed anyone in years. How am I supposed to be confident on a date when I’m not even confident at kissing?”

I’m confused. “Hang on. You ain’t kissed anybody in years? You said you have one-night-stands.”

She nods. “Yeah. But I don’t kiss them. It feels weird. We don’t even care about each other.”

“Do you like kissing at all?” Josh asks.

“No. It’s boring.”

I fix the strap of her shirt, stroking my fingers down her arm. “I don’t think you’re kissing the right people, babe.”

She frowns up at me. “Will you kiss me, then? So I can practice? Clearly I’m getting something wrong.”

My grin widens. “Oh, baby. I was thinking you’d never ask.” I pat my knee. “C’mon. Lay one on me.”

Layla glances back at Josh, who’s sitting opposite us, watching.

“Go ahead,” he drawls. “I can rate you from one to ten, if you like.”

Layla nods solemnly. “Yes, please. That will be very helpful.”

Josh pinches the bridge of his nose, looking like he wants to die.

I snort. “C’mon, honey. No time like the present.”

“Right.” She shuffles a little closer, awkwardness radiating off her in waves. I sit patiently as she tips her face up and slowly presses her mouth to mine.

It’s barely a kiss. Her soft lips ghost over mine, stiff and unmoving. I breathe in the warm orange scent of her as she gives me one long slow peck, then pulls back again.

I don’t say anything, eyeing her.

She pulls a face. “That was terrible, wasn’t it?”

“Not the best I’ve ever had,” I allow, trying not to smile. “Have you considered maybe participating a bit more? Sort of feels like kissing a CPR dummy.”

She scowls, and I sigh, pulling her a little closer. She feels ridiculously soft and small against me. “You’re holding your breath,” I say, trying to ignore my tightening jeans. “Relax, lass.” I squeeze her hip again, and she forces herself to unclench. “Great. Now, stop being so shy. We’re not seeing each other. You’ve got nowt to lose here.”

She takes a deep breath and nods. “Right. Can I—”

“Can you what, sweetheart?”

She reaches over and pushes apart my thighs. I part them easily, letting her climb onto my knee.

“Good girl,” I grumble, as she wraps her arms around my neck. She runs a hand over my jaw, stroking over my beard. “See, this is much better,” I mutter.

She snorts. “I’ve not even kissed you yet.”

“Kissin’s not just lips and tongue. You can foreplay a kiss just like you can a shag.”

“Huh.” She rubs my beard again, smiling slightly when my eyes fall closed. “You like this.”

“You could touch me anywhere and it’d feel good,” I say honestly. Her smile widens. Digging her nails into the back of my neck, she presses forward, kissing me again. This time, she pecks me once, slow and soft, before letting her lips part and slipping her tongue into my mouth. I can’t help the low noise of surprise that falls out of my chest as our tongues stroke together.

It’s not a bad kiss. I’ve certainly had worse. But her body is still stiff against mine, and all of her movements are weirdly rehearsed. She Frenches me for a few seconds, then goes back to the long pecks. Then she repeats the pattern again. And again. It feels like she’s trying to follow a list of instructions. Which, knowing her, she probably is.

Eventually, she pulls away. I smack my lips, considering, as she waits for the verdict. “Better,” I say slowly.

She looks affronted. “*Better?* I thought that was good!”

“You’re still thinking too hard, lass.” I run a hand through her pale hair. “I can practically hear cogs turning in your head.”

Her brows furrow. “But... how am I supposed to do it right if I don’t think about it? I’ve not kissed enough people for it to come naturally.”

I hum. “How about you let me take over? You know how to do this, lass, it’s just all locked up inside here.” I tap the side of her temple.

She scowls. How do you *know* I know how to do it, when—”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I mutter, sinking my hands into her hair and crashing our mouths together.

FOURTEEN

LAYLA

I gasp as heat wires through my body.

When I was kissing Zack, I was trying to be nice about it. It's awkward kissing your best friend — I didn't want to just lean forward and start sucking his tongue.

Zack doesn't care about being nice. Wrapping a strong hand around my throat, he kisses me hotly and hungrily. I melt, letting him drag me into his fierce, hard rhythm. He tastes like honey and smoke and whiskey. I lap the flavour right out of him, and feel my breath getting faster as my body lights up. When I get brave enough to nip at his bottom lip, he growls like a bear, yanking me closer. I pant against his mouth as arousal rolls through me.

Jesus, is this what kissing is supposed to feel like? I feel like I'm going to explode. Like all of the tension that's been slowly building inside me since our date is boiling over. It's like I've lost control of my own body, all of my limbs moving on instinct. He cups my jaw, making a low, rough sound that goes straight between my legs.

Closer. I want to be closer.

I wriggle closer on his lap, jamming my hips against his. Our bodies rub over each other. My hand slides up his thick thigh, and he wraps his fingers around my wrist, drawing my hand up higher, towards the waistband of his jeans...

Josh coughs, and we yank apart. Zack's eyes drift open slowly. He licks his lips.

"Right, then," he says. "Huh." He clears his throat. "Quick learner, aren't you?"

I slip off his lap, breathing hard. My skin feels hot under my clothes. I'm wet and throbbing. I don't think I've ever been turned on by kissing before, but right now, I'm so hot it's literally uncomfortable.

I turn back to face Josh. He's sitting stiffly on the armchair, his eyes fixed on us, his cheeks pink. He clears his throat and nods.

"Yeah. You look fine," he says, his voice rough. "I wouldn't worry."

"Right." I look down. "Good."

We're all silent for a few seconds. I squeeze my thighs together.

"Uh oh," Zack says. "I know that face. You've fallen for me, haven't you?"

I scowl at him. "What? *No.*"

He tuts. "I *warned* you I was powerful, babe. You shoulda been more careful."

I jab him hard in the ribs, making him grunt and double over. "Get over yourself. It was just for practice."

"You say that now, lovebug, but I'm like a drug," he insists. "Tomorrow, you'll be wanting your daily fix."

I snort and stand. "As if. I need the bathroom."

"Need to calm yourself down?" He nods understandingly. "I get it, babe. Take your time. Do some breathing exercises. It'll pass."

I flip him off, pushing my hair back and heading into the corridor towards the bathroom. I click the lock behind me and lean heavily against the door, breathing deeply.

He was only joking, but the embarrassing thing is, I really do need to calm myself down. I glance at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, almost scared

of what I'll see.

It's just as I suspected.

My cheeks are pink. My eyes are bright. My hair is ruffled from his fingers. When I clench my fists, my fingers stick together with sweat. I groan inwardly, closing my eyes.

For the first time, I understand what all of the hype over kissing is about. I feel like I'm on fire.

I run the cold tap and splash some water onto my cheeks and neck, rubbing it into the hollow of my throat. I don't know what's happening.

But I like it.



When I've pulled myself together, I fix my hair and step back into the corridor — and immediately slam face-first into a wall of fabric-covered muscle.

“Listening to me pee, Josh?” I ask mildly, stepping back. “So that's your kink.”

He doesn't say anything. I try to walk past him, but he blocks my way with his massive body. He's watching me coolly, his dark eyes intense.

“Can I help you?” I ask politely.

“I was just thinking.”

“Congratulations! Your listeners will be so happy they took a chance on your show.” I try to move past him.

He takes a step forward, crowding me against the wall, and bends so his face is right by mine. I breathe in the cool scent of him. He smells like sweet mints. My mouth starts to water.

“It occurred to me,” he says slowly, “that a data set of one is completely useless.”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. “What are you implying?”

Slowly, he reaches down and touches the neckline of my top. It’s slipped down a little, and he fixes the fabric back into place, nudging his favourite little ribbon with the side of his thumb. “You’re my girlfriend too, aren’t you?”

“For educational purposes, yes.”

His normally distant eyes are hot and stormy. “What do you think? Will you lose your mind if you kiss me?”

For a moment, I’m shocked speechless. That was the last thing I expected him to say. My silence stretches on too long, and his face shuts down. He pulls back. “I’m sorry. This was—”

I cut him off. “You can kiss me,” I blurt out. “If you want.”

His lips turn up slightly. I notice that he has a dimple on his cheek. Not a full one, but a tiny little divot I’ve never seen before. Then again, I’ve probably only seen Josh smile twice before, so that’s hardly surprising.

He lifts his hand, cupping the back of my neck. I shiver as I feel his fingers twisting through my hair. “Yes?” He murmurs.

My stomach crunches with nerves. Taking a deep breath, I close my eyes and nod, tilting my mouth up to his.

While Zack’s kisses were hot and full of lips and teeth and energy, Josh’s kisses are soft and slow and drugging. His lips press against mine in deep, long, smooth strokes, draining all of the energy out of my body until my knees are weak. I feel hot and soothed and aroused all at the same time. He gives me three long, slow pecks, then just stays there for a few seconds, his lips soft and parted against mine, breathing slowly like he doesn’t want to pull away.

“Well?” I ask, breathless.

He clears his throat, finally straightening. “Well, what?”

“What would you rate me?”

He tugs at his hair. He looks like he's trying not to smile. "You are so odd, Layla Thompson."

"I need to put it in my spreadsheet," I insist. "So I can see how I improve over time. Maybe I should chart a graph. It's difficult to quantify kissing skill, but—"

He makes a low, helpless sound in his chest and kisses me again. This time, the kiss is hard and rough. He pushes me backwards, his heavy body pressing mine to the wall. Grinning, I trail my mouth down his throat, pressing a kiss to his Adam's apple. His whole body flinches. I pause, then kiss his neck again.

He shudders in a breath. "*Layla—*" he groans, tensing against me. "*Shit.*"

A smile spreads over my face. It looks like Joshua Tran has a weak spot.

I suck his throat hard, getting the sensitive skin of his pulse between my teeth. He moans, actually *moans* in my ear, his mouth falling open against my cheek. "Jesus," he mutters, his body sagging over mine. "Jesus — Christ." He grabs my chin and forces my mouth back to his, kissing me hard.

"You have a Neck Thing," I mumble against his lips.

"It's one of the most common erogenous zones," he says primly, tugging my top lip between his teeth. Heat sparks through me.

"It's a nuclear button. I kiss it, and you explode."

He grunts, flicking his tongue against mine. "Where's your weak spot?"

"I don't have one."

He presses me even harder against the wall, which is a good thing, because I think I might collapse without the support. "Everyone has one."

"My only weaknesses are bullets and beheadings."

"I'll find it," he promises, kissing me again. I tip my head back, letting my eyes flutter closed as arousal floods through me. I'm so distracted that I don't hear the footsteps coming down the hallway.

"Oh," Luke says behind us.

I jump, turning to see my ex-teacher standing at the end of the corridor, his eyes wide. He glances between me and Josh. His mouth turns down in disapproval. “Sorry,” he says levelly. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

I open my mouth to say something, but no words come out. Luke settles his glasses on his nose and turns, heading back into the kitchen without further comment.

Josh presses one last open-mouthed kiss to my throat, then pulls away from me slowly. I stare up at him, my legs trembling. I want to reach after him; to twist a hand in his collar and yank him back down to me.

He’s silent for a moment. Swallows. Then, very slowly, he reaches out and runs his thumb under my bottom lip, wiping away a smudge of lipstick. My eyes fall half-closed as heat rushes to my skin.

He drops his hand and steps away. “Eh,” he says dismissively. “Six out of ten.”

My mouth falls open. He ruffles my hair and heads back down the corridor, humming under his breath.

I watch his broad back retreat, seething.

There’s no way that kiss was a six out of ten. The little weasel.

FIFTEEN

LUKE

I walk back into my bedroom and shut the door behind me, leaning my head against the wood. My heart is pounding. I can feel myself getting hard under my jeans.

Jesus.

I haven't been this turned on in a long time. Years, probably. Behind my eyelids, the vision of Layla pressed up against the wall flickers in technicolour. I can still see her melting against Josh. Kissing him hard. Moaning as he kisses down her neck, her cleavage practically spilling out of her low neckline. My balls throb, and I run a hand over my eyes.

I need to get myself together. She's my *neighbour*, for God's sake.

My phone bleeps in my pocket. I pull it out, swallowing a groan when I see Amy's number. I've been ignoring her messages for months now. Ever since I got her first wedding invite shoved into my letterbox. I didn't know what to respond, so I've just been putting off answering.

AMY: The wedding is in five weeks, and you haven't RSVP'd. I need an answer today. Are you coming, and are you bringing a plus one.

AMY: My mum is gonna think it's some massive drama if you don't come.

I sigh. I want to go to my ex-wife's wedding about as much as I want to get shot in the head. But she's right; people will only gossip more if I refuse to attend. Besides, Josh and Zack will both be going. It'll look weird if I don't make it.

LUKE: I'm coming. No plus one.

Then, before she can reply, I switch off my phone, closing my eyes.

I'm happy for Amy. Really. We divorced almost ten years ago. Any bad blood is gone. I just wish she'd stay out of my life. Which will be a lot more difficult after the wedding, since she's marrying Josh's older brother.

I suppose it kind of is my fault. She met Josh's brother Rob at a *Three Single Guys* liveshow. We brought them together. And now they're getting married, I'll probably have to see her a Hell of a lot more. I'm not looking forward to it.

There's a knock on the door, and I step back as Zack pushes into the room. He squints at me standing alone in the dark, then laughs loudly.

"Man, you are so screwed."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I flick the lights on and drop my phone onto the bed, walking over to my desk and picking up a stack of printed listener emails.

Zack leans in the doorway, watching me. "You're blushin'."

"I am not."

"You are." He tilts his head. "You know she'd let you join, right? She likes you."

"Who?" I say, flipping mindlessly through the papers.

He sighs. "Don't play dumb, Luke. Layla. She likes you. And you obviously want to join in, so..."

"I don't," I cut him off. "You're being ridiculous. I'm ten years older than the girl. I used to be her *teacher*."

“Yup,” Zack says unhelpfully. “That’s pretty hot. Bet she had a schoolgirl crush on you. Bet she wrote your name all over her notebooks in class...”

My stomach twists. I slap the papers back down onto the desk with too much force. “Yes,” I emphasise. “A *schoolgirl* crush. Because when I was a married adult with a full-time job, she was a teenage girl. I’m not going to kiss her, that’s disgusting.”

Zack’s face darkens. “She’s not a teenage girl anymore, dumbass. She’s a woman. She’s pushing thirty. She’s your friend. She wants help, and we’re giving it to her. Quit acting like we’re doing something wrong because of your weird guilt complex.” He slams out of the room, leaving me standing alone, my head reeling.

TRANSCRIPT

THREE SINGLE GUYS EPISODE 444: A BAD FIRST IMPRESSION

LUKE: Hey everybody, and thanks for tuning in to this episode of *Three Single Guys*. First of all, I want to say thank you to everyone who has left us a review or shared our latest episode on social media. We didn't expect this segment would turn out so popular, but we're thrilled.

LAYLA: (*Blows a kiss into the microphone*) You're welcome, boys.

JOSH: This week was the first week of our Fake Date Experiment, and Zack and I took Layla on our first date together. It was... interesting.

LUKE: How do you think the date went?

JOSH: Oh, she's even worse than we expected.

LAYLA: It can't have been that bad. I still got a goodnight kiss.

ZACK: Aye, because you're pretty. I just stared at your face and tried to ignore what your mouth was saying.

LAYLA: Huh. I wondered why you didn't respond when I called you an *arrogant prick*. It all makes sense now.

JOSH: It turns out, Layla's main issue is a pretty common one. Like many of us, she tends to treat dates like job interviews. Just like when we're applying for a new job, we try to make the other person like us by acting how we think they want us to be, and hiding our weaknesses. We stress over how we're being perceived so much we come across unnatural and forced.

ZACK: Aye. See, I find dating easy, 'cause I assume everyone likes me.

LAYLA: (*whispers*) Arrogant prick.

JOSH: He is, yes, but he's also right in this case. Dating isn't about making people like you. It's about working out whether *you* like *them*.

ZACK: And remember, when they *don't* like you, it says nothin' about you as a person. You just don't have chemistry. Unlike me and Layla, who cannot be in a room together for longer than five minutes without causing a fire.

LUKE: Because you're... arsonists?

ZACK: Because we have a *spark*. Duh.

LAYLA: Oh, honey, we talked about this. I know you like sticking your fingers into things, but you've got to stop fiddling with the plug sockets, it's not safe.

JOSH: (*Ignores them*) The next time you're on a first date, skip the small talk and cut to the chase. You want to know what makes them tick. So be honest. Tell them what your flaws are, and see whether they rise to the occasion. If you let go of your own defences, nine times out of ten, the other person will drop their walls too.

ZACK: And then, hopefully, their knickers.

LAYLA: Gosh, Zack. That'll be something for me to look forward to.

PICTUREGRAM

Post by *HerTreatLayla*:

[Image description: A blonde woman wearing a gold and black underwear set is standing in front of a white wall. She is looking to the side and laughing.]

Happy Sunday guys! This is me modelling the Monarch Butterfly push-up from my upcoming Butterfly collection. It will be available this summer! ☀

While you wait, @threesingleguyspodcast listeners can get 20% off everything on my web store. Check out yesterday's episode for a coupon code!

xo, Layla

#hertreat #indiestore #threesingleguys

1096 Likes.

User comments:

*found you on the three single guys show!!! You make suuuuch cute clothes *hearteyes emoji**

Just got my set in the mail, it's so cute + feels incredible! Me and my bf both love it xxx gonna buy some more as soon as payday comes!

*Sorry, i find it hard to believe that a girl that has no problems getting her tatas and *peach emoji* out on social media is having problems finding a man. She's just doing this to promote her business. #fake*

Look at those jugs good grief. I'd pay to get my face in them

SIXTEEN

LAYLA

One week after my second episode of *Three Single Guys* airs, I drag myself back up the stairs of my building, utterly exhausted.

It's nine PM, and I've been up working since five this morning. I've spent all day at the warehouse unit I use to store all of my products, doing product quality checks and packing orders. My back is burning from hunching over the label address machine. My eyes are blurry from triple-checking every receipt. My fingers are sore and smudged with pink, where the colouring came off the pink tissue paper I use to wrap smaller items.

But I am very, very happy.

My sales numbers have absolutely skyrocketed since the last episode of *Three Single Guys* came out. It's amazing. I haven't seen numbers this high since Christmas. Just yesterday, I had over two hundred orders come in, and I've had to mark several items as out-of-stock on the website until I can get another shipment from the suppliers. I knew that being on the podcast would be good advertising. Still, I really didn't expect there to be such a massive response. As I climb the last flight of stairs up to my floor, I'm practically walking on air, humming under my breath.

Tonight is our second official 'lesson'. Josh invited me over for a dinner date. Originally, he asked me to meet the guys at a restaurant, but I don't exactly want to be seen canoodling with two men in a fancy dinner spot. Plus, I'm kind of hoping that we'll be able to lure Luke out of his room to hang out with us tonight. Ever since he walked in on me and Josh kissing, I feel like

he's been avoiding me. I've barely seen him all week. When we recorded the episode on Sunday, he arrived at the studio five minutes late and left five minutes early. I think he exchanged a total of ten words with me before disappearing again.

Honestly, it's starting to piss me off. I get it. He doesn't approve of the experiment. But I don't know why he's avoiding me completely. We're supposed to be friends. Before all of this happened, he had no problems watching movies or eating dinner with us. It's starting to hurt my feelings.

Right as I step out onto the landing of my floor, the lift on the other end of the hall opens its doors. As if he's been summoned by my thoughts, Luke steps out, looking ridiculously hot in a long black coat, his silvery hair ruffled. He doesn't see me as he fishes his keys out of his pocket and heads to his flat door.

Trying to ignore my heart suddenly thumping in my throat, I go to join him. "Hey."

He jumps so hard he almost drops his keys, spinning to face me. "Layla," he blurts out. "What are you doing here?"

"I... live here? That's disappointing, I thought you'd noticed."

He blinks owlishly. "I mean. I thought you were going out for dinner."

"Change of plan. Josh cooked instead."

"Oh. So... you're coming in?" He points at his flat door. I nod. He considers for a few seconds, then slips his key back into his coat pocket. "I, ah. Think I need to do some shopping." He steps away from the door and walks past me, heading to the stairs. I stare after him.

Seriously?

"So I'm not imagining it," I say loudly. "You are actually avoiding me, then?"

He looks flustered. "Of course not. No, I just remembered that I... I need to go shopping."

"Right. At 9PM at night?"

“Just need some essentials. Have a good evening.” He starts to walk down the stairs. As I watch his retreating back, irritation simmering inside me, a memory sparks in the back of my head. I suddenly remember the first time I met Luke.

I was fourteen at the time. A shy, perfectionist high school student. It was a lunch break, and I’d just been brought to the headmistress’s office after one of the prefects saw that the sleeve of my blazer was fraying. At most schools, this wouldn’t be a big deal, but at a private school as posh as Emery High, I may as well have committed a crime.

Our headmistress, Mrs Martins, was an evil woman. She acted as sweet as a lamb in front of our parents, but she treated the students awfully. I hated her. After I was brought up to her office, she shouted at me for almost ten minutes straight. I was on the brink of tears when the door to her office swung open and a man stepped inside. The memory blooms in front of my eyes.

“Amy, do you want to pick up some lunch — oh.” He looks between us.

Mrs Martins straightens. “This is Layla Thompson,” she sighs. “She’s in Year Nine, and she’s apparently still incapable of dressing herself.”

Frowning, the man steps further into the room. I stare at him, a bit stunned. He’s gorgeous. Tall and young, with high cheekbones and deep grey eyes.

“Hi Layla,” he says quietly, studying me. “I’m Luke. I’m one of the English teachers.” He glances at Mrs Martins. “What’s going on?”

“I was just explaining to Layla the importance of wearing the school uniform correctly,” the headmistress bites out. “Look at her blazer. It’s disgraceful. This school has a reputation of excellence to uphold, and we can’t do that if our students are running around looking like street urchins.”

Luke steps forward, studying the frayed sleeve of my blazer. I shiver as his fingers trail lightly over the fabric, not touching me. “I see. You’ve worn this to death, haven’t you, Layla? You should get your parents to buy you a new one.”

“They can’t afford it,” I mutter, my cheeks burning. “I’m on a scholarship. It only covers tuition.”

Luke goes still. “Ah. I see.”

Mrs Martins sighs dramatically. “Seriously? We’re paying your school fees, and they can’t even shell out a few hundred for a new uniform every couple of years?”

I look down, humiliated. “I could fix it myself, if I could use the school sewing machines. I asked the textiles teacher if I could do it in class, but she said no.”

“Absolutely not!” Mrs Martins blusters. “I can’t have my students walking around in patched-up clothes. Tell your parents to pick up another shift, or put it on a credit card. This is ridiculous.”

Luke frowns. “Come on, Amy, let’s not put a family into debt over a jacket.” He studies my sleeve. “You think you could fix this yourself?”

“I’ve been hemming my clothes for years,” I say. “I’m really good at it.”

His grey eyes flash to mine, and my stomach flips. “You wear a lot of second-hand clothes?”

I flush. “They’re cheaper.”

He nods. “Very smart. You’ll do well in your economics classes, I’m sure.” He straightens. “Well, in that case, we’ll just give you permission to use the sewing machines during lunch breaks.” He picks up a piece of paper from Mrs Martins’ desk and scribbles a few words on it, handing it back to me with a smile. “There you go, Layla. If your textiles teacher asks what you’re doing, tell her Mr Martins said it was okay.”

I take the note, wide-eyed. “I... Mr Martins? You’re Mrs Martins’ husband?” I glance at the headmistress, who is scowling at me. How did such a nice man marry such an awful woman?

His eyes soften. “Yes. Amy is my wife. I really lucked out in that department.”

Mrs Martins — Amy — huffs, picking up her coat. “Whatever. Let’s get lunch, then. Layla, if I see you in here again, you’re getting a detention.” She saunters to her office door.

Luke smiles at me gently. “Ignore her, she gets crabby when she’s hungry. I guess I’ll see you in a few years, Layla. My office is in the West Wing if you need anything, okay?”

“Okay,” I croak, clutching the permission slip as he holds the door open for me to leave.

I watch Luke heading down the stairs, blinking back the memory. My throat squeezes. “Luke?” I call after him.

“Hm?” He turns back to look at me.

I nod at his flat door. “You could come eat dinner with us, if you want?”

He smiles. “Another time, sweetheart,” he says absently. “Enjoy your date.”

I glare at his back as he disappears down the stairs.

Whatever. If he wants to avoid me, he can. I’ve got enough guys to keep me busy.

I unlock my front door to dump my bag, then slouch across the hall to the guys’ flat. I’ve actually got a copy of their key — we exchanged spares a while ago in case someone got locked out — but I figure it’s slightly more polite to knock, so I lift my hand and rap my knuckles against the wood.

There’s a brief pause, and then the door swings open. Zack stands in the doorway, a grin spreading across his face. “Hey, bumblebee. C’mon in.”

I stare at him. He looks *delicious*. His long hair is tied back. His ring glints from the open collar of his white shirt. And best of all? He’s wearing a suit. I stare at the dark jacket hugging his broad shoulders and clinging to his thick thighs, speechless.

His smile just gets wider. “Come on,” he says again. “We got a special night planned for you.”

SEVENTEEN

JOSH

“I know,” Zack says, as Layla steps inside the flat, wide-eyed. “He went overboard. I tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen.”

I roll my eyes, lighting the last candle on the table and setting the matchbox down. My hands are sweating with nerves, and I slip them into my trouser pockets.

Tonight, it’s my turn to pick a date. I figured, since we’ve already done a bar, a dinner date would be the next best thing. Ideally, I would’ve taken Layla to an actual restaurant, but when I asked her, she said she didn’t want to go out. So I did my best to set up a dinner date in our flat. The dining room table we never use has been covered in a white cloth. I’ve lit tapered candles and put some classical music on the record player. There’s salad in the fridge and a dish of homemade lasagne in the oven. The bouquet of roses I picked out this morning is sitting on the breakfast bar.

I thought I was fully prepared, but now Layla is standing in front of us, I’m ridiculously nervous. She looks gorgeous, dressed in a short little red coat with matching red lipstick.

I’ve barely seen her this week. All of us have been so busy with work. The segment has been crazily popular. Our last episode had six times as many downloads as usual, and we’re getting more listeners every day. Paul is over the moon. He’s already trying to make merch with *The Love Experiment* emblazoned all over it. Our royalties are way up, and we’re getting interest from a bunch more sponsors. It’s great news; the only downside is, we’ve

been so busy handling the influx of attention that we haven't had time to hang out. The only time I got to spend with Layla was on Sunday, when we recorded.

Sunday, when Zack brought her coffee to the studio, pulled her into his lap, and proceeded to record most of the segment with her sitting on his knee, completely ignoring how it was screwing with the mic quality.

I can't even say that it was the mic thing that was bothering me. I was just jealous. It's so easy for him. I don't know how to do that. I don't know how to be casually affectionate. If I could, I'd always be holding Layla. Instead, I have to come up with entire podcast segments as an excuse to get close to her.

I still remember the kiss we shared after our last date. I can practically feel it imprinted into my lips. It's the best kiss I've had in a long, long time.

I really want tonight to go well.

"Hi," I say, when the silence stretches on for too long. "Come in. Dinner's ready."

Layla shakes herself out of her daze, marches up to me, and grabs ahold of my tie. I freeze, my heart thumping in my chest as she yanks me closer and kisses me hard. It takes a few seconds for me to remember to kiss her back. She tastes sweet — like strawberry lip salve.

"What's this?" I sputter, as she turns to Zack and does the same to him. He's slightly more prepared, sweeping her up in his arms and bending her back at the waist as he returns the kiss.

She pulls back, her eyes bright. "Oh. Am I not allowed to still do that? I thought—"

"You definitely can," I say quickly, cutting her off. "We're your boyfriends. You can kiss us whenever you like."

She relaxes. "Good." She looks around the flat. "Wow. You did all this?"

"Yeah," I say, then go silent again. Suddenly, I can't think of anything to say.

Zack tosses me an amused look. “Talk about the blind leadin’ the blind,” he says cheerfully. “Why exactly did we think *you* could teach L about social skills, again?”

I clear my throat. It’s been a long time since I’ve been on a dinner date. I’ve obviously gotten rusty. “You look beautiful, Layla. Can I take your coat?”

She frowns down at her bright red peacoat. “I mean, I can take it off myself...” she trails off as I slip it off her shoulders, folding it over my arm. “Thanks. I guess?”

I nod, pulling out her seat at the table. She stares dumbly at the chair. “This is weird.”

“This is supposed to be a dinner date.” I remind her. “Imagine that we’re in a nice restaurant. The guy will almost certainly pull out your chair for you.”

“Makes me feel like a kid,” she mumbles under her breath, sitting on the chair. I push her in, then hang her coat and pick up the bouquet of roses.

“Here,” I offer it to her. “I got these for you.”

“Oh.” She takes them awkwardly. “Um. Yeah. You shouldn’t have.”

I wait patiently. She stares at the bunch of flowers in her arms for a few seconds, then sets them carefully down on the floor.

Jesus Christ.

I shake my head. “Okay. Give me them back.”

She frowns. “But they’re mine!”

“Nope. They were a test. You failed. Hand them over.” Begrudgingly, she picks the flowers back up, and I take them back. “We’re going to try this again, and you’re going to act like a regular human person, okay?”

“You’re giving out strong alien vibes,” Zack agrees.

She shakes her head. “What am I supposed to do with flowers?!” She bursts out. “I don’t just carry vases around with me to restaurants. Do I just leave them on the table and let them wilt? Do I pretend to smell them, or something? Do I just... look at them?”

“Calm down,” I tell her, trying not to laugh. “This is not as hard as you’re making it. Repeat after me. ‘Thank you. They’re beautiful’.”

“Thank you,” she parrots sullenly. “They’re beautiful.”

“Great. Now put them on the table next to you and forget about them. They’ll be fine.”

She does as I say, laying them awkwardly by her plate.

I can’t help but smile. “You really are useless.”

“Shut up.” She looks around the room uncomfortably. Her shoulders hunch slightly, like she wants to hide away. “You didn’t have to do all of this for me,” she says, as I go to plate the food. “The candles, and cooking, and everything. I would’ve been fine with a pizza in front of the telly.”

“I wanted to simulate a dinner date,” I tell her, setting her lasagne in front of her. “You didn’t want to go out.”

She frowns. “Yeah. Sorry about that. I just didn’t want to be seen with two guys in a fancy restaurant. God knows what all the posh pricks would think.”

Zack snorts, immediately digging into his food. I study Layla as she fiddles with her salad. She’s such an enigma. She’ll post pictures of herself in a thong online, but stresses over what a bunch of middle-aged diners will think if we eat dinner together. It’s odd.

Layla notices me looking at her and blushes. “The podcast must be doing well,” she says awkwardly, as I slip back into my seat. “I’ve got a ton more followers.”

I nod. “We’re getting more listeners every day. Numbers haven’t been this high in over a year, and it just looks like they’re going to get better.”

“High engagement. You must be happy.”

“Of course.”

“I’m just happy I get to mack on my gorgeous best mate,” Zack announces loudly, leaning forward to nuzzle her cheek.

Layla gives him a soft look, tugging on his bun. "I'm enjoying that aspect, too."

I watch them, my lungs aching. She thinks the podcast is all that matters to me, doesn't she? Everyone does. They think all I care about is engagement and numbers.

Of course I care about the podcast. I created it. I've worked for years to make it what it is. I'll always want more listeners. But if I'm honest, that's not why I suggested the segment.

What matters to me is helping her. The image of her, teary-eyed and red-faced in our lounge, flashes into my head again. It makes my chest hurt.

"Why don't you want to be seen with us both in public?" I blurt out.

She looks taken aback. "What?"

Zack frowns. "Leave her alone, man. If she don't want to, she don't want to."

I close my eyes. I've been told a lot that when I get too intense, I come across as harsh. I never mean to.

"Of course," I say, softening my voice. "And we'd never make you. I just want to know why. You were fine with us both taking you to the bar, weren't you?"

She squirms in her seat. "It was dark. And a bar isn't the same as a five-star restaurant. All the posh people would be looking at me thinking I'm a whore."

"Ain't nowt wrong wi' bein' a whore," Zack opines through a mouthful of cheese.

I stare at her. "You worry about this a lot, don't you?"

"What?"

"What other people think of you. You're very self-conscious about how you come across."

She glances up at me. “Well. Yeah. It’s okay for you guys. No one ever criticises you. Zack’s nickname is Zack Hard-On, for God’s sake. He’s celebrated for being a slag. You’ve seen what people have been saying about me online already, haven’t you?”

I frown. “Does it bother you?”

“It doesn’t *bother me*,” she huffs. “But I don’t exactly want them to do it *more*.” She stabs a piece of lettuce with her fork. “When I was a teenager...” she pulls a face. “I wasn’t the most popular kid. I dealt with some shit. And I guess it got in my head.”

It suddenly hits me how little we know about Layla. We’ve known the girl for three years, but she’s still so damn secretive.

As I watch, she cuts her lasagne, crossing her legs and looking around the table uncomfortably. On our last date, she completely relaxed around us; but now she’s locked up again.

I’ve overdone it. The flowers and the candles, me taking her coat and pulling out her chair — she hates all of it. I screwed up.

“You know what? Let’s make this easier.” I stand and pick up both of our plates, carrying them to the sofa. Zack catches on and brings over the drinks, laying them on the coffee table.

“What are you doing?” Layla asks, standing.

“Making you more comfortable. I thought it would be a good idea to simulate a dinner date at a restaurant, but clearly you’re not enjoying that.”

“It’s not that I don’t like it!” She says quickly. “I just... it seems so...”

“Fake?” Zack says cheerfully. “Stiff? Forced?”

Layla dithers. “Unnatural,” she says eventually. “It’s hard for me to relax when you’re being so formal. Makes me feel like I’m getting judged. But that doesn’t mean we have to stop.”

“Anyone who doesn’t care about whether or not you’re comfortable is a shitty date,” I tell her, sitting down on the sofa and patting the spot next to me. “It’s fine. C’mon. Sit and eat.”

Her shoulders slump in relief. “Thanks,” she mutters, slipping onto the sofa between me and Zack. I pass over her drink, and Zack pulls her into his side. I can feel her tense body relaxing between us as she snuggles down.

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath. “What now?”

EIGHTEEN

LAYLA

Josh passes me my plate. “We get to know each other.”

My insides immediately clam up. “I already know you both.”

“Not everything.” His dark eyes flash up to mine. “There are lots of things I don’t know about you. You’re not a particularly chatty person.”

I swallow, looking back down at my plate. “Maybe I like it that way.”

“On dates, people talk, Layla. That’s the point.”

I sigh, poking at my lasagne. “Alright, then. Ask me something.”

He pauses for a few seconds. I tighten my grip on my fork, praying that he won’t ask anything embarrassing.

I didn’t expect to be so nervous on this date. After the last one, I was hoping that I’d be more relaxed, but it feels like I’m right back where I started. Josh and Zack have both lost their suit jackets and ties, and they look absolutely edible with their collars open, sleeves rolled up. Zack stretches next to me, unsubtly wrapping an arm around me, and my heartrate just ratchets even higher.

“What made you get into fashion design?” Josh asks.

I relax. This one’s easy. “Well. It all started out because I was a scholarship student. Emery High — the school where Luke taught me — is a private academy. My parents couldn’t afford the tuition, but I got a scholarship.” I

take a bite of food, chewing quickly. “Problem was, the whole uniform cost about two grand altogether. I used to scrounge second-hand stuff from the lost property and try to tailor it to fit me. Took out hems, stitched up holes, stuff like that. But no matter how good I got at sewing, the clothes still looked old. I stuck out in my class like a sore thumb. It wasn’t particularly fun being The Poor Kid.”

“Posh knobs,” Zack mutters, trying to steal some melted cheese off my plate.

I bat him away, smiling when he kisses my cheek in apology. “I was working in a shopping centre at the time, in the lingerie section. They’d given all the employees some store credit as a Christmas bonus, and I saw this push-up in the clearance section. It was hot pink and bright orange lace. I thought it was hot as Hell, so I bought it and wore it to school the next day. And I felt... confident. Pretty. Underneath my ugly, patched up clothes, I had something special on.” I shrug. “I wanted to make other people feel like that. So I signed up for A-levels in Textiles and Design, got into London Fashion School for undergrad, and the rest is history.”

Josh smiles slightly. “You had your whole life planned out when you were sixteen?”

“Are you surprised?”

“Not at all.” He spears a piece of tomato. “Your parents must be proud.”

“I think they’re a bit confused that I went to such a fancy school and came out determined to sell undies, but they’re supportive. I don’t see them much.”

“You’re not close?”

“I just... don’t have time. I don’t even remember the last time I had a day off.”

“You should see them,” Josh says quietly. “I bet they miss you.”

I glance across at him. “What about you? How does your family feel about you talking about handcuffs and squirting on the internet?”

“My brother thinks it’s hilarious. My dad...” he pauses for a moment, his face glossing over. “He’s...”

“A total prick,” Zack supplies.

Josh nods. “He has informed me on multiple occasions that having a son who runs an ‘agony aunt’ column is deeply embarrassing. But I don’t exactly care about his opinion. He’s a terrible person.”

Crap. “And your mum?” I follow up, almost scared to ask.

Josh doesn’t say anything, spinning his water glass between his fingers. I may be socially stunted, but I know how to take a hint, so I turn to Zack. “What about your parents?”

“They don’t mind me doin’ the podcast,” he says happily. “I think they’re still kinda sad I’m not playing rugby, though. It was my dream ever since I was a kid. They were as cut up as me when I injured my knee.”

“Did you have to get surgery?”

“Oh, aye.” He yanks up the ankle of his dress trousers, showing me the long scar striping down the front of his knee.

I trace my finger over the raised skin. “I wish I could’ve seen you play rugby.”

“I’m glad you didn’t, love. I was a prick back then.”

“You’re a prick now,” I say kindly. “Does it still hurt?”

He smiles, but it doesn’t meet his eyes. “S’fine.”

“It sometimes still gives out,” Josh says drily. “I keep telling him to get it checked out, but he won’t listen.”

“Hate hospitals,” Zack mutters. “It’s fine.”

I lean against his side. “I’m sorry you had to stop playing. That must have been awful.”

He looks pathetic. “It was. Sometimes I even amaze myself with my own bravery and resilience. Will you kiss me better?”

“I guess I have to,” I sigh, setting down my plate. “You *are* my boyfriend. Get here, then.”

“Nice,” Zack mutters, dropping his trouser leg and pulling my mouth roughly to his.

I kiss him back hard, melting against him. It’s hard to imagine that one week ago, I thought I didn’t like kissing. I think I could kiss Josh and Zack all day and not get enough. As Zack gently nudges my mouth open, licking into me, I feel my belly flip, warmth spreading through me.

Suddenly, I feel another hot mouth on my neck. I gasp as Josh presses in behind me, trailing a line of soft, sucking kisses down my throat. Immediately, my whole body goes into overdrive. If getting kissed by one guy was hot, being kissed by two men, my body sandwiched between theirs, is practically orgasmic. I have to force back a shiver as Josh licks a hot line down the side of my throat. I can already feel my underwear getting damp as arousal coils inside me. My head starts to spin. I can’t get enough air in.

“Layla,” Josh mutters into my skin.

I turn to face him blindly, crashing our lips together. He inhales sharply, then kisses me back, hard. We surge into each other. On my other side, Zack’s hands curve over my hips. I shiver as his big fingers slip under the hem of my shirt, sending goosebumps streaking over my skin. I arch into him. Zack gets the message, reaching up to cup one of my breasts in one big hand. I start to pant slightly as Josh touches my face, kissing me harder. Our mouths roll together, slow and sensual, tugging at each other as Zack’s hand climbs my chest. When his thumb finally strokes over my tingling nipple, I can’t stop the moan that falls out of me, my whole body starting to shake.

Josh jerks away like I’ve burned him, his cheeks flaming.

“Do... you want dessert?” He says quickly. “I’ve got ice cream.” He jumps to his feet. “Let me just get it.”

He disappears into the kitchenette. I watch him go, gasping. “Crap. Did we go too far?”

Zack nuzzles my neck. “Nah. He probably just wants to make sure you finish your dinner date.”

I smile. “I never thought he could be so domestic.” I always thought of Josh as so uptight and business-oriented. Kind of like me. I’ve never seen this softer side to him before, but it’s very sweet.

“He’s just tryin’ to impress you,” Zack murmurs, stroking his hand over my stomach. “He only ever cooks for girls. I remember he used to make Sunday roast every week when we were dating Monica. Only southerner I ever met who can make a decent gravy.”

I roll my eyes, pulling away from him. “Right. When you were all dating your ex, Monica.”

Zack snorts. “You really think she doesn’t exist, don’t you? Hang on, we’ve got pictures.” Still holding onto me, he pulls out his phone, flipping through his photo album. “Here.” He shows me the screen.

I lean in for a better look. In the picture, all three guys are sitting on a park bench with a dark-haired girl. She’s perched between Luke and Zack’s laps, leaning across to hold Josh’s hand. He’s smiling across at her, his face full of affection.

I freeze. “Wait. You’re telling me that your four-way was *real*?”

Josh comes back to the table, setting out three bowls of vanilla ice cream. “Yes.”

I look up at him. “Monica wasn’t just a bit for the podcast?”

He gives me an odd look, sitting back down next to me. “We don’t lie on the podcast.”

“I...” I can feel my face heating. My stomach twists as I study the picture. Luke’s hand is on Monica’s hip, and Zack is kissing her neck. All three of them have been naked together in a bed, getting off one girl? It seems like some kind of fantasy.

“Here.” I jump as something cold touches my lips. Opening my mouth, I let Josh feed me a spoonful of vanilla ice cream, letting the sweetness melt on my tongue.

“So you actually all slept with the same woman? For real?”

“Yes,” Josh says patiently. “Repeatedly. For several years. Why did you think we were so happy to share you?”

I gape. “I... but... how the Hell did that happen?!”

He shrugs. “We’d been discussing group relationships for years on the podcast. Once you get used to the idea, it starts to just seem... normal. Logical, actually. We live in a society which tells us that we’re supposed to get everything we need, physically and emotionally, from one person. But that’s impossible.”

Zack nods. “Aye. Monica was a guest speaker at a convention we attended. We had a drink with her in the bar after, and she suggested it. We all said yes, and it went from there.”

“Wow.” I sit back, blinking. “And you liked it?”

Josh feeds me another spoon of ice cream, dark eyes intent on my face. “It was probably the best relationship I’ve ever had. It was a lot easier than you’d think.”

I lick vanilla off my lips. “But you guys broke up? What happened?”

“My fault,” Zack says sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head. “I don’t do long-term. I broke up with her, so she left Josh and Luke, too. It woulda been a bit awkward for her to keep dating my roommates and not me.” He sighs mournfully. “It was hard giving up the sex, though. Damn.”

“Right,” I choke out. “The four-way sex. That actually, really happened. Yeah.”

Josh gives me a weird look. I’m not surprised. I probably look like I’m having an aneurysm. I don’t think I’ve ever been so shocked and turned on at the same time.

“Speaking of,” Zack perks up. “Flower boy here ain’t the only one who got you a present. I have somethin’ for you, too.” He leans over the arm of the sofa and rummages around under the coffee table.

Josh stiffens. “Oh God. Please don’t tell me it’s the—”

“Here ya go,” Zack says happily, dropping a brown cardboard box on my lap. I study the label on the packaging. There’s a black logo on the front, of a curvy, stylised woman with devil horns.

“Sinsters?” The name sounds familiar, but I don’t remember where from.

“One of our sponsors,” Zack says. “Here.” He hands me his keys, and I use the sharp edge to cut through the tape, pulling open the box.

Inside, a pink rubber penis wrapped in glittery tissue paper stares back up at me.

NINETEEN

JOSH

Layla is silent for a moment. “Why is there a dick in here?” She asks eventually.

I rub my temples. “Sinsters is an adult toy company,” I explain. “And Zack is an idiot.”

“No I ain’t!” Zack says enthusiastically. “This shit is important.” He takes the box off her. “I didn’t know what toys you’ve already got, so I figured I should order you the full range. Never hurts to double up. Look.” He starts rummaging around in the box. “You got clamps. Cuffs. A bullet vibe. This one has a little rabbit head, apparently that feels *real* nice. A blindfold. A plug. Look, ain’t it pretty?” He pulls out a plug with a little jewelled heart on the end.

Layla stares at it. “What is it meant to plug?” She asks, her voice hoarse.

Zack looks shocked. “Your *butt*, honey. Oh my God. You never used one of these before?”

“I’ve never used any of this stuff before,” Layla says slowly. Her cheeks are pink. Gingerly, she reaches into the box and pulls out a string of silver metal balls, around the size of large marbles. “Do these go in my butt, too?”

Zack points at her. “I like your enthusiasm, but no. Wrong hole.”

Layla’s eyebrows fly into her hairline. “And that feels *good*?”

“I ain’t got the equipment to tell ya,” Zack says breezily. “Gotta assume so, though. It’ll make you feel nice and full. Hang on, there’s something I wanted to show you.” He keeps on rooting through the box, finally pulling out a plastic bottle. “Here ya go.”

Layla takes the bottle, examining the label on the side. “*Juicy Pleasure Gel*,” she reads aloud. “*Heating, tingling, water-based lubricant. Zack!*”

“What?” He puts up his hands. “It’s a learning material!” He points at the bottle. “For your homework assignment this week, I want you to get out one of your little notebooks and make a list of everything that turns you on. And when you’re done with that, I want you to light some candles, slather your fingers in some of that,” he pats the bottle, “and get yourself off.”

“Oh God,” I mutter.

Layla’s mouth falls open. “*Excuse me?*”

“You don’t have to show us the list, if you don’t want to,” Zack says happily. “But when you start dating, it’s very important that you know what you want out of the relationship. And that includes sexually.”

Layla doesn’t say anything, staring at him.

I rub my eyes. “Zack. Seriously.”

He cuts me off. “Look. You can handle the romance part. You do the bit where you give her roses and ask about her family. I’m not good at that. Sex is my thing.”

“You don’t even know if she needs help with sex!” I point out. I forgot how damn *annoying* Zack gets when he likes a girl.

He shrugs. “Only one way to find out.” He leans forward and takes Layla’s hand. “Pineapple chunk. How would you rate your sex life on a scale of one to ten?”

“*Zack—*” I start.

“One,” Layla says promptly.

That shuts me up. I turn to her. “Seriously?”

She shrugs, not meeting my eyes. Zack shakes his head woefully. “I knew it,” he says. “Good sex requires basic social skills, I’m afraid. Which our little gummy worm sadly lacks.” He squeezes her hand. “Don’t worry, honey. Zack Hard-on will fix it.”

“Why one out of ten?” I demand. “Does it hurt?”

Layla shakes her head. “No. It’s just... kind of boring. Wet and sticky and sweaty. I’d rather be doing pretty much anything else.”

“Wait.” Zack looks alarmed. “You don’t like shagging at all? That’s all I’m good at. What the Hell am I meant to help you with now?”

“I like it,” Layla says. “At least, in theory. But every time I’ve tried, it’s been very... underwhelming.”

“You don’t come,” I surmise.

“Never.”

“Alright, then,” Zack says, as the front door to the flat swings open. Luke steps inside, holding a plastic shopping bag, right as Zack loudly declares, “You want sex lessons, too? We can totally provide that.”

I close my eyes. Luke freezes in the doorway. “*What?*” He barks, looking around the room. “What the Hell is going on here?”

“Zack has become an unlicensed sex therapist,” I say flatly.

“Damn right I have,” Zack announces. “Don’t worry, L, we’re gonna get to the bottom of this. No fake girlfriend of mine is having a crappy bedroom life.” He leans forward. “First things first. Can you get yourself off?”

Layla opens her mouth to answer, but before she can, Luke slams the front door behind him. “Is this an appropriate conversation?” He asks us all icily. His face is white.

“She’s an adult,” I point out. “She doesn’t need age-appropriate conversations.”

“That doesn’t mean you two should be sitting here giving her bedroom advice like a bad magazine column,” he spits, waving a hand around the

room. “What’s with the candles and the flowers? Are you trying to *seduce* your ‘test subject’? That’s not what she asked for help with.”

Zack huffs a laugh. “I don’t know what world you’re living in, old man, but here in the modern age, being able to get off is a pretty important part of most relationships.” He looks back down at Layla. “So, what’s up?”

“Yes,” Layla says, fixing Luke with a hard look. “I have no issues when I’m going solo.”

“Well, that’s great. What do you think of when you touch yourself? Do you watch videos, or read dirty books, or—”

“*Zack*,” Luke snaps. “That’s *enough*.”

“I’m not a child anymore, Luke,” Layla bites out, glaring up at him. “You don’t have to cover my ears so I don’t hear the adults talk.”

Luke’s face tightens. “He doesn’t know when he’s crossing a line. You shouldn’t have to listen to this stuff if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Layla bristles. “If I was uncomfortable with the conversation, I’m perfectly capable of asking him to stop. I *want* their help. If you’re not happy with that, you can leave. He’s doing nothing wrong.”

Luke’s shoulders tense. “Fine,” he says coolly. “I’m not involving myself in this.” Dumping his shopping bag on the counter, he stalks across the lounge and into his bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him.

TWENTY

JOSH

Zack whistles, stroking Layla's arm. "You're spicy tonight."

She stares at Luke's closed door, a sad look in her eyes. "Bitchy, you mean."

"He'll get over it," I assure her. "You didn't say anything that isn't true."

She kicks the leg of the coffee table. "I'm just sick of him treating me like I'm a sixteen-year-old kid he needs to hold at arm's length. We're supposed to be friends, and he won't even talk to me like an equal. He'd probably turn himself in to the police if I tried to hug him."

"Aw." Zack tugs a strand of her hair. "You wanna hug Luke? Listen, he gets cuddly when he's drunk, so I can tell you it's nothing worth getting upset over. Now, where were we?"

"You were asking if I read smutty books," Layla says drily.

"Right." He casts around, picking up a notepad off the coffee table. "Hey, why don't we make your list together? You clearly need extra help in this area. Tell me your top ten turn-ons, and why you think they're hot." He flips to a new page and looks at her expectantly. "Go," he says after a moment, when she doesn't say anything.

Layla looks like she's lost for words.

I clear my throat. "You do want help with this, right? Ignore Zack, you can absolutely do this in private if you prefer."

“I want help,” she says. “It’s just... like, I can’t even list my top ten movies on the spot.”

“It can be little things,” Zack says casually. “For example, I like taking girls up the date, ‘cause it’s tight as hell and I like staring at her buns. Josh likes when you kiss his neck, ‘cause for some reason it’s apparently directly connected to his junk. Stuff like that.”

I can feel my cheeks heating. “Let’s start at the beginning. You can get yourself off when you’re alone, but not when you’re with a guy. What’s the difference?”

She snorts. “When I’m by myself, I can imagine whatever I want. When I’m with a guy, he’s...” She waves a hand in the air. “*There*. It’s distracting.”

“So you rely heavily on fantasy to get yourself off?” I say slowly, trying to push away the mental image of Layla, flushed and wet and naked, touching herself in bed.

God.

She nods. “Sure.”

“Well, then,” I say. “What are you thinking about?”

She hesitates, then looks down, her cheeks colouring. “Is this important? It’s not like I need to come to have a boyfriend.”

I frown. It’s such an un-Layla thing for her to say. “Do you *want* to come?” I ask frankly.

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then it’s important.”

“But—”

I cut her off. “Layla, one of your best qualities is that you’re never ashamed to ask for what you want.”

“And your legs,” Zack interjects. “They’re a great quality, too.”

I hold Layla's gaze. "You did not get this far in your career by putting your own needs last. So I don't understand why you're okay with having a sub-par sex life. Is there something going on here that we don't know about? Some sort of... mental block around intimacy?" She doesn't say anything, and I sigh. "You deserve to enjoy sex, Layla. Do you want that?"

She nods.

I reach out my hand, palm up. After a second, she links her fingers with mine. "You don't have to tell us anything personal. But we won't judge you for it, if you do. Trust me, we've heard pretty much everything on the show."

"Oh, aye," Zack agrees. "We just got an email a couple days ago from a guy who could only come if a girl rubbed a balloon on his bits. The static got him off, or something."

Layla's lip twitches. "What did you tell him?"

"To buy the balloons wholesale from party stores so they're cheaper."

She closes her eyes. "Fine," she mutters, her face burning. "I... when you were talking about that girl you dated... Monica, or whatever."

I glance across at Zack. I'm not sure where this is going. "Yes?"

She shrugs awkwardly. "I like the thought of that a lot. That's... what I think of when I'm in bed."

It takes a second for me to realise what she means. Then the penny drops. "That's what you imagine to get yourself off? Having a *three-way*?"

TWENTY-ONE

LAYLA

I set my jaw, looking Josh straight in the face. “Yes,” I say.

I expect him to look shocked or awkward; instead, he just shoots back: “What configuration?”

“What?”

“You want all guys? A guy and a girl?” His eyes bore into mine. “How many partners? Two? Three? Four?”

I feel like I’m getting drilled at an interview. “Jesus, does it matter? It’s not like it’s ever going to happen. It’s just a fantasy.”

His brow furrows. “Of course it matters,” he insists. “What you want matters. Own it. It’s not embarrassing.”

Christ. “Just guys,” I say. “Two or... three, maybe? I think I might struggle with four. I’d probably end up getting tangled in all the limbs.”

“You want the guys to get off with each other?” Josh presses, all business. “Or just be focussed on you?”

“*What?*”

“Just answer the question.”

“Dude, this is the funniest shit,” Zack whispers. “You’ve done it now, L. He’s in full saviour mode. He doesn’t have an off-switch.”

“Do you want the guys to be together?” Josh repeats impatiently.

Well, now I just sound selfish. “I mean, I wouldn’t *mind*,” I say. “But it wouldn’t do anything for me.”

“You’d like to sleep with two or three men, who are all focussed on getting you off,” Josh repeats back to me. “You know there are dating apps that can help you find multiple partners, right? They’d probably be a better choice than random dating websites.”

I shake my head. “Josh, this isn’t something I’m actually looking for. I can barely find one man I trust, let alone two or three.” I look down at my hands. “It’s a fantasy. Not something I actually want to put into reality.”

There’s a pause. “But you can,” Josh says quietly. He shifts his weight, bringing his face closer to mine. His warm breath touches my cheek, and I feel a hot pulse between my legs. “You can.”

“Aye,” Zack agrees. “In fact, three-ways are our speciality. What an incredible coincidence.” He scoots in on my right. “What do you think? Wanna see if we can make you come? I love a challenge.”

I stare at him, my heart starting to pound. I can’t believe this is happening. The boys are offering me my fantasies on a silver platter, and I don’t know how to respond. “I... *you*? But...”

Josh’s expression softens. “You’re embarrassed.”

I open my mouth to argue — and then realise that I am. I’m more than embarrassed. I’m ashamed. “I don’t think I should be. But... you’ve seen the comments I get when I model my clothes online, right? I’ve dealt with more than my fair share of slut-shaming. It just seems...” *Whorish. Easy.* “Greedy,” I go with.

“It’s not greedy.” Josh uncurls my fingers from my palm. “If anything, it’s a Hell of a lot more work for the girl.”

A vision snaps up in my head. Me on my hands and knees, my mouth sliding over one thick dick as another pistons into me from behind. Moving between the men, listening to them groaning and panting as I get them both off at the same time.

Heat flushes through my whole body. “*Oh.*”

His mouth tips up. “Do you want to try it?” He strokes his thumb over my palm. “With us? It’s fair enough if you want to keep it as a fantasy. But if this is what gets you off, then there’s no reason to be ashamed of it. It gets us off, too. And you deserve a fulfilling sex life.” His dark eyes melt into mine. “We’d take care of you.”

His hand strokes over mine, lighting up my nerve endings. I lick my lips. I can barely breathe. Instead of answering, I just nod.

Josh smiles. “Right now?”

“Well. I shaved this morning. So may as well.” My voice sounds a lot more confident than I feel.

Josh’s grip on my hand tightens for a second, before he nods, business-like, and pulls away, leaving me breathing hard. “Zack? I’m assuming you’re okay with this?” He asks briskly.

Zack grins. “Am I *ever*. But, okay, full disclosure before we start, lass.” He puts his head on my shoulder, his warm affection relaxing me slightly after Josh’s cool intensity. “I think you’re hot as hell, and if I met you at, like, a bar or whatever, I’d absolutely try and take you home. So I do kind of have an agenda. But I also wanna help you.”

I gasp. “No! You want to sleep with *me*, a woman wearing a push-up? How could it be?!”

He grins, eyes twinkling. “Just thought we should get it out of the way. Don’t want you feelin’ like I tricked you for my own wicked gains.”

“Believe it or not, Zack, I figured.” I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry, then glance across at Josh, who’s sitting ramrod straight, watching us silently. “I think you’re hot, too. Both of you.”

“Aight.” Apparently satisfied, Zack slumps back against the sofa cushions and pulls me into his side, patting my hip. “Josh, turn on the telly.”

“The telly?” I’m confused.

The boys share a knowing look over my head. Setting aside the bowls of melted ice cream, Josh takes the TV remote off the guys' coffee table, switching on the set and flicking through channels before settling on some regency movie I've never seen before.

"Sweet," Zack snuggles down next to me. "Love Colin Firth."

"He has a really good interpretation of this role," Josh agrees on my other side. They both focus on the screen.

I look between them. "Um. Isn't there usually more touching involved?" I prompt. "And less... Jane Austen?"

Zack scoffs. "Are you questioning my methods?"

"What, are you telepathic, or something? Are you going to make me come with just the power of your mind?"

"Bet I could," he says with a grin. "Nah, relax, pet. Just watch the telly." He gives my hip a squeeze.

Now I'm getting confused. "What? Why?"

He yawns, stretching. "I wanna watch something. Why, do you wanna pick?"

"No," I say slowly. "I want to shag."

"Tssk. Women only ever want me for one thing. It's hard being this hot, you know."

I frown. "Do you... not want to do this? You can just say."

"Maybe. Maybe not. Haven't decided yet." He drops his hand to my thigh. Heat flares through me, and I instinctively cross my legs. His lips tip up. "Ask me again in like, half an hour, yeah?"

"Okay...?"

I'm not really sure what's happening. This is a pretty impressive 180. Has he changed his mind? Is he trying to let me down gently? "You really can just say no—"

He puts his finger on my lips. "Shh," he says.

I'm so weirded out that I shut up, focussing on the TV. Men and women in elaborate, glittering ballgowns dance on screen, flirting as they spin around a lush dance hall to a string quartet.

I try to relax, but I can't. All I can focus on is the feeling of the two men sandwiched on either side of me. They're both so warm and muscled and so much *bigger* than me. I feel their chests rising and falling as they breathe.

I was never really a fan of big men. I don't like the idea that they could overpower me if they really wanted to.

But right now, I'm finding a new appreciation for giants.

On my left, Josh leans a little closer. His arm presses against mine, hard and hot, and I breathe in the sweet, minty scent of him. Anticipation curls in my stomach.

I tug on his sleeve, and he turns to look at me, his face politely blank. "Kiss me," I order.

His mouth tips up slightly. He runs his eyes over my face, then leans forward and nuzzles my cheek. My heart thuds in my chest. I push forward, pressing my lips to his...

TWENTY-TWO

LAYLA

He pulls away again, turning back to the screen.

My mouth opens and closes like a fish's. "*Josh!*"

"Hm?" He doesn't look away from the TV. "Can I help you?"

"Kiss me properly!"

"No," he says flatly. "Watch the movie."

I gape at him, then turn to Zack, who's started twirling a strand of my hair between his fingers. "Kiss me," I order.

He rolls his eyes. "For God's sake, lass. Relax, already. You're so wound up all the time." He scoops me further into his side. "Cuddle with your boyfriends, lollipop." I pinch him in the ribs so hard he hisses. "What was that for?!"

"Teasing me. Either shag me or don't, but don't drag it out like this."

He gives me a fond look. "Why? Want to get it over with?"

"Well, no, but—"

"Sex isn't an item you can check off on a to-do list," he reminds me. "Look at you. You're all clenched up. There's no point trying to get you off when you're like this." He squeezes my thigh.

I wriggle in his grasp. "But—"

“Who is the teacher here?” He interrupts. “And who is the hapless student who can’t come when she’s getting railed?”

I shut my mouth.

“That’s what I thought.” He turns up the volume on the TV. “Watch the movie.”

I don’t have much choice, so I turn back to the screen.

Ten minutes pass, but each second feels like it lasts forever. I can’t relax. Both men press closer to me, squeezing me in on both sides. Zack drops a hand onto my thigh, and Josh drapes an arm around my shoulder. Every so often, they’ll lean over me to make some comment to each other, trapping me even more tightly in a cage of muscle. And I just sit there, silently getting hotter and hotter as I breathe in the scents of their aftershaves mixing together.

It doesn’t take long for Zack’s hand to start climbing my thigh. Tingles slide over my skin at his touch, and my sex throbs almost painfully as his fingertips brush the hem of my shorts. On my other side, Josh takes my hand and starts to massage it. It shouldn’t be hot, but every press of his thumb into the curve of my palm sends heat shooting through me. I let my eyes flutter closed, melting into the couch as the boys’ hands rove over me, setting me alight.

Eventually, right when I think I might just pass out, Zack leans in and brushes his lips against my throat. I gasp out loud. Josh laughs softly, trailing a kiss down the side of my cheek. I arch under their kisses. Their mouths are wet and warm, touching me all over: my neck, my collarbone, my ears.

It’s overwhelming. This is like one of my wet dreams come to life. I can feel my pants getting damp. Josh presses closer, flicking his tongue over my pulse, and I can’t help the moan that falls out of my mouth as heat rushes through me. Both men immediately tense, dragging in a breath.

Then Zack picks up the TV remote and drops it purposefully onto the carpet.

“Oops,” he says. He leans over, like he’s going to pick up the remote — and then buries his face into my chest.

Heat shocks through me. My back arches as an ugly gurgle falls out of my mouth. Zack was right; the last half an hour of steady torture has made every touch so much better. I'm so sensitive that when Zack starts mouthing at the neckline of my camisole, pressing kisses along my cleavage, I can hardly breathe.

"Oh, *God*," I gasp. "*Jesus*."

Josh leans forward, brushing his lips over my clavicle. "You sure this is what you want?" He murmurs, tucking back my hair.

"It's so hot," I practically moan, and they both laugh.

"Aight," Zack says. "I reckon she's warm enough. Let's not kill the lass, Josh." He reaches over and slips his finger under the collar of my tank top. "Off," he says in a low voice.

I lean forward off the couch, kicking off my shorts and wriggling out of my top. As soon as the fabric falls to the ground, both men freeze, staring at my chest.

"Wow," Zack says.

At first I think he's just being shocked into silence by my boobs — but then Josh runs his fingers over my bra. "Did you make this?" He asks quietly.

"You like?" Momentarily forgetting the situation, I arch my back, showing off the delicate racerback design. "I'm calling it the Butterfly. It's the main part of my upcoming collection."

Josh smooths his fingers over the turquoise and gold lace, his eyes dark. "You're so talented," he says quietly, bending to kiss the strap. His teeth rub lightly against my skin, and heat pulses through me so hard my entire body jolts. "Can I take it off?" He asks, snaking his hands around my waist. He frowns when his fingers stroke across the racerback, not finding the closure.

"It's a front clasp," I manage. "More accessible for people with arthritis or poor mobility."

In the low light of the flickering TV, I see his dimple pop up again. "Can I take it off?" He repeats, and I nod. He clicks open the clasp, and the cups fall

away, freeing my breasts. I see his Adam's apple bob as he swallows.

Zack leans forward, his eyes fixed on my chest. "What do you want, love? This is your fantasy. What happens next?"

Immediately, an image bursts into my head. Me lying in bed with Josh and Zack's mouths all over me. My stomach knots.

"What is it?" Josh says quietly, reading my face.

I open my mouth, but the words stop in my throat. These men are my friends. I can't just... demand that they eat me out. Even if they are offering.

God, why did I think this was a good idea, again?

The guys exchange a look, then shuffle closer to me on either side. "It's okay, L," Zack says in my ear. He slides a hand down my bare back, his calloused fingertips roughing slightly down my spine. "You don't have to be careful with me and Josh. You don't have to worry about doing or saying the wrong thing. We won't judge you. You can have exactly what you want. But you've got to tell us what that is, baby." His heavy hand lands on my thighs, and my legs part automatically.

"I—"

"You want our fingers?" Josh asks on my other side, his breath ghosting over my skin.

I set my jaw. "Your mouths."

Josh's pupils bloom in the low light. "Thank *God*," he mutters, leaning forward. I expect him to kiss me, but he just presses our foreheads together for a second, before pulling back and standing.

"Wanna suck your tits," Zack mumbles into my skin. My mouth falls open on a gasp. I nod, and he drags me sideways into his lap, starting to kiss down my front. I run my fingers through his thick hair, tugging his face closer into my chest. Fire burns in me as his lips brush lightly over my skin, fluttering over my breasts as he kisses his way across my cleavage. When his hot lips close over my nipple, I jolt in his arms, my breath choking in my throat. I never even thought my breasts were that sensitive — but as he roughs his tongue

over the hardening bud, licking it to a wet, aching peak, I realise they most definitely are. He looks up at me through his lashes, making a low grumble of approval as my head falls back against the sofa cushions.

“*Oh,*” I say, before I can stop myself. “Oh, God.”

He groans. “Yes,” he says. “Noises. Make noises.”

I’m so distracted by his mouth on my chest, I barely even notice Josh sliding to his knees in front of the couch.

TWENTY-THREE

LAYLA

“Turn her,” Josh orders. Zack obediently spins me on his lap, so my back is against his chest. Kneeling in front of me, Josh’s big hands spread on both of my bare thighs, gently pulling my legs apart. He leans forward and kisses the crook of my knee softly.

“Oh.” I can’t help the moan that falls out of me. Josh’s eyes dip. He kisses me again, a little higher, pressing his lips in a hot, soft path up the inside of my thigh. When he finally reaches my underwear, he closes his eyes and buries his face between my legs, inhaling deeply. I gasp as his nose presses into the sodden lace of my panties.

Then he starts to lick me.

I shake in Zack’s arms as Josh’s tongue slides over my pants, roughing the navy lace over my core, wetting the fabric until it’s darkened to almost black. He’s kissing me hard, teasing me through the cloth. I keen, arching in Zack’s firm grip. It’s too much sensation, and not enough at the same time. I don’t want the barrier between us; I’m aching to feel the soft warmth and wetness of his tongue.

“Off,” I order. “God. Take them off.”

Zack slips a hand under me, lifting me slightly off the couch. Josh tugs off the scrap of lace, then pushes my knees apart again, and just... stares. I squirm.

“Is she pretty?” Zack asks, like a total prat. “All pretty and wet?”

I elbow him in the ribs, blushing hard as Josh nods slowly.

“Gorgeous,” he mutters, reaching up to grab ahold of my hips. His eyes flick to mine. “Let me take care of you,” he says softly.

I swallow and nod. Josh gives me a tiny smile, sparking warmth deep in my belly. Then, finally, finally, he brings his mouth to my sex. I gasp, shaking all over as his tongue strokes smoothly between my slick, hot lower lips. I pull my legs even further apart, wanting more, and he starts to suck on my folds one by one, gently tugging them into his mouth. His movements are slow and tender, but he may as well be setting me on fire. When his tongue dips into my entrance, I can’t stop my hips jerking against his face.

At the same time, Zack pulls me closer against his chest, his hands smoothing over my skin. He kisses me everywhere; on my throat, my earlobe, the nape of my neck. Soon, I’m making noises—soft little pants and whines as his hands rove over my body. I clamp my mouth shut, embarrassed. I don’t *whine*, for God’s sake.

“No. Stop holding back,” Zack orders.

“I’m not—”

“You are.” He bends and scrapes his teeth over my throat. I feel wetness pool down below, trickling between my lower lips, making Josh groan and push forward. I tremble, trapped between them. “The point of the exercise ain’t to show how unaffected you are. It’s to let go. I wanna hear noises, pixie stick.”

Then, before I can reply, Zack seals the deal by getting my earlobe in his mouth and sucking it between his teeth. I couldn’t hold in my sudden gasp if I tried.

“Good girl,” Zack practically purrs, licking a hot line up the shell of my ear. “Take your time with her, Josh. I’m enjoying this.”

Josh doesn’t answer, fluttering his tongue around my entrance, then slipping it inside me, his mouth hot and firm. I squirm over his lips as need starts to build up in me. It’s more than hunger. It’s an ache. When I’m by myself, I don’t tease myself like this. If I were alone, I would’ve gotten myself off by now, and already moved onto the next item in my schedule. I wriggle, trying to rub harder into Josh’s mouth, and he groans, his big hand coming up to

wrap around my thigh.

“That’s right,” Zack says in my ear, his thumb swirling over my breasts. “Bury him, babe. He’s loving this.”

Josh roughs his tongue against me harder, and a half-sob falls out of my mouth as I grind myself over him faster, rocking over his face. “Please, Josh.”

He shivers as I say his name. My hands sift through his dark hair, tugging at the strands, and he growls into me, flicking his tongue over my sensitive nub. My muscles suddenly spasm. My lungs tighten. I gasp, gulping for breath, writhing over Josh’s mouth. He moans into me. “Josh... Oh, oh *God*.”

“You like that, don’t you, honey?” Zack rumbles at my side. “You going to come in his mouth for him? Soak his face? See, we know you, sweetheart. We can take care of you better than any of those other guys.”

I can feel the pressure inside me building steadily, reaching a boiling, burning fever-pitch. I feel like I’m about to split out of my skin. The realisation hits me in one big head rush.

Oh my God. I think I’m actually going to come.

“Please don’t stop please don’t stop,” I chant, terrified that he’ll pull away at the last minute and I’ll lose this. I’m losing control of my body. I can’t stop my back from arching, my toes from curling. Sweat is building at the nape of my neck and dribbling down my back. I feel like a spring getting steadily wound up.

Josh doesn’t stop. He pushes forward and just eats me out harder, roughing his tongue over me again and again, as Zack tightens his arms around me, holding me in place.

My steady gasps turn into a cry as my release suddenly hits me, like a star bursting in my chest. My eyes fly wide open, and I cling to Josh’s shoulders, gasping and choking as he licks me through it, groaning into me. Zack holds me tight, kissing up and down my throat as I shudder between the men.

Eventually, the pangs of pleasure dissolve away, and I slump back against Zack’s chest, trying to catch my breath. I’m shaking and damp with sweat.

I feel vulnerable. Naked. Peeled open. All at once, I know exactly why I've never come with a guy before. It had nothing to do with how bad or good they were in bed. It was to do with me. I was too scared. I've never trusted a guy enough to lower my defences before.

I stare down at Josh wide-eyed, breathing hard. What we just did feels like the most intimate moment of my life, and I'm still reeling from it. Josh looks back up at me, his face wet, his dark eyes burning into mine. He looks so hot that I can't stop myself from kissing him again. I can taste myself on him, hot and sharp, and for some reason, that just turns me on even more. I slide off the couch and into his lap, rubbing my chest up against his, frustrated that he's still wearing a shirt. My fingers fumble over his buttons as I try to tear it off him. He just gathers me even closer, kissing me back with so much passion that I feel like I'm being set on fire.

"Thank you," I say between kisses. He strokes his hand down the back of my neck —

A big arm cuts between us. I look up into Zack's bright blue eyes. He smiles at me hungrily, pulling me out of Josh's arms and wrapping me up in his own. "It's my turn, I think."

TWENTY-FOUR

ZACK

Layla just looks at me, her chest rising and falling in little pants, and for a moment, everything else falls away. I've never seen her like this — so soft and pliable. A feeling I haven't felt in a long time starts to grow in my chest.

Shaking my head, I push the emotion back and wrap my arms around her, lifting her right off her feet. She swears as I start to carry her out of the lounge and towards my bedroom.

“What are you doing, you Neanderthal?” She shouts, trying to kick my legs. “Put me down. You can't just *carry* people!”

I throw my head back and laugh so hard I almost drop her. “I bloody love you,” I say, and she snaps her mouth shut. “You deserve a bed.”

“How romantic of you,” she says drily by my ear. “Didn't you talk about banging a woman on her kitchen table the other day?” Her voice is light, but I can hear the desire in it. The image of her, all naked and flushed and wet on our dinner table flashes before my eyes.

I give her bum a little slap. “Next time. I'm trying to be a gentleman.”

“You said I should tell you what I want,” she points out as I kick open my bedroom door. “I don't want a gentleman.”

I dip my head and nip at her cheek as we push inside my bedroom. I keep it pretty empty — just a bed, a guitar, and my sound system. Heading for the bed, I toss Layla down onto the pillows and climb on top of her for a kiss. Her warm skin slides over mine as she shunts up her hips, rubbing against my

thigh. I have to bite back a growl. I've been painfully hard ever since she took her top off.

"What do you want?" I ask, kissing the corner of her mouth.

"You," she orders, wrapping her legs around my hips like she's trying to pull me inside her. "Now, please."

"Aight." I give her cheek one last kiss, then pull back, sliding off the bed. Josh comes and helps Layla sit up. He's shucked off his shirt and pants now, and is just standing in his boxers. As I watch, he climbs onto the bed behind Layla, his back against the headboard, and pulls her against his chest. When she's settled comfortably against him, he leans over to open a drawer in my bedside cabinet, tossing a little foil packet to me. I catch it easily with one hand as I strip. My dick is so hard it springs free of my boxers, flushed and stiff. I wince as I roll the condom on, watching as Josh cups Layla's cheek and pulls their mouths together.

It's been forever since me and Josh shared a girl. Even longer since Luke joined in, too. Don't get me wrong, I love a bit of one-on-one time — but everything is so much better when we do this together. Josh is kissing her good, really turning her on as his hands rove over her chest, grabbing handfuls of her breasts, stroking down to her stomach. Layla's whole body is shivering with every movement of his mouth against hers.

If she and I were alone, I wouldn't get to see that. I'd be too busy focussing on getting her off to notice the way her body is slowly tensing, or her fingers are gripping my bed sheets. When you're sharing a girl, you get to watch them getting turned on. You get to overwhelm them and watch them fall apart.

I stand, positioning myself between her legs. Carefully, I touch her pink, glistening sex, parting her warm lower lips. She's gorgeous. Layla immediately pulls away from Josh and peers up at me, her eyes fixed on my dick.

"Come on," she orders. "Now."

Instead of doing as she says, I roll my hips, rubbing my hard-on up and down her folds, getting myself nice and wet with her juices. The latex rubber sticks

to her puffy, sensitive skin, making her choke and writhe in Josh's arms. He strokes her shoulder like he's trying to soothe her.

I tease her for a bit, tracing my tip up and down her slit, pushing slightly into her entrance. She snaps her legs shut, holding me in place with her thighs. "Zack," she swears. "Now, please."

"Alright, lass." I finally line myself up and push slowly inside her. God, she's so tight. Tight and soft and blazing hot. As I ease into her, I feel her throbbing, slick walls resist and then relax to take me. When I finally bottom out, she flops her head back against Josh's shoulder, her mouth falling open. It's almost painful not to move, but I stay still, stroking her thigh until she nods.

"Go," she says breathlessly. "Now. I'm good."

"Yeah?"

She frowns. "Yeah."

I can't resist messing with her. "You sure? We could just stay like this for a bit, if you'd prefer."

"I could murder you in your sleep, if you'd prefer."

I laugh. "Alright, lass. Keep your knickers on. Or off, I guess." She rolls her eyes. Squeezing her thigh, I pull back, groaning at the slick, sucking sensation, then slam into her. She lets out a sound like she's dying.

"More," she orders, and I laugh, rolling my hips again. She feels like heaven; her slippery, greedy walls clamp down on me every time I thrust into her, like she's trying to pull me in deeper. Every little movement I make has her body twisting and shivering.

"You're perfect," I tell her. "Absolutely perfect."

"Do I need to s-say something?" She asks, her whole body jerking with my next thrust.

There's a wet noise that I assume means Josh was kissing her. "What do you want to say?" He asks, his voice low.

“I don’t know. People talk in bed, right?”

I snort. “Weirdo.”

Josh strokes through her hair. “You’re overthinking this. You don’t have a checklist you need to go through.”

“Right.” She takes a deep breath. “I-in that case, *ah*—” She breaks off as I change the angle, plunging even deeper into her. “*Zack*,” she moans, making me laugh.

I pat her knee. “Aye, if it keeps you making those noises, I’d definitely like you to speak, love.”

She grabs Josh’s hand and tugs him out from behind her. I watch, bemused, as he stands up, and she drags him to stand by the side of the bed.

“Take off your pants,” she orders. He raises an eyebrow, but obediently pulls off his boxers, and she reaches for him. He swears, his hands flying to her hair as she presses a kiss to the tip of his dick.

I’m impressed. “Hey. This is some advanced-level three-way stuff, honey.”

“Just another thing I’m naturally great at,” she declares, tossing her hair behind her shoulders. Her bravado is ruined slightly by the way her tits jiggle as I thrust back into her.

I laugh. “You weren’t kiddin’ when you said you liked this, huh? Bet you’ve gotten yourself off imagining this before, haven’t you?”

The flush on her cheeks gets even deeper. She glares at me.

“Can we get on with it,” Josh mutters. Layla just licks a stripe under his shaft, mouthing at his balls. He swears, his knees buckling so hard he almost falls, and I turn my attention back between Layla’s legs.

She’s already close. I can feel it, feel the way her muscles are starting to clutch and grip at me. And I’m right behind her. I lift one of her legs, balancing it against my hip, and start driving into her even harder than before. She shouts, quivering in my grip. Beads of sweat roll down her thighs and dew under my hands. I shove into her even further, desperate to push her off the edge.

“Jesus,” Josh spits out. “L, slow down—”

I glance up, and almost come right then and there. She’s blowing him enthusiastically as I screw her, her pink cheeks hollowed, her lips red and wet as her head bobs over his length. Her whole body is jolting with every one of my thrusts, pushing him further down her throat, but she doesn’t seem bothered, sucking at him sloppily. He has a hand clutched in her pale blonde hair, and he’s panting like he can’t catch his breath. I can’t blame him.

“Layla,” he repeats, “If you don’t stop, I’ll come.”

She makes an approving noise and reaches up with her other hand, squeezing his balls as she tongues at him. I watch as he loses control, shouting as he spills into her mouth. She tightens her grip on him, gulping down his come, her throat moving as she swallows over and over.

It’s the hottest shit I’ve ever seen. Too hot. I can feel arousal coiling and tightening in my stomach.

“I’m close,” I warn her, and she nods, eventually pulling away from Josh. Her lips are swollen, and she’s shivering hard. I can feel her little body winding tighter as I move inside her. She’s trying to slow herself down, to drag this out, clasping weakly at the bedsheets.

I don’t want that.

Bracing my arm against the wall, I ram into her once, twice, three times. Layla lets out a small, very urgent moan, shuddering underneath me. “Oh - oh, God,” she mumbles, her breath coming fast and desperate. “I…”

“Come,” I order.

She cries out as she collapses into another trembling climax, her hands flying out. Her body arches, twisting and shaking. Layla’s a curvy little thing, all soft tits and hips, and her whole body bounces as her release rips through her. Gritting my teeth, I keep on pounding into her, drilling into that special spot deep inside her. Her centre pulses and twitches around me, flushing a few shades deeper. My sheets are getting soaked through with her wetness.

And then it’s my turn. I vaguely register Josh kneeling next to Layla on the bed, pulling her into his arms as she trembles, but I can’t focus on him as my

release slams into me. For a second, the room just fades away. Everything thrums as my head empties. Layla clutches around me, waves of contractions rippling through her muscles as she comes hard, milking me dry as I spurt my release into her over and over and over again.

TWENTY-FIVE

ZACK

Eventually, I come back to reality. Layla is still making noises, soft little needy moans. Her channel sucks at me, fluttering as I pull slowly out of her. I stagger into the ensuite to dump the rubber, and when I get back, Josh is lying with her in his arms, murmuring to her. “I know,” he’s saying into the crook of her neck, pushing her sweaty hair off her forehead. “I know, baby.”

I slide in on her other side. “You good?” I ask. “Need some more?”

“Oh, God, no.” She shakes her head, winding an arm around both of our necks and pulling us closer. “You’ll kill me. Just... just give me a minute.”

I happily snuggle down next to her. My whole body is humming. My head is fuzzy and drunk.

That was probably the best hookup of my life.

We all lay together for a few minutes, catching our breath. Right as my eyes start to drift shut, a phone rings in the lounge. Josh groans and forces himself upright, grabbing his boxers and shirt off the floor. Layla makes an adorable noise of protest, reaching after him.

“Gotta answer this call,” he mutters.

“Ugh.” She flops back down against my chest, burying her face into my skin. “Isn’t it weird for you two?” She mumbles into me. “Sharing a girl?”

“Nah, not really. We’ve been best mates since we were kids. We’re used to sharing stuff.”

“That young?”

I push some hair off her face. “We went to nursery together. He lived across the road from me, so we’d walk home from school and hang out at each others’ houses. He was such a weird kid, but I liked him.”

She smiles slightly. “It must be nice to have been friends with someone your whole life. You guys must be so close.”

“We used to be closer,” I admit, my mood dipping. “After I left high school, I screwed everything up. Cut contact with him for years. Like a prick.”

“When you joined the rugby team?”

I nod. “I didn’t wanna speak to anyone back home. He’d message me, call me, and I never picked up the phone. Even when his mum... when he really needed me to help him, I didn’t do it. Ignored his texts and emails.”

“But you answered when he invited you onto the podcast,” she points out.

I shrug. “Didn’t have much of a choice. He forced me to join. After I got thrown off the team because of my knee, I went on a wee bender. He heard I was back in town, found me in a hotel room, and moved me into his and Luke’s spare room. Next thing I knew, I was on the podcast. Gave me something to do, I guess.”

“Hm.” She studies me for a second, then tilts her face up, catching my mouth with hers. She’s gentle and tentative, kissing me with soft, deep strokes that press us closer together. I stay still, letting my eyes fall closed.

Eventually, she sighs, flopping back on the pillow. “That was nice.”

I snort. “You’re so odd, L.”

“Mm.” She trails her finger through my chest hair, then turns her attention to the ring hanging from the chain around my neck. It’s just a cheap silver band. I bought it when I was seventeen — back then, it was all I could afford.

Layla touches it, running her finger over the cold metal. A sense of *wrong* rolls up in my stomach, and I smile tightly, pulling her hand away.

She looks up at me questioningly. “What is it? Do you never take it off?”

“Only to shower.” I clear my throat.

She narrows her eyes. “You’re not secretly married, are you? Because I think fake girlfriends still count as real cheating.”

I snort. “No. It’s a promise ring.”

That’s a lie. It’s actually an engagement ring, but I don’t really want to get into that conversation.

She looks astounded. “You? You never promise anything.”

“I promise my face between your legs and my tongue inside you. What more could a girl want?”

She doesn’t laugh, focussing her hard gaze on me. I relent, looking at the little silver ring. “Yeah. I was a different guy back then.”

“I’ll say.” She’s silent for a moment, absentmindedly stroking my chest. “Did she die?”

I flinch. “What makes you say that?”

“Well, it would be a bit weird to be wearing an ex’s promise ring for literally any other reason.”

That’s fair. I rub my beard. “Aye,” I say quietly. “She died.”

She lays her head against my shoulder. “What was her name?”

“Emily.” I haven’t said the name in so long. It used to feel so familiar in my mouth, but now the sounds are foreign and clunky. I don’t even remember the last time I thought of her.

God. I’m a terrible person.

“Was it a long time ago?” Layla asks, drawing a spiral in my chest hair.

I take a deep breath through my nose. “Aye. She passed when we were both eighteen. The summer before I joined the team.”

Her hand tightens on me. “What happened?”

My throat goes dry. My insides clam up. For a second, I can’t speak at all.

Layla looks horrified. “Sorry. You don’t have to tell me.”

I shake my head. “It’s fine,” I rasp out. “She got sick. It was fast. Aggressive. She died a couple months after her diagnosis. They did everything to help her. Surgery, medicine. Nothing worked.” It feels like someone’s wrapped their hand around my throat. “I can’t talk about it, pet.”

“Okay,” Layla says.

I let out a breath, my chest easing. “She would’ve loved your bras,” I admit. “The middle-clasp ones. She had to get me to help her put hers on at the end, ‘cause her fingers were too weak. And her whole life was all hospital gowns, and catheters, and shit. She didn’t have anything pretty.”

Layla nods, her face serious. “Did you love her?”

“She was just... like a sunbeam.” That’s how Emily is in my memory. A small girl with brown skin and flowing dark hair, who just *glows*. The old pain rises up in my chest, but I press it back down automatically, like I always do. I can’t feel it. It would kill me.

“I’m sorry.” Layla bites her lip, then awkwardly butts her head under my chin. “I’m sorry.”

I smile down at her. I can tell she’s uncomfortable, bless her. Layla doesn’t like talking about feelings, but right now, she’s trying so hard to comfort me, even though she clearly hasn’t got a clue how to. “S’okay, lass. Can’t undo it now.”

It took me a long time to come to terms with that. After Emily passed, I walked around feeling like I was in a nightmare, and sooner or later, someone would pinch me and wake me up. It wasn’t until after the funeral that I finally realised that there was no way I’d get her back. So I put her engagement ring on a chain around my neck, deleted the phone numbers of all my old friends, and headed off to play rugby for the next seven years. Without her. I’ve not gotten serious with a girl since.

Layla kisses my chest tiredly, and I stroke my fingers through her hair, feeling her breathe against me. She falls asleep soon after, but I can’t seem to keep my eyes closed.

TRANSCRIPT

THREE SINGLE GUYS EPISODE 446: THE SECOND DATE

JOSH: Hello, and welcome to episode 446 of *Three Single Guys*, a relationship podcast by three guys who are absolutely not qualified to give you dating advice. My name is Josh...

ZACK: I'm Zack.

LUKE: And I'm Luke.

LAYLA: And *I'm* Layla! These boys' long-suffering neighbor-slash-fake-girlfriend.

ZACK: You didn't look like you were suffering too much last night.

LAYLA: Shut it.

ZACK: No, seriously, I'm worried now. Why are you suffering? Crap, did we not use enough lube?

LAYLA: What would be the point? It would be like trying to lubricate a pipe cleaner.

LUKE: (*Clears throat*)

LAYLA: We have a great show lined up for you today. Spoiler alert — the experiment is going really, *really* great. But before we get into all of that, today's episode is brought to you by... me.

ZACK: Our girlfriend has her own company! Surprise!

LAYLA: For those of you who don't know, my company *Her Treat* focuses on making ethical, affordable and adorable undies for people of all shapes and sizes. Today, I want to talk to you about my latest design — the Butterfly bra. Josh, what is the number-one most disliked feature on a regular bra?

JOSH: ... The... cups?

ZACK: I know! It's the underwire!

LAYLA: Correct. Underwire has been around for eighty years, and women have been complaining about it the entire time. Instead of underwire, I designed the Butterfly to have a thin, very strong strip of elastic at the bottom of the base, wrapped in glossy ribbon. This allows the design to provide the same support as an underwire by contouring to your ribcage, but without the irritation and potential stabbing. Okay, I'm going to pass one of my pieces to all of you. What do you guys think?

LUKE: ... It's very nice, Layla.

LAYLA: That's all you have to say? No other comments?

ZACK: It's well soft.

LAYLA: Yes, it is. The cups are all made from microfibre fabrics that are strong, silky, and extremely durable. It's the perfect option if you're taking hormones, or you have sensitive skin, or you're nursing. Or you're just on your period and you're extra sensitive. The Butterfly also

features a front-clasp, which is ideal if you have limited arm or finger mobility — no more fumbling around behind your back when you're trying to get ready in the morning. And, best of all, it's hot as Hell. Zack, since you apparently know the most about women's clothing, how would you describe the overall look of the design?

ZACK: Dunno, lass. It's pretty, but it's hard to review clothes without seeing them on someone.

LAYLA: Okay, hang on. I'm wearing one right now. (Muffled sound of clothing) What do you think?

JOSH: *Jesus.*

LUKE: Layla! Put your shirt back on.

ZACK: This is the best day of my effing life.

LAYLA: Thanks. Review, please.

ZACK: Um. Yeah. Your tits look huge. Five stars. Would recommend.

LAYLA: The pants match.

ZACK: *Please* tell me you're wearing them.

LAYLA: Yes, actually, let me just—

JOSH: (*speaking quickly*) Use the code THREESINGLEGUYS for twenty percent off. Terms and conditions apply. The full collection launches August 1st. Layla, for the love of God, please put your shirt back on before Zack's drool breaks the equipment.

TWITTER

Saffy @SaffronJamesModel ✓

I just got a prototype of @HerTreatLayla's new 'butterfly' undie set. Girls. This is a GAME CHANGER

Buzz Tone Podcasts @Buzz_Tone_Media

@ThreeSingleGuys just hit the UK Comedy charts! If you haven't heard the latest episode, download it NOW!

Ellen Smith @bougie_beautie_ellen

I hate @HerTreatLayla. She's rude and bitchy, and her clothes look tacky as hell #getheroff

Hattie Clarke @zack_harding_fan

@ThreeSingleGuysPodcast I'm getting really sick of hearing the new girl on the show. She has such an annoying voice omfg

George Kiely @georgiotheman

@ThreeSingleGuysPodcast Isn't this podcast supposed to be male advice? I'm not a misogynist, but if I wanted to hear a woman nagging me about relationships, I'd speak to my mom. Unsubscribing.

...

From: admin@emerycofehighschool.com
To layla.a.thompson92@email.net
Subject: Welcome Back Alumnis!!

Dear alumni,

It is with great pride that we invite you to join us at the class of 2011 Emery High School ten-year reunion. Put on your glad rags and come to reminisce, renew old friendships, and see all of the faces you've missed over the last decade!

Attire - formal. Location - Emery High Gymnasium. Entrance fee - £20. Partners welcome.

TWENTY-SIX

LAYLA

“I’m telling you, I made the order,” I say for the fifth time into my phone, rubbing my face.

I’ve been sitting at my bedroom desk for the last five hours, and I feel like crap. My back is aching, my eyes keep falling shut, and I haven’t gotten more than four consecutive hours’ sleep in the past five days.

This week has been mental. Sunday’s episode of *Three Single Guys* was a smash hit. The podcast reached number three on the UK podcast and radio charts, and has barely dropped in popularity since. My socials are blowing up; I’m now at 50K PictureGram followers, and my Twitter notifications are coming in so fast I can’t physically keep up. After I did the ad segment for my upcoming Butterfly collection, I got over a thousand pre-orders overnight, and they’re still trickling in. I’m scrambling to get everything ready for the release day in five months. Sales on my previous collection are through the roof, so I need to get all of those orders packed, processed and shipped. I’ve even had a couple of influencers reach out, asking for free products to promote.

On top of that, I’m having so much fun with Josh and Zack. It turns out, having two boyfriends is great. We’ve hung out pretty much every evening this week, eating together, cuddling, watching movies — and afterwards, I’ve spent every single night in their apartment.

It’s ridiculous how much sex we’re having. Every night, multiple times a night. I’ve never been this horny in my life, but now that we’ve finally

broken through the dam, it's like I can't stop touching them. There's something about the fact that there's two of them, passing me between them, sharing me, that just sets me on fire. Zack pestered me until I finally wrote him the list of all my fantasies, and now we're working through them, one by one.

Hell, just last night all three of us were up to the early morning. The guys spit-roasted me again. This time, they laid me down on my back on Zack's bed, sandwiching me between them as they drilled into me hard from both sides. They were merciless, pounding me through the climaxes that wracked and shook through my body, until I was left sweating and moaning in a wet patch in the sheets. After I'd finally taken more than I could bear, I'd dropped to my knees by the bed, alternating between blowing them and jacking them hard and fast. I was never super into giving head, but with Zack and Josh, I can't get enough of it. I love how every little lick and suckle can draw out a low groan or a flinch. It's ridiculously hot to feel how I'm affecting them.

I went down on them for what felt like an hour, teasing them until they were leaking and twitching and panting, finally giving in and filling my mouth with come. I can still practically taste them, hot and thick as they pour down my throat.

At the memory, my cheeks heat. I push the thought away, trying to focus. I need to concentrate.

There's been a problem with my Butterfly line release. We're less than five months out from release date, and we're in the final phase of production. I hire a team of London seamstresses to make my clothes; this morning, while I was cuddled up with the guys, I got a call that they're missing a shipment of lace from one of my fabric suppliers. I called up the company, but they're swearing blind that I never made the order in the first place.

This lace isn't easy to get your hands on; there's no way I can find something as well-priced and ethical at short notice. If they don't give it to me, I'm screwed.

"It's the high-gloss 'thundercloud grey' insertion lace," I say into the phone, trying to keep my temper. "I ordered it last September."

“We have no record of purchase from you,” the woman says, as if I am very slow.

“No? Because the money is missing from my bank account. So unless I’m getting scammed by one of those foreign princes that keeps emailing me, I’m pretty sure that I paid you for it.”

“We have no record of your invoice or order, Miss Thompson,” she says, sounding bored. *“If you don’t have any other queries, I have other clients who need my attention.”*

I frown. “No, wait—”

A beep sounds down the line. I stare at my phone, wide-eyed. She hung up on me.

No. Screw this. I *know* I made that order. Pushing my laptop across my desk, I drop to my knees and pull out my big box of receipts, yanking off the lid and scooping through the papers. My stomach sinks when I realise that the papers are mixed up. I thought I’d organised them properly, but apparently not.

Heat flushes through me as I start flipping through them faster. Crap. I can’t find it. I’ve screwed up.

If I didn’t make the order, I can’t demand that the company sources it in time. And if I don’t get the fabric in time, the launch won’t happen. Which means that all of the promotion and marketing that I had to schedule months in advance will need to be cancelled. And I’ll have to pay off all of the deposits without any income, which will put me at a deficit. And for all I know, by the time I do get the fabric, the design will be out of trend anyway. Which means I’ll have wasted tens of thousands of pounds.

Crap.

Above my head, my laptop dings from the desk again. And again. And again. It’s been pinging steadily for the last hour, but I’ve been ignoring it to talk to the supplier. Trying to steady my breathing, I straighten and click on my email app, opening up the inbox. I have over twenty new emails. I scan down the subject lines.

Where is my coupon code??

Your website doesn't work

hello, I need code please

Just a heads-up - don't advertise something if you're not going to deliver.

My mouth goes dry. I have a sign-up bonus on my website — if people agree to receive emails about new deals, they get a fifteen-percent-off coupon. But clearly, something is screwing up. I open my email campaign manager and scan through the list of email addresses. It looks like the coupon codes are getting sent, but for some reason, people aren't getting them.

For God's sake.

Leaving the stack of receipts for now, I settle down in my desk chair and open my search engine. I need to work this out right now.



After four hours of running tests and checking filters and a bunch of other stuff I don't really understand, I finally come to the conclusion that my IP is on a ton of blacklists because someone using it is sending spam.

I don't know what the Hell to do about that. I'm not even really sure what an IP address is. Irritation boils in my stomach. I don't have *time* for this. My eyes flick to the clock at the bottom of my laptop screen. I need to find the invoice before my fabric supplier closes for the night.

Another email comes in.

Subject: I one-starred you on Google. You need to treat your customers better than this.

Swearing, I grab my phone and stab Zack's contact. He picks up on the second ring.

"Hey, baby. I was—"

"What's your email campaign rate?" I demand.

"What?"

"What are your click and open rates?"

"As your fake boyfriend, I have to say, this isn't really turning me on. You wanna know a secret? Men love when you say 'hello' to them, instead of barking questions at them like you're trying to use Siri. We're sensitive like that."

"Zack."

He sighs. *"I dunno. Me and Josh are both at a printing press. Hang on, he's a nerd like you, he probably has them memorized. Let me check."*

"What?" I frown. "Why are you at a press?"

"We're testing merch quality. All of these t-shirts look great on me. If you were wondering. Hang on, I'll send a pic."

I rub my eyes. It's all so easy for them. They can record and edit a podcast, and film behind-the-scenes footage, and do bonus episodes, and update their website and social media every day, and stay on top of emails, and make new advertisements, and put out new merch every month — and I'm struggling to send a bloody email.

"He says fifty percent open, and eighteen percent click," Zack says eventually. *"Dunno if that's good or not."*

I sputter. "Fifty percent? Are you sending people treasure maps, or something? How is that so high?!"

"I put grey sweatpants pictures in some of them."

"Jesus." I lean back against the wall, breathing hard. "Right. Okay, then." Clearly, I'm really messing something up. I just have no idea what.

Zack's tone changes. *"Hey. You okay, honey? You don't sound so good."*

"I'm fine. Just. Having some issues on this end."

"Luke's at home. I'll see if he can come over and check it out for you."

"No. No, it's fine. I'll work it out myself."

"He won't mind—"

"I said *no*," I say, and my voice comes out sharper than I meant it. The line falls silent, and I sigh. "Sorry. Sorry, I didn't mean to snap. I'm just stressed. But I'm fine. I don't need help."

"Okay, gumdrop." There's some muffled speech in the background. *"Listen, we gotta go. We're still on for our date at eight tonight, yeah? Surprise location, wear something pretty."*

My eyes widen. I completely forgot we were due to have another date.

Anxiety clutches at my throat again. I can't do all this. I take a deep breath, and it comes out more like a hitched sob.

"What is it?" Zack asks, sounding alarmed. *"Hey, are you crying? Is something wrong?"*

"Nothing. Bye." I hang up and turn back to the computer. My pulse is beating in my throat. I can't breathe right. My inbox is filling up with more and more complaints, and the invoices scattered on the ground stare up at me. Before I can work out which problem to handle next, my phone rings again.

I take a deep breath and pick it up. *"Her Treat, this is Layla speaking."*

"Miss Thompson," a woman says on the other end. *"This is Vivian White, Anna Bardet's assistant. I contacted you on behalf of Anna Bardet Couture a few days ago about her latest scholarship scheme, but we've had no response from you."*

My eyes widen. Anna Bardet is a huge lingerie designer. Every year, she holds an exclusive scholarship programme for up-and-coming indie designers, where they have to enter design ideas for her upcoming collections. The winning applicant gets to do a collaboration with her.

It's a massive deal. The kind of thing that could move my career onto a whole other level. I just don't remember being emailed about it.

I glance at my inbox, my heartbeat speeding up. "I... one sec." I scroll down, trying to find the message.

"Anna hand-selects twenty applicants for the scholarship every year," Janie says. "All of the other contestants have responded already. We're just waiting on your entry."

"That's great," I say through gritted teeth as I scroll frantically. I can't find the email. "Um, can I get back to you?"

She sounds pissed. *"No, not really. We need your response today. We've waited long enough."*

"I just..." My hand tightens on the receiver. "Now's not a good time. I'll call you back in, like, a minute."

"Miss Thompson, if you're not serious about this collaboration, I'm sure there are plenty of similar brands dying for the opportunity to—"

"I'll do it, I promise. I... just need a sec," I say, setting the receiver down and putting my face in my hands. Tears pop into my eyes.

I can't do this. It's too much. My laptop dings with another notification. And then another. And then another. My office phone starts to ring again. My mobile chimes with a meeting reminder, but I can't bring myself to check it. I feel completely overloaded. Sinking onto the floor, I put my head in my hands, trying to shove down my panic.

I can't do this. I can't.

TWENTY-SEVEN

LUKE

As I sit on the sofa in our apartment, scrolling through my email inbox, my heavy eyelids keep falling shut.

I'm exhausted. Layla has spent every single night for the past week in our flat, and apparently, Josh and Zack are taking their roles as her 'boyfriends' incredibly seriously. No matter what I do, I can't block out the soft moans and gasps that filter through my bedroom wall.

I'm not happy that they've both started sleeping with her. I understand why they're tempted; Layla is a beautiful woman. But there have to be massive ethical issues with exchanging her appearances on our podcast with sex. Not to mention the fact that, when things inevitably do go pear-shaped, it's going to make our living situation a Hell of a lot more awkward.

I don't understand why they can't keep it in their pants. It's not like they're the only ones attracted to her. If I'm honest, I've liked Layla ever since she moved in. And now that she's getting closer to Zack and Josh, it's getting worse by the day. It's torture watching her wander through our flat in her skimpy little outfits and not being able to touch her. Plenty of times over the last week, I've laid in bed and imagined what would happen if I just gave in and agreed to take her on a date.

But I don't, because I can't. It would be completely inappropriate. Even if I weren't Layla's ex-teacher, I'm over ten years older than her. I'm sure she'd rather die than go out with me.

Sighing, I turn back to my laptop, staring blankly at the email from Paul. Our manager is thrilled that we've hit the charts again. I can't go an hour without him messaging me about another merch idea or celebrity guest suggestion. It's driving me insane.

On the table next to me, my phone starts to buzz. Zack's name flashes across the screen. I unplug it from my charger, swiping it to answer the call. "Hello?"

"Hey. Do you know what's up with Layla?"

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"She called me a minute ago, and she sounded... weird."

"Weird, how?" I say slowly, standing.

"I dunno. Shaky? The way Josh sounds when he's pulled three all-nighters in a row, and we have to forcibly pry his coffee out of his hands because he's about to have a mental breakdown." There's a muffled protest from Josh in the background. *"What? You do that, man. Yeah, like, all the time. It's okay, we still love you."*

I nod. "I'll go check in on her."

"Awesome. Okay, later." He hangs up.

I grab my keys and head out of my flat into the hallway, crossing the corridor and knocking on her door. There's no response. "Layla?"

"Now's not a good time," she calls. I frown. Zack's right. She does sound... wrong. Her voice is all muffled. I waver in the hallway, not sure what to do. As I hang back, uncertain, I hear a sharp breath, and then a smothered sob.

Alarm runs through me. "Sweetheart, I'm coming inside, okay?"

There's no answer, so I push open the door to her flat and freeze, staring at the mess.

Her lounge looks like a bomb has hit it. Normally Layla is ridiculously organised; she loves labels and files and containers. But now, there's stuff everywhere. Packaging and invoices and fabric samples are strewn over the

couch and floor and coffee table. There are empty mugs and bowls of half-eaten food on pretty much every flat surface, and the sink in her little kitchenette is overflowing with dirty crockery.

Something is wrong. This isn't like her at all.

I hear another muffled sob, and follow the noise to the bedroom, pushing the door open gently.

Layla is sprawled on the floor in coffee-stained pyjamas, surrounded by stacks of papers. As I watch, she flicks through them frantically. Her hair is tied up in a sloppy bun falling to one side of her head, and her eyes are ringed with smudged makeup.

“Layla,” I say softly.

“I’m fine,” she mutters, not looking up at me.

“You’re not fine.”

“I’m just busy,” she snaps, slapping one pile of papers down and picking up another. “I j-just can’t find this stupid receipt. God, I’m so stupid, why the Hell don’t I file things better?!” She tosses the papers back down and tugs at her hair, breathing hard. “I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she mutters, her green eyes wide. “I don’t know how I can fix this, I don’t...” she trails off, her chest heaving. She’s clearly on the edge of panicking.

I step into the room, shutting the door behind me. “Layla, it’s okay. Get up, sweetheart.”

She ignores me, stirring through the papers again. “Maybe I didn’t print it out? Or I deleted it? Why would I do that, though? It can’t just have disappeared—”

“*Layla.*” I cut her off, my voice firm. “Get. Up. Now.”

TWENTY-EIGHT

LUKE

She squints up at me. Her fingers are shaking. “Are you using your teacher voice on me?”

“If that’s what it takes, then yes. This isn’t healthy. Come on.”

She looks down at the pages strewn around her and covers her face. “God,” she mutters. “I’m an absolute mess, aren’t I?”

Without even thinking, I drop to my knees and reach for her, pulling her into my arms. She’s stiff for a moment, tense and quivering in my grip. Then she tips closer to me, burying her face in my chest. I rub my hand over her back, trying to make soothing sounds as she shudders against me.

I wish she’d just cry, for God’s sake. This is almost worse. She’s just... tense and shaking in my arms.

“This isn’t just about clothes for you, is it?” I say quietly. “You’re trying to prove something.”

“No one ever thought I’d be good at anything,” she says into my shoulder. “But I am. I don’t need help.”

“We all need help.” She takes a little gasping breath, and I cup her cheeks. “C’mon, sweetheart. Breathe. Whatever it is, it’ll be okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It is.” I look around at the papers scattered across the floor. They look like receipts. “Are you having money issues? We can help you.”

She cringes so hard I’m vaguely worried she’ll sprain something. “I don’t want your money,” she spits. “I... it’s not a financial issue.”

“Then what is it?”

She opens her mouth, trying for a few seconds to find the words, then runs a hand through her hair, frustrated. “I’m just so flippin’ stupid,” she spits out. “I’m *stupid*. I just need to be better at all of this. All of it. And it’s too much, and I can’t do it all—”

“Hey,” I say sharply. “You’re not stupid. Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

She rolls her eyes, wiping her face, and I grab her wrist, pulling her hand down to make her look me in the eye. “I’m not joking, Layla. If I hear you saying this stuff about yourself again, all of this,” I wave between us, “this stuff with the podcast, it’s done.”

She looks up at me, breathing hard. “I just...” She looks down. “I don’t know what to do. I have so much that I need to get done, but I can’t do any of it.”

“You’re not in the right frame of mind to work. The more you try, the more you’ll struggle. And the more you struggle, the more you’ll panic. It’s a vicious cycle.” A few strands of hair are sticking to her cheek, and I stroke them away without thinking. “Do you want to tell me what’s upsetting you?”

She rubs her face. “I had a shipment of lace that was supposed to come in earlier this week,” she mumbles. “The company is saying I never ordered it. But I’m sure I did. And if I can just find the receipt, their customer service reps would have to take care of it, but I can’t, which means the entire release is going to have to be pushed back. And I’ve already booked promos, so I can’t do that.” She swallows hard and shakes her head. “And on top of that, there’s apparently something wrong with my email, but I don’t know what a DNS record is and I looked it up and nothing is making sense, so I don’t know what to do. And one of my favourite designers asked me to apply for a scholarship with her, but how the Hell am I going to win it when I can’t even answer a goddamn email?” Her mouth turns down. “I just want to get things right. And I keep screwing up, over and over and over.”

“You’re just overwhelmed.” I wave around the messy room. “I’ve coached thousands of students through their A-levels. Trust me. I’ve seen this more times than I could count.” I look down at the papers on the floor, reading through the dates. “What invoice were you looking for?”

“You won’t find it,” she mutters. “I’ve been looking for ages.”

“Humour me.”

She rubs her eyes. “S’from Pink Pearl Silks.”

I immediately spot the company name on a sheet half-hidden under her bed.

“The high-gloss lucent insertion lace?” I read aloud. “In shade 8793, thundercloud grey?”

She frowns, looking up at me. “Yeah? How did you...?”

I reach forward, carefully extricating the sheet and passing it to her. “Here.”

“It was right in front of me,” she says flatly, taking it. “It was right there. And I didn’t see it.”

“Well. It was under the bed,” I say charitably.

She shakes her head, dropping the invoice and tugging at her hair. “Jesus Christ. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s like I can’t think, or see, or breathe—”

“You’re tired. You’re overwhelmed. You’re human.” I reach up and untangle her fingers from her hair, twisting them with mine before she hurts herself. “But we can fix it. We have a tech assistant who helps with our website and email campaigns. We’ll have her look over your technical issues.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re refusing to accept payment for being on our show,” I say drily. “There aren’t really enough favours we can do for you. Until recently, I was pushing the others to pay you, but...”

She finishes the thought for me. “Now I’ve slept with Josh and Zack, it would be weird.”

A pang runs through me. “Right.” I drop my gaze and accidentally get an eyeful of white, soft-looking cleavage. Layla’s pyjamas are fairly skimpy. I quickly look away.

We’re both quiet for a bit. I keep rubbing circles on her back as her breathing slowly evens out, her body relaxing. Eventually, she leans against me and closes her eyes. “Thank you,” she says. “Sorry you had to come here. You can go, now. I’m fine.”

I frown. I don’t like the thought of leaving her alone like this. She looks so tired. It’s so different from her usual brash, bolshy personality that I’d stick a pin in my eye if I thought it’d make her feel better right now.

There’s only one way I can think to do that. I sigh. “Look. Do you want to go out?”

She blinks. “What?”

“Do you want to get a drink, or something? I know you’re meant to be having a date with Josh and Zack tonight, but I think you need some time off. There’s a pub in Battersea I’ve been meaning to try out, if you like.”

“I can’t,” she says glumly. “I have so much to do.”

I switch tacks. “The most productive thing you can do right now is take some time off. You’re too stressed to work anymore, and if you don’t give yourself a break, you’ll be in just as bad a state tomorrow.”

She hesitates. “I guess.”

“Great,” I say briskly, standing. “Take a scan of your invoice, send it to your supplier, then go get ready. I’ll straighten up your flat a bit, and when you’re ready, we’ll go out.”

She pulls a face. “I can’t let you do that.”

“Why not? You’d do it for us, if our situations were switched.”

“Well, yeah, but—” she trails off, her cheeks pinkening.

“But what?”

“If you see how gross my flat is, you’ll never look at me the same again.”

“You’re embarrassed because you’ve been working too hard to clean?” I say incredulously. “Christ, Layla. You’re my friend. I don’t care about the mess, I care about *you*.”

That startles her into silence for a few seconds. Her green eyes are wide as she stares up at me.

“Okay,” she says eventually, uncrossing her arms. “Thank you.”

TWENTY-NINE

LUKE

Two hours later, we're both sitting in a booth at the back of a London pub. It's packed tonight; there's a football match on, so the place is full of fans watching the game. Layla and I have both had to squeeze onto one tiny bench, pressed close together. Layla has a mojito in front of her, and is looking a lot happier. The colour is back in her cheeks, and she's finally smiling again.

"I still can't believe you don't remember me from high school," she shouts over the clamour of the pub, kicking her heeled feet as she sips at her straw. "I was *such* a good student."

"I'm sure." I swig at my own beer and try to ignore the feeling of her thigh pressed against mine. After she showered, Layla changed into little black shorts and a skimpy green top. She looks lovely, of course — but it's an awful lot of bare skin to have pressed up against you. I can't help myself glancing down the long stretch of white leg as she shuffles closer, making room for a guy to squeeze into the booth on her other side.

"I was!" She insists. "I wrote an essay on the use of light in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. You said it was the best in the class."

"I'm sure it was brilliant," I agree. "Unfortunately, I think I've read about four hundred essays on that topic, so nothing is springing to mind."

She kicks me under the table, her eyes crinkling. "You were everyone's favourite teacher, you know. I was so excited to move into your class."

I look down at my hands, my smile fading. “Hopefully I wasn’t too much of a disappointment. I probably wasn’t at my best when I was teaching you.”

She nods. “It was when your divorce was going through, right?”

I wince. “The students knew about that?”

“We knew. Mrs Martins—” she frowns, thinking. “Um...”

“Amy,” I supply.

“Right. She’d talk about you in class, sometimes. A lot of the girls were happy that you were back on the market.”

I grimace, and she laughs. “You were, what, sixteen at the time?” She nods. “You must have the reunion coming up soon, right?”

Layla’s face shutters. “Yeah. I got an email about it a few days ago.”

“Are you going to go?”

She taps her straw against the rim of her glass. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Well. I might be there as well. I got my invite just this morning.” Amy emailed it to me specifically. I’m not sure if it’s just part of her role as headmistress, or she was trying to dig at me.

Her eyes flash to mine. “Really?” She considers. “That’s convenient. Maybe you should just come with me, then.”

I sputter on my beer. “Like, as your...”

“Date, yeah.” She leans against me, amusement glinting in her eyes. “I’m really big on reducing carbon emissions. It would save petrol.”

“My car’s electric,” I manage.

She rolls her eyes. “That’s the nerdiest way I’ve ever been turned down. And I’ve been turned down a *lot*, as you well know.”

I clear my throat, setting down my beer. “Layla—”

“I know, I know. You wouldn’t touch me with a barge pole. I’m just kidding.” She sighs, turning back to her drink. “Do you seriously go to the

reunion every year? Why would you want to go back to that hellhole?”

My eyebrows raise. “You didn’t like Emery High? I thought it was a wonderful school.”

She almost chokes on her mouthful. “Oh?”

“Yes. There was plenty of funding. The area was nice. And the students were some of the loveliest I’ve ever worked with.”

She snorts at that. “Sure they were.”

“Emery High has some of the lowest rates of student exclusion and suspension in the country,” I tell her proudly. “I never remember seeing a child get expelled for bullying or fighting. It was a lovely atmosphere.”

Layla is silent for a moment. “I hated almost every second of it,” she says eventually.

I’m taken aback. “Why?”

Her mouth twists. “Guess I’m not that academic.” She looks down at her glass. The noise in the room seems to just get louder as she lets the conversation trail into silence.

I frown. The happiness has drained out of her again. “Layla.” She doesn’t respond, so I touch her hand lightly. “Hey. Did I do something wrong?”

“No,” she says, stirring ice around her glass. “You did nothing.” We’re silent for a moment. Layla studies the table, running her fingertips slowly over the glossy grain.

I clear my throat. “So. How is the experiment with Josh and Zack going? Honestly.”

She smiles slightly. “I didn’t lie on the podcast. It really is going great. I’m already a lot better at flirting, I think. And I’m getting more natural on my practice dates.” She grins suddenly. “And now I can come in bed, too. If you were wondering.”

“I wasn’t,” I say firmly. She just laughs. “Well, I’m glad you’re finding it helpful. Just remember that if you ever feel like you need to stop, you can

change your mind.”

She narrows her eyes, taking another sip of her mojito. “Why are you so against it? Is it just because you think it’ll ruin my friendship with Zack and Josh?”

I shake my head. “I just don’t think they’re going about it the right way. Your issues aren’t social, or...” the word sticks in my throat.

She smirks. “Sexual?”

I nod. “Right. There’s nothing wrong with you. I think you’re just finding the wrong men.”

“Oh?”

I nod. “I think finding a partner is less about attraction, and more about logic. If you can find a person that’s compatible with you, you can avoid facing troubles down the line when the honeymoon phase is over.” I smile at her grimly. “And you won’t make the same mistake as me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Jesus. You got divorced *once*, Luke. It’s not like you’re doomed to be alone forever because one relationship didn’t work out.”

My mouth falls open. “I don’t think I’m *doomed forever*—”

“No? I’ve never even seen you bring a girl home. There must be some reason for that.”

“Well... I...” I bluster. Honestly, I haven’t thought about finding a partner in forever. I’m perfectly happy with my life the way it is. I’m coming up to forty, after all. It feels a little late in life to be swiping through Tinder.

Layla leans forward, raising her voice over the noise. The movement puts our faces very close together. I can see all of the individual lashes framing her eyes, and the sprinkling of freckles on her cheeks. “It’s your whole schtick on the show. The ‘resident divorcee’. And I get it; it’s your speciality. But how come you aren’t even trying to date?”

I can’t look away from her. There’s a smudge of dark makeup under her eye, and without thinking, I reach up to thumb it away. “I... suppose I haven’t found the right woman.”

Her eyebrow quirks. “You dated Monica, didn’t you? Zack said you guys broke up because he couldn’t commit. Did you want to stay with her?”

My mood drops. I really wish Zack would stop talking about that. “That’s not quite what happened,” I admit. “I actually instigated the breakup. I wasn’t prepared for anything serious. Zack agreed that it was time, so we split.”

She frowns. “What about Josh?”

“Josh wanted to stay with her. He liked her a lot.”

“And his feelings were just ignored? That seems unfair.”

For the first time, I let myself really study her. She looks so unbelievably kissable right now. Her eyes are dark and dilated. Her pretty pink lips are wet and parted. My hand is still on her face, and without thinking, I stroke my thumb over her cheekbone. “I suppose it was,” I murmur.

Her gaze flickers to mine, and she smiles slowly. “You know,” she says. “That was a long time ago. You should start dating again. Before you get old and lose all your hair.”

“Charming, Layla.”

My heart thuds as she laughs, sliding a little closer. My eyes widen as she tilts her face towards me.

She’s going to kiss me.

I thought I was making up all of the little flickers of attraction I saw in her, but maybe I wasn’t, after all. She’s actually going to kiss me.

And I’m going to let her.

Suddenly, a shout goes through the bar. I look up to see a footballer on one of the TV screens lift up his shirt and do a victory lap on the field, bellowing in triumph after shooting a goal. Layla swears as the guy next to her throws up his pint, sloshing beer down her front. “Jesus!” She shouts, turning to face him. “What is wrong with you?”

He turns to her, grinning sloppily. “Whas’ the matter, honey?” He slurs.

She scowls at her wet shirt. “You’ve soaked me, you utter moron.”

“Oooh, *have I?*” He throws his head back and laughs. “Smile, princess. S’just a shirt.”

Layla opens her mouth to argue, and I wrap my arm around her shoulder, yanking her into my side. She immediately goes quiet. “Go,” I tell the man.

His face creases. “You can’t tell me what to do,” he says.

“Go,” I repeat. “You’re a public nuisance. Get out of our way.”

Even after all these years, I am very good at getting people to do what I tell them to. Zack says it’s a leftover from my time as a teacher; whenever I raise my voice at someone, they automatically feel like they’re about to get into trouble. The man wavers, and I arch an eyebrow. “Now, please.”

“Whatever,” the guy mutters, standing and shuffling out of the booth.

I wait until he’s out of sight, then turn to Layla. “Are you alright, sweetheart?” I pick up a napkin and start trying to wipe off the front of her thin shirt.

She looks up at me with huge, dilated eyes. Her cheeks are pink. She swallows and nods, slipping out from under my arm and standing. “I... I’m gonna dry off in the bathroom. You want another drink?” She looks flustered.

I frown. “Layla, I can get it. It’s no bother.”

She fixes me with a look. “Why? Are you trying to *impress* me, Mr Martins?”

“Of course not,” I say. “But—”

She smiles. “Then I’ll buy the next round. Gimme ten minutes.” She turns on her heel and heads to the toilets without another word.

THIRTY

LAYLA

My head is spinning as I step out of the bathroom and head to the bar. Even after five minutes under the hand-drier, my damp top still clings to my chest as I slip into a barstool and order two more drinks.

I don't mind. I feel hot and flushed and flustered. I could use something to cool me down. As I wait for my drinks, I glance back at our dark booth in the corner of the room. Luke has pulled a paperback out from somewhere and is reading it, completely ignoring the chaos around him. My stomach flips.

I almost kissed him.

I don't know what came over me. We were sitting so close, shouting over the noise of the bar, and it felt like there were magnets in my skin, dragging me into him. I remember the way his dark eyes fixed on my mouth as I talked. The light graze of his fingertips against my cheek.

For a second, I thought maybe he wanted to kiss me, too.

I shake my head at myself. I'm being stupid. I need to get over this ridiculous crush.

The teenage bartender comes back with my drinks, and I pull my card out of my wallet. As I hold it against the reader, I vaguely recognise the sound of the bathroom door getting slammed open behind me. The reader beeps, and I take back my card just as a deep voice booms through the pub.

“TWO-POUND THOMPSON! WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

I freeze, all of the blood draining out of my face as my ex-boyfriend, Donny Pritchard, swaggers up to the bar.

Okay, so I lied when I told the guys that I've never had a boyfriend. I have had *one*. But the fact that I ever dated Donny — even though it was just for a week in high school — is so incredibly embarrassing that I refuse to own up to it.

He looks no different than he did ten years ago. He's still tall, broad-shouldered and handsome. He still has the same cleft chin and pretty green eyes, although right now they're bloodshot from drinking. He smirks at me, slumping down in the barstool next to me.

“Layla. Babe,” he booms. I try to edge away from him as his hot, yeasty breath fans over my face. “What the Hell are you doing here? Doesn't seem like your kind of place.” He waves down the bartender. “Gimme a beer, man. Best stuff you got on tap.” He slaps his card down onto the bar, then grins at me, leaning back in his stool and crossing his arms behind his head.

“I'm getting a drink,” I say flatly. “The same as you, apparently. What's with the cheap suit? You look like a wanker.”

He looks down at his crumpled three-piece. “S'not *cheap*,” he sneers. “Just got back from a campaign. I'm running for the London Assembly. I'm shooting for Mayor one day.”

I snort. “Don't you need to know how to read to be a politician?”

His eyes spark. “Big words coming from you,” he says loudly. “You've been doing well for yourself, haven't you, Layla? I've seen your pictures online.” His gaze drops pointedly to my chest. “Seems like you're really using your *assets*.”

Before I can respond, the bartender steps forward and slides two glass jam jars towards me, full of pretty pink and red drinks.

Donny guffaws. “*Mate*. How come you're serving her first? Is it 'cause she's got her rack out?”

The bartender sputters. I fight back the wave of cold that rolls over my body, plucking my paper umbrella out of my drink. “If you don't shut up,” I say,

“I’ll stab you in the face.”

Donny blinks. “What?”

“I’ll rip out your eyes and eat them like olives,” I inform him, twirling the umbrella between my fingers. Donny’s face darkens with a scowl. I don’t break eye contact, staring him down.

The bartender looks between us. “Um, is there a problem here?” He asks, sounding terrified.

Donny straightens. “Sorry, mate.” He grins again. “Were you interested?” He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. “I wouldn’t bother. If you want to see her topless, just look her up online.”

I grit my teeth, my shoulders tensing. “You can go now, Donald.”

Donny ignores me, leaning in and dropping his voice to a stage whisper. “She’s a... what do you call ‘em? Glamour model. Girls who pose naked. Hang on.” He pulls out his phone and shows it to the boy. “Here, man. Check it. Nice, right?”

I peer over his shoulder. On his screen is a campaign photo I took a couple of years ago for a product launch. I’m wearing a lilac corset laced up with lavender ribbons. And, yes, my bum is out. But who cares? It’s social media, for God’s sake. The whole internet is like, pictures of food and bums.

“Do you have that saved in your phone?” I ask, disgusted. “God. You’re so *rank*. And I’m not a glamour model, I’m a fashion designer, you utter cretin.” I reach for the phone. “Put that *away*.”

Donny lifts it out of my reach. “Hey, why are you getting fussy now? If you didn’t want people to look at them, you wouldn’t put them up on the internet for everyone to see.” He leers at my chest. “You sure as Hell wouldn’t be wearing a shirt like that.”

As his eyes bore into the front of my top, something odd happens inside of me. A switch flips. Suddenly, all the anger coursing through me freezes, turning to cold, raw fear.

I swallow hard. I don't know what's happening. I'm good at being catcalled. I'm great at it, in fact. It's happened so many times in my life, I have a whole Rolodex of snippy, sarcastic comebacks stored in the back of my mind.

But right now, I'm reaching desperately for something to say, and nothing is coming to mind. I stare at Donny, my throat tightening as he smirks back down at me. Memories from my time at high school flash in front of my eyes like a movie.

Girls whispering behind their hands about me as I walk down the hallway to class.

Boys grabbing me and trying to yank me onto their laps on the bus.

Teachers sharing knowing looks as I traipse into the headmistress's office for the fifth time in a week.

I shudder, trying to take in a breath. I feel sick. I feel so, so sick. My hands are shaking. My heart is pounding.

Donny leans closer, eyes fixed on my chest. "Jesus Christ, you can see your nips through this. You know that, right?" He swipes at the front of my shirt. I bat his hand away, and he grins like a shark. "God, you've filled out since we were together, haven't you? Did you get your boobs done?"

"We were never together," I say.

"Yeah?" He rubs his chin. "'Cuz I'm pretty sure I remember you dragging me into the changing rooms to whack me off—"

All of the blood drains out of my face. There's a ringing in my ears. My body is paralysed, caught between the urge to run, and the urge to lash out and gouge his stupid eyeballs out with my fingernails. Donny's grin widens as he leans in again, and I just close my eyes, freezing in place.

A heavy hand lands on my shoulder. "*What* is going on here?" A low voice comes from above me.

I look up at Luke standing behind me. His face is white with anger as he studies my expression. "Are you okay?" He asks quietly, and I nod.

Donny looks up, and the laughter drains from his face. “M-Mr Martins.” He stutters.

Luke turns his steely gaze on him. His lips press together. “Donald. How nice to see you again.”

“Uh. Yeah. You too, Mr M.” Donny rubs the back of his neck, frowning at Luke’s hand on me. “Uh. Why are you hanging out with Tuggy?” His eyes widen. “Holy shit. Are you two on a *date*?”

Luke drops his hand like I’ve burned him. “*Tuggy*?” He repeats. “What the Hell does that mean?”

Hearing that word from his lips snaps something inside me. I stand up, sliding off my stool like a zombie, and head to the exit, pushing through the crowds of rowdy patrons. Shoving the bar’s back door open, I step out into the black night air, sinking onto the pavement and wrapping my arms around my knees.

Cars rush past on the road. Cold evening drizzle mists over me. Tears blur my eyes.

This was a bad idea. Trying to date means putting yourself out there. Which means making yourself vulnerable. I put my face in my hands, trying to breathe.

A few minutes later, the door behind me opens. Noise from the bar washes out into the street. I don’t move as Luke steps outside and shuts the door behind him, setting a can of cola on the stone step next to me.

“Drink it,” he says quietly. “The sugar will help.”

“I don’t need help,” I mutter.

“No?” He asks mildly, looking down at me as I shiver. “Well. It can’t hurt.” He toes the can closer to me.

All of the embarrassment burning inside me suddenly twists to white-hot anger. I don’t know why Luke is so obsessed with seeing me when I’m weakest, but it’s really starting to piss me off.

“For God’s sake,” I snap. “Can you please just leave me alone?”

My hard voice echoes around the empty street. There's a pause, and then Luke sits down next to me. "No," he says softly. "No, Layla. I'm not leaving you alone out here when you're upset."

I close my eyes, dragging in a shuddering breath.

Fine.

I take another deep breath and pull myself together.

THIRTY-ONE

LUKE

Layla completely shuts off.

It's like she freezes over. One second, she has hurt and frustration and fear all over her face; the next, she's sitting calmly on the stone steps, examining her nail beds, her expression cold and detached. "Seriously," she says again, her voice almost bored. "It's not a big deal. You don't post pictures of yourself half-naked online if you can't handle a little catcalling."

"I don't think that's true," I say slowly, trying to nudge the soda closer to her. "Sweetheart, you'll feel better if—"

"I'm *fine*," she snaps, and I look down. She sighs and leans her head back against the brick wall, squinting up at the dark sky. "Sorry," she says softly. "Sorry, sorry. I turn to a bitch when I'm embarrassed."

I shake my head. We're silent for a moment. A car trundles down the road. A few streets away, I hear drunk voices singing a Mariah Carey song. Slowly, Layla reaches down and cracks the tab of the can, bringing it to her lips and taking a few deep swallows.

"What does Tuggy mean?" I ask when she sets it back on the pavement.

She makes a lewd jerking motion with her hand.

I grimace, my stomach turning. "What? Why the Hell did he call you that?"

She looks at me sideways. "You really don't remember me at all, do you?" She says, her voice soft.

“I told you. I barely remember anyone from your class.”

“You remember Donny,” she points out, and I huff.

“Yeah. Because Donald refused to study, and then his parents threatened to sue me for bad teaching practice every time I gave him a failing grade. I ended up tutoring him on Friday lunch breaks, just to get them to back off.” I don’t like to think badly of my students, but occasionally, you meet a kid that’s just bad, through and through. Donny was one of them.

I try to put the pieces together. “Did he give you a hard time?” I guess.

“Among others,” she says stiffly.

“Was it... bad?” I ask, my voice hesitant. I already know the answer. She wouldn’t be crouched here, shivering in the cold, if it wasn’t bad.

Her face twists. “Well,” she spits, “I got death threats every day for about three years straight, so yeah. I’d say it was pretty bad.”

My stomach lurches. “What?” I ask. “Death threats? At Emery High?”

She fiddles with her bracelets. “I know, I know. *The loveliest children you’ve ever worked with. Lowest rate of student suspension in the country.* I guess I must have just imagined it.”

I sit forward. “I don’t understand. Were you bullied by the other students?”

She tilts her head and looks at me, her pale eyes inscrutable. “Well,” she says slowly. “It wasn’t the janitor threatening to beat me to death behind the bike shed.”

“Layla—” My horror must show on my face, because she immediately backtracks.

“I shouldn’t have said that.” She shakes her head. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I ignore her. “Donny threatened to *kill* you?”

She snorts. “Oh, no. He was just the ringleader, making up stories about what a slag I was. It was mostly the girls who wanted to kill me.” Her lip curls in disgust. “Trust me, *Tuggy* was the best of my nicknames. I had a bunch.

Handy Queen. Two-pound Thompson.”

“Two-pound...” I repeat weakly, my head whirring.

“It was the rumoured price I charged for a blowie.” She tosses her hair back. “One pound to touch my boobs. Fifty pence over the shirt. Not that most of them bothered paying. Or asking.”

Horror shudders through me. All of this was happening whilst I was there? Right under my nose? “Layla. You didn’t—”

She scowls at me, her eyes hard. “None of it’s *true*.”

“That’s not what I was going to ask, sweetheart. Why didn’t you ask for help?”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Her eyes flare. She suddenly flings her leg out, kicking the half-empty can across the pavement. It clatters against the gravel, rolling to a stop a few feet away.

“Screw you,” she spits. “Don’t make this *my* fault. I *did* ask for help. I told my form teacher. I told the receptionist. I told the headteacher. I told the goddamn nurse every time I had to come in for an extra PE kit, because the guys liked pouring water down the front of my shirt. For God’s sake, Luke, do I seem like the kind of person who takes this stuff lying down?” She shakes her head. “I kicked up as much of a fuss as I possibly could. No one did anything. Anything. Hell, the head of year told me I should be grateful, because ‘when a boy picks on you like this, he’s clearly interested in you’. And then she called me a ‘slapper’ behind my back as I walked away.”

I stare at her, wide-eyed. “The head of year... *Eveline* told you that?”

She looks at me coolly, her eyes gleaming in the dark like a cat’s, like she’s daring me not to believe her.

I run a hand over my face. This is all my fault. If I’d been in a better state, I would have noticed something was wrong. I should’ve helped her. It was my job to keep the students safe. Jesus, no wonder Layla’s so prickly and defensive around men now; she’s used to them trying to hurt her.

She was sixteen, for God's sake. Sixteen, and getting sexually harassed in school. "But why?" I ask, my voice breaking on the last word. "Why did the other kids pick on you like that? I don't understand."

She's silent for a long, long time, staring up at the sky. "I don't want to tell you," she says eventually.

The words hit me like a brick wall.

All of my life, I've prided myself on being someone people can come to for help. When I was a teacher, I had kids traipsing in and out of my office all day, just to talk to me. It's one of the reasons I like doing *Three Single Guys*. Giving advice is what I'm supposed to be good at.

But Layla doesn't want to open up to me. Why the Hell would she? She was getting bullied for years, right under my nose, and I didn't do anything to help her. I was her teacher, and I let her get hurt and harassed. I let her down.

My phone suddenly dings in my pocket. I stand up, my head spinning. "I... I need to make a call." I mutter. "I'll be back in a minute."

THIRTY-TWO

LAYLA

Luke is gone for almost ten minutes, which I appreciate. I take some deep breaths, then wipe off my cheeks and pull open my clutch, looking for my compact mirror. By the time the door behind me opens again, I'm blotting my lipstick with a tissue, and I feel much steadier.

"I'm going home," I tell Luke as he steps outside.

He nods. "If you can hang on a second, Josh will pick you up. I need to go do some damage control."

I frown. "Is something wrong?" Is he just trying to get out of sharing a car with me?

He nods. "There's been an issue with one of our merch shipments. The t-shirts have been printed in the wrong colours." He rubs his eyes. He looks exhausted. "Zack and I are going to see if we can sort it out. Josh will take you home."

"I can get the Tube myself..." I start to say, but before I can finish talking, a familiar silver car pulls up by the curb. My shoulders slump. Great. Someone else to witness how pathetic I am.

The car's lights flash, and Josh opens the door, stepping out into the road. He looks like he came here in a hurry; his black hair is ruffled, and the collar of his dark coat is turned up. His concerned gaze immediately goes to me. My stomach crunches with embarrassment.

Josh slams the door shut and makes his way to me, but Luke waylays him, grabbing him by the shoulder and saying a few words in his ear.

I bristle. What is he saying about me? *Take care of her. Make sure she's okay. She's upset.*

Josh raises an eyebrow, then nods, turning to me and offering me a hand. "Let's go home."

"Why are you on babysitting duty?" I ask sullenly.

"I'm your boyfriend, aren't I?"

"Josh."

He sighs. "Because I'm the one least likely to treat you like a baby," he answers, his voice flat. "Come on."

My cheeks burning, I let him help me off the stone step and lead me to the car, still idling on the curb. He opens the front passenger seat door for me, but I ignore it, opening a door in the back instead. Embarrassment is rushing through me in hot waves. I don't need taking care of. I'm fine.

"Bad night?" He asks, climbing into the driver's seat and buckling in.

"Bad day," I mutter, and he nods, turning his attention back to the road.



We're silent on the drive home. Josh keeps glancing back at me in the rearview mirror, worry clear in his eyes. I ignore him, watching the streetlights flash by the window, rolling amber stripes of light over my bare thighs. When I picked this outfit out earlier, I thought it looked hot.

Now I just feel gross.

I close my eyes and press my forehead against the cold windowpane, breathing deeply as we wind through the London roads back home.

When we reach our building, the lift is broken, so we climb up all six flights of stairs in silence. By the time we finally get back to our floor, all I want to

do is take off my heels, strip off these stupid shorts, and step into a scalding hot shower. I need to wash this night away.

Josh walks me to my flat door, and I pull my key out of my clutch.

“Well. Good night,” I say, fitting it in the lock. “Thanks for coming out. You didn’t have to do that.”

He nods but doesn’t move.

“Bye,” I prompt, unlocking the door and pushing it open.

He peers in over my shoulder. “Have you got new lampshades?”

“...no?”

“Are you sure? Can I check?” I stare at him, and he sighs. “Can I come in with you?”

I hesitate. Normally I would say no. I feel crappy, and I don’t like other people to see me upset.

But this is Josh. As my eyes scan his chiselled face, emotion tugs inside me. For once, I don’t want to be alone. I want to be in his arms, so badly my skin aches. And I don’t know why.

I shrug. “You’re my boyfriend, aren’t you?” Before I can change my mind, I take his hand, leading him inside my dark apartment.

THIRTY-THREE

LAYLA

“You want a drink or anything?” I ask, kicking off my heels and heading for the kitchenette. “Water? Wine?”

Josh shuts the door behind him and bends to unlace his shoes. His phone beeps in his pocket, and he hooks it out, checking the screen. “Hang on a sec,” he murmurs, typing back a quick message. I pour us both some water. When I turn back around, he’s migrated to the couch, and is frowning at his phone like he wants to throw it out of the window.

“Who is it?” I ask.

“My brother,” he says shortly. “He wants my help organising the guest seating for the wedding.”

“It’s just in a few weeks, right?”

“Hm.” His phone beeps again, and he sighs. “And *that* was Luke.” He starts tapping at the screen. “He wants to know if you’re doing okay.”

Irritation flashes through me, but I bite it back. I’m not really angry at Luke. He’s just concerned. It’s my fault for letting him see how much Donny upset me.

“I’m fine,” I say again. “Really. I ran into an old schoolmate. It... knocked me off-balance for a second.”

The lie hangs in the air between us. Josh’s dark eyes glitter as he assesses me, his face inscrutable. “Okay.” He puts his phone away.

I set the waters down and curl up on the sofa next to him, tucking my feet under me. We're both silent for a minute. Without meaning to, my mind flashes back to Donny. I remember the familiar sneer on his face as he leered at my chest.

If you didn't want people to look at you, you sure as Hell wouldn't be wearing a shirt like that.

Old, half-buried memories flicker through the back of my brain, making me feel sick.

"You can tell me," Josh says suddenly. I glance across at him. He's not looking at me, staring out of the window at the city lights. "You're upset. You can tell me what's hurting you."

I tug at the hem of my shorts. "I'm not hurt. Nothing is upsetting me."

"Is it the podcast?" He asks. "Is it upsetting you? Because you can drop out whenever you want. Things have gotten pretty crazy."

I frown. "I don't want to drop out. Even if I did, I wouldn't do it. You guys would lose a ton of followers. And the whole point of this segment was to boost your popularity."

He frowns. "I don't care about that."

I snort. "Yeah, you do. The podcast is your life. You love it."

"Not to the detriment of other people," he snaps. "I wouldn't hurt someone for *business*, for God's sake."

His voice is uncharacteristically sharp. I'm taken aback. "Never said you would."

Josh closes his eyes, his shoulders slumping. "Sorry. Touchy subject, I guess. I was just on the phone to my brother before Luke called me." His lips press together. "Rob wants to invite our dad to his wedding."

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Years ago. I was hoping to keep it that way." He looks out of the window at the city lights outside. "He was like that. Cold. Harsh. A workaholic that

cared more about his bank accounts than other people. People say that I'm like him a lot, so..." he shrugs. "Yeah. Sore subject."

I don't know what to say to that. A few seconds of silence pass as I watch him. His face is dipped in shadow. I can see his pulse thrumming in his throat. He looks sad and tired, and it's unfurling something inside of me.

"Can I try something?" I ask.

He nods wordlessly. Slowly, I lean forward, curling my hand in his hair. His lips part, but he doesn't move as I shuffle closer and touch my mouth to his.

Just like the last time we kissed, need immediately flushes through me. I melt against him, my body softening against his hardness. God, it feels so good. It feels right. He makes a low noise and kisses me back hard, licking into me. The dark room around me smudges like an oil painting. I can feel tension building deep in my stomach, like a spring winding tighter and tighter. We keep touching each other, stroking our hands over each other like neither of us can quite convince ourselves to stop. The ache between my legs gets worse and worse, until I'm squirming on his lap, rocking slightly against his thigh. I feel half-desperate.

I need more.

Yanking up my tight shorts, I climb onto Josh's lap, straddling his thick thighs. He groans as I shuffle forwards, wrapping my arms around his neck. We kiss again, long and hard, until the blood is thudding in my head and I have to pull back and gasp for breath.

"Layla," he rumbles, gripping my hips like he's scared I'll pull away. "What is this?"

Ignoring the question, I dip in for another kiss. He meets my lips stroke for stroke. Our chests rub against each other, and the buttons on his shirt press through the fabric of my thin silky top, rubbing against my overheated skin. I shiver. I had no idea that buttons could feel so good.

"Layla..." he starts again.

I nibble at his throat, and he groans, his hips bucking under mine. "God, I love your weak spot."

“D-don’t use it against me,” he manages, as I lick over his pulse.

I shake my head, nipping at the hot skin until his hands clutch at me. “I’m just being a good student.”

His big palms slide up the sides of my waist. His eyes meet mine. “Can I...?”

I gulp. My skin is blazing. My breasts feel achy and full. I want them in his hands more than anything.

I grab the hem of my shirt and pull it off, tossing it in a crumpled ball to the floor. Josh swallows visibly. His eyes rove over my lilac balconette. It’s one of my favourite sets, simple and pretty, embroidered with fine, shimmery thread.

Slowly, he reaches out and touches the tiny bow between the cups, his jaw tight. “Shit,” he says succinctly.

I smile. He runs his finger lightly over the lace, tracing the line of the cup, then looks up at me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Let me show you how okay I am,” I practically purr.

He groans as I push him back and tug at his shirt. Buttons pop as I yank the panels apart, baring his hard chest. I run my fingers down between his abs, and they crunch under my touch. I smile like a shark.

Yes. This is better. Meeting Donny made me feel weak and sad, but now I’m back in control. Josh grabs my hips, twisting like he wants to flip me over. I push his hands away.

“No,” I order. “I’m on top.” I soothe the sting of the order by ducking and pressing a kiss to his pec. He sinks back against the couch cushions as I kiss down the side of his throat.

“You’re incredible,” he murmurs. “Amazing.”

Emotion ripples through me, and I quickly tamp it back down. No. I don’t want to feel right now, I want to shag. “Shh,” I order. “No talking.”

“No?” He sounds amused.

“No.” I pull back for a second, rubbing my sternum. “Don’t want to talk.” I go back to necking him.

“Hey,” Josh says.

“Mm?” I suck on his Adam’s Apple, breathing hard. My heart is hammering painfully. My lungs squeeze as I slide my hands down the front of his muscled chest, reaching for his belt.

“Layla.”

I tug at the belt, pulling it loose from the buckle. “Yeah?” My voice is breathy. My fingers are trembling.

“Layla, look at me.”

I don’t. My sweaty hands slip on his belt. I swear under my breath, my fingers fumbling with the buckle. My head is swimming.

“Layla.” Josh’s voice hardens. He reaches down and grabs my wrists, pulling them gently away from him. “Layla, stop.”

THIRTY-FOUR

LAYLA

I freeze, blinking up at him. “What?”

He cups my face and tilts it up. His thumb strokes across my cheek as he studies me. He looks so concerned that it makes something in my stomach tremble. “You still don’t look right.”

“I’m fine,” I whisper. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like... you think I’m about to fall apart.” I squirm as my throat tightens. I’m uncomfortable, and sweating, and there’s a pit in my stomach that’s hurting so much I feel sick. I guess it must show on my face, because Josh just looks even more alarmed, dropping his hands.

“Layla,” he says softly. “What is it? You want to talk about it?”

“I’m not upset,” I sputter. “At least—I don’t think I am.”

Josh doesn’t say anything. I can’t handle his eyes on me anymore. Embarrassed, I slide off the sofa and grab my empty water glass from the coffee table, skittering towards the kitchen. Refilling it at the sink, I lean against the counter and gulp it down. The cold liquid slides through me, cooling my insides, and I take a deep breath as my heartbeat steadies. Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s fine.

Setting the glass on the drying rack, I turn back to the sofa, but Josh is gone. The door to my bedroom is open, light spilling into the hallway, so I follow

him inside. He's standing shirtless and barefoot by my bed, plumping up my pillows.

"Better now," I announce, crossing the room and putting my hands on his shoulders to shove him onto the bed. He falls onto the mattress, and I slide into his lap, but immediately, that scared, panicked feeling starts back up again. I could growl with frustration. What the Hell is wrong with me? Why am I freaking out about this? It's just *Josh*, for God's sake.

Deciding to just ignore it, I try to catch his mouth in another kiss.

He turns his face away, letting my mouth skitter over his jaw. "Not tonight, L."

"I'm fine," I insist. "Really."

He raises an eyebrow, then opens his arms for me. "Either way, I'm not in the mood. Come here."

I consider for a moment, nerves squirming in my stomach, then shuffle forward and let him fold me into a hug. Instantly, all of the tension inside me melts away.

He lays his cheek against mine. "What are you feeling?"

"Nothing. Turned on."

He makes a low rumbling noise in his chest, but doesn't say anything.

I rub my eyes. "I feel like I'm about to fall off a cliff," I say honestly. "And I don't understand why. I don't know what's scaring me."

"Christ, L." He traces his fingers down my arms. "You're just not ready. It's fine."

I frown. "But I already slept with you! How could I not be ready?!"

He shrugs a shoulder. "You can be ready one day, and not ready the next. You're not a vibrator. You're not always on."

"That doesn't make any sense," I whisper. Although deep down, it does. Meeting Donny has left me weak and raw.

He doesn't answer, turning to kiss me. His lips ghost over mine, feather-light, like he's tracing the shape of my mouth with his. My heart thumps painfully in my chest. He trails his lips across my cheek, mouthing softly at the hinge of my jaw, then finally pulls back.

I sigh, feeling the hardness under his pants press against my thigh. "Sorry," I say quietly.

Josh shakes his head and wraps his arms around me, pulling me down onto the mattress next to him. "Tonight's lesson: never apologise." He kisses the nape of my neck. "Do you want me to stay or leave?"

"What would a boyfriend do?" I consider. "Stay, right?"

"There's no right answer here, L. What do you need?" He brushes my hair away from my face.

"I... I don't know." Frustration knots my stomach.

"Check in with yourself," he says patiently.

I obediently dig inside myself, trying to untangle the threads of fear and happiness and anxiety and stress. The answer rises to the surface of my mind.

"You," I say. "I need you. Here. Now. Yes." His chest shakes with silent laughter, and I huff. "Yes. Stay. Please. And stop laughing at me."

"You're pretty cute."

My heart glows in my chest. I kick his ankle under the sheets. "I'm not cute. I'm terrifying."

"Mmhm." He wraps his arms tighter around me and pulls me flush against him, so we're spooning.

I wriggle against him angrily. "I make men jump from windows and flee from restaurants to get away from me."

His eyes glow almost luminescent in my low bedroom light. "I'm not fleeing."

"Yet."

“Mm.” He starts carding a hand through my hair, and the sensation is so relaxing I feel my eyes starting to fall shut. “Sleep,” he murmurs, so low I barely even hear it. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

THIRTY-FIVE

ZACK

“Will you please just tell me what’s wrong?” I ask the next morning, trailing after Luke as he marches across the road to our apartment building.

It’s seven in the morning. In a perfect world, I wouldn’t be awake for another three hours, but Luke banged on my bedroom door thirty minutes ago and demanded that I come with him to buy Layla breakfast. It’s a mild day—the sky is bright and grey, and the air is nippy, but Luke doesn’t seem to notice the cold, walking like a zombie to the zebra crossing. He’s clutching a paper bag full of food.

It’s not the first time all four of us have ordered breakfast together, but we normally just hit the local chain cafe. For some reason, though, today he insisted on going to some fancy little boulangerie he knows Layla likes. He’s bought croissants, pain au chocolat, fresh bread—even macarons. For breakfast. I was too tired to argue.

We reach a crossing, and I study his face. His body is tight and thrumming with tension, but his shoulders are slumped with tiredness. He looks exhausted. “Seriously,” I say. “What’s wrong, man?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he says flatly.

“You’ve looked like crap ever since you got back from the pub yesterday. What happened?”

Josh and I had been working on Layla’s lesson plan late last night when Luke called. He’d sounded almost frantic on the phone. Said that he’d taken Layla

out for a drink, and pretty much begged Josh to pick her up and drive her home. I'm still kinda offended he didn't ask me. "Why did you send Josh to pick her up?" I prod. "Did you and Layla fight?"

He grunts.

"You're my business partner," I try. "You're meant to tell me stuff."

Nothing. The traffic lights flash, and we cross the road, heading back towards our building.

"If you ain't gonna tell me, I'll just start guessin'," I say, as we beep our keycards and the doors to the lobby open. "Were you on a date? Did she turn you down, or something?"

"No."

"Did you turn *her* down? Oh, mate, please tell me you didn't reject her because you think teaching her how to read *Holes* a literal decade ago means you're like, morally forbidden to touch her knee, or whatever. You ain't her teacher anymore."

"It's not that," he says woodenly, stabbing the button for the lift. The doors slide open and we both step inside.

"Then what—"

He sighs. "When we were at the pub, she bumped into an old classmate. He said some pretty disgusting things about her."

My hackles rise. "Like what?"

"Ask her yourself. That's as much as you're getting out of me." The lift dings as we reach our floor.

"Okay," I say, as we step out into the hallway. "If some guy harassed her, why do *you* look like you want to chuck yourself off a bridge?"

Luke stays silent, and I sigh, finally giving up. We reach Layla's door, and I unlock it, pushing into the flat and heading straight for the bedroom.

"Where are you going?" Luke asks, stepping inside and locking the flat door behind him. "Her *bedroom*?"

“It’s seven in the bloody morning, so that’s probably where she’s gonna be, yeah.”

He looks horrified. “You can’t just go into her room!”

“Why not? She practically lives in mine. And Josh is in there.” I frown. “Why did you ask Josh and not me to pick her up, anyway?”

“She was... upset,” he says slowly. “I knew Josh would give her what she needed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“She didn’t want to be coddled, Zack. And you would’ve tried to sleep with her.”

I stop walking, staring at him. “You actually think that, don’t you?” I say slowly. “God, you’re a prick sometimes.”

He closes his eyes. “I didn’t mean—”

“I don’t hit on sad women,” I say, snatching the paper bag out of his hand. “I’m not that much of a damn manwhore. Wait out here if you want, I’m going in. I might even manage to keep my pants on.” I stomp over to Layla’s closed bedroom door and nudge it open with my foot, peeking inside.

Josh and Layla are both in bed. Josh is sitting propped up against the headboard, staring down at Layla sleeping on his chest like she’s the centre of his damn universe.

Poor bastard. He can deny it all he wants, but this obviously isn’t just a crush. He’s head over heels for Layla.

Damn. This isn’t gonna end well.

He glances up when I step inside. “Thanks for knocking,” he drawls.

I shrug. “I brought food. She’ll forgive me, I’m sure.”

Disturbed by the noise, Layla rolls over sleepily, cracking open one eye like a slumbering dragon. She studies me for a second, then closes her eyes again. “Josh?” She murmurs.

“Mm?” He says, stroking her arm.

“Zack is in my bedroom.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I lean against the wall, looking down at her. “Maybe this is just a wet dream.”

She shakes her head, burying it back in the pillow. “Can’t be. You’re wearing clothes.”

Great. Now I have a semi. “That can be rectified, lass. You just say the word.”

“Sorry.” She sniffs. “I don’t sleep with home invaders.”

“You can’t blame me,” I insist. “I got lonely. Did you two get it on last night and not invite me? That’s just plain rude.”

Josh rolls his eyes.

Layla stretches like a cat. “We just cuddled.”

I can’t help the grin that spreads over my face. “*You?* Cuddled?”

“He did most of the work.”

“Well,” I say. “I bet I’m a better cuddler than he is.”

She doesn’t respond.

“Did you hear what I said?” I ask helpfully. “I said *I bet I’m a better cuddler than he is.*”

She sighs, obviously still too sleepy to argue, and lifts the quilt, inviting me into the bed. “Come on, then.”

Finally. Dumping the food on her bedside table, I climb into the bed next to her. The pretty pink sheets are warm from her body. I wrap my arms around her, and she practically purrs, stretching to give me a little kiss.

I fight the urge to laugh at her. “You’re so sweet when you’re tired.”

“Need coffee to be a bitch,” she mumbles, burying her face in my chest. “You’re soft.”

Josh snorts. “Did you fix the t-shirts?”

I scowl. “I don’t know what’s wrong with them. We just can’t get the company to print the right colours. The graphics are fine, but the actual fabric shades are all wrong.”

Layla groans into my shirt. “God. You’ve been giving them HEX codes for the colour shades, haven’t you?”

“... yes?”

“Honey. No. You’re designing a shirt, not a website logo. You need to give them Pantone codes for the cotton and vector codes for the print.” She snuggles closer.

I stare at Josh. “We’re literally dating a girl who went to fashion school. How did we not think to ask her?”

“Because you’re dumb,” Layla announces, closing her eyes. “Also, your garment labels are weird. I’ll give you the number of the girl who designed mine. Where’s Luke?”

“Hovering nervously in your living room.” I point at the bag on the nightstand. “He spent, like, fifty quid on breakfast for you this morning, by the way. You might wanna eat it before it gets cold.”

Her eyes flutter open again. “Um. Why?”

“It’s an ‘apology gift’, apparently.”

She stiffens. “Apology?”

“Mm.” I gather her a little closer against my chest. “He’s walking around like he’s murdered someone. Don’t think I’ve ever seen him so guilty.”

“*Crap*,” she mutters, pulling out of my grasp and sitting up. Her hair falls in rumpled waves around her face. “It wasn’t anything he did.”

“He said something about you getting hassled at the pub last night?” I prompt. “He seems pretty cut up about it.”

Josh sits up, his gaze sharpening. “Is that what happened?” He demands. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Layla runs her hands over her face. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she mumbles.

Josh and I exchange a look. “Reckon we should switch up the syllabus?” I ask. “Skip right to next week’s lesson?”

“Only if she wants to,” Josh says. “Don’t push her.”

“What is it?” Layla asks cautiously.

I pat her thigh. “Telling your partner all your secrets.”

She looks at me flatly. “Yeah, right.”

“That’s seriously it!” I protest. “I can email you the lesson plan, if you like.”

She looks up at Josh, and he nods, tucking some hair behind her ear. “It’s actually about being emotionally vulnerable,” he says quietly. “But he’s right. After the first few dates, maybe a few sleepovers, the next step to intimacy is opening up. Letting someone into your private, personal life.” He kisses her shoulder gently. “You want a serious relationship, not a casual fling. The only way you can get to that next level is by being vulnerable.” He reaches out and takes her hand, threading their fingers together. “I don’t want to pressure you. But if you want to work on opening up, you can trust us. We won’t hurt you with anything you tell us.”

Layla bites her lip, torn.

I snuggle in on her other side. “Come *on*, ladybug,” I coax. “Tell your loving boyfriends what happened.”

Her shoulders sag. “Fine. I guess I should get this over with, anyway.” She raises her voice. “LUKE! CAN YOU GET IN HERE?”

There’s a pause, and then the bedroom door squeaks open. Luke’s pale face appears in the doorway. Layla points at the edge of the mattress.

“Sit,” she orders. “If I’m telling this story, I don’t want to have to do it three times.”

THIRTY-SIX

ZACK

Luke sits on the end of her bed without a word.

“Okay.” Layla takes a deep breath, looking down into her coffee cup as she thinks. “Back when I was in high school,” she starts, “I was pretty different to how I am now. I was shy. Quiet. There was this guy I liked. Donny Pritchard.”

Luke flinches.

“The guy at the bar?” I surmise, and she nods.

“He was two years older than me, but he got held back because he was, like, really thick. But he was handsome and over six foot, so all the girls fancied him anyway. One day when I was sixteen, he asked me out completely out of the blue. I was shocked; I didn’t realise he knew I existed. But of course I said yes.”

Josh and I exchange a look. I don’t like how this is going.

“About a week after we started dating,” she continues, “he brought me into the PE changing rooms at lunch time. We were snogging, and he asked me to take off my shirt. I told him I wasn’t ready.” She scowls. “He got mad. He told me that he never really liked me; he’d asked me out for a dare. I started crying and ran home. And by the time I got to school the next day, everyone was looking at me differently. Whispering about me behind their hands.” Her mouth twists. “*Apparently*, he’d told everyone I’d blown him in the changing room, and let him come on my face.”

I almost gag.

“*What?*” Luke demands. Josh stays silent, just looking at her.

She takes a calm sip of coffee. “That same day, I overheard twenty different rumours about me. I’d screwed three guys at once. I’d whacked off my maths teacher for a better grade. I had crabs, I had herpes, I was a diagnosed sex addict.” She laughs bitterly. “I was a *virgin*, for God’s sake. But still, all the girls hated me because they thought I’d steal their boyfriends away. The boys catcalled me in the hallways. I literally got propositioned about twenty times that day. *Please, babe. Five quid for a blowie. I know you did it for Donny, why not me? You think you’re too good for me?* I had my locker graffitied. My stuff destroyed. Rubbish thrown at me.”

“Jesus,” I mutter. “Jesus.”

She studies her nails, her face blank. “I kept waiting for it to blow over, but it never did. For the next three years, I was the resident school slag.” Her face darkens. “And all of it happened because one stupid *guy* couldn’t take no for an answer.” She frowns up at Luke. “But it wasn’t your fault.”

“Do you think this is why you struggle to date now?” Josh asks carefully. I glance across at him. He’s trying to hide it, but he looks murderous; every muscle in his body is tense, and his jaw is clenched tight.

Layla shrugs. “Probably. It makes sense.” She fiddles with her coffee. “Sometimes I think about what would have happened if I had agreed to sleep with him. The rumours were awful, but at least I knew they were made up. If I’d actually slept with Donny, and then all this stuff came out, it would’ve ruined me. I don’t think I’d ever be able to get over that amount of shame.” She twists her fingers together. “So, yeah. It’s hard to trust a stranger with my body now, I guess.”

My heart feels like it’s cracking in my chest. Without thinking, I reach forward and gather her up, pulling her into me. For a second, she stiffens, and I think she’s going to pull away; but then she softens, laying her head on my chest.

“Thank you,” she says, her voice muffled.

“For what?” Josh strokes the back of her hand.

“Helping me get over this. Even if, like, I didn’t actually tell you what I needed to get over.”

I brush a kiss to her temple, and she closes her eyes slightly, leaning into me. “It’s our pleasure. But how did you get out of it, lass? You don’t seem like much of a wilting violet anymore.”

She purses her lips. “It was in my final year. I was in the changing rooms, getting changed out of my PE kit, and this girl came up. Emma Swann. She was one of the worst. She grabbed my clothes and tossed them out the window, so I was just left standing there in my bra and skirt like an idiot. The PE teacher came out of her office and asked why I wasn’t changed yet, and when I told her, she started yelling at me. *‘You make this excuse every week. It’s getting old. Stop being an attention-seeker, get your clothes on, and get to class before I give you detention.’* I looked around, and everyone started staring and laughing at me, and it was like... a switch flipped in my brain. I remember thinking — I can either let this ruin me, or I can just get the Hell over it.” She shrugs. “The teacher started shouting at me to get to class, so I just flipped her off and walked out to pick up my kit in my bra.”

I grin. “Nice.” Josh gives me an annoyed look, but Layla nods.

“It was nice. It was incredible. It was like I’d been pushed past my breaking point, and I wasn’t scared anymore. I didn’t care that people were staring at me. I didn’t care that they were talking. It was the first time I hadn’t been scared in *years*, and the feeling was just... addictive.” She sets her coffee cup aside. “I was suspended until my exams, and I spent all of the extra time working on my plan. I got a job at a proper lingerie store. After my A-levels, I got into university, enrolled in three evening business classes, and spent five hours a night sewing. Five years later, by the time I was twenty-three, I had my first version of the store. By twenty-four, I was making a living wage off my clothes. By twenty-six, I started paying influencers to promote my stuff. I started getting featured in online magazines and listicles. My social media hit five figures. And now, here I am.” She spreads out her hands. “It’s not easy. I still have to work overtime and hustle like Hell to keep my revenue up. But I worked hard, and I’m nothing like that kid getting bullied in high school, anymore. I made a plan, I stuck to it, and I was successful. More successful than most of those other kids will ever be.” Her eyes burn. “So I don’t want you to feel sorry for me. It’s not some big, tragic story. I came out of it better

than any of them.”

“*Baby.*” I stroke through her hair. “Honey. You’re so strong.”

She squirms. “Stop petting me. It’s patronising.”

“Nope.” I cuddle into her closer, and she gives up, leaning into me. Josh squidges closer on her other side, taking her hand.

Luke finally speaks up. “I can’t believe none of the teachers did anything,” he says, his voice hoarse.

She glares at him. “Well. You should believe it. It’s true. I have plenty of proof.” She tries to wriggle out of my grip. I don’t move, and she bangs on my arm. “Free me.”

I sigh, letting her go, and she bends under the bed, pulling out a silver filing box. She dumps the box on the quilt and yanks off the lid, revealing stacks of printed emails. “I CC’d myself into all of the emails I sent the teachers, and I still have all of their replies,” she explains, flipping through them to a pile of handwritten notes. “I even got the teachers to sign forms whenever I made a complaint. It’s dumb, I guess, but I just... wanted to prove to myself that I was doing the right thing. Even if no one else was.”

“It’s not dumb,” Josh says, picking up one of the forms. “It’s smart. These write-ups might have actually held up in court, since you got the teachers to physically sign and date them. It’s impressive. What do you think, Luke?”

There’s a beat of silence. We all turn to look at Luke. He’s looking at the pieces of paper spread out on the quilt, his face grey.

“Luke?” I prompt. “You alright, mate?”

He swallows and stands, leaving the room.

THIRTY-SEVEN

LAYLA

The door clicks shut behind him, and I close my eyes. This was exactly what I was afraid of. “He blames himself.”

“Why?” Zack says, picking up a croissant and taking a huge bite. “He wasn’t there.”

“Because he still thinks I’m just some kid he should’ve taken care of,” I spit. If I’m honest, the overprotective teacher act is getting really old.

“He’s right,” Josh says flatly, stroking my shoulder. “He should’ve.”

I push him off and slide out of bed, grabbing a hair tie off my dresser. “Do you honestly think he wouldn’t have helped me if he’d known what was going on? It’s not his fault he didn’t know.” I yank my hair up into a ponytail.

“He was there,” Josh insists. “He should’ve been paying closer attention. He sat in a room with you for hours every week, he should’ve noticed something was up.”

I shake my head, gritting my teeth. “It was ten years ago. He needs to get over it.” Anger glows inside me. “Why the Hell would he just walk out? It’s not *my* fault Donny was a prick. I don’t deserve to be avoided. I didn’t do anything wrong.” Shoving my feet into my slippers, I stomp to the bedroom door. “Screw this. We’re sorting this out right now.”

Zack goes to stand, but Josh grabs a handful of his shirt and yanks him back down onto the bed as I slam out of the room.

When I step into the lounge, Luke is standing by my window, looking down into the city. Every line of his body is tense, and my anger dies down a bit. This must be eating him up inside.

He swallows when he hears me come in, turning his head but not looking at me. “Layla—”

“It’s not your fault,” I say firmly.

“It is my fault, sweetheart.” His voice is resigned. “It was.”

“You couldn’t have known—”

“I was your teacher,” he interrupts me. “It was my job to protect my students. I had responsibility over you. And I failed you.”

“You had your own stuff going on,” I point out. “You were getting divorced, for God’s sake, of course you were preoccupied.”

He laughs, but the sound is hollow. “Are you joking? In what world is an adult divorcing his wife on par with a child getting bullied and harassed to within an inch of her life? I...” A shudder passes through his broad shoulders. “You were sitting in my class for hours every week, and I never even suspected.”

“Right,” I say slowly. “Because you were a teacher, not a mind reader. You can’t know something you’re not told.”

He’s quiet for a moment, dipping his head. I think he hasn’t heard me, and open my mouth to repeat myself — then freeze when I see his white-knuckled grip on my windowsill. I stare. Luke is always so controlled. So in-charge of his own emotions. I’ve never seen him white-knuckle angry.

“Except I was told,” he says eventually. “Wasn’t I?”

I blink. “What?”

He turns on me, and his expression is so intense I fight the urge to take a step back. His mouth is hard. His eyes are burning with self-hatred. “You said you

went to all of your teachers. All of them. Did you ever come to me?"

I don't say anything, but I've never been a very good liar. He can see the answer on my face.

He closes his eyes. "You did." He rubs his forehead. "Tell me what happened."

"It's not a big deal—"

"Tell me."

I sigh. "I asked to speak to you after class once," I admit. "You agreed and set up a meeting at lunchtime in the staff room. Then you never showed. I waited all hour, but..." I trail off. I still remember that lunchtime. Sitting on a plastic chair in the hallway, getting stared at by passing teachers who obviously thought I was in trouble. Watching the clock slowly tick down the minutes before PE, dread building in my stomach.

"Jesus." He turns away from me, running his hands through his thick hair.

I try to soften the blow. "It was partly my fault. I knew that you were busy with A-level students. I should've tried again."

"Why would you?" He asks, his voice bitter. "When I obviously didn't care?"

"You do care. I know you do. And you know why?" He doesn't respond. I take a step forward. "Because you believe me now."

He frowns. "What? Yes. Of course I believe you. Why wouldn't I?"

I lick my lips, trying to keep my breathing steady. "I bet if I told any of my old teachers this now," I say slowly, "they would brush it off. Or they'd say I was lying, and that I never came to them for help."

His Adam's apple jerks as he swallows. "Of course, you did. I... back then, I was barely making it into work. I can absolutely believe that a quiet, well-behaved GCSE student asking for a lunch meeting would've slipped my mind. Hell, I was probably locked in my office, trying to avoid Amy. Or arguing with her." He takes a deep breath, then looks me dead in the eyes. "I am so sorry."

“I forgive you,” I say promptly. “Now will you please move on?”

“It’s not like I can just forget this happened.”

“Why not?” I ask flatly. “It’s what I want.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t understand, sweetheart.”

Rage suddenly sloshes through my veins like rocket fuel. “I don’t understand,” I repeat slowly. “Sorry. Am I on drugs, or was *I* the one who was getting bullied? Me, not you. No one understands this better than me. But of course, you make this all about you, and your stupid teacher duty. In your head, I’m just a silly little sixteen-year-old student, who you’ll always know more than.”

He frowns. “Listen—”

“No,” I snap. “*You* listen to me. I am your coworker. Not your student. Not your pupil. There is no power structure between us anymore. We’re both adults. I am your equal now. You should be giving me just as much respect as you give Josh, and Zack, or any other person you’d meet on the street. But you don’t, and it makes me sick.”

His eyes widen. “This has nothing to do with respect, Layla.”

I wave him silent. “Do you not think it hurts me to constantly be reminded of high school? Back then, I was a victim. And now, I’m not. I’m not.” I repeat, my eyes stinging. “When you treat me like a helpless sixteen-year-old, it makes me feel like utter crap. So please, just... stop.” My voice breaks on the last word. “Stop.”

Luke looks at me, shocked, then takes a step towards me. I don’t even realise I’m crying until he touches my cheek gently, catching a teardrop with his thumb.

Electricity shoots through me. His skin on mine is intoxicating.

“I had no idea this was hurting you,” he says, his voice very deep. His thumb sweeps over my skin again, wiping off another tear, and I shiver. “I’m sorry. I never meant to upset you.”

I nod. “So you agree? You’ll drop all this bullshit, and just treat me like another one of your co-hosts?”

A look I can’t read flits across his face. He drops his hand. My cheek tingles with the memory of his touch. “I can’t,” he says stiffly. “I can’t treat you like Zack and Josh. Sorry.”

I’m so frustrated I could scream. “Why not?” I demand. “What can I do to prove to you that I’m your equal? I’m an adult. I live by myself. I make my own money. I have my own business, I’m arguably just as successful as you, but you’re always going to see me as below you, aren’t you?”

“Not below me,” he says urgently. “Never below me, Layla. I just—” He trails off and grimaces, swallowing hard. “If I let myself…” he tries again, then closes his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Christ.”

“If you let yourself what?” I prompt.

His lips part. I can see the struggle in his eyes. We’re both breathing hard. The moment seems to balance in the air between us, like we’re standing on the edge of a cliff, about to fall into the unknown.

Then Luke makes a strangled noise and reaches for me. My eyes fly open as he wraps a hand around my throat and tugs my mouth to his.

THIRTY-EIGHT

LUKE

When I finally crush my lips against Layla's, my mind wipes itself blank. All of my thoughts dissolve. All that's left is feeling. I breathe in her sweet scent. Feel her warm, soft body yield against mine. Blood thumps through me as I crowd her backwards, pushing her against her living room wall, kissing her hard.

I always thought kissing Layla would be a little like fighting; she's so sharp, I thought we'd be wrestling for dominance. But instead, she softens, practically sinking into me. I twist my head, starting to kiss my way down her jaw. She makes a small gasping noise, trying to pull back, and without thinking, I wrap my hand around her ponytail, yanking her back into place.

She freezes, breathing hard, and my brain finally flicks back on. For a second, neither of us move. I close my eyes as realisation floods through me.

What the Hell am I doing?

I swore I wouldn't give in to my attraction to Layla. I've managed to stick to that promise for years. And now she's come out here and told me that I essentially abandoned her during high school, and my response is to *kiss* her? And I'm not just kissing her — I'm pulling her hair, for crying out loud. No wonder she looks so shocked. She's never seen this part of me before. Few people have.

I don't mean to get so controlling in bed. I try to be gentle and respectful, but whenever I'm turned on, I just turn into this commanding, authoritative prick. Zack insists that I'm a latent Dom. Amy preferred to say I became a caveman

as soon as I got hard.

“Layla.” I drop my hand, taking a step back. “God. I’m so sorry. Sorry.”

Layla just looks at me for a few seconds, panting, her green eyes wide and dark. Then she pushes into me, crushing her chest against mine. “*More,*” she orders. Before I can protest, she grabs the hem of her shirt and tugs it over her head. I stare, dazed, at her chest.

She’s perfect. Absolutely perfect. Soft pale skin, gently curved waist, teardrop-shaped breasts.

My last thread of self-restraint snaps. Without a beat, I bend and catch one of her tits in my mouth. She cries out, running her hands through my hair as I lick her hard, roughing my tongue over the sensitive skin. God. How many nights have I laid awake, hearing her making these noises through the walls and wondering what Josh and Zack are doing to her?

I want to hear all her noises. I want to drag them out of her. I wrap a hand around her throat, keeping her pinned in place to the wall, and slide my free hand down over her trembling stomach, trailing it under the waistband of her pyjama shorts. Layla gasps, her body jolting in shock.

“Please,” she says again, as I tease my fingers under the delicate lace of her briefs.

Dimly, at the back of my mind, I know I should be a gentleman. I should carry her into the bedroom, and lay her down, and make this special for her.

But I can’t make myself stop.

I slip a hand between her warm, smooth thighs. They close around me, trapping my wrist in place as I cup my fingers over her damp pants, rubbing her through the lace. She squirms over my hand, choking for air, and I speed up my movements, drawing little circles right where she needs them. I don’t tease her. I don’t drag it out. I can’t. Need is thrumming through me. I need to see her come. I need to feel her fall apart over my hand. I’m moving solely on instinct.

I bend and catch her breast in my mouth again, right as her release hits her. She gasps, flinging her hands out, clawing at the wallpaper with her

fingernails as she soaks my palm. I don't relent, massaging her even harder as she shudders and gasps, climbing the wall. "*Luke*," she chokes out, accidentally kicking me. "Oh, god, *Jesus*—"

"Shh." I catch her mouth with mine, kissing her even harder. I can feel her fluttering against my fingers, and it's driving me crazy. She fists her hands at my shoulders, gasping.

When the spasms eventually fade, she immediately lunges forward, grabbing for my belt buckle and yanking it open. I groan as she tugs down my fly and shoves her hand down the front of my pants. Her small hand cups over my painful hard-on, and she freezes in place, her eyes widening. I fight the urge to laugh, rubbing my leaking cock into her palm.

"You don't wear underwear?" She squeaks.

"I thought you listened to the podcast," I murmur, wrapping my hand in her ponytail again, tugging to bare her neck. "You didn't hear my speech on the health benefits of going commando? It was only a couple of episodes ago." I bend to kiss under her ear.

Her cheeks are bright red. "I thought you were talking in theory."

"Oh." I nip at her cheek. "No. I wasn't."

She gives me an incredulous look, her fingers tightening slightly around my length.

I clear my throat. "Sweetheart," I say softly. "If you just keep your hand down there, this isn't going to last very long."

She blinks back to reality. "Oh," she murmurs, pulling her hand free. "Take them off."

I raise an eyebrow. "Are you telling me what to do?"

She swallows. "Please."

Chuckling, I obediently shuck off my jeans, then grab a fistful of my shirt and tug it up over my shoulders. As soon as I'm undressed, she turns me around, changing our positions and pressing me up against the wall. Her fingers are wrapped around my hot, swollen shaft before I even know what's

happening. I shudder as she starts to stroke me, her touch light.

God. I don't remember the last time a woman touched me. I barely even remember the last time I touched myself, for God's sake. Getting myself off hasn't been a priority of mine in a very, very long time.

But it looks like that's finally changing. Layla pumps me a couple of times, her eyes intent on my face, then lets me go and drops to her knees.

My eyes widen. My hands fly to her hair as she leans forward, licking a long, hot stripe up my shaft. "Sweetheart," I start. "Are you sure—"

She shuts me up by taking me into her mouth. I shout, my head thudding back against the wall as her warm lips stretch around my tip.

Suddenly, Layla's bedroom door flies open. Zack stalks out, a hand over his eyes. Layla makes a noise of protest that vibrates straight through my balls.

"I ain't looking," he promises. "Just let me know if you're shagging him or murderin' him, L. I don't really wanna find a new co-host at this short notice, but I get it, he's really annoying."

Layla just sucks at my head in answer. I can't choke back my groan, twisting my fingers in her hair and tugging her further onto my dick.

Zack peeps out from behind his fingers. "Oh, good. They're just shagging, J!"

Josh appears in Layla's bedroom door and leans in the doorway, watching silently as Layla tongues my slit, completely ignoring the other two men.

Zack clears his throat, pointing between us. "So, like, I'm well glad that this is happening, but like... is it a couple thing? Or can we join? 'Cause if not, I've got to go back to our flat. Like, right now." He cups a hand over his crotch, adjusting himself through his jeans.

Layla finally pulls away from me, letting my dick go with a wet popping noise. I look down at her, my heart thumping. She looks *ruined*. Her lips are swollen and pink, her colour is high, her hair is ruffled.

I cup her chin, pulling her face to look up at me. "What do you think, sweetheart?" I ask. "What do you want?"

She licks her lips, glancing between the three of us. “Are you all clean?” She asks. “If I’m having a four-way, I want to go all in.”

All of the blood rushes out of my brain.

THIRTY-NINE

LAYLA

Luke stares at me like he's seen a ghost. I just watch him back, my heart thumping painfully in my chest. Heat shimmers over my skin. I feel like I'm about to burst with desire.

I can't believe this is finally happening. How many times have I dreamt of this moment in the last two weeks? Of Luke standing in front of me, his naked chest glistening with sweat, finally ready to share me? I'm not convinced that I'm not dreaming.

And now I'm going to sleep with three men. *Three men*. The thought sets me on fire. I'm so turned on I'm almost desperate.

"Yes," Luke says, his voice low. "I'm clean." He blinks, like he's suddenly remembering himself. "I can, ah, find the papers, if you like..." He starts to pull away, but I dig my fingers into his arms.

"It's okay. I believe you."

He looks surprised. "Yes?"

I nod. "You're not a stranger. You're one of my best friends. You'd never do anything that could hurt me. Yes, I trust you."

He groans and pulls me back in for another plunging kiss. I sag as his tongue swirls in my mouth. When we finally pull apart, my head is spinning. All of the colours in the room seem too bright. I may need to sit down. Slowly, he loops his fingers around my wrist, brushing his fingertip lightly along the sensitive skin of my pulse.

“Me and Josh are good,” Zack says to my left, bringing me back to earth. “We both got checked last week.”

I can’t help but smile. “Aw. You guys go together?”

“Don’t like needles,” Zack says with a grimace. “Medical shit... weirds me out. Spent enough time in hospitals to last me ‘til I die.”

I lean against Luke. “Does Josh hold your hand? Give you juice boxes?”

Josh comes to join us, stepping up to my right side. “No,” he says shortly, pressing a kiss to my temple. “But he wouldn’t go if I didn’t drive him.”

“Works out best for him in the end,” Zack nods. “If I don’t get tested, I can’t get it on. And when I can’t get laid...”

“He’s a nightmare to live with,” Josh mutters.

I smile. Josh likes to pretend he’s all business — a robot who only cares about facts and figures and sales graphs. But deep down, he cares so much about his friends. “Well, then.” I wave a hand. “I’m clean. And on the pill. So.”

“*Hm.*” Josh presses closer, kissing my jaw. “Why do you ask?”

“Why do you think?”

“You want us to come inside you?” He breathes in my ear.

“No,” I say, “I’m just concerned for your health.”

I feel him smile into my neck. He strokes his hand down my thigh. “Why do you want to know if we’re clean?” He repeats.

Luke looks confused. “Am I missing something? I’m assuming she wants us to take her raw.”

I choke on my own spit. Hearing dirty talk coming out of my old professor’s mouth just feels wrong.

It might be a tiny bit hot.

“We’re trying to get her more comfortable talking about what she wants,” Josh explains over my head.

“Ah.” Luke surveys me. “I never knew she had an issue with that.”

“She doesn’t, in literally any other area of her life,” Zack chimes in, pulling off his shirt. “We’re on a personal mission to fulfill as many of her fantasies as possible. She gave us a list, obviously. It’s going to be a hell of a lot easier now you’ve got your head out of your backside, let me tell you. Most of them involved a third guy. I was gonna start swiping through Tinder.”

“Interesting,” Luke says slowly. He turns to me. “Tell me what you want,” he orders.

I swallow. “No rubbers,” I say, heat flushing through me. “I want all three of you. Coming on me, or in me... I don’t know. I just...” I squirm under Luke’s steely gaze. “I want all of you. I want to be full up and covered in you. Wet.”

Luke’s eyes flash. He wraps his hand around my throat, pushing me back against the wall. I gasp as he kisses me again. “You’re going to show me this list,” he says against my mouth. “And we’ll go through it together.”

“God,” I pant. “I like when you do that.”

“What?” He starts pressing a chain of kisses down the side of my throat. I hear the sound of rumpling clothes as Josh undresses, but I ignore it, meeting Luke kiss for kiss.

“Push me around. Tell me what to do.”

“Good,” he says roughly, biting the juncture between my neck and shoulder. I melt against him.

“Hey,” Zack says indignantly. “You don’t let *me* tell you what to do! I told you to get on your hands and knees the other day, and you told me to make violent love to myself!”

My eyes fall half-shut. “I-it’s not hot when you do it.”

He’s outraged. “*Excuse* me? Everything is hot when I do it!”

“Quit talking,” Luke orders. “Make yourself useful and eat her out.”

I shiver.

Zack considers for a moment. “Nope.” He decides. “I want to try something new.” Sidling in close to me, he slips a finger down over the seat of my panties, tracing it along the line of my asscrack. I freeze against Luke, my heart thudding.

“Yes?” Zack purrs in my ear.

I close my eyes and nod.

He gives me an approving little pat. “Atta girl. We’re gonna have to relocate for this.”

I don’t need any more convincing than that. Before anyone can say another word, I’m shucking off my pants and running back to my bedroom. I hear the men laughing behind me as they follow.

I can’t help it. I’m desperate. This is essentially my biggest fantasy come to life. I need all three of them like I need my next breath. I stumble into my bedroom and drop onto the bed, grabbing Luke by the hand and dragging him down with me for another kiss. Dimly, I hear Zack rummaging in my bedside drawer.

“You *have* been doing your homework,” he says happily, pulling out the bottle of lube. “Christ, love, you’re getting through this stuff.”

“Makes everything feel so much better,” I moan, reaching out to cup Luke’s flushed balls.

He catches my wrist and pulls my hand away. “No.” He says quietly. “I want to watch you. I’ll be here when you need me.” He stands as Zack settles onto the mattress behind me. True to form, he’s gotten naked at some point in the last few seconds. I run my eyes hungrily over his thick, toned thighs and brick-like abs. He might not play rugby anymore, but he definitely works out enough to keep up his body.

He grins at me. “Like what ya see, pet?” He asks, his Northern accent thickening. “God, I’ve been dreaming of you like this.” He smooths a hand

over my bum cheek, stroking it possessively, then yanks me into his lap, my back against his hard chest. “Alright, lass. I’m gonna go slow with you, since you ain’t done this in a while. Tell me if it gets uncomfy. Josh, get her nice and warm.”

Josh comes to sit on the bed in front of me, his dark eyes searching my face. He threads a hand through my hair.

“You’re okay?” He asks quietly. I know he’s thinking about last night.

“Better now. Promise.”

He nods and tries to catch my mouth in a kiss, but I dodge it and start making out with his neck. His whole body jerks with shock, his mouth falling open on a pant. His hand flies up to cup the back of my neck, holding me in place as I nibble on his throat.

“Oh, you found Josh’s Mute button,” Zack says casually, uncapping the bottle. “That’s nice.”

“Where’s yours?” I ask sweetly, sucking on the pulse beating under Josh’s skin. He groans, shuddering. “Could come in handy.”

“Right under my balls. Feel free to try and find it any time.” Without warning, he slips a hand under my butt and pushes his slick fingertip against my back hole, rubbing a slow circle. I tense at the pressure, and both men slide forward, squeezing me in between two hot, muscled chests.

“This is on the list,” Zack tells Luke conversationally, as Josh tugs me into a hot kiss. My lashes flutter as his strong arms wrap around me, pulling me closer. Heat is thudding through my skin as he kisses his way down from my mouth, to my throat, then buries his face in my warm, trembling breasts. I arch back into Zack, sighing. The sensation is incredible. Silky and warm and wet...

I start to rock slowly on Zack’s lap, grinding my softly swelling sex against his bare leg as Josh licks lazily at my breasts, tickling my wet nipple with the tip of his tongue.

“She likes to be surrounded,” Zack informs Luke, who’s watching darkly. “It breaks her brain. And it means when I do this...”

He adds more pressure, sliding the very tip of his finger inside me. I quiver. It's not painful, not exactly, but close enough. My back hole burns.

"There's nowhere for her to go," Zack finishes, sounding very pleased with himself.

"Get her wetter," Luke orders over our heads. "She needs more."

"Aight, boss." There's a wet squirting noise, and more cold liquid dribbles between my hot cheeks. Zack starts to massage the wetness into my tight asshole. I press my face into Josh's neck. "This is what you like, huh, gorgeous?" Zack asks. "She's all packed in tight. Tight and full, huh, babe?" He gives my bum a slap, and I hiss, pressing closer into Josh.

"I see," Luke says, his voice level. "That's very interesting." He tilts his head, surveying us. "You know, I think you could push her a bit harder, Zack."

FORTY

LAYLA

I choke.

Zack chuckles. “Aight, boss.”

I feel more cool wetness against my behind, and then increasing pressure as Zack pushes his fingertip into me. I moan, my thighs quivering. It’s so goddamn *tight*.

Still plastered against my front, Josh reaches forward, sliding his fingers between my crossed legs. I don’t realise how wet I am until he starts swirling through my slick folds, rubbing his thumb leisurely over my twitching bundle of nerves.

Suddenly, I can’t fill my lungs. I gasp, shuddering all over. It barely takes a few touches before I start to fall apart. I cry out as Zack takes the opportunity to push his finger in to the knuckle, penetrating the tight ring of muscle.

With his finger in my backside, the climax feels different. Deeper, like it’s quaking up from some place deep inside me. It shakes me to the core, wracking through my whole body. I wind up claspng onto Josh’s neck, gasping as he strokes my back.

“Okay?” He asks in my ear as I wind down, clawing at his skin.

In answer, I tug at him, trying to pull him down onto the mattress. “Lie down,” I order. “I want to ride you.”

He groans, doing as I say, lying down on his back on the bed. Zack pulls out of me, and I hear him fumbling with the bottle as I climb over Josh's thighs, settling my weight over his hips. He's hard as a rock; I can feel the heat of his glistening erection thumping against my stomach. Josh watches me silently, his eyes dark and his cheeks flushed as I lean down, running my hands over his ripped abs. I trail them teasingly down his happy trail, and then finally fist the base of his swollen shaft. His whole body flinches as I wrap my fingers around his length, giving him two firm pumps.

"Layla," he says darkly, his hands flying to my waist. "Don't."

I kneel over him, not breaking eye contact as I guide him to my own wet entrance. He grips my hips, groaning deeply as I sink onto him, sheathing him down to the root.

It feels incredible. He fills me up completely, hot and solid, stretching unbelievably deep inside me. I roll my hips once, twice, finding the right angle, then look over my shoulder at Zack, lifting my bum in invitation.

"Oh, you can tell she's watched a ton of these videos," Zack says. "You know all the positions, don't you, honey?"

I flush. "I need you," I say. I do. My ass is clenching over nothingness. I feel empty. "Now." My eyes drop to his member. He looks ridiculously big, fat and glistening, but I don't care. He could cleave me in half and I'd like it.

He huffs a laugh. "Lass, you've seen my package, haven't you? If you think it's the width of one finger, I'm gonna be very upset. Josh, keep her busy."

I whine, rocking over Josh, and Josh obligingly thrusts upwards, punching into me. My protests all dissolve as he angles his hips, his stiff rod suddenly shoving *deep* inside me. "Oh."

Josh gives me a rare smile.

"Good girl," Zack purrs. "Keep riding him. You like that, don't you honey?" I feel his finger slide back into my arse. He rolls it around, stretching me out inside, stimulating nerves deep inside me. I glance back to see that he's jacking himself off as he fingers me, his eyes fixed on my behind.

Moaning, I grind my hips over Josh's, riding him faster, taking him even deeper. When Zack finally adds a second finger, all my thoughts disappear. What starts off as an easy glide soon gets more and more intense. My back hole aches and stretches as he pushes gently inside. Above all, I feel *full*. It's a dull feeling of pressure inside my belly, but as Zack pushes forwards, sliding his fingers further into me, the feeling gets more and more intense. I can feel my wet, tight internal walls slowly stretching to accommodate him. I squirm. I'm full. Stuffed full between the two men as they thrust inside me again and again and again. The feeling is unbelievable. I can barely move. I'm flushed and overheated and breathless, squirming for more friction.

Josh strokes my face. "Good?" He asks.

I nod, shivering as I look down at him. It's more than good. This is every wet dream I've ever had come to life. Every fantasy.

Well. Almost.

I glance around and spot Luke. He's standing in the corner of the room, a hand fisted around the base of his dick as he watches.

"Get here," I say, my body jolting as Zack shoves his fingers deeper into me. "God. Please. Please, please."

He shakes his head. "Not yet." His voice is very low. "Keep going."

I lean over, straining to reach him. I must accidentally bare down, because Josh suddenly shouts at the squeeze. "Jesus. *Layla*. Kiss me."

"Come *here*," I order Luke, my eyes blurring.

He shakes his head, nodding at Josh. "You heard him. Kiss him."

Obediently, I fold over to kiss Josh. He melts under me, sliding his tongue between my lips. We make out hard, our tongues sliding together in time with his and Zack's movements. I can feel his body tightening as he bites my neck. The feeling of our slick, naked bodies rubbing together is one of the hottest, most primal experiences I've ever had. It's raw and animal. And I love it.

"I need to come." I grit out.

“One sec.” Josh adjusts the angle, slams up into me again. I close my eyes. He’s screwing into me so hard that there’s no way I can hold this back. No way in Hell.

“Josh—”

He’s sweaty and gold in the bedside light. “Hang on, love. Zack—”

Zack grunts behind me, increasing his pace, drilling his fingers into me. I’m pretty sure I’m about to pass out. My head is spinning. My arms and legs are trembling. I rub up against Josh hard, frantic for release.

“Josh... Zack—please,” I pant, “Please. Come on.” I need to come. I feel swollen and heavy and throbbing. I start nipping a mark onto Josh’s neck, and he groans, his hips spasming under me. I’m so wet that the sudden thrust makes me squelch. My entrance sucks at him, clutching down. I’m almost there.

A hand touches my face. I look up.

FORTY-ONE

LAYLA

Luke is standing in front of me, one fist closed around his dick. He looks nothing like my old teacher. All the mildness and gentleness has gone. Now all that's left is authority. His eyes are dark as he studies me.

“Are you close?” He demands.

I nod, moaning as I feel Josh change his angle slightly, hitting me even deeper inside. Luke nods and pumps himself once.

My eyes flick between his legs. He's so hard it looks almost painful. His dick is swollen and leaking, visibly twitching in time with his heartbeat. I lean forward until his balls are hanging heavy and hot by my cheeks, and start lapping at them, mouthing at the sensitive skin underneath. Luke cries out, tugging painfully at my hair.

“God.” He twists his hips so his hard-on bumps against my face. “Suck it, Layla.”

My mouth waters as he presses his smooth, hot head roughly against my lips. Carefully, my body still shivering and wrenching with each of Josh and Zack's heavy thrusts, I open my mouth to take him.

God, he's big. Big and soft and hard, all at the same time. I take him as deeply as I can, and he groans as he sinks into me, tightening his fingers in my hair as I swallow his warm, manly taste, breathing him in.

Zack suddenly slaps my bum, his handprint stinging against my soft cheek, and my whole body jerks. I choke a little, whimpering as Luke's length

shoves further down my throat. Tears blur my eyes.

“It’s okay.” Luke’s hand trails down my neck, massaging me to softness. “Relax. You can take it.”

I nod, shuddering, and let my throat relax, breathing through my nose. Luke groans as I take him even deeper, swallowing him almost down to the root. I shudder as I feel him slide slickly down my throat.

It’s not a comfortable position at all; half-kneeling over Josh, getting fingered doggy style by Zack, my neck twisted to take Luke as deep as possible. But for some reason, I like that even more. I like that the men are just using me. Pounding into me like I’m just a set of holes.

It suddenly strikes me how lucky I am. This is one of my hottest fantasies come to life, and I could only ever live it out with these three men. There’s no other guy on the planet that I’d trust to do this with me. But I know these boys love and respect me. I know they’d rather die than hurt me.

Zack twists his hand, curling his fingers. I start to moan as I bob over Luke’s thickening erection, going down on him sloppily. I’m so close to coming. I’m a mess. My face is wet with sweat and spit. My insides are burning.

And still, I want more. I rut desperately back between Zack and Josh, trying to get more pressure. They yank me back into place as I start to thrash, my body helplessly jerking and shaking as it tries to process the onslaught of sensation.

“She’s dripping on me,” Josh hisses, as I squeeze desperately around him, riding him even harder. “Christ, L, I’m going to...”

He’s going to come. I know he is; his skin is starting to glow with sweat, and his breath is coming faster. Maybe I’m just imagining it, but I swear I can *feel* him hardening inside me. I grind down harder, screwing down into him, rubbing myself over him until his mouth falls open.

And then he’s coming inside me. His balls throb as he starts to unload, his seed spilling deep into my belly, filling me up inside. I fist my hands into his shoulders, still licking sloppily at Luke’s rock-hard member as I ride Josh through every last twitch and pulse.

Behind me, I feel Zack suddenly pull his fingers out. I shout in indignation—and then jolt as I feel something fat and hard pressing against my back hole. My eyes widen as Zack thrusts the slick head of his cock inside my arse right as he starts to come. Heat fountains through me, spilling deep inside me as Zack shoots into me. He's not deep enough to fill me, and I can feel the wet heat of his come dribbling down my cheeks, slipping in sticky rivulets down my thighs. I gasp, heat shocking through me. I feel like I'm overflowing.

At the same time, Luke yanks his dick out of my mouth. I choke, my airway suddenly filling, as he steps forward, pumping himself sloppily in his hand. My mouth falls open as he shouts and finally loses control, spilling all over my back. Come showers over my skin, warm and wet. I start to shake as it rolls down my sides, dripping off my chest and waist onto the sheets. Josh jerks his hips, pushing even deeper into me, and I'm gone.

My release wipes me away. Everything goes blank and empty as pleasure rolls over me. I choke and gasp, scrabbling at the sheets, my eyes squeezed tightly shut as I ride the wave. I vaguely feel hands holding me up, supporting me, squeezing and stroking me. Fingers stroke between my legs, dragging my orgasm out of me in long, convulsive waves.

When I come back to Earth, I'm panting and dripping, still on all fours on the bed. Josh carefully slides out from under me, pressing kisses up my neck. Luke steps forwards and pushes me gently onto the sheets. "Good girl," he practically purrs into my ear, wrapping me in his arms. Gasping, I look across at him. He looks utterly satisfied, his silvery hair mussed and his eyes fuzzy with pleasure. It's so hot it makes me throb all over again. "You're perfect. So perfect."

I snuggle into him wordlessly.

There's a low groan over my head, then Zack slumps down at our side, breathing hard.

"Shit," he crows. "This is gonna change the game, isn't it?"

TRANSCRIPT

THREE SINGLE GUYS EPISODE 447: THREE BECOME FOUR

JOSH: Hello everyone, and welcome back to episode 447 of *Three Single Guys*. First of all, I'd like to congratulate Beth, Cyrus, Sebastian and Jack on their engagement. They've emailed into the show several times over the years, and we just received news that they're finally tying the knot, so congratulations!

ZACK: And thanks for sending another wedding invite for Josh to add to the weird collage he has on his bedroom wall.

JOSH: Shh. Now, this week, we polled our listeners to see what you'd like to see in next month's episodes. Aside from the numerous people who suggested we all make a sex tape...

LAYLA: You wish, creeps.

JOSH: ...The number one request was that Luke join in the segment.

LAYLA: Hey, did I mention that I used my womanly wiles and convinced Luke to join the segment?

LUKE: It was your womanly wiles, was it?

LAYLA: Yep. I batted my eyelashes at you, and you fell at my feet.

Now I have three fake boyfriends. I guess this means my lessons are working, right?

LUKE: I stand by my statement that you never needed lessons. But, yes, from now on, I will be joining in this asinine experiment.

JOSH: We love you, too. Let's see... the second biggest request is that Zack do an episode on grieving a partner. Layla, I believe this was your idea, wasn't it?

LAYLA: Only if you want to. You guys get so many questions about grief, I think you could lead a whole episode on it.

ZACK: *(Doesn't respond)*

JOSH: ... okay. I guess that's a no. We also had several people saying that Layla should join our listener advice segment. So, while you're here, love, would you like to read out a listener email? I've got one for you right here.

LAYLA: Sure. *(Paper rustles)*. Okay. 'My boyfriend's always asking me to ride his face — but I'm a bigger girl, and I'm worried I might hurt him. From Curvy in Kentucky.' Okay, babe. I don't know how strong the human head is, and I don't think it matters. There's no weight capacity. Just sit on his face, and if he dies, he dies.

JOSH: *(Coughs violently)*

ZACK: Damn straight. Bury him alive. Lucky guy.

LUKE: The human head can withstand up to about five hundred pounds of pressure. But that's not really a weight limit, since in this position, you'd be kneeling, with your weight balanced on your knees. If you struggle to hold your balance, try holding onto your headboard.

LAYLA: Nope. Don't listen to him. You don't have to kneel. Sit on his mouth like a throne. Enjoy your ride, doll. Josh, do you need some water?

JOSH: I'm fine. I just didn't realise you were so experienced at sitting on guys' faces.

LAYLA: I'm not at all, actually. Hopefully, I will be one day. Very, very soon.

(A brief pause. A chair scrapes back)

LUKE: Alright, I think we're done for the day. You're coming with me.

JOSH: Thanks for emailing, Curvy in Kentucky. You've given us a lot to think about.

TWITTER

Saff @Saffron.Martins

*THIS IS NOT A DRILL!! LUKE IS JOINING THE SEGMENT!! ♥ ♥
#TeamLuke all the way*

Eli @eli_the_ski_god *

*they totally f*cked after that last episode lmao. Get it guys*

Daisy @daisywhittakerart

Can't wait for the next episode of @ThreeSingleGuys to drop, why am I so invested in the dating lives of four strangers???

Karen @KarenAMullaly

*Wait, is she seriously sleeping with three guys?? That's so disgusting.
unsubscribing*

Hamish @HamishKostolsBoss

*.@SweetheartSoulmatesPodcast Looks like Three Single Guys
knocked you off the charts :(*

FORTY-TWO

LAYLA

There are three big holidays in the lingerie world: Valentine's Day, Christmas, and Mother's Day, in that order. Usually, Mother's Day is the least of my concerns — I'm still struggling to get over the post-Valentines rush — but this year is different. Because this year, I have almost six times as many buyers than I've ever had before.

The last week leading up to the holiday is absolutely hectic. Orders are through the roof. I'm sending out last-minute shipments multiple times a day. Sifting through invoices. Fixing website problems and customer complaints. Running the Mother's Day sale social media campaigns. Pink Pearl Silks have finally shipped my order of lace, so my production team have been working overtime to get back on schedule, and Josh sat down with me and managed to fix the issues with my email campaigns.

On top of that, I've had to get my application in for the Anna Bardet scholarship. I finally found the invitation email buried in my spam folder. I didn't have enough time to come up with a whole set of new designs, so instead I submitted a few excerpts from my upcoming Butterfly collection. I seriously doubt that I'll win the scholarship, but if I do, it'll be great marketing.

What with everything going on, I can barely find enough time to record the episodes with the guys, let alone go on proper dates with them. We make it work, though. In the evenings, the boys drop in with some food, to check on me and force me to eat. Other times, they just sit with me, chatting, signing merch, doing their own thing. I always used to worry that when I started

dating, my future boyfriend might get needy or annoyed when I dropped off the radar for work, but the guys understand. They know I'm not ignoring them on purpose. And when I need a break, they're there for me, too.

My busy schedule has not gotten in the way of my 'bedroom classes', as Zack likes to call them. And now that all four of us are sleeping together, they've really become next-level. I think I've been screwed in every room in my flat. Last weekend, I blew Luke in the shower when he snuck in after my morning run. Later that day, Zack made me dinner, then laid me out on the kitchen table and ate me out for forty-five straight minutes for 'dessert'.

On Thursday evening, they all take turns. Josh takes me first, laying me flat on the bed and pounding me hard and fast until we're both coming hard. Then, before I can catch my breath, Zack takes over, spreading my legs wide apart and drilling into me mercilessly. When he comes, his release is so hard I swear I can feel his heat splashing inside me, coating my walls. Then, while I'm still squirming and dripping, Luke takes over, positioning his body over mine and screwing me like a piston, our eyes locked the whole time. I'm already so full that I'm squelching with every thrust, the come inside me frothing and dribbling out onto my thighs. When he finally spills inside me, my release is so strong I feel my vision black out for a few seconds. He pulls out gently, leaving me sore and gasping and absolutely overflowing with the boys' cooling seed.

That night, I dream of what they did to me. I wake up hot and sweaty and sopping wet, and have to drag myself across the hall to their flat and wake them up for a repeat performance.

So, yeah. Between the eighteen-hour workdays, and getting systematically railed by my three fake boyfriends, I'm pretty busy. By the time Mother's Day rolls around, it's actually pretty anticlimactic. By Sunday, there's nothing left for me to do. Everyone has already bought their gifts. Everything has been shipped. The few stragglers who forgot to get presents are frantically ordering gift cards online, but that just generates them an email code, so I don't have to actually do anything. When I wake up on Sunday morning, I snuggle in bed and enjoy my newfound freedom for a whole thirty minutes.

Then I start to get antsy. I get up and clean my bathroom and kitchen. I rearrange my wardrobe into rainbow order, then decide it looks stupid, and reorganise it by clothing type. I draft three new email campaigns. I do all the pampering things I've been neglecting during the last week: painting my nails, shaving my legs, embalming myself in lotion like a dead pharaoh. I even go to the effort to curl my hair, and experiment with a glittery green smokey eye that looks so hideous I have to remove it immediately.

By evening, I'm just lying like a starfish on my bed, all soft and exfoliated and manicured, bored out of my skull. I check my phone over and over, but aside from a good-morning text from Zack, no one has messaged me at all today. I've been waiting for over a week to finally have some time off, and now that the day has come, I'm lying here watching the clock on my bedroom wall tick away the seconds.

Screw this. I do not have three fake boyfriends so that not even one of them can admire my freshly shaved legs.

Jumping out of bed, I pull open my wardrobe and pick out one of my favourite pieces of lingerie. It's an Anna Bardet: a pale pink corset with white ribbons and a built-in garter belt. I get dressed quickly, slick on some lipstick, then toss my coat over my underwear like a hooker, buttoning it carefully shut. Grabbing my keys, I slip into my shoes and head across the corridor to apartment 6B.

The guys' flat is dark when I unlock the door and step inside. Which is odd. What are they all doing on a Sunday night? And why wouldn't they invite me?

"Hello?" I call into the empty room. "Is anybody there?"

There's no response. I flick on the light, and my eyes land on a pile of torn pink wrapping paper and tangled silver ribbon spread haphazardly across the coffee table. It looks like someone was trying to wrap a gift in a hurry.

Crap. I sag in the doorway, suddenly remembering a conversation I had with Zack on Friday night. He told me that he and Luke were planning on visiting their families this weekend. I was knee-deep in emails about late postage, so I'd just nodded and then immediately forgotten. I guess the boys are all out tonight, taking their mums for extravagant Mother's Day dinners, like good

children. And here I am, standing in their flat in my undies, like an idiot.

Well. I guess it's Netflix, a bottle of wine, and an early night for me, then.

I'm about to turn and leave when I hear a low sigh echo from somewhere in the flat. I squint around, suddenly noticing a crack of light outlining Josh's bedroom door.

I perk back up. Kicking off my shoes, I pad up to his door and knock. "Josh?"

There's no response.

"Josh? Can I come in?"

There's a cut-off sigh, then a hitched breath. It almost sounds like someone crying. Alarm rushes through me, and I shove open the door.

Josh is sitting hunched at his desk, his head in his hands. He's wearing a pair of sweatpants and a loose, worn T-shirt with a hole in the sleeve.

"I'm busy," he intones, not looking up. His voice sounds weirdly choked.

I frown, glancing around. The lights are all off. "Josh? Why are you sitting in the dark?" He doesn't move. His shoulders are heaving with uneven breaths. "Josh—"

"I said I'm *busy*," he snaps, his head finally jerking up. "Layla, I don't have time for this right now."

I stare at him. Josh and I have bickered plenty over the last three years, but he's never snapped at me before.

"... Josh?" I say softly. "Has something happened?"

He closes his eyes. "I'm sorry," he says immediately. "Shit. Sorry, L. You can come in. I just..." He turns back to his laptop. The screen glows, illuminating his face in electric blue. He swallows thickly. "I'm sorry," he says again.

I pause, then step inside the room, looking around.

I've never been inside Josh's bedroom before. He's a lot more private than Zack and Luke, so when I stay over, I sleep in their beds instead. I imagined his room to be as pristine and bare as an IKEA catalogue, but it's actually a lot more cluttered than I expected. His double bed is covered with rumpled navy sheets. A handful of colourful festival lanyards are hanging on his door handle, and his walls are dotted with signed convention posters. One entire wall is lined with bookshelves, stuffed with thick-looking books. As I step closer, I realise they're textbooks, with titles like *Attachment Theory in Relationships* and *How to Solve Conflict and Appease the Inner Child*.

I point at them. "Hang on. Do you actually know what you're doing?"

He follows my gaze, running a hand through his ruffled hair. "Hm?"

"You say on your show that you're not qualified," I point out. "You have more textbooks than most people would need to buy for a five-year psych degree."

"Well," he says after a moment. "I want to help people. I can't do that if I'm giving bad advice."

I turn to look at him. He looks exhausted. His face is pale, and there are dark circles curving under his eyes. "You really care about this, don't you?"

"What?"

"The show. I assumed you were more focussed on the business side. You're usually so busy with emails and finances and marketing." I tilt my head, studying him. "But you're not, are you? You care about the listeners. You want them to improve their lives."

He doesn't say anything, his lips thinning. Everything starts to fall into place. No wonder Josh is so emotionally invested in the show succeeding. And no wonder he's so adamant about impressing Buzztone. If he were doing *Three Single Guys* for money, the boys would have gone solo a long time ago. But he wants the marketing reach a production company can give him. He wants to reach people.

I'm pretty sure Zack just does the podcast for fun. Luke is a teacher at heart, so of course he likes giving advice. But Josh actually cares about helping people.

My heart thuds. I cross the room and cup his cheeks, stroking my thumbs over his cheekbones. His eyes flicker shut.

“What are you working on?” I ask.

“Just going through some emails.”

I glance over his shoulder at his laptop screen. As usual, his inbox is overflowing. I scan the subject lines.

My wife wants to get a divorce. I’m still so in love with her.

I want my parents to come to my wedding, but they don’t believe in gay marriage.

I just found out my husband got a vasectomy and didn’t tell me. I can’t stop crying. I’ve been trying to have a baby for years. Is this the end?

Josh is drafting a reply to that one in another window.

Hello. I’m so sorry to hear what you’re going through. I can’t imagine the pain you’re in. We won’t be able to address this on the show, as our advice segments for the next few weeks are full — but I thought I’d message you privately with some suggestions on how to address your relationship, and a few recommended resources...

It suddenly hits me that he has to do this every single day. Every day, hundreds of people are messaging him, unloading on him, begging him for help. And he tries to help every single one of them. Even the emails he can’t read aloud on the podcast, he answers privately.

It must be exhausting.

I lean over him and shut the laptop. “You don’t need to do this now.”

“Our numbers are up,” he says dully. “We can’t lose momentum.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing this for the numbers. You’re not doing marketing or social media, you’re answering emails.” He doesn’t say

anything. I sigh. “You don’t record for another week,” I remind him, wrapping my arms around his neck and sliding into his lap.

He clears his throat and shifts. “No, but these people can’t wait another week. They have problems now.”

“They’ll cope. You’re a podcast host, not a mental health professional.”

“I just need—”

I cut him off. “No. You’re shaking, Josh. Look.”

FORTY-THREE

LAYLA

I lift one of his trembling hands. He stares at it for a moment, then threads our fingers together. I lean forward, pressing my lips to his. It's a slow, gentle kiss, with none of our usual fire, but heat still simmers through me. When I finally pull back, blood is pumping through my body, and Josh looks vaguely more alive.

I trail my lips over his cheek, then look up, finally noticing the corkboard he has pinned over his desk. It's covered in small cards and slips of paper, and it takes me a second to realise what I'm looking at.

"The infamous wall of wedding invites." I reach out, brushing one of the embossed cards with my fingertip. "I thought Zack was joking about this."

He tilts his head against mine. "Is it weird?"

I shake my head, running my eyes over the collage. There must be over a hundred invitations here. Cream, pink, white. Some are handwritten. Some are embossed. Some have photographs, or floral details, or watercolours. There's so many that they're overlapping each other, pinned two or even three pages deep. It's incredible. "Do you go to all of the weddings?"

He shakes his head. "We did at the beginning. Now there's too many. We make them if we can, though." He points at a line of photographs at the bottom of the corkboard. I lean in to get a better look.

They're wedding photos. In each picture, all three boys are standing in suits and ties, with their arms around an assortment of beaming brides and grooms.

In a couple, Zack is wearing a tartan kilt, which is doing fun things to my insides.

“That’s so cute,” I whisper, glancing across the line. My eyes automatically focus on one photograph, tacked right at the end. Unlike all of the others, it’s not a wedding photo; it’s a black-and-white headshot of a middle-aged woman, smiling brightly at the camera. I immediately recognise the silky black hair and intensely dark eyes. “Is that your mum?” I point. Josh nods slowly. I examine her. “She’s lovely.”

“She was.”

I glance across at him. “She’s dead?”

“When I was nineteen. Car crash.”

I look down, leaning back against his chest. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

His voice is robotic. “I didn’t tell you.”

I squeeze his elbow, my heart thudding. God, no wonder he’s locked away in here, having a breakdown. The rest of England is spending time with their mums today, and he’s stuck here with no one.

I try to think of the right thing to say. “She’d be so proud of you, for everything you’ve done.”

He sighs, his breath rushing over my cheek. “I hope so. She was the reason I came up with the idea for the podcast in the first place.”

“Did she like advice shows?”

He shakes his head. “Her and my dad’s relationship was... bad.” He stares at the photo, his face blank. “He met her in Vietnam, on a month-long business trip. She was a maid at the hotel he was staying at. Working fourteen hours a day for pennies, while rich men spent ten times her daily salary on one drink in the hotel bar. She and my dad had a fling, and then he brought her back to England and married her.” His mouth twists. “My grandparents thought it was so romantic. He’d met this pretty, poverty-stricken foreigner and dragged her out of the gutter. Like a Cinderella story.”

I find his hand and hold it. “But it wasn’t.”

He snorts. “My mum used to say that he picked her because he liked the way she cleaned his hotel toilet. He didn’t want a wife; he wanted a silent, beautiful maid who’d share his bed, have his kid, and never ask anything of him. He was always complaining about how Western women were too ‘modern’, and I guess she was his solution.”

“They fought?” I ask, grazing my lips down his temple.

His eyelashes flicker as I kiss his brow bone. “No. It would have been better if they had. Instead, my dad just... ignored her. Blanked her completely.” He takes a sharp breath. His voice is level, but I can feel the energy thrumming through him. “It tore my mum to bits. She was convinced she could make him love her. She’d spend all day cleaning. Making him these massive meals. She’d cut flowers for the dinner table, set out all the nice china, and be waiting by the front door to kiss him when he got home from work. And he’d step inside the house, grunt at her, and take his dinner to his office. Every single day.” He touches the ends of my hair.

“That’s horrible,” I murmur.

He looks down, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “When I got older, I realised how badly he was treating her. I used to beg her to divorce him. But she never understood. And over the years, it’s like she just faded away. By the time she died, she was just... a shell.” He takes a deep breath. “That’s why I do the show. I want to help people like her. I want to help them see that they deserve better.”

“You’re so much more than you let other people see, Josh.”

His hand flexes on my hip. He dips his head, and for a second, I see a flash of the emotion hidden behind his carefully blank expression. Then he clears his throat, and it goes away again. “You can stay, if you like,” he murmurs, tugging at the belt of my coat. “I can’t promise I’ll be very good company, but—” he pushes aside one of the panels of my coat, and stares at the corset I’m wearing underneath. I wait patiently as he visibly struggles to speak.

“You’re not wearing any clothes,” he manages eventually.

“Yes. And I see now that it’s not really appropriate for the situation.”

His mouth turns up slightly, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes. "You came here wanting to have fun. Sorry." He hooks his finger under the straps. "Sorry Zack's not here. He'd have taken this off you before you'd even made it through the front door."

I push his hand off me, offended. "Okay. Can you not act like I'm a total bitch?"

He blinks. "What?"

"You don't have to apologise for grieving. For God's sake, you're my friend. I don't just want to sleep with you."

His gaze flickers. "What do you want?"

I run my fingers through his thick hair. "I want *you*. I want to see you happy, and proud, and sad, and tired. I want your low moments, as well as your high ones. I want all of you. I want as much of you as you'll give me."

He looks up at me, his eyes dark, and I'm shocked by the raw grief in his face. Josh seems so cold and aloof, but he has so much going on under the surface.

And I want to help him. I have to.

"I want a date," I decide.

"What?"

"I'm your girlfriend, right? You guys have taken me on all these dates. I haven't gotten to pick anything. I want a date."

"Right now?" He looks exhausted. Like all of his batteries have run out of juice. It hurts my heart to see him like this. "Can I get a rain check?"

"Sorry, it's not raining," I tell him. "Don't worry. It'll just be at my flat. I'll order pizza and we'll watch a movie. Whatever. It'll be chill."

He frowns. "I don't think I'm in the right mindframe to be romantic. I'll probably just bring the mood down." His hand splays over my back. "I'm sorry."

“Jesus, Josh.” I lean forward, pressing my forehead to his. “I don’t want you to be romantic. I don’t want you to be anything.” His breath hitches as I press a kiss under his jaw. “You don’t have to do anything. Or say anything. You can just sleep in my bed, if you want. Drink all my wine. Play Snake on your phone and ignore me. We don’t have to exchange one word. I literally don’t care.” I take his hand, interlacing our fingers. “Just come, please.”

His brow is furrowed as I help him to his feet. “Why?”

“I don’t want you to be alone right now.”

He doesn’t have anything to say to that. He lets me tug him out of his bedroom and across the hall into my flat. Next to his dark, messy lair, my living room is like some kind of pink-papered paradise, clean and warm and full of light. I shove him onto the sofa, hand him the TV remote, and go to the fridge to get us both a drink.

When I get back with two bottles of beer, he hasn’t moved. He’s staring blankly at the wall opposite, his jaw working. I can practically feel the sharp fragments of his grief splintering through the quiet room.

“Josh,” I say quietly.

He looks up at me. His eyes are dry, but he’s breathing hard.

I plop onto the sofa next to him. “Lie down.” When he doesn’t move, I push him down, curling against his broad chest. His arms wrap around me automatically, and he buries his face in my hair, breathing me in. For a while, we just lie together in the quiet, dim room. Eventually, he falls asleep, his body finally relaxing underneath mine. It’s way too early for me to sleep, but I just arrange him a bit more comfortably, watching over him as the sun sets outside the window. My heart feels like it’s bursting.

TRANSCRIPT

THREE SINGLE GUYS EPISODE 448: LET'S TALK ABOUT TEXT

ZACK: So, this is the end of week four of our experiment. Today, we focussed on your sexting skills. Layla, what did we learn?

LAYLA:... that if a guy sends a grey sweatpants pic, don't respond with the magnifying glass emoji.

ZACK: Or?

LAYLA: The laughing face emoji.

ZACK: And? What else?

LAYLA: (*sighs*) That if a boy says 'send nudes', they're supposed to be pictures of *me*.

JOSH: Although to be fair, that basketball player did have a very nice bum. (*Papers rustling*). Do you want to know what this week's lesson will be about?

LAYLA: Amaze me.

JOSH: Well, for the listeners following along at home, we've already gone over the first meeting, flirting, the second date, and messaging

etiquette. By this point, you should have a good surface understanding of your partner. Now, it's time to take things to the next level by introducing them into your personal life.

LUKE: Vulnerability is a key factor in intimacy. This is the way you're going to forge strong emotional ties, so it's a vital part of dating, and one that a lot of us struggle with.

LAYLA: Yikes. I should have told you earlier. I have no feelings. I am a hollow shell of a human, sorry.

JOSH: (*Ignores her*) So, for this next phase of our experiment, we're going to be digging a little deeper. We've all come up with an activity that will let Layla into our personal lives.

LUKE: I'll go first. As lots of you know, my ex-wife is getting married in a week's time. I've been invited to the wedding, and I'm inviting Layla as my plus-one. If you'd like to come, sweetheart?

(Long pause)

LAYLA: Um, yeah, I'll give it a go. I've never been to a wedding before.

LUKE: They're awful.

LAYLA: We can trauma bond, then.

JOSH: Jumping off from Luke's idea — L, my entire extended family will be at the wedding, and I'd like you to meet them. If it's okay, I'll arrange a spot for you at our after-wedding breakfast. Meeting the family is always a stressful part of a new relationship, so I think this would be a good exercise.

LAYLA: Oh, God. Um, okay.

JOSH: You don't want to? I promise to fake a migraine if you want to leave.

LAYLA: That's so romantic, babe. No, just... prepare for everyone to hate me. I'm not good with families.

ZACK: Or people in general, as we have learned over the last few episodes.

LAYLA: Alright, Zack, what do you have?

ZACK: Well, my gorgeous co-host, I will be introducing you to the world of *sexual* vulnerability. 'S important to learn to let go of control in bed, and I would be more than happy to give you a personal demonstration.

LAYLA:... I have to admit, I don't think you're trying as hard as the others.

ZACK: Oh, I'll try plenty hard, my little Bundt cake. Don't you worry about that.

LAYLA: *Bundt cake?*

ZACK: Aye. Like, one with cream frosting. 'Cause after I take you from behind it looks like —

LUKE: (*Interrupting*) Actually, Zack, ever since Layla's suggestion the other week, we've had a ton of requests for you to do that episode on grieving a partner. If you're willing, that would be a good option.

ZACK: (*Brief pause*) I don't know how that's gonna teach the lady how to find a guy. Are you grieving, Layla?

LAYLA: Only the loss of my dwindling reputation. It drops with every

innuendo you make.

ZACK: You make stockings and garters, lass. I bet your sales would only go *up* if I told the listeners at home about how that new push-up from your collection makes your boobs look like a pair of pillows in a —

JOSH: *(claps once into mic)* Note to self — edit this out. Layla, stop giggling.

ZACK: Aw, c'mon.

JOSH: *(claps again into mic)* Restart.

LUKE: It actually would be a good dating exercise. If we're talking about being vulnerable with partners, discussing relationship grief is a perfect example of that. And I know it would be helpful to the listeners, too. If you—

(Sound of a chair scraping back)

ZACK: The answer is no. Stop bloody asking.

(Door slams).

LUKE: Ah.

TWITTER

Couture Urban @Couture_Urban_Magazine ✓

New in ethical fashion: Layla Thompson is taking the UK lingerie market by storm with *Her Treat*, a company focussed on creating cute, affordable, exploitation-free undies. Check out our interview with her below ♥

PodFest @LDN_PodFest ✓

NEWS JUST IN! Due to popular demand, we've upgraded the @ThreeSingleGuys live show venue! There are now 200 extra tix available, but they're going fast!! Get in quick

Sweetheart Soulmates @SweetheartSoulmatesPodcast

@ThreeSingleGuys latest episodes are what's wrong with modern 'progressive' views. Since when was it acceptable for a woman to publicly date three men? A disgusting example to set for the impressionable youth listening...

Briar Saint @TheRealBriarSaint ✓

Spent all my downtime on set today listening to @ThreeSingleGuys and laughing my makeup off. They've got a great episode on group relationships, I think I'm gonna start sending it to nosy journalists. Give them a listen [here](#). Xo

FORTY-FOUR

JOSH

“The numbers are through the roof,” Paul crows down the phone. “God, I’m so glad I picked this project to back. I knew you guys would pull it off.”

“Uh huh,” I say blandly, staring through Layla’s bedroom door. While I’m stuck taking calls in her living room, all of the others are in there, packing for my brother’s wedding tomorrow. The week since Mother’s day has gone by in a blur of interviews and sponsorships and social media frenzy, and the wedding date crept up on me way sooner than I expected. The ceremony isn’t until tomorrow afternoon, but since I’m the best man, I’ll have to be available from early morning, so we’re driving to the hotel tonight.

I can’t wait. I’m excited for Rob to get married — but honestly, the wedding isn’t the main thing on my mind. I’m mostly looking forward to spending some time away with Layla. She’s been working so hard, for so long, that me and the other guys arranged a little surprise for her. We’ve booked out a special suite at the hotel, and extended our stay for four nights, so we can have a proper mini-break. Since Layla won’t accept money from us, we figured we may as well splash out to spoil her a little.

But first, I have to deal with our manager.

“And did you see what Sweetheart Soulmates tweeted?” Paul laughs. “They called you all disgusting! Can you believe it?”

“Yeah. I mean, no.” As I watch, Layla saunters past her bedroom door in a little red slip. A half-naked Luke grabs at her, pulling her onto the bed with him. She climbs up onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck, and

starts rubbing up against his crotch.

“And it’s all because of you,” Paul says dreamily. I nod, staring as Layla kisses Luke, slowly starting to rock on his lap. A moan filters through the lounge. Jesus Christ. Is she *riding* him? With the bedroom door open?

“This was your idea. You should be proud of yourself. God, I can’t believe that Briar Saint tweeted about you.”

I smile slightly. On Monday morning, the actress Briar Saint tweeted about us, and all of our steady momentum just exploded. Suddenly, everyone was messaging us. Our email inboxes have been constantly full. Our PO box is overflowing with sponsored items and free gifts from companies that want to work with us. Layla gave an interview for a London-based fashion magazine a few days ago, and she’s had to hire three more seamstresses to help her keep on top of all of the orders. London PodFest even got in touch yesterday, and told us that there was so much demand for entry to our live show that they’ve upgraded us to the largest auditorium in the building. We’ll be talking for a thousand people — by far the biggest crowd we’ve ever recorded in front of.

Paul is pretty much shitting himself. He sent us all boxes of chocolates this morning, and when we went to record in the studio last week, he was there with bottles of Prosecco. We’re now his biggest clients. And it’s all because of Layla.

There’s another moan from the bedroom. I glance at Layla. She’s riding Luke now, holding onto the headboard for balance. As I watch, she tosses her hair back, then shoots a look at me over her shoulder, green eyes glittering. She’s doing this on *purpose*.

“You don’t sound very happy,” Paul chides. *“This show is your baby. I thought you’d be over the moon.”*

“Of course I’m happy,” I tell him. *“I never thought the podcast would do this well.”* Layla is panting now, her thighs straining as she bobs up and down over Luke’s dick. I can see the sweat sheening her skin, a flush slowly climbing up her chest as she screws him hard. The sight should probably just get me hard, but instead, it makes something flutter inside my chest.

I've been screwed ever since Mother's Day. Since she burst into my room half-naked, climbed up into my lap, and stayed with me. I miss my mum all the time, but usually, it's just a background hum. But every so often the grief hits me all at once, and it hurts so much I get physically sick. On Mother's Day, with Luke and Zack both gone and nothing to do but think, it felt like I was dying. Like my organs were shutting down.

And then she came, and took me to her flat, and just held me. There was no hesitation. No holding back. She just instinctively knew what I needed and did it for me.

I don't want you to be alone right now.

Ever since then, I can't even look at her without my heart clenching in my chest. Every room she walks into seems brighter. The sky seems bluer. I can't get her out of my head.

I've never been in love. I don't know what it feels like. But I wouldn't be surprised if it felt like this.

As I watch, Layla finally comes, slamming her hand against the headboard with a muffled cry. Luke follows soon after, pulling her into his chest as she trembles. I grimace, adjusting myself in my suddenly-tight jeans.

"What was that?" Paul asks down the line. *"Are you watching a movie?"*

"I have to go," I tell him. "I'll talk to you Tuesday. Have a good weekend. None of us will be available."

"What? Bu—"

"We're going on holiday. Bye." I hang up and set my phone on the coffee table, heading to Layla's room. Her and Luke are tangled together on her bed, panting. Zack is sitting next to them, fully dressed, a hungry look on his face as he watches.

"It's rude to have sex with the door open," I tell Layla.

"Is it?" She gasps, pushing Luke away. "I wasn't trying to be rude. I was trying to be inviting." I try not to stare at her trembling, sweat-slicked cleavage as she gasps for breath.

“Um. Aren’t you supposed to be packing? We’re leaving in half an hour.”

“I *am* packing,” Layla insists, climbing out of Luke’s lap and slithering into Zack’s.

“Our little cornflake was just giving us a fashion show,” Zack announces, pulling her close. “She wanted us to pick what pants she should bring with her. But it’s hard not to jump on her when she’s dressed like this. You’d do the same thing.”

“I would,” I admit.

Layla smiles, grinding against his crotch. “How do you like this one?” She asks, plucking at the blood-red babydoll slip she’s wearing. Before I can answer, her phone buzzes on the table. She waves at me. “Can you pass it?”

I hand it over. Zack groans as she shuffles off his lap and checks the screen. “Seriously?” He flops back onto the bed. “Honey, we’ve talked about this. *We don’t answer emails when we’re sitting on our boyfriend’s knob.* Really, you should know this by now, it’s a week-one lesson!”

“Easy for you to say,” Layla mutters, flipping through her phone. “You guys get to clock out at the end of the day. Become self-employed, and see how often you get to put your phone on silent. I’m waiting on like, ten different emails.”

Zack huffs. Luke stretches out behind her, laying his head silently on her shoulder. Layla smiles, not looking away from her phone as she threads a hand through his hair.

Luke has changed completely since he finally gave in and started dating Layla. It’s like a dark cloud hanging over his head has just dissolved. I guess he’s had feelings for her for longer than he’d like to admit. Knowing him, they were probably eating him up inside.

He took her on their first official one-on-one date yesterday night. Apparently they went to a sky restaurant; ate some fancy dinner at the top of a skyscraper in central London. I’m sure it was incredibly romantic. It’s a bit unfair, really. Luke’s had way more experience in wooing women than me and Zack. Still, he joined the game so late, he has some catching up to do. I watch as he nuzzles into Layla’s neck, smiling into her skin.

It's crazy how happy this one girl can make all of us.

"Hey. Spaghetti hoop. You good?"

Zack's question brings me back to Earth. I turn to look at Layla. She's tense against Luke, gripping her phone so hard her knuckles are white as she reads the screen.

"Layla?" I ask. "Something wrong?" She doesn't answer, so I kneel in front of her. "L. Hey. What is it?"

"I got it." She's breathing hard.

"Got what?"

She takes a deep breath, not taking her eyes off the screen. "I *got it*. I... can't believe it."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Remember when we taught you about nouns?" Luke asks. "You were about eight at the time. Could you try using a few now? You got *what*, sweetheart?"

"The scholarship!"

It takes a few seconds for her meaning to click. "With Anna Bardet? The one you thought you couldn't land?"

She nods, her face flushed with pleasure, and happiness shoots through me like a comet. Without even thinking, I wrap my arms around her and pick her right up, spinning her around.

"Layla, that's *amazing*."

"Put me down, you knob." She kicks my ankle, but she's smiling.

I pull her closer. "I'm so proud of you," I tell her. She locks her arms around my neck and starts kissing the side of my throat, making me hiss.

"I'm not surprised," Luke says from the bed. "She'd be mad not to choose you."

“Damn straight,” Zack agrees. “Sounds like we got something else to celebrate.”

“*Speaking of,*” I say, dodging Layla’s attempts to lick my neck, and setting her carefully down on the carpet. “Come on. You need to get packing.”

She frowns. “I’m almost done.”

I glance down at the clothes carefully arranged in her pink suitcase. She’s packed for a pretty basic trip; she has one dress I’m assuming she’s wearing to the wedding, and then a handful of jeans and t-shirts.

Zack sniffs, poking at a black sweater. “You’ll want something fancier than this.”

She bats her eyes at him. “You’re taking me somewhere nice?”

“I ain’t saying anything.”

Layla turns to me, her eyes questioning.

“You might need some more clothes,” I tell her. “We have a surprise for you.”

FORTY-FIVE

LAYLA

We end up getting stuck in traffic on our way to the Chelsea hotel, but I don't mind. I'm still reeling from the news about Anna Bardet. I emailed her back immediately accepting the scholarship, and her assistant told me that they'd get back to me today with a date I could fly out to the HQ in New York. I spend the whole car ride bouncing in my seat, obsessively checking my emails as Josh inches the car forward.

It takes over two hours, but we eventually make it to the hotel, pulling up outside a huge white building covered in ivy. As we step inside the atrium, my eyes are like dinner plates. The place is massive, with tiled floors and big marble columns supporting the high ceiling. There's a waterfall splashing happily in the centre of the hall, lined with leafy foliage. One wall is lined by a whole fleet of shiny silver lifts; in the opposite corner, I hear clinking glasses and laughter coming from the hotel bar. Busy-looking people in expensive suits and dresses stride through the hall, talking on phones as they drag their suitcases behind them.

"Wow," I say. Whatever Josh's brother does for a living, he must be loaded to be able to afford a venue like this.

I turn towards the reception, but Zack stops me. "Let me get that for you," he says, grabbing the handle of my suitcase. He and Josh exchange a nod. "Me and Luke are gonna go put these in the room. Why don't you sit down while Josh checks us in?" With a hand on my back, he walks me towards the circle of plush white armchairs in the waiting area.

“It’s fine, I’ll come with you.” I reach for my suitcase, but he shakes his head.

“Sorry, pudding cup. We’re gonna set up your surprise. You gotta wait. Preferably out of earshot of Josh.”

“You’re leaving me here?” I ask, glancing at Luke. He just smiles mysteriously. “For how long? What am I meant to do?”

Zack shrugs. “Design some knickers. Practice flirting with one of the bellboys. I don’t know. You’re good at entertaining yourself, aren’t you?” He gives me one last lingering kiss on the cheek, then squeezes my shoulder. I watch as he and Luke drag our cases towards the lift, then glance back at the reception. Josh is already deep in conversation with the pretty lady at the desk.

Sighing, I plop into an armchair and pull out my phone, bringing up my email again. My inbox is tragically empty, but I still go through every folder obsessively, triple-checking my spam, junk, and promotions tabs.

Nothing.

A throat clears over my head. I glance up to see a man standing over me. He’s attractive — tall, with brown skin and thick glasses. The sleeves on his black shirt are rolled up, and there are tattoos running up and down his forearms.

“Hey,” he says in a deep, gravelly voice. “Mind if I sit here?” He gestures to the chair on my right.

“Go for it,” I say, turning back to my screen.

The guy sits down. “Thanks. I’m Gavin.”

I nod, not looking up.

“I’m guessing you’re here for the wedding?” He asks, after a moment. “Bride or groom’s side?”

“Groom,” I say automatically, then frown. “Um. Bride? Both?” I’m dating the groom’s brother, but I’m Luke’s plus-one, and he was invited by Amy. Group relationships are confusing.

At the reminder of the wedding, my stomach pangs with nerves. Honestly, I'm kind of dreading it. Every time I think of meeting Mrs Martins — *Amy* — again, I feel kind of sick. I haven't seen my old headmistress since I left high school. And she wasn't exactly the nicest to me back then.

Maybe Luke and I can avoid her together.

Gavin's mouth quirks up. "Sounds complicated." He narrows his eyes on me. "You look familiar. Do I know you?"

"I don't think so," I say shortly, scrolling through my messages. Why does he keep talking to me?

He tilts his head, studying my face. "Really?" He says quietly. "I could swear we've met before. Maybe I've seen you at work?"

"I don't..." I trail off as his eyes flicker down to my mouth, just for a second, before meeting mine again. A lightbulb goes off over my head.

Oh. He's flirting.

Oh.

FORTY-SIX

LAYLA

My heart starts to beat faster. I do a quick catalogue of his body language.

His feet are pointing towards me. His face is dipped close to mine. His eyes are focussed on me.

He's definitely flirting with me.

I smile slowly. It's about time I had a new victim. And Zack *did* tell me to practice.

I put my phone down. "That depends. Do you buy a lot of women's underwear?"

He looks taken aback. "Uh. No?... Why?"

Maybe that's a bad line. "I own a lingerie company."

His eyebrows shoot up. "Wow, okay. That's way cooler than mine. I work in stocks." He pulls a face. "It's boring, I know."

"That *is* pretty boring," I agree, and his expression shutters slightly.

Oops. I open my mouth to tell him I'm kidding, but Gavin coughs. "I know. To be honest, I hate it, but it pays well, so—"

"That's okay then," I say before I can stop myself. "I don't mind boring men if they're rich."

Jesus. Shoot me.

Luckily, this time Gavin catches on. “I’ll be the wallet, you be the looks?”

“Perfect. We can text each other once a fortnight from opposite sides of your yacht.”

Gavin throws back his head and laughs too loudly. A couple across the atrium turns to look at us. “Oh, that’s great. But how about I make you a drink, first?” He gives me a winning smile. “I’m a mixologist in my free time. Come back to my room, and I bet I could make you a better drink than the rubbish they’re serving in the bar.”

I blink. “Your hotel room? That’s bold.”

“We have to start somewhere.” His eyes twinkle. “You could show me some of your designs. It’d be fun.”

“I’m sure.”

He leans forward, and I lean back. I’m enjoying flirting just fine, but I don’t want him in my personal space. And I really, really don’t want to go back to his room with him.

It’s funny. From the very first time I started ‘practise flirting’ with Josh and Zack, I was hooked. But I don’t feel any of that desire with this man. I’m not sure why; he seems kind enough, and he’s obviously interested in me. But I don’t feel that same tug towards him.

“What do you say?” Gavin asks, leaning in even closer. His breath fans over my face, and I fight the urge to wince. “Are you busy tonight?”

I open my mouth, but before I can reject him, strong arms wrap around my shoulders.

“Yes,” a low voice says over my head. “She is.”

I breathe in the cool smell of mint as Josh dips down, nuzzling at my temple. Immediately, all of my unease fades away.

Gavin leans back, lifting up his hands. “Sorry, mate,” he laughs. “Didn’t realise she was taken. You better keep an eye on her.”

Josh ignores him, taking my hand and tugging me upright and towards the lifts. Before I know what's happening, I'm being gently pulled into the lift car, the mirrored doors sliding shut.

I study his face as the lift shoots upwards. His expression is blank and hard, his jaw clenched.

“Are you mad?” I ask.

He softens and threads his fingers through my hair. “Not at you. It was just... surprising to see you with another man.”

“Zack told me to practice flirting.”

He mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like ‘bloody idiot.’

The lift dings and the doors slide open. We step out into a long white corridor lined with black doors and crystal light fixtures.

“It actually went pretty well,” I say, as Josh leads me to the door at the very end of the hallway. “I think you'd be proud of me. I only insulted him a bit, and I think he was kinda into it.”

He pulls a keycard out of his pocket, then pauses. “Did you... want to spend the evening with him? I'm sorry. I just assumed—”

I lean against his chest. “No. I didn't.”

His body relaxes. He bends and brushes his lips lightly against mine. “Good,” he murmurs.

I kiss him back slowly, then turn back to the door. “Go on, then. Show me my surprise.”

He taps the keycard against the keypad. A light flashes green, and he gestures for me to turn the handle. My eyes widen as the door swings open.

FORTY-SEVEN

LAYLA

The guys haven't just got us a hotel room: they've booked out a whole suite. The place is gorgeous. Huge, with high white ceilings and softly glowing chandeliers. The walls are covered with splashy watercolours, and one corner of the room is set up as a bar, complete with rows and rows of bottles of liquor.

Luke and Zack are already there, shoes and jackets off, sprawled out on the biggest bed I've ever seen. It's probably two metres wide, and stacked high with plush-looking pillows.

We'll all fit.

My heart flutters. I float over and touch the pristine white sheets, smiling as my fingers slip over the glossy fabric. "This is real silk," I practically purr.

Zack snorts. "Told you she'd notice."

"We requested them from the hotel specifically," Luke admits. "I thought you'd appreciate it."

Appreciate it? I want to get on my knees and rub my cheek against it. I want to gather all of the fabric up and take it home to make a wedding dress. This quality of silk is wasted on *bedsheets*.

"I found her with a guy at the reception," Josh says behind me, taking off his jacket. "He was inviting her up to his hotel room."

Luke's smile drops off his face. Zack gasps, scandalised. "Are you *fake cheating* on me?" He clasps a hand to his chest.

I shrug. "You told me to practice flirting."

"*Baby*. I didn't mean it. You're the best fake girlfriend I've ever had, I can't share you with another man!"

Luke coughs.

"Okay. I can't share you with a third man," Zack allows. "Two is my limit."

"Sorry. Instructions were unclear. Now I'm in love with a stranger." I look around with wide eyes. "Guys, what the Hell is this?"

"We've got it for the long weekend," Josh says. "After the wedding is done tomorrow, we'll have Sunday and Monday to ourselves. I think after the last few weeks, you deserve a minibreak."

"This is ridiculous," I breathe, turning to the nightstand. It's overflowing with complimentary gifts: a box of chocolates wrapped in a gold ribbon, a gift basket full of soaps and massage oil, and a massive bouquet of red roses, wrapped in shiny cellophane. There's a tiny card nestled in the flower-buds, and I pick it out, reading the embossed writing.

WELCOME TO THE HONEYMOON SUITE.

My mouth falls open. I spin back to face the guys. "*The Honeymoon Suite?*"

Zack puts up his hands. "Only room with a big enough bed, babe. Not our fault the peasant suites are for sad little boring couples."

"But—" I sputter, then turn to Josh. "Shouldn't your brother be in here? *He's* the one getting married!"

"The Bridal Suite is different," Luke says, sitting up on the bed. His white shirt has been unbuttoned at the collar. He looks deliciously ruffled. "It has separate rooms for the bride and groom, so they can get ready without seeing each other before the wedding."

"That's boring," Zack mutters. "What if I want a last-minute quickie?"

Luke looks amused. “There’s an inter-joining master bedroom in the middle of the suite, for their last night of pre-marital life. Or, as you so romantically put it, any last-minute quickies.”

I frown at him. “How do you know all that?”

He reaches for me, tugging me between his knees. “I’ve spent the night there, remember?”

It takes me a second to work out what he means. “Wait. Is this the same venue you got married at?”

His smile is tight. “Amy clearly didn’t want to go through the hassle of organising a wedding again. Even the invitations are the same template we used.”

My mouth falls open. “That’s screwed up. Are you okay?”

“It’s fine,” he says, smiling unconvincingly. I reach up to trace the lines under his eyes, worry tugging at me.

He’s tired. He didn’t join me, Josh and Zack in bed last night. When I got up in the middle of the night for some water, I found him just sitting on the couch in the living room, reading. At four in the morning. Clearly I’m not the only one who’s anxious about the wedding.

“Don’t look at me like that.” Luke curves his hands over my hips, then pulls me closer into his body. “I’d much rather be here,” he says into my hair. “With you.”

I smile, letting him tug me into a kiss. When we pull apart, my brain is fizzing with sparks, and Josh and Zack are both watching with hungry eyes. I lean forward to press my mouth against Josh’s —

There’s a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Josh calls. The front door of the suite opens, and a bellboy dressed in a dark burgundy outfit steps inside, pushing a gold tray full of covered dishes.

I sit up, my stomach rumbling. It smells amazing. “Wait. What’s all this?”

Josh joins the man and starts helping him uncover the plates. I stare as the dishes are revealed: plates of steaming linguine, pizza, garlic bread melting with butter. My mouth waters.

“We’re celebrating,” Josh says simply, lifting up a silver cloche to reveal a plate of chocolate fondants. “I think you deserve it.” He glances at the bed. “If we put a towel down, do you wanna eat in bed? We have seven courses.”

“That’s the hottest thing a man has ever said to me,” I breathe. All three men laugh.

Luke wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his lap. “Tell me what you want,” he murmurs in my ear. “I’m feeding you tonight.”



Half an hour later, I’m pretty much in heaven.

We’re all sitting on the bed, eating from the massive array of plates. Zack and Josh are sprawled out on the sheets, their collars loosened and sleeves rolled up. As promised, Luke has sat me on his lap and is feeding me himself. Every time I try to pull free and reach for something, he makes a low noise in his chest and drags my hands back to his thighs. I’m pinned in place.

It’s kind of hot. And judging by the hard-on nudging against my backside, he thinks so, too.

We’ve managed to demolish most of the courses by now, and I’m full and sleepy and happy as I lean against Luke’s chest. He scoops up a forkful of chocolate fondant and holds it to my lips, watching intently as I eat the bite. My eyes flutter shut as chocolate fudge melts all over my tongue.

Josh clears his throat, stretching out his legs. “So,” he says, nudging me with his socked foot. “I’ve been meaning to ask.”

I force my eyes back open. “Mm?”

“Tell us more about this invitation from Anna.”

I smile, sinking back against Luke as he takes a bite of cake. “She offered to fly me out to New York in a couple of weeks, so she can see my stuff in person. If it works out, I could form a collaboration with her. Stay in New York, get my stuff put in her shops and featured in her fashion week shows.”

Zack freezes midway through picking up a strawberry. “New York, lass?”

I nod. “Fashion capital of the world. It’s where everything happens.”

“Will you have to design something new for her?” Josh asks slowly.

“I submitted my Butterfly design. I’ll have to make some changes to incorporate it into her style, though.”

Zack immediately looks outraged. “No! You can’t let her take credit for it, it’s yours!”

“I’d get credit,” I say patiently. “It’s a collaboration. Plus I’d get a massive influx of attention and money to pour into the product.”

“But she’d make money off you,” he complains.

I sigh. “Josh, tell Zack how marketing works.”

Josh shakes his head, his brow furrowed. “How long would you stay in New York? Weeks? Months?”

I shrug. “Hopefully, while I’m out there, I’d be able to set my own roots. Actually start up a brick-and-mortar store.”

“What does that mean for you?” Luke says slowly. “You’d move to America? Forever?”

I nod. There are a few seconds of silence. The men exchange looks. I frown. I was hoping for slightly more excitement.

“Do you want to live in America?” Josh asks eventually.

“It’s the logical next step for my career. I’d be mad to turn it down.”

“Yeah, but do you *want* to live in America?” Josh presses. “Not just work there, but live there, full time?”

“I guess. I never really thought about it. My main focus is the business.”

No one says anything for a few seconds. Then Zack tugs at Emily’s ring, frustration all over his face. “Flippin’ stupid idea,” he mutters.

I sputter. “*Excuse* me?”

He meets my gaze levelly. “You heard me. It’s a stupid idea.”

FORTY-EIGHT

LAYLA

“Hang on.” My voice rises. “Do you guys think I *shouldn’t go*? Why?!”

There’s a brief pause. Josh sets his plate aside. “I think that you’re so driven by your work, that you don’t consider what makes you happy,” he says diplomatically. “By anyone’s standards, you’re already incredibly successful. There’s no need to relocate.”

“But I could be *more* successful,” I argue.

Zack throws his hands up. “Of course you could!” He says, exasperated. “Even if you were the biggest brand in the world, you could still be *more successful*.” He shakes his head. “Where does it end? You want your stuff being made by strangers in big factories? You wanna be buying cheap materials and underpaying people to get to the top?”

I’m offended. “No! I would never—”

“You’d never what? Prioritise your job over people? Then why do you want to uphaul your whole life to make some more money, when you’re doing just fine here? You haven’t got anyone or anything in America!”

I’m shocked. Zack is usually so laid-back. I don’t think we’ve ever properly argued before. “So?” I demand. “What do I have in London?”

“Us,” he says simply. “You’ve got a home. A gorgeous flat. A great production team. Smoking-hot neighbors.”

I narrow my eyes. “So you think I should stay just because *you* want me to. Nice, Zack.”

Zack sighs. “L, I know you. You don’t like meetin’ new people. If you move to America, you ain’t joining clubs or going to parties. I don’t like the thought of you holed up in some tiny flat in New York, working yourself to death. No friends, no family, just... ignoring everything good in your life.”

I can suddenly see it so clearly: me working my thirties away, too shy to make new friends, too lost in my work to talk to people. I’d slowly lose touch with the guys until we never spoke at all. I can picture myself in a few years’ time, hunched over my desk at three in the morning, listening to the guys’ voices from all the way across the ocean as they talk about some new girl they’re seeing.

Shockingly, tears burst up in my eyes. I blink them back furiously. “But this is all I’m good at.” I say. “I’m *good* at this, Zack. I am so *good* at my job.”

“You are,” he says, looking at me levelly. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

I throw up my hands. “I don’t know how to do anything else!” I exclaim. “I know how my business works. I know what I need to do to keep improving it. I have a plan that I’ve been checking off since I was eighteen. If I don’t follow it, then... anything could happen!”

The guys are all still for a few seconds, stunned into silence.

“You’re scared,” Zack says, watching me.

“Yeah, I’m scared. When I was a teenager, my whole life was taken out of my control. I was doing fine, enjoying school, living my life — and then one guy decided to make up a lie about me, and I lost all my friends. Everyone hated me. People decided it would be fun to hurt me. It wasn’t my fault, I did nothing wrong, and I had to live with the consequences of someone else’s actions. It wasn’t fair.” I shake my head, my chest burning. “But I let it fuel me. And now I’m living a better life than those people. I got better grades than them. I’m making more money than them. I’ve been in magazines. On podcasts. I’m going to collaborate with *Anna Bardet* at New York Fashion Week. They acted like I was worth nothing, but I knew they were wrong, and

when I go to my ten-year reunion, they're all going to see that. I'll be better off than all of them, because I was smart, and I worked hard, and I *stuck to my damn plan.*"

I break off, breathing hard. The boys all look at me for a few moments. Then Josh slides closer to me, cupping my cheeks with his warm, dry hands.

"You want to control everything," he says quietly, his eyes boring into mine. "But you can't, Layla. You need to learn to let go of your plan and just... live sometimes. It's okay."

Luke nods behind me. "Until you trust another person to be on your side, you'll never find a partner. You've never found a boyfriend because you've never found a man you trust will love you and take care of you."

I swallow. "I thought it was because I didn't know how to date."

Luke sighs. "Layla, this was never about you being awkward on dates. People with far less social skills than you get married every day. You never got a second date, because every time you sat down with a guy, you were on the defensive. They could tell that, no matter what you were saying with your mouth, you had absolutely no interest in opening up to them."

I bite my lip, fear rising up in me. I don't know what to do.

The guys are right; I don't really want to move countries. But the thought of staying here with no clear career path is terrifying. If I'm not always pushing for more, who knows where I might end up? "I don't know how to let go," I whisper. "I'm so used to having to fight for everything."

"Do you want to try?" Luke asks in my ear, taking my wrists and pinning them back onto his thighs. Heat blooms in me, and I lean back into him, pressing my cheek into his soap-scented shirt. He presses a kiss to the base of my neck, his gaze flicking up to Zack. "Didn't you have a lesson planned out for her? Now seems like an ideal time."

Zack has been sitting silently, watching me, tugging on the chain around his neck. Now he sits back. "You like that?" He asks, pointing at Luke's lap.

I look down. "Sitting on Luke's knee? I bet he'll let you try, if you ask nicely."

“He means *this*,” Luke says, tightening his grip. “Do you like me holding you down?”

A breeze suddenly washes in through the open balcony window, and the shiver that runs through me is practically convulsive.

All three men laugh out loud. I blush.

Zack nods, satisfied. “I want to try something with you. Hang on a sec.”

He slips off the bed and walks to the wardrobe. I hear him rummaging around, and then he appears a few seconds later, holding a black bundle. “Here. What do you think of these?” He shows me a handful of strips of glossy black fabric, about as wide as my hand, probably a metre long each.

I touch one. “What are they?”

Zack hands one to Luke. “Care to demonstrate?”

“Gladly.” Luke takes the fabric and wraps it a few times around my wrist. Then he loops the ends around his hand and tugs my arm to the headboard, tying my wrist loosely to the bedpost.

I frown. “What—”

Before I can finish my sentence, Josh leans forward and tugs down the front of my shirt, burying his face in my chest. I choke and squirm as he licks a hot line down my ribcage, but the movement just tugs at the fabric holding me in place. I can’t move. I’m completely powerless as Josh pulls my cool breast into his hot mouth, looking up at me through his lashes.

“Y-you want to tie me up?” I gasp, twitching on Luke’s knee.

“You think you’d like that?” Zack asks, his voice gruff. “You mentioned wanting to try it before. Dunno if you were just kidding, but it could be good for you.”

“*That’s* your lesson?!” I sputter. “Zack, what the Hell?!”

He shrugs. “I want to see you give up control for a bit. You’re tightly strung, lass, and I want to unwind you. Let us handle everythin’.”

“I-is being in control a bad thing?” I ask, flinching as Luke slides a hand between my legs. My head tips back. “*God.*”

“Of your business? No. Of your life? Usually not. But in relationships?” Zack nods. “Aye. It can be a bad thing, if you refuse to let go of it. You’ve done great at opening up emotionally with us recently, but that really ain’t the crux of the problem, is it?” He smooths a palm down my hair, watching as I tense slightly. “It’s in the bedroom you get all knotted up. I think this is your last line of defence. If you learn to give up your body — not just to anyone, mind, but to people you actually trust — I think it’ll be good for you.” He tilts his head, looking at me. “You haven’t got to, of course. But d’you reckon you’d enjoy it?”

“I...” I look between the three of them, panting slightly. My heart is suddenly hammering in my chest. Josh flutters a kiss over my sternum as Luke slips his hand under the waistband of my pants. I tug at the restraints and moan. “Yes. I’d enjoy it.”

Zack grins. “Great. Then we’ve got a lesson to start.”

FORTY-NINE

LAYLA

Five minutes later, the food has been cleared away, and Luke is laying me down on the bed. He insisted on undressing me himself, and my bare skin tingles as he settles me in the silky sheets. Nerves thump through me as he straddles my hips, taking my hands. “Up here,” he says quietly.

I don’t resist as he leads my wrists to the bed’s headboard. Zack passes him the cloth, and satin slips over my sensitive skin as Luke carefully knots my wrists to the metal rails, his eyes intent. I squirm, pressing my thighs together as heat flushes through me. I can’t believe this is actually happening. I don’t know if I’m more turned on or scared.

Luke pulls back, admiring his work. “Test,” he orders. I obediently pull on the restraints. Shock jolts through me when I realise how tight he’s made them. They’re not painful, but I have no give at all. I’m stuck to the bedposts. I can barely wriggle.

A bubble of panic rises up in my chest. I’m completely vulnerable. I have no way of defending myself if I need to. I’ve always defended myself. I’ve always had to, what if something happens, what if I can’t get *away*—

Luke’s big hand touches my cheek. “Okay?” He asks quietly, dipping his head so only I can hear. I look into his face and nod slowly, breathing out.

I’m okay. I don’t need to take care of myself. I trust the guys. They’ll take care of me.

As soon as that thought hits me, my entire body relaxes. I don't have to worry about anything right now. Just for tonight, I can let the guys take over. I feel wetness touching between my thighs and press my legs together.

Luke nuzzles my cheek, then pulls back. "If you want them off, just tell us," he says quietly. "We'll untie you right away."

I nod. "I know."

He runs a hand through my hair. "Anything you're worried about?"

I lick my lips. "Don't call me names."

"Names, love?"

"I..." I tug again on the cloth around my wrists, my cheeks heating even more. "Don't call me your *little slut* or anything. I won't react well. I'll probably try to scratch your eyes out."

His eyes soften. He bends to kiss my palm, and I take advantage of the position, running my hands through his hair and tugging hard. He hisses, his breath coming faster. "Of course not, love. Never."

I nod firmly. "Then I'm good."

"Good girl." He gives me a quick kiss, then straightens, moving out of my line of sight. Zack takes his place, crouching next to the bed. He's stripped off his clothes, and his broad chest glows in the low light.

"Now, lass," he rumbles, his blue eyes very kind. "We're going to break you down a bit. Keep you on edge. That okay?"

I automatically try to reach him, frowning when my arms stay stuck in place. "For how long?"

"However long we want." Zack strokes some hair off my cheek. "We're gonna take you as far as you can handle. And then we'll give you as much pleasure as you can stand. It'll be worth it, I'll promise you that."

I consider him, pursing my lips. "You know, I can handle a lot."

He grins, his eyes twinkling. "Oh, pet. You really shouldn't have said that."

“Yeah?” I look down at my naked body spread out on the sheets. Josh and Luke both hover at the foot of the bed, staring at me. “Because there’s been a lot of talk and no action, so far. Can someone please just touch me?”

There’s a pause. “You heard her,” Luke says, and a tingle runs up my spine at the authority in his voice. “Touch her.”

At the foot of the bed, Josh lays down on his front on the mattress, his head between my legs. His hands squeeze my calves comfortingly, and my toes curl as I feel his breath against my wet sex. Blood pounds through me as he gently parts my lower lips with his thumbs.

“Look how you open up for him,” Luke says quietly. My cheeks get even hotter. “You’re so pretty, sweetheart.”

Josh leans forward and blows lightly over my engorged bud. I try to clap my thighs together, and Zack tuts.

“Nope. We can’t have that, muffin. Hold on, we’ll just get your legs, too.”

“*What?*” I sputter, but before I know it, both of my legs are being gently pulled apart. I feel the cool slip of fabric over my skin as someone ties my ankles to the bedposts. I try to crane my neck to see who, but it strains my muscles, and I can’t get a good look in the dark room, so I just flop back onto the pillows and listen to my hammering heart.

That’s what this is about, right? Trust. I don’t have to know who’s doing what to me. I know that all three men will take care of me.

The hands leave my ankles, and I just lie there for a second, splayed out. Zack has left the glass doors to the balcony open, and with my legs pulled so wide apart, I can feel the cool night breeze fanning over my wet, sensitive sex. I fidget as heat builds higher in me.

“Touch me,” I order again.

Josh’s hand smooths over my thigh, and then his tongue presses against my sex, sliding between my folds in one long, hot lick. My eyes flutter shut. “More,” I say.

Low chuckles reverberate through the room. The licks keep coming, slow and steady. Josh mouths at me hotly, tracing his tongue teasingly around my slit. I squirm slightly. I'd assumed that the boys would be edging me hard; that they'd go hard and fast until I was right on the brink. But instead, they appear to be taking a much gentler approach, bringing me to a low simmer rather than a boil.

Somehow, that's even hotter.

I try to stay as still as I can, my breath coming faster as heat churns in my blood. Josh's tongue flicks over my hood, sending a sharp spark through me, and a moan falls out of my mouth. I'm soothed with a kiss, and then I feel movement as Josh pulls back, and someone else steps forward to take his place. I know it's Zack when I feel the rough friction of his beard rubbing slightly against my thigh. He presses a tiny kiss to my apex, then nudges his face between my legs, resuming the gentle licking. I relax, letting him take over. The only noises in the room are my soft, breathless sighs mixed with the sound of silk sliding over silk, and the background hum of the city outside the window.

I don't know how much time passes with the boys steadily eating me, then rotating positions. Their touches stay gentle and slow, but with each new mouth on me, I feel the fire in my belly get a little hotter. Soon, I'm leaking on the expensive silk sheets, gasping for breath. Zack is between my legs when I finally start to lose it. As his tongue flutters teasingly over my entrance, sparks begin to rocket through me. I gasp as my back arches. My thighs tense. Zack notices and pushes closer, tugging me between his lips until I'm gasping and throbbing and pulsing, right on the brink, my eyes falling shut...

And then he pulls away again, right as relief dangles over my head.

"What?" I gasp out.

Zack raises his head. "Sorry, pet. Don't think you're ready yet. You can handle a Hell of a lot more than this, remember?"

I flop my head back on the pillow. "*Ugh.*"

There's more laughter, and then Zack's mouth presses back between my legs, taking my breath away.

The cycle continues. The guys bring me to the brink two, three, four, five times, licking and nibbling at me gently until my whole body is burning and shaking and coiling up for the explosion — and then they pull away, leaving me unrelieved and increasingly desperate.

My frustration is steadily building. The sixth time it happens, I can't hold in my thin whine as Luke's hot mouth disappears, right on the brink of my climax.

A hand squeezes my thigh. "You're good," Luke says quietly. Risking the pain in my neck, I strain to see him. The sight of his silvery hair curled up against my belly has my thighs clenching. I ache to squeeze my legs together, but the fabric at my ankles is holding me so tightly that all I can do is cant my hips up and rub frantically against his mouth. He groans, sucking on my throbbing lower lips, then puts a heavy hand on my belly, pushing me back down.

"Stay still," he orders.

"You can grind on him all ya want, lass," Zack says above me, sounding amused. "It'll just make it worse. He won't let you come."

I choke back a sob, trying to focus on his words, but all I can think about is coming. My brain is slipping into a heady, needy haze. How long can they possibly keep doing this?

"In fact," he muses, "just for that, I think we'd better up the ante a bit. Josh, get up here."

There are some shuffling sounds, then Josh and Zack join me at the head of the bed, kneeling on either side of the mattress.

"Suck on her nips," Zack orders. "I wanna see if we can make her scream."

Josh reaches down and weighs one of my breasts in his big hand, squeezing slightly. My body jerks again in the restraints.

“God,” Zack mutters. “I love how sensitive she is. Don’t worry, honey. It might take a while, but we’ll sort you out.”

His smug look is enough to strengthen my resolve. “Fine,” I force out through gritted teeth. “Bring it on.”

FIFTY

LAYLA

Sixty minutes later, my face is wet with tears. My whole body is shaking uncontrollably, hot and cold washing over me in big shivery waves. I'm covered in sweat; it's building under my hair, rolling down my thighs, sticking the slippery silk sheets to my bare skin. My sex is clenching desperately, pulsing and weeping all over the bed. I'm so empty I ache, deep in my womb.

Between my legs, Luke gives me another leisurely lick, tracing the tip of his tongue across my entrance, dipping inside. I choke, trying to slam my thighs together, to hold his head there, but my bound ankles just rattle the bedframe uselessly. He gives me a feather-light kiss, fluttering his lips teasingly over my sensitive, sucking flesh, and I cry out, tugging at the bonds.

I'm exhausted. I've been balanced on the very edge of release for what feels like forever. The guys have spent the last hour taking turns to eat me. Right now, Zack and Josh are both kneeling by the mattress at my side, kissing their ways up and down my chest as Luke takes his time between my legs.

I thought I'd be able to handle it, but I can't. I feel dizzy. The ache in me has sharpened to actual pain. As each minute passes, I get closer and closer to my breaking point. I stare at the ceiling, tied down and splayed out, chest heaving.

Luke licks me again. At my side, Zack starts nibbling at my neck, grumbling in approval as I tremble and twist away from him, overwhelmed. Tilting my head, I look out of the big glass doors at the night sky outside. The city noise

has died down now, all of the late-evening commuters gone. The lights in the windows of the opposite office buildings have all switched off. But I'm still here.

"Please," I choke out. "Please, just let me..."

"Yeah?" Zack murmurs in my ear. "You wanna come?"

I nod furiously. I'm too far gone to be embarrassed about begging. All I can think of right now is coming.

Josh kisses my boob. "She wants to come, Luke."

Laughing, Luke buries his face in me, his fingers gripping hard into my legs. I cry out as he starts devouring me even faster, drinking down my wetness, roughing his tongue over my throbbing hood over and over again. Simultaneously, Josh and Zack both speed up their movements, pinching and plucking at my boobs harder. I shout in relief, dropping my head back against the pillow, waiting for the sweet relief of release. Finally, finally, they're going to let me come. I let my eyes fall shut...

And then Luke pulls away again, when I'm right at my peak.

"No!" I shout, as the warm glow inside me fades away again. "Please! Please, God, please..." All of a sudden, I start to cry, big heaving sobs that shake right out from my chest.

I'm shocked at myself. I don't know why I'm crying. I'm not sad. I'm not even upset. I'm just turned on, and frustrated, and right at the end of my rope. There's too much pressure boiling up in me, I have to release it somehow. If I don't get to come soon, I'm going to scream. I rub myself against the mattress furiously, searching for any kind of friction, but my damp skin just slips over the silk.

"Shh." Josh says, sitting up and wiping my cheeks. "Shh, sweetheart." He leans in for a kiss. "It's okay."

I shake my head mutely. It's not okay. My whole body is trembling, pounding, *hurting*. I'm so on edge that I spasm as he strokes his hand soothingly over my hip. "Please," I gasp. "Please, please."

“Zack, she’s had enough,” Luke says, kneeling down at the foot of the bed and rubbing his cheek against my thigh.

“Aye,” Zack says. “You have. C’mere, precious.” I feel hands on my wrists, tugging at the fabric, and then my arms are gently lowered to my sides. At my feet, Luke is untying my ankles. Finally able to move again, I flop back on the mattress, staring up at the ceiling. The men murmur over my head for a moment, then the mattress shifts and creaks as Zack sits down on the bed next to me, scooping me up in his muscled arms. I bury my face in his bare chest, rubbing into his chest hair as I try to catch my breath. I’m sopping and pulsing and desperate between my legs, so sore and sensitive I could scream.

“Please.”

“You did so good,” he says, rocking me. “Are you ready to come now, love?”

“*Please*,” I rasp. “Oh, God. Please, please.”

He gives me one long, hot kiss that has me keening and trying to press closer — then he lays me out gently on the bed and stretches his muscled body over mine. His erection is a hard press between my damp thighs. I squirm my hips against his, trying desperately to push him into me.

He laughs. “Easy, lass. Hold on to me.” He takes my arms and wraps them around his neck, then finally, *finally*, guides his thick, smooth head to my fluttering entrance.

As soon as his hard rod pushes inside of me, cleaving through my swollen inner walls, I come immediately. My scream of relief is muffled into his neck as my entire body shakes uncontrollably against him. He makes a garbled noise deep in his chest, holding me closer as I shudder over and over, painful waves convulsing through my overstimulated, sweaty body. It feels like my release lasts forever. Every minute of getting tortured until I was hot and aching is now finally getting paid back, and the sensation is so strong it carries me away.

Zack talks me through it. “That’s it,” he murmurs in my ear. “We’ll have you coming so many times you forget your own damn name.”

The thought is so hot I almost come again right there. I peer over his shoulder. “Where—”

I see two sets of eyes fixed on me. Josh and Luke have both sat down in chairs opposite the bed and are watching intently.

“Don’t worry about them,” Zack murmurs. “They’ll get their turns. And they love to watch.” He bites my cheek. “Hard and fast, okay, love?”

I choke and nod, and he pulls out a fraction. I have a few seconds to wince at the horrible empty feeling before he grunts and slams back into me. His full, heavy balls slap against my pelvis. Heat jolts through my body, and I scrabble at his back as his thick length rubs my inner walls, sending sparks through me.

True to his word, Zack screws me hard and rough. I flop against him, each thrust jerking my body around like a rag doll. Even though his movements are brutal, he holds me gently, cupping my cheek tenderly. His big thumb strokes up my cheekbone as he rams into me harder.

“You’re perfect, L,” he pants between thrusts. “Always knew you were.”

“Come,” I pant. “Oh God. Come, Zack. You need to come.” Already, I can feel my second release bubbling up inside me. I writhe on his dick, gasping and sweating, desperate to reach it.

“No,” he retorts.

I blink up at him. “W-what?”

He tightens his grip on my hips, his nails digging into my skin, and changes the angle. I gasp, choking on air.

“Made you wait so long,” he forces out through gritted teeth. “Now I wanna see you come. Over and over. We ain’t stopping.”

I bite his shoulder, muffling my scream as another release hits me like a lightning strike. It’s too much. I’ve never felt so much pleasure. It feels so good it hurts. I spasm against him, shuddering painfully. When my insides finally stop clutching, I try to twist away, but Zack won’t let me, thudding hard and fast into my G spot. I’m so wet from my hour of torture that with

each thrust, my channel makes a slick sucking sound, my own arousal sticking my thighs together.

“You like it like this, sugar?” He breathes in my ear. “You like giving up control? You like giving yourself over to me? To do what I want with you?”

“*Zack,*” I moan, trembling as another wave of feverish heat sweeps through me. I’m not sure if I’m coming again, or I just haven’t stopped. It feels like this is one long, drawn out release, rising and falling with every movement of Zack’s hard rod inside me. Zack’s mouth crashes into mine as he keeps on thrusting into me, harder and harder and harder. His thick thighs are starting to twitch hard against mine. I can feel him losing his rhythm. He’s almost there. Desperately, I try to remember every kegel exercise I’ve ever learned, bearing down on him, squeezing hard.

He finally breaks, coming with a roar and spurting me full of his hot, slippery seed. I cry out as he pulses inside me, slamming into me so hard I can barely breathe. I cling to Zack’s broad shoulders as we shudder together, letting the hot wave of pleasure sweep us both away.

FIFTY-ONE

JOSH

Zack finally slumps over Layla, his chest heaving as they both collapse onto the bed, gasping for breath.

I don't say anything, my mouth drying out as I look at the two of them. Jesus, my balls hurt. It's been a long time since I've had to see a show like that. Luke and I both watch wordlessly as Zack slowly pulls out of Layla and bends to press a few fluttery kisses over her back, before stepping back and limping towards the bathroom. Layla lies curled up on the sheets, shaking, her skin glowing under the light from the bedside lamp. Her pale hair is sticking to her forehead with sweat, and her thighs are wet with come.

Luke and I stand up as one.

I'm so turned on I'm dizzy. My heart is pounding. I'm aching. My dick is swollen and leaking as I sit next to her on the bed, stroking her hair away from her face.

She looks blissed out. Pink-cheeked and happy. Her lashes are spiky, and there's some makeup trailing down her cheek. I go to wipe it off, and she pushes her face into my palm. I can't help but laugh.

"You're sweet," I tell her.

"Shut up." She nips at my fingertip tiredly. "Get here." She reaches for my crotch. Luke and I both stripped when we had her tied up, and she takes advantage of my lack of pants, grabbing at me.

I laugh, pushing her head away.

Luke plucks a bottle of water out of the mini-fridge and hands it to her. “Drink, first.”

She sits up with a groan, flopping against the pillows and taking the bottle. “You always take care of me.”

“Yes,” Luke says steadily. “And I will as long as you’ll let me. Drink, Layla.”

She studies him over the rim of the bottle, then twists off the cap and takes a few long gulps. I watch her throat move as she swallows.

“Good girl,” Luke says, when she finishes and sets the bottle aside. “Get on all fours.”

She groans. “Help.”

I wrap my arms around her waist and help her roll onto her front. As she kneels, I see a flash of her sex. She’s pink and still twitching, her lips glistening and dripping with Zack’s come. She looks like a *dream*. I take a deep breath, then glance at Luke.

He smirks. “Love, can I have your mouth again?”

“Seriously?” I ask, hardly believing my luck.

“She’s all yours. If that’s okay, sweetheart?”

Layla nods dreamily, and I squeeze her hip, trying to think past the rushing in my ears. “Alright then. C’mon. Up. Hands and knees.” She kneels obediently, and I stroke my hands over her bumcheeks, squeezing slightly. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

“Ain’t she lovely?” Zack says behind me, coming out of the bathroom. Heading over to the armchair in the corner of the room, he slumps down in it, stretching out his arms and watching us with lidded eyes. “No wonder your shop does so well, pet, with that body modelling the clothes.”

“I was hoping it was more my design skills,” Layla says drily.

“That’s the bum that sold a thousand knickers,” he announces, completely ignoring her.

Swearing under my breath, I carefully trail my fingers between her legs, stroking the delicate flesh. She clenches her thighs, fidgeting as I slip my fingertip around her flushed, glistening slit.

“Please,” she says quietly. “I need you. Feels empty.”

I can’t argue with that. Gripping onto her hips, I line myself up and push gently into her slick heat. I expect there to be more resistance, but she’s so wet with Zack’s come and her own juices that I can slide my head right inside her.

The sound that falls out of Layla’s mouth almost has me coming right there. “God,” she murmurs, one hand flying back to grip my arm. “God.”

“Good?” I ask, trying to keep still.

She nods, her hips jerking slightly as she tries to get used to the sensation. “More.”

Obediently, I push a little further into her. *God*. Even after screwing Zack, she’s still so *tight*. Tight and wet and blazing hot. I grit my teeth and shove myself forward, sinking further into her until she moans.

“God. You’re so *deep*,” she chokes out. “It feels so *good*.”

Zack’s booming laugh sounds from the corner, but I ignore him, setting my jaw and pushing deeper into Layla. Her slick, tight channel slowly parts, letting me push inside inch by tortuous inch, until I finally bottom out in her. She sags under me, her hands clawing at the sheets.

I shut my eyes. It feels like being squeezed in a vice. A hot, wet, slippery vice, that flutters and pulses around me as I settle my weight more comfortably. *God*.

“I won’t last long,” I tell her.

“Me neither,” she pants, twisting her hands in the sheets. “Luke, get here.”

Luke steps forward. Immediately, Layla lunges for him, swallowing him down. He sputters, cupping her cheeks, obviously trying not to thrust into her mouth as she runs her lips sloppily up and down his shaft. Trying to start off gentle, I roll my hips. She yowls as I shove myself deep inside her, her whole

body shaking and twisting. Ignoring the delicious fluttering around my dick, I pick up the pace, steadily pounding into her. Her sharp, muffled gasps start to mix with Luke's low groans.

We can't keep it up for long. I wish it would have lasted longer, but I'm too bottled up, and Layla is far too sensitive after being teased for an hour straight. It barely takes two minutes before she's writhing against me, her thighs soaked with arousal, whimpering and sighing around Luke. Luke looks like he's right on the edge. "Layla," he orders, sifting through her hair. "Tell me what you want."

"Come on me," she manages to say, swallowing him down deeper. Apparently, that's all he needed to hear. He yanks out of her mouth a second before he's about to lose control, spraying his come over her chest in thick ropes. Layla pants as the hot liquid dribbles over her, glazing her soft, white breasts in come. The sight is so goddamn hot it tips me over the edge.

"L—" I start, and she purposefully screws her arse back into me, clenching around me. I fist a hand in her hair, throwing my head back as I thrust into her one last time. Plunging as deep as I can, I finally lose it. Stars burst behind my eyes, and my dick pulses as I flood into her, spurting deep inside her. She sputters as I fill her up, her hands clawing at the sheets as she gasps and comes one last time. Luke and I both grip onto her, holding her shakily as she convulses, shouting and sobbing.

FIFTY-TWO

JOSH

Eventually, she flops onto the mattress between us, gasping. She's a mess. Sweaty and wet all over. Frothy come drips down her front and slips out from between her legs. Little shivers keep flinching through her, like she's getting shocked.

I pull out of her as gently as I can. Layla shivers at the gush of warm liquid that drips over her skin. For a few seconds, no one says anything.

"How are the sheets?" She mumbles eventually, and I laugh breathlessly.

"Impressively clean," Luke says. "We'll have to dry you off, though. Don't move."

She obediently lays there, panting, while we pluck tissues from the box on the nightstand and carefully wipe off her hot skin. Luke strips off the crumpled bedding and replaces it with a set lying folded in the wardrobe. I slide a tissue down Layla's peachy bum, soaking up the come dripping over her skin.

"Leave it," she groans. "Want you inside me." She's still trembling.

"Yeah?" I climb into bed next to her. "Are you okay? Cold?"

She shakes her head and burrows into my neck. "Don't think so."

"You're shaking," Luke says quietly.

“You broke me,” she says with a sigh. I kiss her sweaty temple, wrapping the sheets tighter around her and tugging her into my arms. Luke lies down on her other side, sandwiching her in. She slowly calms down between us, her shivers slowing, then stopping. I keep stroking her hair, catching my breath.

“Is she alright?” Luke asks after a few moments. “She’s gone quiet.”

I check her face and smile. “She’s falling asleep.”

“I guess we wore her out,” he murmurs, reaching across the bedside table to flick off the lamp.

“Mm.” I pull her a little closer to me. “I missed this.”

He’s still for a moment, then nods. “Me, too.”

Zack is still up, moving around the dark room. I hear him fumbling around in the bathroom, then dropping to his knees next to the bed and rummaging through his suitcase. I glance at the digital clock glowing on the bedside table. It’s past midnight. April 5th.

No wonder he can’t sleep.

“Are you going to the bar?” I ask into the darkness. “Need me to go with you?”

He pauses. “Why would I go to the bar? Gotta be fresh to see Robbie get hitched tomorrow.” He pulls something out of his case and heads to the wardrobe. “Forgot to hang my suit.”

“Come to bed,” Layla mumbles into my chest, stirring.

I hear the wardrobe door shut. “But all the good spots are gone, lass.”

I sigh, trying to peel Layla off me. “You can hold her, if you like.”

The mattress dips on my right. “Nah, man.” He rolls so his back is to me. “But I’m cuddlin’ her tomorrow.”

“Of course,” I say quietly.

“M not a teddy bear,” Layla protests tiredly, snuggling closer into me. “I get to pick who I hug.”

I thread my fingers through her hair, my eyes wide open in the dark. Six weeks ago, I'd never have imagined that I could be here, with her in my arms.

Again, that old pang of guilt runs through me. Would she have agreed to do this if she'd known I had feelings for her?

I don't know.

Pushing my worries about Layla to the back of my mind, I close my eyes, letting myself drift off. I'm almost asleep when a phone beeps.

Zack groans, rolling over and slapping around the bedside table. There are some muffled thuds as complimentary chocolates fall onto the carpet, but eventually he manages to grab the offending phone. "S'yours, L," he mutters.

She hums, not moving from my chest.

He rubs his eyes, squinting at the bright screen. "You're gonna wanna read it. S'an email. From Anna Bidet, or whatever her name is."

"What?" Layla bolts upright in bed, lunging for the phone. I wince and sit up as she rubs against my crotch, pulling her against my chest. "What is it?" I ask, brushing her dishevelled hair out of her face so she can see the screen.

"Oh my God," she breathes, her body humming with excitement as she reads the email. "Anna's flying me over. The ticket is for next Sunday."

Next Sunday. My stomach drops. That's in eight days. Eight days, and she'll be out of the country.

"How long will you be out there?" Luke asks into his pillow.

"She doesn't know." Layla turns to look at me in the dark. "Crap, what if it clashes with the podcast?"

"We ain't recording long-distance," Zack grumbles. "There's no way to get the audio mixed the same. Tried it before when Luke went to visit his family. It sounded like he was at the bottom of a well."

“The convention is next Saturday,” I say slowly, reaching up to trace a finger across Layla’s ribs. “Maybe we should finish up your segment then.”

Zack goes still. “What?”

I swallow, my throat tight. “We could go out with a bang,” I say, trying to sound enthusiastic. “Do the finale at the live show. We can publish it for listeners later.”

“It would be a good way to wrap up the segment,” Luke agrees tiredly. “People will get to meet Layla, ask her questions.”

“It’s too soon,” Zack argues. “PodFest is like, a week away. We can’t end the whole segment then.”

“We said it would only be six weeks,” I remind him. He tosses me a glare.

I know what he’s feeling. He doesn’t want to let Layla go. He doesn’t want this ‘experiment’ to end. God knows I don’t either, but it’s not like we have a choice. This was only ever meant to be a short-term arrangement. We agreed on that.

If Layla were any other woman, I’d assume that we’d just keep sleeping together. Everyone’s enjoying themselves; there’s no reason we can’t carry on a casual relationship. But Layla won’t want to waste away the next few months screwing around. As soon as we’ve done that live show, I’m sure she’ll be back on her dating grind, flicking through dating apps and eating dinner with two men a week until she finds the perfect guy for her.

I don’t know how I’m going to handle watching her fall for someone else. But I have to.

“The live show,” Layla says. “Yeah, that’s perfect.” She bounces a bit on my lap. “I hope I’ll be back in time for my class reunion. I wanna show off.”

I clear my throat. “Do... you want me to go with you to your reunion? As your plus-one?”

“Nope. My classmates already think I’m a slag, I can’t bring my boss with me.” She squints at Zack and Luke. “I can’t take you guys, either. They’ll think I’m a WAG if I go with Zack, and God knows what will happen if I

show up on a teacher's arm. I can do it myself. Oh my *God*, I already have so many design ideas for Anna." She leans forward, trying to slide out of my arms.

Luke wraps an arm around her waist and tugs her back down. "Not now," he orders. "Sleep."

"But—"

"No." He rolls her closer to me, so she's lying between us, and kisses her cheek. "We'll work it out tomorrow."

For a second, I think she's going to argue. Then she relaxes, laying her head on my pillow and cuddling into my neck. I feel her breath flutter against my skin. "You guys are my favourite people," she says in the dark.

I close my eyes, my heart pounding in my chest. Zack and Luke murmur back to her. And I just lie there in the darkness.

I have to tell her how I feel. As soon as possible.

I'll tell her tomorrow. I have a wedding to deal with first.

FIFTY-THREE

LAYLA

“Are you sure this dress is okay?” I ask the next morning, twisting to check myself out in the dressing-table mirror. Zack rolls over on the bed and looks up at me through half-closed eyes. He looks great today, in a broad-shouldered black suit, his Viking-blond hair loose around his face. “Very nice,” he rumbles, stretching out to grab my hip. “Take it off.”

I bat him away, trying to adjust the hem of the dress.

It’s about quarter-to-twelve, and the wedding is due to start at half past. Josh left this morning to help the wedding party set up, while me and the other boys stayed in the room. After last night, all I really wanted to do was stay in bed all day — I’m exhausted and feeling a lot cuddlier than usual — but instead, I got up at 8 o’clock to start getting ready. I’ve been shaving and plucking and curling ever since.

I’m nervous as I study my reflection in the mirror. When I picked out this dress, I thought it was perfect for a wedding. It’s a silky, mint-green piece that melts against my skin and makes my eyes glow. Considering most of my wardrobe is black or red, it’s the lightest, prettiest bit of formalwear I have. But now that I’ve put it on, I feel like a hooker. The flimsy fabric falls down to my mid-thigh and clings to my curves. “I didn’t realise how short it was. Or how *low*.” I fuss with the neckline, trying to tug it up. Have my boobs gotten bigger since I bought it? “Do you think it’s too... revealing?”

Zack snorts. “Since when do you care about that?”

He's right. I usually don't. But today's different. If I'm honest, I'm dreading seeing Amy again after all these years. She'll probably have invited a bunch of other teachers from Emery High, too. If I show up looking like this, God knows what they'll think.

I sigh, my shoulders slumping. "You're right. I guess it doesn't really matter. Amy already thinks I'm a slag. I may as well lean into it."

Luke looks up. He's sitting on the other side of the bed, fixing a pair of silver cufflinks into the sleeves of his shirt. "Amy doesn't think that, love," he says woodenly.

I glance at him in the mirror. His face is grey.

I'm worried about him. He's doing a good job of acting like he's okay, but he's been quieter than usual ever since we woke up. Earlier this morning, I went into the bathroom to brush my teeth while he was shaving. At least, I thought he would be shaving. Really, he was just gripping the sink, staring blankly at the wall as the tap gushed hot water down the plughole. He looked like he was about to throw up.

"How do you know?" I ask. "You never spoke to her about me, did you?"

"She wouldn't be cruel enough to judge a teenage girl like that," he insists, wiping a hand over his face. "If she didn't help you back in high school, I'm sure it was because she was just as preoccupied with the divorce as me."

I look back at my reflection. "Hm," I say, reaching for my mascara wand. "Okay."

We lapse into silence again as I touch up my makeup for the fifth time, trying to breathe through my nerves. Luke checks his watch again, his face grim.

Zack looks between us. "You guys know you have to look happy at weddings, right? I've seen cheerier people at cremations." Neither of us say anything. He sighs, sitting up. "Alright. Enough of this. I know what will cheer you up." He rolls lazily off the bed, pulling his suitcase out from under the mattress. I watch as he extracts a pink silky pouch. He tugs the ribbon to open it, shaking out a string of silver beads. I recognise them immediately. They're from my Sinsters gift box. "I brought you a present, honeybun."

“That’s not a present,” I point out. “They were already mine.”

“My gift is the gift of putting them inside you,” he informs me. “Alright, bend over, lass.”

My mouth falls open. “But... right now?”

His mouth ticks up. “Aye.”

“I... you can’t make me... it’s a wedding!” I mean, at least it’s secular, so the ceremony isn’t in a church. Maybe I won’t get drop-shipped directly to Hell when I die. But still.

“Oh, I won’t make you come. That would be very rude, on someone else’s big day,” he agrees. “But they’ll just keep you...” He leans forward and presses a fleeting kiss on my eyelashes. “On edge.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Luke’s fingers fumble on his tie. He swears under his breath as he messes up the knot, yanking it loose again.

I consider him. “Will me squirming in my seat distract you from how awful today is gonna be for you?”

His expression darkens. “Don’t do it for me, love.”

“Yes, then.” I sigh. The idea is tempting. It will certainly make the next few hours more bearable if I have a distraction. “But what about Josh?” I know he’s excited for his brother to get married. I don’t want him to think I’m being disrespectful.

Zack snorts. “Josh won’t give a monkey’s. We’d better not tell him before the ceremony, though. Don’t want him getting hard in front of everyone.”

“Oh.” My cheeks feel hot as I look at the smooth, silver beads. “I... Okay, then.”

Luke dips his head. “Really?” He asks, his voice duskiest than usual. I shiver.

“Yes.”

His lips curve up. All of a sudden, the exhaustion has drained out of him. He looks alive and hungry. “Alright. Zack, may I?”

“Course, mate,” Zack says, graciously handing the beads over.

Luke comes to stand behind me, placing a gentle hand on the small of my back and turning me towards the bed. “Bend,” he says quietly, stroking a hand up my back. His fingertips prickle over my skin, sending tingles flicking down my spine. My mouth suddenly dry, I bend over the bed.

“Lift up your dress.”

I do as he says. He slips off my underwear, then takes one of my hands and leads it to the bed’s wooden headboard. “Hold,” he orders.

I do, tightening my grip on the bedframe. “You know you turn into a total caveman in bed, right?”

Zack laughs, kneeling next to me on the floor. “He’s all ‘Kneel. Lick. Blow.’ I know you can do whole sentences, mate. You’re well clever.”

Luke gives him an imperious look. “Stop talking and open her up.”

“Right on.” Without further ado, Zack leans forwards and buries his face into my sex. I gasp, my eyes falling shut as he teases my entrance, his tongue dipping into me. I twist my hips towards him so his face is practically buried in the warm blonde curls between my legs, and his mouth opens on a pant. He wraps his big hand around my ankle, groaning against my skin.

I’m distracted from the spike of pleasure when something cold and hard touches my lips. My eyes flutter back open. Luke is dangling the string of balls in front of my face, his eyes dark as he watches my reaction. I focus on them, spinning prettily on the silver chain.

“Suck,” he orders, his voice very deep.

Obediently, I open my mouth and take the first ball inside. It’s hard and surprisingly cold as I roll my tongue over the smooth surface, getting it warm and wet enough to put in me.

“And the next one.”

Not taking my eyes off of his, I open my mouth wider, accepting the next ball. And the next. There are five on the string, and I don’t think I could fit all of them in my mouth, but he seems to be satisfied with three. He taps my

bottom lip with his index finger.

“Open,” he orders. I do, and he carefully slips the beads out, dipping to press a chaste kiss to my lips. “Good girl,” he says quietly.

A shiver wracks my whole body. He touches my cheek gently, then turns to Zack.

“How is she looking?” He asks. “Is she ready?”

“I’m drowning down here,” Zack says happily, pulling back to look at us. His face is wet and pink.

I blush. Luke smirks. “Get up,” he orders Zack, who stands, moving aside. Luke takes his place at my back and pushes me more firmly against the mattress, so I’m bent, bare ass in the air. Cold air touches the wetness between my legs, making me shiver.

“Relax,” Luke says in my ear, dragging the string of balls between my folds, getting them slick and wet. “Are you still sore from yesterday, love?”

I nod, the memory of last night sending a flutter through me. I am sore. Sore and sensitive and needy. “I like it,” I say, closing my eyes as he gently pushes the first weighted bead against my entrance. There’s a moment of resistance, and then it slides smoothly inside of me. I clench my thighs, shifting at the odd sensation.

“Okay?” Luke asks. I nod, and he kisses my temple again, pressing the next bead into me. It clinks against the first, adding to the heaviness in my womb, and I flinch slightly. Luke soothes me with another kiss.

Slowly, one by one, all five beads are pushed into my throbbing channel. My body tenses as I start to feel more and more full, the pressure building in me.

When all of the beads are inside me, Luke pulls back and kisses the nape of my neck, carefully tugging down the hem of my dress. “How does it feel?” He asks quietly.

I stand and press my hand to my stomach. It’s an odd feeling. Heavy and full. It’s not enough to make me come, but it’s definitely enough to keep me on edge. It’s like being constantly teased every time I shift my weight. I bite my

lip.

“I, um.” My cheeks burn under his intense eyes. My brain feels scrambled.
“Good?”

He laughs, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me into a hug. I breathe in the sweet scent of paper and tea.

“How the Hell am I gonna talk to people?” I complain into his shirt. “I can’t even think.”

He pulls himself away from me reluctantly and nods at the high silver heels lying by the bed. “Wear those,” he says, “and I assure you. Neither will we. We can all look stupid together.”

I nod, taking a deep breath. “Right. Okay.” I pick up my clutch and carefully slide my feet into the shoes. “Let’s get going, boys.” Trying to act a lot more put-together than I feel, I push back my shoulders and head to the door.

“Layla?” Luke says after me.

“Mm?” I turn.

He’s watching me with amusement all over his handsome face. His eyes flicker down to my stomach. “What’s your dress made of?”

I blink at him, confused. “Mulberry silk.”

“And what happens when silk gets wet?” He prompts.

“I... it can get discoloured. Sometimes stained. It’s hard to wash. Why?”

“Hm.” He turns to the dresser and pulls something out, throwing it at me. I catch it. It’s a balled-up bit of fabric. “You might want to wear some underwear, then.”

“Aye. Wouldn’t want your pretty dress getting ruined,” Zack agrees, crossing the room towards me and fondly stroking a hand over my behind. The clench between my legs is almost painful, and I have to shift my weight again, wincing as the beads press deep inside me.

This wedding is going to be absolute torture.

FIFTY-FOUR

LAYLA

We arrive at the ceremony with minutes to spare.

The wedding is being held in the hotel's ballroom; a massive, high-ceilinged hall lined with fat marble pillars. Long swathes of white gauze hang around the ceiling, and huge bunches of pink and cream flowers spill out of patterned vases arranged decoratively through the room. Rows of white chairs have been set up in lieu of pews, and a soft pink carpet has been rolled down the aisle. At the end, an officiant dressed in white is standing behind a fabric-covered table, smiling benignly around at the guests as he flips through a thick book.

I take Luke's hand, squeezing his fingers. As we walk down the aisle towards an empty row, I see people turning and staring. An old man looks at Luke pityingly, shaking his head. A grandma in a lilac blazer and matching knee-length skirt turns to her neighbour, raising her eyebrows meaningfully.

And then their eyes turn to me.

Cold slips down my spine as the whispers start. As we pass a row full of elderly women, I hear one voice rise up out of the muffled murmuring, cutting through the hush of the hall.

"Very young for him, isn't she?"

Heat touches my cheeks. I look down, suddenly feeling sick.

There's a tiny tug at my hand, and I glance up at Luke. His face is creased with concern. "Hey," he murmurs. "You okay?"

“I feel like everyone is staring at me,” I mutter.

Luke laughs. “They’re staring at *me*, sweetheart.”

“Mm.” I look around the room. I recognise a few teachers from high school, and my stomach twists uncomfortably.

Luke gives me a level look, then leans in to press a kiss to my cheek. I breathe in a lungful of his aftershave and feel my heart rate slow.

I’m fine. Everything’s fine.

We sit down a few rows from the front. Zack groans as he settles into his tiny chair. “This is discrimination,” he mutters under his breath, shifting to try and get comfortable. “Not everyone’s got legs like a goddamn garden gnome.”

I pinch his side to shut him up, and he gives me a heated look, setting a heavy hand on my thigh, a little too high up to be socially acceptable. My stomach flips. The music starts, and we all stand as the officiant makes a quick speech. I try to pay attention, but I can’t focus. All I can think about is the heavy weight of the balls inside me. It feels ridiculously naughty to have them rubbing inside me while no one else knows. Zack glances at me out of the corner of his eye and smirks.

Finally, the officiant’s speech is over, and we all sit again. I squirm a little in my seat, trying to find a comfortable position as the wedding procession starts.

The groom is first. Josh’s brother, Rob, looks just like him. He’s probably not as tall, but he has the same curling dark hair and sculpted cheekbones. Unlike Josh, though, his face seems to be set in a permanent smile. His brown eyes sparkle as he looks around at the crowd, his hands jammed into his tux pockets. The wedding party steps forward next; a long row of men in dark suits and pretty girls in pastel dresses. I stare as Josh sweeps by, looking delicious in an inky black suit, a dark-haired woman on his arm.

“Amy’s sister,” Luke murmurs into my ear. I shiver as his breath tickles my loose hairs over my skin. “Maid of honour.”

“She’s pretty.”

“Mm.” He shoots me an amused look. “And happily married with three kids. If you were wondering.”

I roll my eyes, but my shoulders ease slightly.

Finally, Amy steps out into the aisle, clinging onto her father’s arm. My stomach sours when I see her. My old headmistress. She looks just the same as she did when I was a kid — the same sweet, doll-like face and pretty features. She reaches the end of the aisle, and Rob takes her hands. She smiles up at him, her eyes fixed on his face. They’re obviously sickeningly in love.

Luke shifts in his chair next to me, clearing his throat, and I reach out, putting my hand in his lap. He takes it, interlacing our fingers together. His face is tight.

On my other side, Zack gives me a wicked look. I raise an eyebrow wordlessly. He leans closer, casually sliding his hand up my knee — and then sticking it up my dress.

My mouth falls open. I stay still, my heart hammering, as Zack slowly slips his fingers up my thigh, coming to cup my crotch under my dress. I can’t move; that would bring too much attention to us, and the friction would probably just make my issues even worse. So I just grit my teeth and focus on the scene in front of me as Zack starts to stroke me.

My sex blooms under his light touch. I can feel my hot lips swelling, getting wetter, as he teases his fingertips over the thin cotton of my underwear. I’m still so sensitive from last night that even the lightest touch is enough to send arousal tickling inside me, making me squirm.

I glance across at Luke. He looks back at me coolly, his face perfectly calm, as if he has no idea what Zack is doing under my skirt. But he’s watching. Minutely, he jerks his head back to the front of the room. I get the message. *Pay attention.*

I swallow, turning back to look at Amy and Rob. They’re both holding hands, smiling as they listen to the officiant drone on. Zack keeps stroking me, his touch getting firmer as he draws lazy circles around my sensitive nub, and I grip the sides of my chair as I start to throb. I can feel my cheeks flushing as

my breathing gets heavier. I'm trembling. I want to touch myself. I want to yank Zack's hand away. I want to stand up and run straight back to the hotel room. I try to focus on the ceremony playing out in front of me, but all I can think about is the slowly building ache between my legs.

I can't help myself. Slowly, I start to rub against Zack's hand, twitching my hips forward slightly. The balls shift inside me; I can almost picture them clinking together as electricity bolts through me. At the exact same moment, Luke reaches out and puts a hand on my thigh. Pleasure rushes through me in a hot wave. He's only touching my *leg*, for God's sake, but all at once, it's too much. I can't help the sharp gasp that falls out of my mouth.

Zack quickly pulls his hand back, covering the noise with a forced cough into his fist. A few heads turn to face us, and I sit frozen in my seat, mortified, pressing my thighs together to try and squeeze some of the ache out of my violently pounding pussy.

I have no idea how long the ceremony lasts. It feels unusually short, but it's not like I'm paying attention. As I sit there, trying to be still and quiet, my sex won't stop clenching, over and over and over. Zack keeps his hand in my lap, tickling his fingers under the hem of my dress whenever I start to cool down. By the time the ceremony ends, I'm breathing hard and soaked.

I'm finally jolted back to reality when a round of applause goes up. I look up blearily as Rob touches under Amy's chin, dipping his head to pull her into a chaste kiss. The flower girl starts dancing around and haphazardly chucking petals everywhere. Josh bends down, laughing, and scoops her up before she collides with the bride and groom. Zack slowly withdraws his hand, patting my knee soothingly. I close my eyes and try to take some deep breaths. I feel so wet that I'm scared to stand up.

As soon as the kiss is over, the band starts up again. The crowd starts to chatter and stand. I force myself to my feet gingerly.

"Excuse me," a loud, nasally voice says behind us. "Luke Martins." Fear jolts through me. Oh God. Someone *saw*.

We all turn around. An old lady sitting in a sparkly pink mobility scooter has reversed into the aisle, and is staring at us impatiently.

“Mrs Smith,” Luke says calmly. “How nice to see you again.” He doesn’t sound particularly enthusiastic. I give him a questioning look. “Amy’s aunt,” he supplies.

The woman peers at us both from over her glasses, frowning. “What are you doing just standing there?” She demands. “Stop clinging to that young lady and help me to the bathroom. I need someone to put down the ramp for me. I don’t know why they insist on putting stairs everywhere, it’s very inconvenient.”

Luke nods. “Of course, Mrs Smith.”

I squeeze his wrist. “We’ll get you a drink,” I promise, trying to unobtrusively twist my legs together.

He pulls a face. “Don’t bother,” he mutters. “I’ll probably be a while. She likes to talk.”

“Chop chop!” Mrs Smith shouts at the top of her lungs. Luke inclines his head and follows her as she powers down the aisle towards the bathrooms.

Zack snorts, wrapping an arm around my waist. “Poor sod,” he says, giving me a cheeky grope. “C’mon. Let’s get you a drink. You look a little warm.”

I’m too turned on to protest, so I just let him drag me away. There’s a refreshments table set out along one side of the hall, full of finger food and drinks. It’s already attracting a horde of people, but they naturally make way for Zack’s huge body as he edges his way through the crowd.

“Champagne?” Zack asks, sliding a hand over the curve of my bum. “Punch?”

“You’re getting a punch in a minute,” I mutter, slapping him away. “Stop feeling me up, I’ll start dripping on the tiles, for God’s sake.”

He groans deeply, picking up the ladle for the punch bowl. “Here you go, love,” he murmurs, pouring a very generous amount into a crystal glass. As I reach for it, he brushes his stubbly cheek against mine. “We’ll stay a couple

hours, then I'll take you upstairs and set you right, yeah? We'll be back in time for dinner."

My mouth dries. Ignoring the fluttery pinch between my thighs, I take the glass off him, swilling it back in one gulp. Sweet peach juice floods my senses.

"Another?" Zack asks. He reaches out and touches his thumb under my bottom lip, wiping away a rogue drip. "God, you're so gorgeous. C'mere. Gimme a hug."

"What? I'm supposed to be here with Luke—" I trail off as he pulls me close, and I feel the hard bulge between his legs.

Jesus. My breath hitches as he rotates his hips slightly, pressing his hard-on against me. It's the tiniest little touch, but it makes stars burst behind my eyes. My entire lower stomach aches with wanting. He bends, his breath ghosting over my cheek, and drags my bottom lip into his mouth. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help it. I kiss him back.

"And *who* do we have here?" a voice suddenly comes from behind us, and I jump away from Zack, breathing hard. I know that voice.

Bracing myself, I turn to see the bride and groom coming towards us. Amy's eyes flick between me and Zack, disapproval all over her face.

FIFTY-FIVE

LAYLA

Rob looks even more like Josh up close. He's smiling brightly, and I can see he has the same dimples as his brother. But it's not him that I'm focussed on.

Amy winds her arm through Rob's and studies me assessingly, her expression blank. A trickle of cold goes down my spine as she narrows her eyes at me.

"Layla Thompson," she says slowly. "What on *Earth* are you doing here?"

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

Rob grins, slapping Zack on the back. "Thanks for coming, man. Didn't expect you to make it, if I'm honest."

Zack laughs. "I never miss an open bar. Congratulations, guys."

The two of them start chatting happily, but I can't focus on what they're saying, my eyes locked on Amy's. Memories are rolling over me in waves.

I haven't told Luke this, because I know he'll just blame himself, but Amy was one of the cruellest teachers back at Emery High. Once the bullying started, I used to spend most of my lunch breaks in her office, practically begging her to help me. I remember once I went to the office to see her, wet and crying, after one of the guys had poured water all down my shirt. As I walked into the staff room, I overheard her talking to the other teachers. *That Thompson girl wants to see me again. I don't know why she's even bothering with her A-levels — that's a girl that's bound to end up on a pole, if ever I saw one.*

It wouldn't bother me much now, but when you're a sixteen-year-old goody-two-shoes, hearing the head teacher of your school say that about you is scary. And so unbelievably embarrassing.

I swallow thickly, forcing myself to meet her gaze. "Hello, Mrs Martins."

Zack clears his throat next to me, and Josh's brother smiles. My cheeks heat.

"Oh God. Mrs Tran... I mean, um, Amy. God. I'm sorry."

Amy laughs sweetly. "It's not a problem. One of the pitfalls of being a teacher, I'm afraid. I saw one of my old students in Tesco the other day, and he called me *Miss*." She pulls a face, then glances across to Zack. "And you must be Zachary, right? Rob has told me a lot about you." Her eyes flick back to Zack's hand on the back of my neck. "So, how long have the two of you been dating?"

I shove Zack off me. "We're not. I'm actually here with Luke."

"Huh. I did see you two together earlier." Her pale eyes burn through me, and I fight the urge to step back. "Well. That's not a match I thought I'd ever see."

"Here ya go, love." Zack interrupts, passing me a glass of lemonade. "Get this down ya." He rubs my arm.

"Thanks." I tip the glass back, swallowing down the drink so fast my eyes water.

"Seriously, though, thanks for coming, man," Rob tells him over my head. "Wasn't sure you were gonna make it."

Zack wipes some lipstick off the rim of my glass and grins when I glare at him. "Why? I'm not that flaky, am I?"

"No," Rob says, smiling at a passing couple. "It's just, I know it's a tough day for you. When we were doing table arrangements, Josh said you probably wouldn't come." He smiles at Zack sympathetically. "It's good to see you getting out."

Zack goes still next to me. I watch, alarmed, as his face drains of colour.

Rob keeps talking. “Honestly, if I’d known about the date, I would’ve moved the wedding. But everything was already booked. So, yeah, I really appreciate it. I know Josh would—”

“Zack?” I ask, interrupting him. “Are you okay?”

Rob pauses. We both watch as Zack tugs at the collar of his shirt. He’s starting to breathe hard.

“I…” he clears his throat. “Yeah, I just. Can you hold this a sec?” He shoves his glass into my hand. Liquid slops over the rim and wets my fingers. “Crap,” he mutters. “Sorry. I…” he reaches for a napkin from the table, dabs at my dripping wrist, then takes a deep breath. “Shit.”

“It’s okay.” I set the glass down, touching his back. “Hey. Are you feeling alright?”

Zack opens his mouth, closes it again—then turns on his heel and leaves, striding through the hall and towards the exit. I watch his broad back disappearing into the crowd, confused.

“Oh, shit,” Rob mutters. “I… shouldn’t have said that.” He shakes his head hard. “I really shouldn’t have said that.”

FIFTY-SIX

ZACK

I push through the crowds of people like I'm on autopilot. My blood is pounding in my ears. I feel like I'm in a dream. Or maybe a nightmare. It has to be a nightmare, right? This can't be real. It can't be.

How the Hell could I forget what day it is?

Faces turn towards me as I cross the wedding hall and make my way to the exit. There's a painted wooden sign set up on an easel by the doorway, greeting all the guests as they come in. I stare at it, the letters blurring.

CONGRATULATIONS!
ROB AND AMY TRAN
APRIL 5TH

How could I forget? The date's literally everywhere, for God's sake. It was on the invites. It's on the signs. It was on the receipt when we booked into the hotel, but I didn't notice. How? How is that possible?

I know how. Layla.

I've spent the last couple of weeks in a Layla-induced haze. She's filling my brain. Nothing seems to matter when I'm with her. I've been so caught up in her, I've forgotten the one person who used to matter to me most.

I stride through the hotel lobby. There's a cluster of people hanging around near the main entrance, clutching their suitcase handles as they wait to check

in, so I cast around until I spot the personnel exit, half-hidden behind the lifts. Ignoring the *No Entry* sign, I push through the white door, stepping out into a small private car park. It's almost deserted; one of the caterers is leaning against the wall, smoking a cigarette. He looks at me cautiously as I practically fall out of the door, panting.

"Christ. You alright, mate?" He blinks. "Uh. I mean. You're not meant to use that entrance, sir. Do you need directions?"

I open my jacket. "I'll give you a hundred quid to piss off."

He stubs out his cig. "Alright, then."

I grab my wallet, yank out a handful of bills, and shove them at him.

"Thanks!" He pockets them and disappears, the door slamming shut behind him. The sound echoes through the car park.

I slump down onto the stone steps and look up at the sky. Somehow, the afternoon has slipped into evening without me noticing; the bright blue sky is starting to darken at the edges, and I can see a sprinkling of stars directly above me. I take a deep breath, forcing the cool spring air into my lungs, but my chest feels too tight.

April 5th. It's April 5th. The anniversary of Emily's death. I've never forgotten before.

Every single year since the day she died, I've gone to visit her. I've brought her flowers and sat with her and talked to her. I know nobody else will do it; all of her other friends have forgotten her, and her mum didn't even go to her funeral, for God's sake. The woman started downing a bottle of vodka a day as soon as Em got her diagnosis, and she didn't stop until it was over. She's probably at home right now, a couple of bottles in.

I hated her for that. I hated her for choosing to forget her daughter. She should have been there for her, but instead, *I* was the one skipping class to sit next to Emily's bed, holding her hair back as she threw up, trying to make her laugh. Soaking in every last second I could spend with her.

A memory blooms in front of my eyes. Emily, lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by beeping machines and plastic tubes. I was sitting next to her,

clutching her hand. I knew she wasn't going to make it through the night. She was already half-gone.

"Don't leave me," she murmured. *"You're the only person who cares about me. Don't leave me alone."* Her eyes were so full of terror I wanted to scream.

The memory used to be as clear as a movie scene, but now it's watery and blurry. I can't remember the curve of her cheek, the slant of her eyebrows. I can't picture the exact shade of her hair. It's all disappearing. I bunch my hands into fists, breathing hard.

I don't know how this happened. I promised Em that I wouldn't forget her, but she's slowly slipped away from me. It's only been twelve years, for God's sake. Twelve years, and I've already forgotten the girl I said was the love of my life.

I pull out my phone, checking the time. I'm too late. The graveyard closed an hour ago. I squeeze my eyes shut as a wave of grief rolls over me.

Nobody will have been to see her today. She's been completely alone for over a year. It only took a decade for everyone to stop noticing that she's gone.

What am I doing, drinking and dancing and kissing pretty girls on the day she died? What the Hell is wrong with me? I slam my phone down onto the steps and put my head in my hands. Rain starts to fall, soaking into my expensive suit.

I've let myself get in way too deep with Layla. It needs to stop.

I can't do this anymore.

FIFTY-SEVEN

LAYLA

After Zack disappears, I just stand stupidly at the drinks table, staring after him.

I'm not sure what made him react like that. Did something happen? Did I do something wrong? Rob gives me an apologetic look as Amy tugs him away, leaving me standing alone.

I sigh and set my empty glass down on the table, glancing around the room. I should probably find the other guys. I spot Luke in the corner of the hall, still talking to Amy's aunt. He looks like he's about to die of boredom, so I start to make my way towards him — but before I've taken two steps, a large hand touches my back.

“Hey,” a voice says in my ear.

I smile, turning to look up at Josh. He looks incredible. He's pulled off his blazer and rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt. My eyes trace his thick, muscled forearms before flicking back to his flushed face.

“Hey,” I say, reaching up to tug at his tie. “You look great in this.”

“Oh?” His eyes are unusually bright as he looks down at me. “Maybe I should wear it more often.” His deep voice is darker than usual, the clipped accent softening to a low purr. I blink as he wraps a hand around my waist, feeling the soft fabric of my dress. “You look beautiful,” he murmurs, tugging me closer. Heat blooms between my legs, and I'm suddenly hyper-aware of the heavy metal beads filling me up inside. “You always do.” He

dips his head, pressing his face into my hair and breathing in deeply. I catch the faint smell of whiskey on his breath and suddenly realise what's happening.

"You're drunk," I murmur, squirming slightly. "Holy shit. I've never seen you drunk." Whenever we hang out, Josh usually sticks to water or soda. I've never seen him drink more than one beer at a time.

He hums, pulling me closer until our bodies are flush. My cheeks warm as his hand slides smoothly to the small of my back. "No."

"You are."

"I don't think so." He tucks his face in the crook of my neck. "You smell like cherries."

"You're such a little liar," I say, fighting the urge to laugh.

He sighs against my skin. "Maybe we opened a bottle of whiskey in Rob's room," he admits. "Amy's dad gave it to him as a gift. It would be rude to say no."

I run a hand through his thick hair. "When was the last time you drank whiskey?"

"Couple years ago."

I'm absolutely delighted. "Oh my God. Joshua Tran, nine-foot nightmare, is a total lightweight."

"I'm really not drunk," he insists, pulling back to look around. His dark eyes shine as he takes in all of the people smiling and chatting. "I had one shot, about five hours ago. I'm just... happy. Everything turned out perfect."

"You love this stuff, don't you?" I realise.

"Hm?"

"Weddings. Love. Family."

He shrugs. "It's nice to see everyone so happy."

“You’re so cute,” I whisper, and his smile widens. He dips his face down to kiss me, but I pull back before our lips touch. “Uh uh. I’m here as Luke’s date, remember?” I’ve already shown him up by kissing Zack. I’m just hoping nobody saw.

“So? You’re dating all three of us, right?” He kisses the side of my cheek instead, and heat rushes through me.

“Yeah,” I say slowly, my heart hammering. “But if people see us together, they’ll assume it’s some big drama. The wife’s ex brought a date, and she was caught cheating on him with the best man. Shock. Horror. *Scandal*.”

He presses his lips under my jaw. “You’re not cheating,” he murmurs, his low voice rumbling through me. “No scandal.”

I close my eyes. “No, but no one else knows that. And I don’t want to make Luke look bad, or ruin your brother’s wedding. Today is his day.”

He sighs. “You’re right,” he says, not moving.

“... that means you can let go of me,” I prompt.

“I’m trying,” he says, holding me tighter.

I laugh. “Jesus, is this what lies under your rock-hard shell? A great big pile of mush? Pull yourself together, this is just embarrassing.”

He suddenly spins me in time to the music, pulling us both behind a huge flower arrangement bursting with white silk roses. “My brother’s here, dancing with the woman he loves. I just want a second with the woman—” He pauses, like he’s catching himself. “The woman I care about.”

My stomach lurches. I look up at him. He won’t meet my eye, but I can feel his body tensing under my hands. Like he’s bracing himself for the rejection.

I tug at his collar. “Aw,” I tease. “You care about me?”

He frowns. “Sorry. I meant to say despised. I get those words mixed up.”

“Uh huh.” I slide my hands down the hard planes of his chest. “And how long have you *despised* me?”

His eyes are swallowing me whole. “From the moment I met you.”

I can't breathe. It feels like a cloud of butterflies is taking flight in my chest.
"Loser," I whisper.

He smiles then, so bright and sudden it almost hurts my eyes. "Layla," he murmurs, his big hands cupping my cheeks.

"Josh!" I glance around us. "People could see—"

"Don't care," he murmurs, bending down and tugging my mouth to his.

FIFTY-EIGHT

JOSH

I'm almost dizzy with happiness as I kiss Layla slowly, holding her close.

I'm having the best damn day.

Don't get me wrong, I'm tired as Hell. Since five this morning, I've been ironing ties, picking up clothes from the dry cleaners, and bringing people coffee. While she was getting ready, Amy kept writing sappy little romantic notes to my brother and demanding I pass them on to him. I probably would've refused, if he wasn't so goddamn happy every time I came in with another one.

Pulling back from Layla for a second, I glance back at the dance floor. Rob is out there with Amy, twirling her under his arm to the band music. Warmth glows in my chest. He looks like he's walking on air.

God, I love weddings.

Layla sighs, leaning against my chest, and I look back down at her. As if this day could get any better, now I have the most gorgeous woman in the room in my arms. I nuzzle into her temple, kissing down her hairline and across her ear. "This dress is incredible," I murmur, smoothing the mint silk over her skin.

She doesn't answer, yanking my mouth back down to hers. I tug her bottom lip slowly between my teeth, sucking on the soft flesh, and she makes a low choking sound, a shudder wracking through her.

I pause. Layla's never usually this receptive. I suddenly realise that she's sweating, trembling slightly against me. Her breath is coming in small, sharp pants.

"Hey." I pull away. "Layla."

She turns her face away, burying it in the front of my shirt. I run a hand down her back, left bare in her dress, and another shiver runs through her, more violent than the first.

This isn't right. I carefully peel her away from me.

"Sweetheart?" I stroke her hair back from her eyes. Her face is bright red, and her chest is heaving. I frown, cupping her cheek. "Hey. What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Yes," she mutters, leaning against me like she doesn't trust herself to stand upright.

I'm getting increasingly alarmed now. I slide my hands down to her waist, holding her up. "Yes?"

She huffs. "Zack and Luke..." she bites her lip.

"Hm?"

"They..." she shudders against me as I stroke her back. "Ugh. You remember those balls that Zack gave me? From Sinsters?"

I blink at the change of subject. "I... yes?"

She gives a little shrug, shifting her weight slightly. "They put them inside me."

I stare at her as all of the blood rushes out of my head. It takes a moment for her words to sink in. Then I swear.

"Christ, Layla. You were sitting there with toys inside you through that whole ceremony?"

"Yes," she whispers, pushing closer. I can feel the strain in her body, the slight tremble in her hips. She's been on the edge for a while.

“And they left you like this?” I ask, bending to breathe in the scent of her hair. “That’s just cruel.”

“Mmhm.” She looks up at me, her green eyes huge. “Help me?”

I look behind me at the party. We have the wedding photos scheduled in a few minutes. Any second, one of the bridesmaids is going to come looking for me. My entire body is screaming at me to grab Layla and carry her all the way back to our hotel room. But I can’t.

“Please?” Layla asks softly. She looks a mess; there’s a pink flush crawling up her neck and cheeks, and she’s breathing shallowly as she rubs her body unobtrusively up against mine. I can’t leave her like this.

“Come with me,” I mutter, taking her hand.



Layla lets me lead her out of the hall and into the service corridor. Hustling her to the end of the hallway, I open the door to the private staff bathroom. It’s pretty in here: the wallpaper is patterned with roses, and the seashell-shaped sinks are set in a long marble counter studded with gold-plated taps.

Locking the door behind us, I turn and push Layla back up against the wall, kissing her again. She melts against me, gasping. Her hands cling to my lapels like she’s holding herself up. “Please,” she whispers again. “It’s driving me mad.”

I slide my hand down the curve of her hip, feeling the cool fabric of her dress bunch under my fingertips. “Do they hurt? Want me to take them out?”

She shakes her head, grabbing my wrist and guiding it between her legs. “Please,” she breathes. “Touch me.”

Dutifully, I slide my palm underneath her dress. Her soft, smooth thighs are hot and damp. When my fingers reach the sodden lace lining her pants, I have to close my eyes. She’s *soaked*. Nudging the wet fabric aside, I slide two fingers between her slick, puffy lips, marvelling at her softness. She shudders all over as I tease my fingertips around her entrance, before gently dipping

them inside. As I start to stroke her, I feel the hot, slippery surface of the metal beads. She jolts as my fingertips brush them, and I kiss her cheek. “Does that feel good?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

“Y-yes,” she stutters. “*Oh—*”

I laugh, fluttering my fingers inside her.

For a few minutes, we’re mostly silent. I finger Layla steadily, and she buries all of her little gasps and murmurs into the front of my shirt. She’s already close. I can feel her wetness dripping down the palm of my hand, wetting my wrist.

Suddenly, my phone beeps on the counter. I close my eyes. Crap. “I don’t have much time. That’ll be my brother wanting to do pictures.”

She grinds up against me again, her hips trembling against my hand. When I meet her eyes, they’re glassy with tears.

I frown. “Baby, does it hurt?”

“It aches,” she hisses. I pause, and she makes a sad sound. “No,” she gasps. “No, keep going!” Her voice is tight with desperation. Obediently, I keep up my steady movements, plunging my fingers deep inside her. Her slippery walls clamp down on me like she’s trying to drag me in deeper, and her whole body jerks against mine. She’s on the edge. She probably has been for a while. Her breathing starts coming quicker, each gasp more high pitched and desperate than the last, and I kiss her even harder, not letting up so she can catch her breath.

“Gonna come?” I murmur.

She nods into my shoulder, and I smile against her, thrusting my fingers in even deeper until I reach the metal beads. Very carefully, I grasp ahold of one, twitching the string inside her as I roll my thumb over her swollen nub.

FIFTY-NINE

JOSH

Her eyes widen. With a low moan, she explodes in a hot, wet mess against my hand. I hold her steady as she convulses against me, gripping hard onto the front of my jacket as waves of sensation roll through her. I can feel her pulsing around my fingers, hot and strong as she writhes against me.

It is the hottest thing I think I've ever seen. I have to close my eyes and force myself to steady my breathing.

Eventually, she starts to slow down, but I'm not done. My heart is hammering. I want more. I jam my fingers knuckle-deep into her, not letting up until she's squirming again.

"Josh—" she mutters. "I can't—it's too much."

I twist my fingers, scooping at her inner wall, and tug on the string of beads. Almost instantly, she's coming again, her body jerking hard against mine as she shudders all over. Her hair has fallen over her face, strands tickling all over her cheeks, and I push them back behind her ears, holding her close as she gasps silently.

By the time the last wave of shivers leaves her body, she's slumped against me, sweaty and limp. I kiss her wet cheek, pulling out of her reluctantly. On the counter, my phone beeps again.

"I have to go," I mutter. "They need me for pictures."

She nods, panting. "Okay." Her lashes dip as she glances down at my trousers. "You don't want help with that?"

I wince, reaching down to adjust myself. “No time.”

These pictures are going to be awful. Blood is thumping in my balls so hard it’s physically painful, and my skin feels so hypersensitive, I can feel every damn fibre of this stupid suit scraping my nerves. I’m gonna have to make sure I’m standing at the back of all of these photographs.

She nods, nuzzling into my tie, then pulls back. “Okay,” she says quietly. “Go. I’ll see you later.”

I kiss her cheek and turn to leave.

“Wait.”

I turn back. Layla grabs my wrist and tugs my hand to her lips. Before I can say anything, she’s slipped two of my fingers in her mouth, licking them clean of her juices. My balls squeeze at the sensual tug of her lips and tongue against my skin.

“Layla—” I groan. “Please. You’re killing me.”

She nips the tip of my finger, then pulls back and smiles sweetly. “Just cleaning you up. Have fun.”

It takes everything in me to turn and leave. But, somehow, I manage it.



The wedding photographer has set up shop in a corner of the ballroom, setting out all of her equipment against a big white wall decorated with roses. Most of the wedding party are already in position, chatting. Rob is trying to surreptitiously drink a flute of champagne while his new mother-in-law re-ties his tie and talks his ear off.

I go to join them. “Hey. Sorry, it took a while to find you.”

Amy’s mum looks at me and pulls a face. “For God’s sake, clean yourself up. We’re starting soon.” She pushes past us. “Has anyone seen Amy?” There’s a chorus of *nos*, and she huffs, wandering back into the crowd to find her daughter.

I turn to Rob, who looks like he's trying not to laugh. "What did she mean, clean myself up?"

He clears his throat. "You, um, look like you just got ravished. Fix your hair."

Shit. I should've checked myself in the bathroom mirror before I left. I reach up and start combing my hair down with my fingers.

Rob watches, grinning. "It's that Layla girl, isn't it? She's cute."

"She's here with Luke," I say stiffly, rolling down my sleeves and looking around for something to check my reflection in.

"You know I listen to your podcast, right? I know all about your weird little four-way experiment." He tilts his head, looking at me. "I'm happy for you."

"Nothing is happening between us." I tug my tie straight, then try to covertly check my fly is done up.

"No?" He asks, eyes crinkling. "You do know you've been talking about her for years, right? I feel like I almost know her myself."

I blink. "What do you mean? I've never talked to you about her."

"Josh, I don't think we've had one conversation in the last three years where you haven't mentioned her. Sure, you didn't say her name, but it's obviously her." I look at him blankly, and he raises his eyebrows. "Your infuriating green-eyed neighbour? She works too hard and screws up your internet when she's taking video calls? Blonde hair, hot temper, likes to show you her underwear? Ring any bells?"

"I didn't tell you all of that."

"Oh, but you did." He looks out over the crowd. "It didn't click until I saw her today. The way you talk about her, I was picturing some kind of warrior princess. She looks more like a little fairy."

"Don't let her hear you say that," I mutter, buttoning my cuffs as the photographer stomps up to us, looking harried. "Do I look okay?"

“You look beautiful,” he assures me. “Absolutely stunning. My gorgeous baby brother.”

The photographer, a five-foot-nothing woman with grey-streaked hair, claps to get our attention.

“Has anyone seen the bride?” She calls, scanning all of our faces. No one in the wedding party says anything, and she sighs. “Jesus Christ, every bloody time. Right. We’ll start off with the groom’s side, then. Can all of the groomsmen get in front of the flowers, please. Groom and best man in the centre. Where are the father and mother?”

Rob stiffens.

I clear my throat. “They’re not in attendance.”

She grumbles under her breath, as if our dead mother and prick father are incredibly inconvenient for her.

“I thought of inviting him,” Rob mutters, as all of his groomsmen shuffle into position around us. “Figured he wouldn’t come.”

“He’d have ruined the whole wedding,” I say. “Picked everything apart. Criticised you and Amy. He’d think all of this was stupid.” Our dad has no idea what love is. He hated anything romantic. Weddings were his idea of Hell.

He nods. “Yeah.” We’re silent for a moment as the photographer takes some test shots, scowling at her camera. “Seriously, though,” he says quietly. “I’m happy that you found Layla. She sounds sweet.” He glances across at me. “And just for the record — she likes you back.”

My heart stammers in my chest. I try to keep my face straight. “How could you...”

He snorts. “Don’t you read your tweets? Every one of your listeners can hear it. The girl’s falling for you. And the other two as well, I think.” He turns to me, his eyes serious. “Let her know. Don’t do that thing where you try to make everyone else happy, but ignore what you want. You deserve to find someone.”

I don't know what to say.

In front of us, the photographer sighs, setting her camera down. "For God's sake. Could the best man kindly remove the lipstick from his neck?" She calls out, her voice dripping with irritation.

I turn to glare at Rob, who's bent over laughing. "You prick."

"I thought you were experimenting with a new look!"

Someone offers me a tissue, and I wipe the makeup off my skin. I can still smell Layla on my fingers.

Today is going to be a long day.

SIXTY

LUKE

“And little Jimmy finally passed his first swimming badge,” Amy’s aunt tells me, rolling her eyes. “Ten metres. Only took him two years. The child is deathly afraid of water.”

“That’s great, Mrs Smith,” I tell her, trying to pull away. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just—”

She waves me off. “Oh, don’t call me that. We’re all family here. Be a good boy and top up my drink, will you?”

I smile and take her glass, turning to the drinks table and swapping it out with a fresh flute of champagne. It’s been over half an hour since Amy’s aunt cornered me, and she’s been chatting my ear off ever since, bringing me up to speed on all the latest family gossip. I’m not sure if she actually remembers I’m not her nephew-in-law anymore, or if she legitimately doesn’t care and just wants someone to talk to. I hand her the new drink, then try for the fifth time to excuse myself.

“If you don’t mind, I need to find my date. She’s disappeared somewhere.”

She waves me off, eyeing up one of the waiters, and I make a quick escape, stepping away and scanning the hall.

It’s so odd to be here again. Everywhere I look, memories ping up in my mind. The venue clearly hasn’t updated its decorations in the last fifteen years. The cream vases of silk roses are the same. The swathes of gauze hanging from the ceilings. The rows of white chairs decorated with pink

ribbons.

Even the wedding guests are the same. Everyone is over a decade older, but all of Amy's family and friends are here. Most of the unmarried adults now have kids. The babies are moving into secondary school. There's a vaguely familiar-looking teenager hanging around on her phone by the chocolate fountain, ignoring everyone, and I frown, trying to remember where I've seen her before. As I watch, she glances up at me, her eyes flickering, and recognition shocks through me.

It's Lavender, my ex-niece. I remember her as a chubby little four-year-old, watching TV cuddled up against me, or holding my hand as I walked her home from school. She loved me, because I was the only adult who'd sit down and have tea parties with her stuffed animals. And I loved her, too. To pieces. I'd never been an uncle before.

I haven't seen her in over ten years now.

The wedding hall suddenly flickers around me, déjà-vu rolling over me like a wave. For half a second, I'm an excited twenty-four-year-old on his wedding day, absolutely brimming over with happiness. Then the image fades, and I'm left standing alone in the crowd of celebrating people, laughing and dancing and chatting. Lavender looks at me awkwardly for a few seconds, then blushes and drops her eyes back to her phone.

Suddenly, it feels like my lungs are getting crushed.

Without thinking, I turn on my heel, weaving through the party and towards the ballroom's big wooden doors. As I step out into the hotel lobby, my heart is pounding hard. Making my way over to the lifts, I lean against the wall, taking a few deep breaths.

I honestly didn't expect that coming to the wedding would be so hard; but I also didn't expect it to look like I'd stepped right back into my old wedding photographs. The last time I was here was the best night of my life. And now everything I worked so hard to achieve back then is gone.

It's hard not to feel like I've lost something.

A hand touches my arm. I turn to see Amy looking up at me, her eyes wide. She must have followed me out here; she looks ridiculously out of place,

standing in the atrium in her puffy white gown.

I force myself to smile at her. “Hi,” I say. “Congratulations. You look beautiful.”

She snorts and waves me off. “Re-wearing the dress was a bad idea. I can barely breathe in this thing. And I already gave up on my heels.” She lifts the hem of her dress, showing me the pair of Converse hidden underneath.

“Well. It’s a lovely party. Thank you for the invite.”

“Thanks for coming. Since your best friend is now my brother-in-law, I thought it would be best for us to show there’s no bad blood between us. Might make family events less awkward.”

I nod. “How’s Emery High?”

“Same old, same old. I’ve been thinking of switching schools. You can only be the principal of one place for so many years before it gets mind-numbing.”

I nod, and we both stand silently for a moment, looking out over the lobby.

“So,” she says eventually. “Layla Thompson.”

“Yes.”

“How did you two meet again?”

“She lives in my building. Moved into the flat opposite mine a few years ago.”

“Right. And you’ve been seeing her all that time?” The disapproval is clear in her voice.

I close my eyes. “Are you going to tell me off? Trust me, I was hesitant, but she insisted that enough time has passed that it’s not creepy or pathetic to be dating an ex-student.”

“That’s not my issue.” She purses her lips. She’s wearing her favourite dusky-pink lipstick; Tender Rose, I think it’s called. At our wedding, I had to reapply it for her five times, because I kept kissing it off.

I grimace at the memory. I don't miss Amy. I honestly don't. But I miss myself, back then. I miss how optimistic and happy I was. I miss how utterly sure I was that the relationship would work out.

I don't think I've been sure about anything since the divorce. It killed that part of me.

"What do you remember about her from school?" Amy asks carefully.

"Not a lot. She was smart and quiet. It was the year our divorce papers were going through, so..." I trail off. "I wasn't fully present in classes."

"Hm." Amy tugs on her earring. "But you like her, don't you?"

"More than I ever expected to," I admit.

"I thought so." She sighs heavily. "Look. I don't want to ruin your day, or anything. But I have to tell you something."

The tone of her voice is scarily sombre. "Yes?" When she doesn't respond, alarm bells start ringing. "Amy, what is it?"

"I saw her kissing Josh earlier," she says. "Behind the roses. I thought you'd want to know."

My shoulders ease, relief flooding through me. "I see."

She stares at me. Clearly, she was expecting a more dramatic response. "That's it?" She asks, incredulous. "*I see?*"

"Layla and I aren't in a committed relationship. She can kiss who she likes."

Amy looks at me like I've gone mad. "I... Luke, don't take this the wrong way, but... are you okay? Do you think you need to talk to someone? A therapist, or something?"

I blink at her. "What? What do you mean?"

"Do you think maybe you're a bit depressed?" She asks gently. "Because from where I'm standing, it sort of looks like you're going through a midlife crisis."

I frown. “I appreciate the concern, but this is the best my life has been in a long time. I’m not depressed in the slightest.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Seriously? You’re almost forty years old, and you don’t have a wife. You don’t have kids. You don’t have a house. You share a flat with a couple of boys ten years younger than you—”

“Josh and Zack aren’t *boys*. They’re good men. And I don’t see why a ten-year age gap should stop me from being friends with someone.”

She looks at me like I’m an idiot. “You’re not just *friends* with them, Luke. You’re living in a flat with them like a student. And now you’re coming to my wedding with one of your ex-pupils on your arm.” She crosses her arms. “I’ve just told you that she’s spent the whole evening kissing my husband’s brother, and you didn’t even bat an eyelid!” I go to respond, and she cuts me off. “And it’s not just him, either. I saw her getting awfully close with Zack by the drinks table earlier. *Zack Harding*, Luke. A famous ex-rugby player. Do you seriously think you can compete with him in the eyes of a twenty-eight-year-old girl? Especially one like Layla Thompson?”

A bad feeling slips down the back of my throat. “What do you mean, ‘a girl like her’?”

She scowls. “You might not remember her from school, but I do. And everyone, students and staff, knew Layla Thompson to be *a certain kind of girl*.”

I close my eyes.

I’d assumed that Amy was unaware of Layla’s bullying in high school. I didn’t consider for a second that she might have known about it. “What does that mean?” I say carefully.

Amy sighs. “She was easy, Luke. I had girls in my office all the time, complaining that she’d stolen their boyfriends. She skipped between men almost daily, and there were plenty of rumours that she was exchanging... *favours* for money. She was generally considered to be the loosest girl in the school, and clearly, nothing has changed—”

“Amy,” I say sharply. “What is wrong with you?! Why would you talk about a student like that? Layla’s time in school was very difficult. We should’ve

been helping her, and instead, we stood by and let her get bullied and cast out.”

Her lips quirk up. “So you *do* know. Let me guess. She told you it was all lies?”

I throw my hands up. “Whether they were lies or not, it’s completely inappropriate to judge an underage teenage girl on what she does in bed! She was a literal child, and you’re calling her *loose*?!”

She sighs. “I’m just saying that these things form patterns. If she was sleeping around then, she very well may be sleeping around now.” She presses her lips together, looking out over the lobby. “This has always been your issue. You can’t see what’s in front of you. You’re so caught up in your romantic little dream-world that you block out all of the warning signs.”

I frown. “I don’t know what you’re talking ab—”

“My parents begged me not to marry you,” she blurts out suddenly, shocking me into silence. “*Begged* me. My dad even promised to pay all the cancellation fees for the wedding. They knew I was making a mistake, and they were terrified it would haunt me for the rest of my life.”

I stare at her, my mouth drying out. “*What?* I thought your family liked me.”

“Oh, they liked you fine; you were a perfect gentleman. Kind and sweet and caring. But they liked you as a boyfriend, not a husband. They knew from the moment they saw us together that we weren’t going to work out long-term.” She looks down at her nails. “I never told you this, but the night before our wedding, I almost didn’t go through with it. I knew, deep down, that it was wrong.”

Her words hit me like a bucket of cold water to the face. For a few seconds, I flounder, speechless.

“Then why did you?” I manage eventually. “Go through with it?”

She shrugs. “I was young, and you were the sweetest guy I’d ever met. I thought I was in love with you.”

“But you weren’t,” I finish. My heart feels like it’s cracking in my rib cage.

“No. And I knew it the moment you put that ring on my finger, and I felt absolutely nothing. We were doomed before we even said our vows.”

I take a deep breath through my nose. My head is spinning. I can’t believe what I’m hearing.

It was hard enough for me when our marriage fizzled out. I thought Amy and I were soulmates. I’d never even considered that we might fall apart.

But if what Amy’s telling me is true, maybe all of that love was one-sided. Was our relationship really all in my head? Am I really that stupid?

“Well,” I say finally, “for the record, I did love you. I never thought for a second that we wouldn’t make it.”

“I know you didn’t,” she says gently. “Because you see the world through rose-coloured glasses. But this isn’t a fairy tale. True love doesn’t conquer all. Open your eyes and actually look at your relationship, for once in your goddamn life.” She presses forward, her eyes hard. “Layla is young. She’s beautiful. She has a reputation, and judging by her behaviour tonight, absolutely nothing has changed. I don’t want to see you get hurt, Luke. And anyone can see that *she won’t stay*.”

I shake my head, trying to pull back. “I’m not listening to this—”

She grabs my arm. “Yes, you are. For God’s sake, I’m trying to help you!”

I try to shake her off, but she won’t let go.

SIXTY-ONE

LAYLA

After Josh leaves to take pictures, I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, breathing hard.

I look like a mess. My quickie with Josh did nothing to stop the heat burning through my veins. If anything, I feel even worse than before. My thin dress is sticking to my skin with sweat, and my nerves feel like they're on fire. And the beads...

I can feel them inside me. They're not annoying — just a heavy pressure, a deep fullness that's just gotten worse since Josh made me come. No matter how much I shift my weight to try and get comfortable, I can feel them pressing into me.

I take a deep breath, forcing myself to focus on the task at hand. Classical music plays over hidden speakers, soothing me slightly as I pin back the curls that Josh tugged loose. As I lean over to pump some hand cream from the dispenser, the beads shift again, sliding over one another and sending a hot pulse of pleasure through me.

I gape, grabbing onto the side of the counter and crossing my legs tight as blood rushes between my thighs.

I can't do this. I can't go back to the party and smile and mingle with something *inside* me, no matter how good it feels. I'll go mad. I need to get back to the hotel room and take them out. Maybe leave them on Zack's pillow as a present.

Taking a deep breath, I scoop some cold water into my hand and wipe it over the back of my sweaty neck. When I'm as cool as I'm going to get, I straighten, dab myself off, and head back into the hallway. I barely get two steps down the corridor before a low voice calls my name.

"Layla."

I turn, jumping as Zack barrels down the narrow hall towards me. He looks... off. His collar is undone, his tie is lopsided, and his eyes are red. His ring is hanging from the chain around his neck, swaying slightly. He catches up with me and grabs at me, pulling me close, his fingers curling into my forearms. He's breathing hard.

"Zack," I say softly. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Fine," he grits out.

"Did something happen? Why did you go?"

He grimaces. "Sorry. Knee was hurting."

Concern tugs at me. "D'you wanna go back to the room?"

"M better now," he says, grabbing my hand. "Come with me." He starts tugging me down the hall. I follow, bemused, as he drags me towards the fire exit, pushing the door open and leading me out into the hotel's sprawling gardens.

It's getting late now, and the sky is darkening to a deep twilight-blue over our heads. Zack leads me through the garden, pulling me through rows of perfectly manicured hedges and bushes, heavy with glossy leaves and aromatic flowers. Birds sing pretty, fluting tunes in the trees above us. Someone has set up fairy-lights in the foliage, and they twinkle down on us as we make our way through the grounds.

I look up at Zack. His jaw is clenched and his eyes are fiery. I'm not sure what's going on. "Where are you taking me?"

"Somewhere private," he mutters, tightening his grip on my fingers.

I dig my heels into the perfectly mown grass. "I don't like getting dragged around," I warn.

“You’ll like what comes after,” he promises flatly, pulling me behind a large, heart-shaped topiary, into a little alcove hidden by strands of hanging ivy.

I look around. He’s brought me to a sweet little private spot; a secret nook against the garden wall, shadowed by bushes and greenery. A single glass lantern swings over our heads, illuminating us.

I’m impressed. Even if someone did come wandering out into the garden, I doubt they’d be able to find us back here.

“Are we getting it on?” I check.

“Yeah,” he says, and presses me up against the wall, tugging up the silky hem of my dress without preamble.

Thank *God*.

My head falls back against the cool mossy brick as he crashes our mouths together. It’s a dirty kiss, full of biting and nipping, and after Josh’s gentlemanly sweetness, it’s just what I need. The cool evening disappears into a hot red haze as our skin slides together, our mouths rolling against one another.

Zack’s hand slips up my smooth thigh, cupping my crotch. “Shit. Where’d your pants go?” He mutters against my cheek.

“Josh has them.”

“Little wanker,” he mutters, slipping his thick fingers through my hot, sopping folds. “God, you’re soaked. You still got the beads in?”

I nod breathlessly, pushing my head against his shoulder and squirming over his hand. He gives a low grumble of approval, biting my bottom lip and dragging it between his teeth as he dips his fingers into me, delicately scooping out the first fat silver ball. As he tugs at it, the whole string moves deep inside me. I gasp, digging my fingernails into his arms as he slowly starts to pull the chain loose. Hot, smooth metal slides over my G spot, stimulating the sensitive nerves. I’ve been so on edge for so long, even that small touch is enough to set me off. I feel my toes curl and my thighs tense as I shudder with a sudden sharp climax.

“Good girl,” he roughs out as I pant, twisting his wrist so I can grind up against his palm. “Good, good girl.”

Heat starbursts in my belly as I rub helplessly against his hand, thrusting to get the friction I need as he gently pulls the balls out, one by one. Eventually, I’m half-collapsed against the wall, sweating and huffing, and he has the full string of beads curled between his fingers. I gape as he puts them, dripping, into the pocket of his suit. “I’ll wash ‘em later,” he says with a shrug, wrapping his forearm around my waist and hoisting me up against the wall. I naturally clap my legs together, but he grabs both of my thighs and pulls them apart, lifting them to wrap around his waist. “*Open.*”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I snap, fumbling at the zip of his dress trousers. It takes half a second for him to pull his throbbing erection free, line up, and thrust inside of me. I swallow back a cry of pleasure as he plunges into me.

Oh. God. That’s good. That’s right. That’s what I needed. For the first time today, I feel my entire body relax. It’s like an itch deep in my core is finally getting scratched.

He groans, pressing his rough cheek against mine as he holds still for a second, letting me get used to the sensation. “Good?”

I nod, and he pulls his hips back, slamming into me. My mouth falls open as he does it again. Again. Again. Again. He pounds me, hot and sloppy, shivers wracking his body with every thrust. His eyes are squeezed closed, like he can’t bear to look at me. I watch him blearily as pleasure rushes through me.

This isn’t how I’m used to Zack being. Normally, he likes to tease me. To drive me crazy with his mouth and his fingers, until I’m practically begging for him. But now, it’s like he’s in a frenzy. His free hand fists in my hair, tugging through it, teasing through my carefully styled curls.

“If I cared about my hair,” I pant, “you’d be in so much trouble right now.”

He doesn’t say anything, plunging into me again. My body spasms as electricity arcs through me, and I clench my thighs around his waist, using my legs to pull him closer into me. I need him closer. I need every part of us to be touching. I need him inside me. My sex is so sensitive and achy it’s almost painful. I grind against him, desperate for pressure despite the

soreness. I can't help it. I need the touch. I'm sopping wet and slowly getting more and more frantic as the pressure builds inside me.

"God," I murmur. "Please. Please, please."

"Please what?" He rolls his hips, hitting a sensitive spot. Wetness trickles down my thighs, and I bite back a soft noise, jerking my hips furiously against his. I'm so close.

"More," I gasp, and he quickly obliges. Yanking down the neckline of my dress, he starts massaging my breasts. I buck, echoes of pleasure thrumming through me and squeezing my insides, and he growls, dipping his head and tugging one hardening bud into his mouth with a harsh pop. His hot wet tongue laves over the sensitive skin, and I shudder all over. The cold night air washes over my breast, sending my skin prickling.

And still, it's not enough. I reach down between us, sliding my hand over my stomach. He grabs it, pressing it against the wall.

"No," he growls.

"If you don't want to touch me, I will."

He leans forward and licks a hot line down the side of my neck, freeing my wrist and bringing his own hand between my legs as he screws me. I gasp, my body jerking as his calloused finger curls around my sweet spot.

"Oh. God. Zack." I let my head tip back against the wall. "Zack."

His hips stutter against mine. "Don't," he mutters. "Don't say my name."

I bite his ear, hard enough to make him flinch. "I'll say whatever I damn well please." I bite him again, pressing my teeth hard into his earlobe.

He groans, tucking his face into the crook of my neck.

"You're so..." he trails off.

"Yeah," I admit. "I am."

His grip on me tightens. He slams into me again and again, railing me so hard white stars flash behind my eyes, pleasure shaking my body like a rag doll. I'm so distracted, it takes me a few seconds to realise that there's warm

wetness touching my neck.

Is he *crying*?

“Zack.” I pull back, my vision hazy. “Hey. Hey. Are you okay?” He nods into my neck.

“Look at me,” I demand, but he doesn’t. I can feel the tension radiating off him in waves. His muscles are bunched and hard. He thrusts into me again, and I gasp, twisting. I can feel my release cresting up inside me, like a wave about to swallow me whole. “Zack. God. I’m going to...”

He presses his forehead against mine and seals our mouths together with a kiss, swallowing my cries as the pressure peaks and I fly over the edge.

This time, the climax isn’t fast or sharp. It’s soft and intoxicating, a rush of warmth that gets hotter and stronger as it rolls through me. I moan as the garden disappears around me, the stars and the moonlight and the soft glow of the lantern blurring into streaks of light that burn behind my eyes. Heat slips under my skin, sliding through my veins and burning in my stomach.

“God,” Zack mutters, pressing even closer. His massive body shudders over mine as he starts to come. Normally, he’s as loud as a bear when he’s getting off; but now he’s staying completely silent, his teeth clenched shut like he’s trying to fight the pleasure away. I cling to him, sighing, feeling our bodies shake together in the darkening garden.

Eventually, the feeling seeps away, but I don’t let Zack go. Slowly, he sets me back onto the ground, holding me upright as my heels sink slightly into the wet grass. I lean against him, catching my breath. My heart is fluttering in my chest.

What we just did shouldn’t be romantic. There’s nothing poetic about an illicit shag behind a building. But somehow, it is. I stroke my fingers through Zack’s hair, watching how the glass lantern strokes his skin in gold. He looks beautiful out here, unravelled and out of breath. Tipping my head up, I press my lips to his, breathing in his soft exhale.

“I love you,” I murmur. I don’t think before I say it. The words just slip out, easy as breathing.

Zack flinches. He pulls back, and I finally see his eyes. They're bloodshot and puffy.

My stomach drops. I didn't imagine it. He really was crying. Something's wrong. Is it his leg? Did I hurt him? I reach for him, cupping his jaw. "Zack —"

He lurches out of my grip and pulls his dress pants back up, securing the button. He's breathing hard.

I smooth down the skirt of my dress and wipe gloss off my cheek, watching him closely. "Maybe we should go back to the room," I say softly.

He swallows convulsively and shakes his head. "I can't do this anymore," he says, his voice like gravel.

Cold slips down my spine. I can tell by the tone of his voice that he isn't just talking about the wedding.

"You can't do what anymore?" I ask carefully.

He waves between us, not meeting my eyes. "This. The lessons. The... 'dating'. The kissing, and the shagging, and the fake couple bullshit. We can't do this anymore. I'm done. I'm done."

SIXTY-TWO

LAYLA

It takes a few moments for his words to sink in.

“So, let me get this straight,” I say slowly. A cold breeze whispers through the garden, sending goosebumps prickling over my bare arms. “You came here to sleep with me one last time, and then break up with me.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he says, his face a mask. “I had to... I had to check if I needed to end this. And I clearly do, if you think you’re in *love* with me.”

I study him as he tugs his shirt back into place, fiddling with his cuffs. I can feel my insides icing over.

“Give me back my key,” I say eventually.

His head jerks up. “What?”

“You have the key to my flat. Give it back. I don’t want you to have it.”

He looks at me like I’ve just slapped him in the face. “You’re mad at me,” he says hoarsely.

“Yes,” I say. “I am.”

He shakes his head. “Layla, that’s not fair. You know it’s not.”

“How is it not fair? It’s how I feel.”

“You promised.” His voice gets louder, shaking slightly. “You said you understood that this wasn’t going to turn into anything. You knew this would just be lessons, you said you were fine with it, so don’t look at me like that!”

“Like what?”

“Like... I’m the villain here. Don’t look at me like I’m *hurting* you—”

“I can’t help it!” I snap. “You are hurting me!”

He shakes his head slowly, his face dark with anger. “I told you I didn’t want this to get in the way of our friendship. You said it wouldn’t!” He jams a hand in his hair. “Is that it, then? I either date you, or I have to lose one of the best friends I have? Don’t you see how manipulative that is? You can’t force me to love you, Layla. And if you’re hanging out for that, you’ll be waiting a bloody long time. Because it will never happen.”

My mouth falls open. I can’t believe this is happening. “This hurts me, Zack! You hurt me! Do you expect me to want to hang out on your sofa and eat ice cream with you, after you slept with me and dropped me like a used condom?”

“That’s not what—”

“You came here to shag me one last time before you turned me down. You pinned me up against a wall, you came inside me, and then you broke up with me before you even did your belt up! No, we are not friends anymore!”

He doesn’t say anything.

I shake my head, trying to calm down. “Look, this spiralled out of control. We can both admit that. But I’m not going to apologise for something that you also took part in. This stupid ‘experiment’ didn’t require you to have your hands up my skirt 24/7. *You* chose to flirt with me constantly. To climb into my bed every night. To book us into a *Honeymoon Suite* like we’re a goddamn married couple. I didn’t make you do any of that! That was all you. So don’t stand there acting like I’m a crazy, overreacting, manipulative bitch when we both did this together!”

“This is unfair,” he whispers. “You’re being unfair. You knew what you were getting into, I told you these were just lessons—”

“No,” I cut him off. “You want to know what’s unfair? You made me trust you. You told me, over and over again, to open up and be honest with you. You made me feel safe and loved and comfortable. And now, when you’ve finally peeled away every defence I used to have, you’ve decided to have one last quickie with me, and then break up with me while your goddamn come is still inside me?! And you’re somehow telling me that it’s *my* fault, when you’re treating me like a fricking flesh light? What the Hell is wrong with you?! You’re not my friend, you don’t respect me at all! No friend would treat me like that!” I take a deep breath. “Hell, the guys back in high school hated me. They spread lies about me. They made me feel like a dirty, worthless slapper, but at least none of them tricked me into letting them *inside* me.”

I take a step forward, so we’re standing chest to chest. I can feel his heart hammering under his shirt. His hard eyes don’t leave mine. “That’s the cruel part in this, Zack. So stop lying to yourself, and get it through your thick head that you are just as much to blame as me.”

He doesn’t say anything. My voice dies away, fading into the still garden. Seconds pass.

Eventually, he presses his lips together. “So that’s it,” he says. “We’re not friends anymore.”

“No, we are not. Now get the Hell out of here.” He doesn’t move. I feel emotion bubbling up in my throat, a big salty seawave of sadness, and fight the urge to burst into tears. “Now!” I shout. “Get away from me!”

He clamps his jaw shut. His eyes are burning black holes in his face. Slowly, he turns and leaves, heading back the way we came. His footsteps crunch heavily through the grass. I wait until he’s completely out of sight, then slump back against the garden wall, pressing my cheek against the cold brick. Pain floods through me.

I don’t understand how this keeps happening. I don’t know why I’m always the easy option. There’s just something about me which makes men think it’s okay to use me. I don’t know why.

It wouldn’t hurt so much if it wasn’t Zack. Zack, who is, by all means, a grown-up Donny Pritchard. He’s the popular jock. The one that women fawn

over. The one who could have any girl he wants. He goes through women like they're disposable tissues, and I let him. After Donny, I swore I'd never fall for someone who would hurt me again, and I did. I did.

Tears fill my eyes, my cheeks heating as old memories from my teenage years flow back.

I try to reason with myself. I know it's not the same thing. Zack is being a prick, but he's not a sixteen-year-old boy trying to coerce me in the PE changing rooms. It's not like he's going to go around telling everyone that I'm easy.

Even if that obviously is what he thinks.

God. I've been such an idiot.

Bending over, I pick up my clutch from where I dropped it in the wet grass, pulling out my phone to text Luke and Josh.

LAYLA: I'm going home. Give my congrats to the bride.

Neither man responds. Whatever. I flick through my phone to a car service app, typing in the hotel's address. I'm sick of tonight. I just want to go home. The nearest vehicle is fifteen minutes away, which is just enough time for me to pack, so I order it, then shove my phone back down the front of my dress, stumbling out of the alcove and back towards the hotel.

The ballroom blurs around me as I push my way through the party, weaving through people dancing and drinking like I'm in a dream. I've almost made it to the door leading to the hotel atrium when I hear my name.

"Layla!"

I turn to see Josh's brother, Rob, stepping out from behind a drinks table, his expression concerned. "Hey. Are you okay?" I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. His face falls. "Oh. God. Um. Hang on." He pats down his pockets, pulling out a travel pack of tissues. "Amy's mum made me carry them," he says sheepishly. "In case she cried. Are you okay? Want me to find Josh for you?"

“I’m sorry,” I mumble, backing away. “I’m really sorry, I need to go.” I don’t want kindness right now. It’ll break me. “Sorry,” I choke out again, and practically run past him, dodging through the huge wooden doors and out into the hotel lobby. Tottering over to the lifts in my heels, I stab the call button, then lean against the wall, trying to calm myself down. As the blood rushing in my ears fades away, I can dimly pick out two hushed voices coming from the other side of the elevators.

“Amy,” a man says, and I jolt upright as I recognise Luke’s low tones. “Stop. I’m not arguing with a bride on her wedding day.”

“For God’s sake, I’m trying to help you,” Amy hisses. “Listen to me. I taught Layla for years. I know her. And I can see that she’s got you completely wrapped around her little finger. She’s been doing this ever since she was a teenager — flirting with every guy she can get her hands on, manipulating them all. She doesn’t even have the self-respect to stay away from her own teacher, for God’s sake.”

Bile rises in my throat. I don’t know if I’m about to puke or cry or scream.

I hear Luke take a breath, but I don’t stick around to hear him defend me. The lift dings, the metal doors sliding open, and I jump inside, jabbing the button for our floor. Tears blur my eyes, and I wipe them away fiercely.

I need to get to the hotel room. I need to pack, and go home, and forget this wedding ever happened.

SIXTY-THREE

LUKE

“... and really, why would a girl in her twenties want to be with her old professor?” Amy continues, ignoring my attempts to get away. “Unless she has some kind of kink, which is just weird. I mean, it’s not as if you make that much money.”

She’s been going on like this for almost twenty minutes now, systematically picking apart my relationship with Layla. My head is aching. I’m starting to think she’s right. Not that Layla is easy, or loose, or any of the other awful things she’s saying about her; but clearly, she’s correct when she says I look at the world through rose-coloured glasses.

I loved Amy for almost a decade. Not once during that time did I realise what a callous person she was. She’s happily slut-shaming a victimised teenage girl. How could I fall for a woman like this?

Obviously, I don’t see things clearly when I’m in a relationship. I was so in love with Amy that I didn’t have any clue what kind of person she really was.

“I mean, look at you. You’re clearly falling for her,” she keeps going. “Anyone can see it. And trust me; everyone besides you knows how this is going to end.”

The worst part is, she’s right. I am falling for Layla. How could I not? She’s lovely. She’s sharp, and smart, and driven — but underneath that hard shell, she’s also sensitive and thoughtful and kind. I’m falling for her.

Fear rises up inside me. I glance back at the open door to the wedding hall, looking out at the swirling mess of dancers inside. As I watch, Lavender comes back into view. She's still on her phone, tapping furiously on the screen. Her mouth is turned down, her thin shoulders hunched like she's trying to hide away. She's unrecognisable as the bouncy, pink-cheeked toddler who skipped around our wedding in a pair of glittery fairy wings.

"How's Lavender?" I interrupt Amy's tirade. "She looks upset."

She follows my gaze. "Lav? God, she's being such a brat these days. She tried to bring her 'girlfriend' as a plus-one. I told her, look, I don't care what you do in the bedroom, but I don't want your experimental bisexual phase to be recorded forever in my wedding photos. We're trying to set her up with one of the caterers' sons, and she's being so rude about it." She frowns. "Stop looking at her, it's weird. I doubt she remembers you."

Right on cue, Lavender looks up at us, meeting my gaze again. She pulls a face, like 'what do you want?', and my stomach sinks. All at once, the realisation hits me.

I can't do this again. I can't go through another wedding, another divorce. I can't lose a whole other life. I'm falling for Layla, and that's dangerous. Why the Hell would things work out with her any better than they did with Amy? Apparently, I'm excellent at ignoring red flags, and there are plenty when it comes to Layla.

She's my former student.

She came to me for help.

She's never had a boyfriend before.

Oh; and our entire relationship has been completely fake.

Amy grabs my wrist again. "I just want to help you," she says for the fifth time.

"Don't touch me." I shake her off. "Amy, the last thing I want to do today is criticise you. But I will not listen to you talk about any former student like this."

She rolls her eyes. “You are so freaking whipped. For God’s sake, just—”

“Hi, guys. What’s going on out here?”

I turn and see Josh’s brother Rob striding towards us, his expensive suit rumpled. Immediately, Amy lets me go, standing back so she’s a respectable distance away from me. “Hi, Rob,” she coos. “I was just chatting with Luke, here.”

Robert looks at me, his eyes questioning, and I sigh. “Amy was just—” telling me I’m a gullible idiot that will die alone. “Berating me on my tie choice.” I say stupidly.

Rob laughs. “Damn. You never can get away from that, then?” He clears his throat. “Listen, mate, I just saw your girl come through here. She looked pretty upset. I didn’t want to tell Josh, we’re gonna need him in a few minutes for the toasts, so—”

My heart drops. “Upset how?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “She was like, almost crying. I tried to talk to her, but she ran off.”

“Sounds like she drank a bit too much of our champagne.” Amy pats my arm. “Go look after your date, Luke. I’ll see you later. Enjoy the rest of the wedding.”

I nod jerkily, and she drags Rob back towards the party, giving me one last firm look over her shoulder.

As I watch her back disappear, my phone buzzes with a notification. Swallowing hard, I hook it out of my pocket. I have messages from Layla and Zack. I check Layla’s first.

LAYLA: I’m going home. Give my congrats to the bride.

I stare at the screen. What? Why the Hell would she be going home? Did something happen? Flipping back to my texts, I scan through Zack’s messages.

ZACK: check Laylas ok

Alarm blooms in my stomach. I type out a response.

LUKE: What happened?

ZACK: we fcked

ZACK: then i told her it was over

ZACK: im done being her tutor or whatever

ZACK: she was mad

ZACK: and sad

I squint at the messages for a few seconds. Up until now, Zack had been doing surprisingly well. He usually really struggles on the anniversary of Emily's death, but I thought maybe the wedding was providing him with a good distraction.

I guess not. It looks like the shit has finally hit the fan. I tap the phone icon to ring him, and he declines the call.

Swearing, I go back to our text thread.

LUKE: You slept with her, then dumped her?

LUKE: Why on Earth would you do that?

ZACK: didnt dump her, wasnt dating her

ZACK: go talk to her

ZACK: im going out

LUKE: No. What is wrong with you? Come back and apologise to her.

He doesn't respond. I try to call him again, but the low beep on the other end of the line tells me he's turned his phone off.

Cursing, I slip the phone back into my pocket and head towards the lobby lifts. I guess I'll have to sort this out myself.

SIXTY-FOUR

LUKE

There's almost no one in the hotel; most of the guests and staff are at the party, so I make my way up to our hotel room quickly. When I open the door, Layla is standing in the middle of the room, packing. Her suitcase is set on the bed, and she's shovelling in handfuls of clothes and toiletries haphazardly.

She looks up when I step inside. "What?" She snaps.

She sounds angry, but her eyes are puffy. She's been crying.

My heart twists. All I want to do is step forward and fold her up in my arms, but after my conversation with Amy, I'm scared to. Clearly I'm a total idiot when it comes to relationships. I don't trust myself anymore.

I clear my throat, keeping my distance. "Zack texted me. He wanted to check if you were okay."

She snorts. "Yeah, right. He's made it very clear that he doesn't care about me." She shoves another t-shirt in her suitcase. "Did he tell you what he did?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. It was completely out of line."

"He expects me to still be his friend," she hisses, wiping her eyes hard. "When he treats me like a blow-up doll."

"I think he's having a hard day," I say carefully. "I'm sure he never meant to hurt you."

She throws her hands up, exasperated. “A hard day? You’re having a hard day. Your ex-wife is getting married. He’s spent the afternoon drinking, dancing, and screwing me. He’s having a brilliant day.” She picks up a dress, crumpling it into a haphazard ball.

“He’s not,” I say honestly. “At least, not anymore. It’s the anniversary of Emily’s death. Usually he spends the morning at her grave, then comes home and drinks himself to sleep. But we were so busy with the wedding, I think he forgot what day it was. It must have hit him all at once.”

She pauses, emotion flickering over her face. “Oh,” she says, lowering the dress. “Oh.”

I nod. “I know he’s acting like a prick, but maybe cut him some slack? I’m sure he’ll apologise as soon as he’s had the time to process everything. He probably feels awful right now.”

She tightens her jaw, picking the dress back up. “No,” she says firmly, folding it. “I won’t forgive him.”

“But—”

She tucks the dress into the suitcase and reaches for the robe she wore last night. “He’s grieving,” she says firmly. “And I’m sorry about that. Of course, I am. But that doesn’t excuse his behaviour. I told him that I loved him, and he hurt me to make himself feel better. I don’t think that’s a valid coping mechanism, and I’m not letting him get away with disrespecting me completely, just because he’s sad.”

Her words hit me like a brick to the chest. “I... you love Zack?”

Her cheeks redden. “Don’t act like you didn’t know. You’re a relationship coach, for crying out loud. You probably all knew before me.”

“Oh.” My lungs feel too tight. “I see.”

Silence stretches between us. She picks her hairbrush off the dresser and shoves it into her case, then straightens, crossing her arms over her chest. “Go on,” she demands. “Ask me.”

“Ask you what?” I say, my mouth dry.

“You know what.” Her eyes are cold. “Ask me if he’s the only one.”

I look down at my feet. The clock on the mantel ticks away the seconds. “Maybe this is a good thing,” I say eventually. “That we’re ending this.”

Layla flinches. All of the anger seeps out of her face, replaced with shock. “What?”

“If your feelings are getting involved, it’ll only end up hurting you in the long run. Zack certainly didn’t cut things off in a professional or kind way, but—” I nod slowly. “This is for the best.”

“If my feelings are getting involved,” she repeats slowly, enunciating every syllable.

I sigh, wiping a hand over my face. “This was only ever meant to be a teaching exercise for you, Layla. That was all it was ever going to be. And you’ve passed; I’d say with flying colours.”

She stares at me for a few seconds, breathing hard. “It’s not just Zack,” she says tightly. “You wanted me to be vulnerable with my feelings. So, here you go. It’s not just Zack. I’m falling for all three of you. I love *you*, Luke.”

“It wouldn’t work out,” I say, my voice breaking. “Zack doesn’t want a relationship. And I can’t be with someone like you, Layla. It wouldn’t be right.”

I know I’ve said the wrong thing before I’ve even finished the sentence. The blood drops out of Layla’s face as she stares at me.

“Someone like me?” She says quietly.

“I didn’t mean it like that. You’re young, Layla, and beautiful. You’ll meet plenty of men vying for your attention.”

To my horror, her green eyes start to sparkle with tears. She turns away, hiding her face from me. “Screw you,” she whispers. “God. I... I never thought you thought of me like that.”

Christ. I’m doing this all wrong. “Layla, that’s not what I meant at all. I just mean—”

“*What?*” She snaps, wheeling back around. “I’m young and beautiful, so I’m not reliable? Is that what you’re saying? I’ve got a hot body and a pretty face, so why would I be loyal? Of course I’m manipulating you. Of course I just want to sleep with you. Of course I’ll leave. Why should you trust me when I’m so goddamn *easy*?” She takes a deep, shuddering breath. “I heard what Amy said to you.”

I close my eyes. “Oh,” I say faintly. “Sweetheart—”

“Don’t *sweetheart* me!” She shouts, her voice echoing through the huge suite. “Look, I know you don’t want to hear this. But your ex-wife is a judgemental, callous, cruel bitch. When I was sixteen years old, she treated me like I was the whore of Babylon. And you’re still choosing to believe her over me?! You don’t even have a relationship with her, but you’re taking her side?!”

“Layla, I’m not taking her side—”

“Yes. You. Are.” She shakes her head, her face pained. “I’m not just *sex*, Luke. For so long, I thought I was. But you’ve made me understand parts of myself I didn’t even know existed. And now you’re breaking up with me because you think I’m too goddamn *hot* for you?” Her voice chokes off.

I fight to keep my voice level. “I’m so sorry that you overheard what Amy said about you, but I honestly, truly didn’t believe any of it.”

“No? Because this morning, you kissed me and held me and treated me like I meant something. And now you’re acting like I’ll never mean more to anyone than a fling. Because I’m *pretty*.”

My headache is getting worse. “Layla, this was only meant to be a teaching arrangement—”

Fury lights her face. “Stop saying that! Stop acting like this is all in my head! Zack did it too, and I’m not letting you pull that crap. I know it’s not true.” Slamming her suitcase down on the mattress, she marches across the room, coming to stand right in front of me. Up close, I can see the tear-tracks in her makeup. “Look me in the eye,” she demands, “and tell me that you don’t care about me romantically. Tell me there’s nothing here between us. Tell me it’s all in my head.”

A few seconds pass.

“I can’t,” I whisper, my voice hoarse.

She leans closer. I breathe in her warm scent. “Tell me that you didn’t realise we were crossing a line. Tell me that you didn’t *know* I was falling for you.”

I lick my lips. “I can’t,” I admit. “I knew.”

Of course I knew. We all did. The whole reason we brought Layla on this little retreat was to woo her. We weren’t plying her with silk sheets and chocolate-covered strawberries out of friendship. It wasn’t a conscious plan — we’re not *that* cruel — but honestly, what other reason could there be? The stupid fake-boyfriend experiment doesn’t exactly extend to tying her up, or sending her to weddings with toys stuffed inside her. It’s not like we can discuss that stuff on the podcast. We don’t have the right to act surprised that poor Layla started developing real feelings. It’s what we wanted.

We tried to make her fall for us. Because all three of us want her.

Her shoulders sag. “Yes. You knew. You all knew.” She stomps back to the bed, slamming her suitcase shut and yanking the zip closed. My heart hurts. I hate this. I hate how much pain I’m causing her, but I don’t know what else to do. “You’ve played me. I can’t believe I was stupid enough to trust you.”

Red-faced, she grabs the suitcase handle and pulls it off the bed, dragging it over the thick carpet to the exit. I watch as she steps out into the corridor. Desperation bursts up inside me.

“I can’t do it again,” I blurt out. “I’m sorry. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

She turns back in the doorway, her face like a mask. “Explain.”

“I... I realised at the wedding that I can’t go through it again. I can’t let myself fall in love with someone and watch it slowly fade away. I can’t. It’ll break me.” She doesn’t move. I push on. “I didn’t just lose Amy when we divorced. I lost a whole life. I lost nieces and nephews. I lost grandparents. Godchildren. My house. My career. The future I’d built for myself.” My throat tightens. “Sweetheart, it would be so easy to jump head-first into this with you. God knows I want to. But I need to be logical about this. I can’t be with someone unless I’m really sure the relationship will work out. And the

odds of this working out with you specifically... they're too low. I'm sorry."

Emotion flickers in her eyes. For a second, I think she understands.

Then her mouth presses into a grim line.

"You're a coward, Mr Martins," she says quietly. "You spend all day teaching other couples to open themselves up to love. But you'd never do it yourself. You tell other people to take risks you think are too dangerous for yourself. You're a hypocrite and a coward. And I *hate* cowards."

She leaves, slamming the door behind her.

SIXTY-FIVE

LUKE

After Layla leaves, I sit alone in the hotel room for almost two hours, watching the sky darken outside the windows. I don't remember the last time I felt so awful.

Eventually, I muster up the energy to pack up mine and Zack's suitcases and order a taxi. Josh needs to be at the post-wedding breakfast tomorrow morning, and after a lot of deliberation, I leave him a quick note saying Zack was struggling, so we've all gone home. I feel bad lying to him, but I know he won't be able to leave before tomorrow afternoon, after everything has been cleared up. There's no point putting extra stress on his shoulders. Layla's gone; he may as well enjoy the time with his family.

That night, I don't sleep. I can't. Layla's words keep running through my mind like a broken record.

You can't tell me you didn't know I was falling for you. You knew. You all knew.

I've been so stupid. I never should've even kissed her, let alone slept with her. I shouldn't have held her in my arms at night, or invited her to a family function, or tied her to a bloody headboard. She's absolutely right; we've all been treating her like our girlfriends. We can't turn around now and say that none of it was real. It was.

We were supposed to be helping her find love. Instead, we strung her along, encouraged her to open up to us, and then broke her heart.

The only thing I can console myself with is that I nipped it in the bud when I did. If I'd caved last night, and just grabbed her and kissed her like I wanted to, it would have hurt her so much more in the long run.

I can't be with Layla. And soon, she'll see that. She doesn't want to be with some forty-year-old divorcee with commitment issues and a history of bad romantic choices. We did all of this so she can find someone else; someone suited to her.

So I don't know why I feel so bad about it.

Zack finally gets back to the flat at nine the next morning, just as I'm giving up on sleep and heading into the kitchen for a coffee. He's a mess; his suit is crumpled and stained with dirt, and I can smell the sour scent of beer and sweat on him. He doesn't say a word to me, heading straight to his bedroom and locking the door. I make my drink and pull out my laptop, settling in for a day of work. I need something to distract me until Josh gets home.



Almost four hours later, I'm halfway through a blog post about setting healthy boundaries when a massive clatter rocks the flat.

“IDIOT!” Zack's muffled shout easily pierces through his bedroom wall. There's another crash, like he's kicked something over. “GODDAMN IDIOT! What the HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU?”

Alarmed, I shut the lid of my laptop, but before I can go check on him, Zack barges into the lounge. He looks half-mad; his eyes are wide and red, and he's still in last night's suit.

“Zack.” I stand. “Are you okay?”

He ignores me, storming into the kitchen and yanking open the cupboard under the sink. He starts rooting around inside, pushing out armfuls of cleaning supplies. Bottles of dish soap and grease remover clatter to the kitchen tile, bouncing and rolling under the cupboards.

I follow him, alarmed. “Hey. Calm down. What is it?” I reach down to touch his shoulder, and he shoves me away.

“DON'T TOUCH ME!” He roars, standing and moving onto the next cupboard. He slams the door open so hard all the plates inside rattle. “GET THE HELL AWAY FROM ME!” He tugs out a pile of plates, dropping them onto the wooden counter. I hear the porcelain crack.

“Zack.” I grab him by the shoulders, spinning him to face me. “What’s happening? Are you looking for something?”

He looks down at me. He’s panting like a dog. His pupils are so dilated his eyes look black. “I can’t find her ring,” he forces out, his voice rough.

It takes a few seconds for that to sink in. “Emily’s ring?” I ask. “The one you wear around your neck? When did you last see it?”

He runs his hands through his hair. “I don’t know,” he snarls. “I don’t know. I had it at the wedding. But now it’s gone. I lost it.” He kicks the dishwasher, slamming his foot into the door with an awful clang. “I FECKIN’ LOST IT!”

Oh, Jesus. “Zack. Stop. We’ll find it.”

“What if we don’t?!” He kicks the dishwasher door again, denting the metal.

I grab him by the back of his jacket, pulling him away. “Stop that. Go sit in the lounge, and we’ll sort this out, okay?”

He makes a strangled noise, turning away from me and bracing himself against the counter. For a few seconds, he’s still, breathing hard. Then he grabs a mug from the draining board and throws it at the wall. It shatters into pieces.

I jump back from the shards. “Zack, for God’s sake—”

He buries his face in his hands and starts to cry. I freeze as I watch tears drip down between his fingers, landing on the counter. “I don’t have anything else from her,” he chokes out. “She’s never gonna give me anything else. If it’s gone, she’s gone, and I’ll never get any part of her back again.” He slumps against the counter, his breathing ragged. “She’s gone. I lost her. I lost her.”

My chest hurts as I look at him.

I’ve never seen this side of Zack. He always seems so carefree. It was obvious that the booze and the girls and the crazy nights out were a

distraction from something, but I didn't realise this was what he was running from. To my knowledge, Emily died twelve years ago. She's been gone almost half his life.

Before I can work out what to say, the flat's front door flies open. Josh strides in, his face like thunder. I barely have time to register what's happening before he grabs Zack by the collar of his shirt and shoves him backward, slamming him up against the kitchen wall.

"What the Hell did you do?" He snarls.

SIXTY-SIX

LUKE

“Josh,” I say warningly, “now isn’t the time.”

He ignores me, getting in Zack’s face. “What. Did. You. Do,” he repeats, each word scarily precise. “I went to the brunch this morning. My brother said he saw you dragging her out into the gardens last night. He said she left *crying*.”

Zack doesn’t say anything, staring down at his best friend, breathing hard.

“She won’t answer my calls,” Josh snaps. “She won’t answer her front door. I spoke to the front desk, they said she didn’t come home last night.”

My stomach dips. I suppose it’s hardly surprising that Layla didn’t want to go back to her flat, with us living a few metres away across the hall. But where did she go? Is she safe? Did she just disappear in the middle of the night, wandering London in the dark in her tiny silk dress?

I close my eyes and force myself to breathe. Layla is smart. She won’t be walking the streets or taking the Tube. She’ll have booked a taxi and gone to a hotel, I’m sure. She’ll be fine.

I really, really hope she’s fine.

“Get off me,” Zack mutters, shoving Josh away. His red eyes are hard. “I just told her the truth. That we weren’t going to do this anymore. That all of this teaching BS is done.”

“Actually, he did a bit more than that,” I add. Josh turns to me, and I recount the events of last night as quickly as I can. When I tell him about Zack sleeping with her in the gardens, he closes his eyes. When I get to my conversation with Layla in the hotel room, he looks like he’s about to have a hernia.

“You idiots,” he hisses, dropping heavily onto the sofa and running his hands over his face. “What the Hell is wrong with you?”

“Obviously, we went about it wrong,” I say. “But I think it was for the best. She said that she was falling for us. It would be cruel to keep playing this stupid game, knowing that she’s developed feelings.”

Josh’s head jerks up. “She said that?”

I nod.

“And then you left her?”

“Well—”

“Let me get this straight,” he says, his voice rising. He points at Zack. “She told you she loved you after you slept together, so you dumped her while your prick was still wet.” He jabs a thumb at me before Zack can answer. “And she told *you* she loved you right after she overheard her childhood teacher calling her ‘easy’ — and instead of reassuring her that she wasn’t, you just dumped her, too?” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “And neither of you thought that, given her past, that might affect her?”

My phone buzzes in my pocket.

“What were we meant to do?” Zack snaps. “We can’t love her. I can’t love her. I can’t. I said it from the beginning.”

Josh shakes his head, his face creased in frustration. “You’ve not just rejected her, you idiot, you’ve *hurt* her. You’ve hit her where she’s weakest. Can’t you see that?”

“At least I was honest with her,” Zack mutters. “What was your plan? Just keep on shagging her and kissing her and not telling her that you’re literally *in love* with her? You don’t think that’s kind of shitty? Maybe, if she’d

known you've been obsessed with her since the day she moved in here, she wouldn't have been so quick to agree to going down on you. You ever think of that?"

I blink between the two of them. "Wait," I say slowly, ignoring my phone as it vibrates again. "Josh. You've had feelings for her all this time?"

Josh starts to speak, but Zack interrupts him. "You seriously didn't know?" He snipes. "He'd been trying to psych himself up to ask her out for months before we came up with this stupid segment. That's why he was always so pissy when she went out on dates with other guys. He was jealous."

I look at Josh. "Is that true?"

A muscle twitches in his jaw, but he doesn't say anything, fixing his gaze to the floor. My stomach sinks.

I don't know who I feel worse for, honestly. This situation must be breaking Josh's heart, but Zack's right — it was seriously unfair to Layla to not tell her about his feelings before offering to help her.

God, what a mess.

Zack sighs, shaking his head. "Look, man, if you want her, go for it. *You* haven't broken up with her."

"I can't," Josh counters. "She doesn't want me. Don't you get it? She wants this." He waves between the three of us. "She wants us. All of us, or nothing. I'm not enough for her." My phone buzzes again, and he groans. "For God's sake, will you answer your damn phone?!"

I pull my mobile out of my pocket, checking the screen. Amy's been texting me. I scan through the messages, my blood going cold.

AMY: If I can't convince you, maybe these will.

AMY: a picture is worth a thousand words, right?

AMY: (sent 11 images)

My heart suddenly pounding, I tap to open the photos.

They're all pictures of Layla at the wedding. Layla kissing all three of us.

There's one of me, standing next to her and brushing a kiss over her cheek. A handful of her with Zack, laughing as he pulls her against him, nuzzling her neck. And three or four very blurry pictures of her with Josh. She's clinging to his lapels as he dips her down into a deep kiss, half-hidden by some huge vases of flowers. They're not professional photos; they look like someone snapped them surreptitiously with a phone camera.

This is bad.

Swiping on Amy's contact, I call her back. She picks up on the second ring.

"Luke—"

"Where did you get those photos?" I demand.

"Hello, Amy, how's the honeymoon?" She drawls, sounding irritated. *"I hope the flight was okay. What's the weather like in Madrid?"*

"You're the one who decided to spend the first day of her honeymoon looking for incriminating photos to gossip about," I spit. "Where the hell did you get these?"

She scoffs. *"I didn't take them, if that's what you're accusing me of. I had better things to do at my own wedding than spying on your little girlfriend."* She sniffs. *"It turns out a few of the guests recognised you from your show. They saw the opportunity to pap you, and they took it."*

God. My skin feels cold. How could we have been so stupid? The wedding was a public event. We were all so caught up in Layla that we forgot how our relationship might look on the outside. "You have to delete them. Don't share them with anyone else, okay? They make Layla look terrible."

"Do they?" She says, her voice acidic. *"It's not like they're doctored, Luke. If they make her look terrible, it's because she is terrible. You need to wake up from this stupid fantasy and realise that she's cheating on you."*

"I told you, it's not like that! I knew she was with Josh and Zack. They've kissed her in front of me plenty of times, for God's sake."

There's a long pause. *"Oh my God,"* Amy says eventually. *"Are you serious? I think I've heard of guys who like to see their girls get with other men... what the Hell is that called...?"*

"I don't have time for this!" I burst out. "Just tell me that you'll delete the pictures!"

"It's too late, hon. You're all celebrities now, remember?"

"What does that mean?"

"They're all over social media. That's where I found them in the first place. Surprised you haven't seen them yet, honestly. I—"

I hang up and slam the phone onto the coffee table. Josh and Zack have stopped arguing and are both watching me warily. "Check our Twitter," I tell Josh. He's the one who controls all our shared socials.

He frowns. "What? But—"

"Now," I snap.

Frowning, Josh fishes his phone out of his pocket and taps at it a few times. His face goes slack as he stares at the screen. "Oh my God."

TWITTER

Goss Magazine @Celebrity_Goss_News You won't BELIEVE these pictures! Insider leaks photos of THREE SINGLE GUYS cheating scandal!!!

Sweetheart Soulmates @SweetheartSoulmatesPodcast We hate to say we told you so, but...

Lola Snow @LolaSnowOfficial ✓ That slag Layla cheated on her costars like a DOG. Three Single Guys has been my FAVE podcast for years, breaks my heart to see the boys get played :(#EndLaylaThompson

Goss Magazine @Celebrity_Goss_News 'End Layla Thompson' - Celebrity influencer Lola Snow starts online hate campaign against the former podcast host, amassing thousands of retweets in less than an hour

SIXTY-SEVEN

LAYLA

Curled up in the crisp sheets of my huge hotel bed, I stare out of the window, watching raindrops slide down the glass. It's late evening, and amber headlights flash down the wet roads below as cars make their way through central London, navigating the after-work traffic rush. The honks of car horns mingle with the rhythmic thudding echoing through my bedroom wall, interspersed with occasional feminine whimpers and soft grunts.

It sounds like my neighbours are having a good night.

I'm too sad to even put in earphones to drown them out. I'm too sad to do.... Anything, really.

It's been four days since the wedding, and I still feel completely and utterly decimated. I used to think movies overplayed heartbreak; that the image of a girl in her pyjamas, crying in bed and eating pints of ice cream, was just a dumb stereotype.

Now I know the truth. Movies underplay the pain. I can barely get out of bed. My whole body hurts. I feel like I've been ripped apart.

And I hate it. I hate the guys for making me feel like this. I hate myself for putting myself in a position where I could be hurt this badly.

I look around the hotel room, taking in four days' worth of clothes and room service trays strewn across the expensive furniture. Maybe it was cowardly to go to a hotel instead of just going back to my own flat, but I can't be in the same building as the guys right now. I can't lie in my bed at night, knowing

they're just a few metres away. I can't handle the thought of accidentally bumping into them in the corridors or standing next to them in the lift. I already had an overnight bag packed for the wedding. It was far easier to head into the city and pay for a new suite.

To try and cheer myself up, I booked into a really, really nice place: a five-star, right on the bank of the Thames. As I turn back to the window, the London Eye glows at me through the glass, its bright red lights reflecting off the surrounding high-rises and sky-scraping office buildings. I thought that staying in a posh hotel might make me feel better — that the California King bed and luxury jacuzzi would help remind me that, even though my relationship failed, the rest of my life is still going great.

It didn't work. A California King is ridiculously huge when you're only one person. Especially when you're used to curling between multiple bodies to sleep.

My laptop dings under the covers, and I pull it out, squinting at the screen. It's another notification. I swipe it away, feeling sick.

My social media has exploded in the last few days. Apparently, some prick at the wedding reception decided to secretly photograph me with the guys, and then blast the pictures onto every social media platform under the sun. And now all our listeners are calling me a slag online.

It's funny. I've analysed those photos so closely. In every single one of them, it's the guys who are coming on to me. Luke is kissing my cheek. Zack is pulling me into his chest. Josh is tipping my mouth up for a kiss. But of course, everyone naturally assumes *I'm* the slag.

I don't understand it. The listeners knew that I was going on dates with all three men. They've spent weeks fighting over which guy I should 'pick'. *Three Single Guys* has recorded multiple episodes on group relationships in the past. But for some reason, as soon as everyone saw those photos, their first assumption was that I was a total ho.

To make matters worse, the guys haven't said anything. The first couple days after the wedding, I kept waiting for them to write a post or upload an episode explaining the situation. They never did. All they've done is tweet one very bland PR statement, asking people to 'please not spread rumours

when they don't understand the context behind the pictures'.

Obviously, since they didn't actually explain what happened, that did absolutely nothing.

They have been ringing me, Josh especially, but I haven't answered. I can't. They're letting people run with these stories, and it makes me sick to my stomach. It's one thing to say they don't want to date me; it's another to let me be publicly embarrassed and not step in to defend me.

The worst part is, I can't even defend myself. I've got plenty of experience with bullying. I know how it works. The guys have a whole mob of fans on their side, and I have no one. If I try to argue with them, it'll just fan the flames. I need the boys to stand up and defend me, but for whatever reason, they're not doing it.

Another email notification dings up on my laptop, and my jaw locks as I read the subject header.

I found an article you might enjoy. Eat dirt you ugly ho.

The attachment is titled '*Ten Ways to End it All*'.

Something breaks inside me. Tears flood my eyes, and my stomach suddenly churns. I barely have enough time to shove aside my laptop and dodge for the ensuite bathroom before I'm throwing up in the porcelain toilet bowl. I've not eaten properly in days, so bile burns my throat, choking me as I kneel on the cold marble and heave, over and over.

By the time my stomach finally settles, my hands are shaking. I'm sweating all over. Little pricks of light are dancing over my vision. I flush the toilet and flop down onto the floor, wrapping my arms around my knees and breathing hard as old, half-buried memories pound through my mind. Teachers mocking me. Girls laughing at me. Boys whistling and catcalling and grabbing me. I rub my face, trying to shut them off, but they just get louder and more vivid, washing over me in great big heavy waves until I can't even sit upright anymore.

God knows how long it takes me to calm down. It feels like hours. Eventually, I end up just lying on the tile, my heart pounding out of my chest, tears trickling down the sides of my nose.

This isn't the first time this has happened in the last few days. The heartbreak is bad enough, but it's the harassment that's really been hurting me. It's like all the old anxiety I felt when I was sixteen has flooded back. I can't eat because of the knot in my stomach. I can't sleep, and whenever I do drop off, I wake up in cold sweats. I feel like I'm going crazy.

As I lay on my hotel bathroom's mirror-shine floor, defeat washes over me. I can't do this anymore. I can't. It's killing me. Something has got to change.

Standing shakily, I head back into the bedroom, opening my laptop again and bringing up my email. With trembling fingers, I tap out a quick message to Anna Bardet Couture, giving her assistant the phone number of my hotel room, and letting her know that my work number and email will be unavailable until further notice. Then I finally shut down my laptop and power off my phone.

Immediately, relief floods me. Climbing weakly back into bed, I reach for my sketchbook, snuggling down with it.

I've spent the last few days trying to distract myself by working on design proposals for this weekend's meeting with Anna. So far, I already have four sketches incorporating my butterfly design into her own style, but none of them are good enough. They need to be perfect. There's now more riding on the collaboration with Anna Bardet than there ever was before.

I've looked through some New York real estate sites. Even a small apartment is ridiculously expensive, but if Anna ends up offering me a contract, I should be making enough to live and work in the city. And right now, moving to America is looking more and more attractive every day.

I glance at my suitcase, lying open by the foot of my bed. In just a few days, I'm finally getting out of here. Then I can put this whole mess behind me.

Hopefully forever.

SIXTY-EIGHT

LUKE

Saturday is the first day of London PodFest, and as we step inside the convention hall, the atmosphere is electric. I look around the atrium, squinting past the bright lights and chattering hordes of people. Josh and Zack hang behind me, silently seething at each other, and I sigh, trying to block them out.

Today is going to be a terrible day.

None of us wants to be here. We considered cancelling our appearance altogether, but so many of our fans had bought tickets just to see us live. We couldn't let them down. I called the convention organisers a few days ago and managed to wrangle us out of our guest panels, but we still have the live show scheduled in an hour, and it's going to be rough. I'm sure there will be a lot of questions about Layla.

My chest starts to ache.

I miss her. So much. It's been a week. She hasn't come home. She hasn't answered any of our calls. She hasn't responded to any of our messages. Josh and I have been trying every day, multiple times a day, but we never get through.

I don't know what to do. Ever since the pictures of her at the wedding have gotten out, the social media rumours have spiralled out of control. A reality star tweeted about the scandal a few days ago, and now the photos are going viral. It's unbelievable. We've never gotten this much attention before. There are news outlets posting about the story online. Buzz Tone has chimed in

with a statement. Every hour, we're getting inundated with tweets and messages and DMs. And almost every single one of them is bashing Layla.

I look over the convention hall, blankly watching the crowd chatting and laughing with each other as they visit the brightly coloured booths set up throughout the auditorium. Each exhibition table is heaping with merchandise. Con-goers with shiny lanyards around their necks wait in long queues around podcast hosts, clutching memorabilia and notepads, waiting for autographs.

We barely get five feet through the door before fans start approaching us, crowding around us and shoving Sharpies into our hands.

"Oh my God, I love your show!"

"Can you sign my shirt?!"

"Can I get a selfie? I can't believe you're really here!"

"Where's Layla? Is she not coming? Did you guys fight?"

"Is it true she cheated on you?"

"I always knew I didn't like her."

I force myself to smile and keep my mouth shut as we scribble our signatures onto programmes and merchandise.

Josh and I have discussed what to do about the gossip, and we finally decided to try and ignore it as best as we can.

It's been hard. There's nothing I want more than to sit down and spend all day replying to every piece-of-shit troll who's spouting disgusting slurs at her — but I can't. I know I can't. Addressing rumours just validates them. When we tested the waters with a simple statement asking people not to spread rumours about the leaked photos, our socials practically blew up. The tweet got twice as much attention as any of our other posts, and the articles started coming in even faster. We were scared that we might attract the attention of another celebrity, so we backed off.

Paul solidified our decision. Our manager has been begging us to make an episode on the podcast called 'Why We Broke Up'. He's desperate to

capitalise on the traffic the drama is bringing us.

Which is why we're not saying anything. It feels absolutely awful to not step in and defend Layla, but I'm not going to do anything that will just end up hurting her more. This is about her, not about how much better I would feel if I stood up for her.

For her part, Layla's been silent on social media. I hope she's just switched off all her devices. I'd kill to know that she's okay.

"You got another pen?" Josh asks me roughly, shaking his dried-out marker.

"No," I lie. "I think Zack does."

Zack signs a poster, completely ignoring us. Josh grits his teeth, and I sigh, pulling a spare marker out of my pocket. "Here." Josh takes it wordlessly.

He and Zack have barely spoken since their big fight the day after the wedding. Not one word. Josh is too angry.

Not that Zack has much to say. I've never seen the man so utterly miserable. He still hasn't found Emily's ring. We've called the hotel, but they said it must have been thrown away during clean-up. I was hoping the Con would cheer him up a bit. Conventions are usually the highlight of his year. It's probably a leftover from his time playing rugby; he still loves the rush of performing in front of a crowd, signing autographs, taking pictures with fans.

Right now, though, he just looks angry. He's scowling like the spectre of Death as he bends down to let a girl take a picture with him. She doesn't seem to care, squeaking with happiness when she sees the selfie, then skipping off to show her friend. I watch her go, staring at her pink t-shirt. Emblazoned on the back are the words—

"Team Josh," Zack reads, rubbing his injured knee. "Interesting choice."

Josh closes his eyes. "I thought they'd given up the shipping."

So had I. But apparently not. As I glance through the people crowding around us, I see a bunch more shirts, in pink, white, and blue. All with our 'team names' on.

Oh, good. They're colour coded.

Zack slaps Josh on the back. “Don’t worry, mate. If you’re her favourite, she’s obviously completely demented.”

Josh tosses him a dirty look, shrugging his shoulder away. “Don’t touch me,” he mutters.

Zack puts up his hands. “You think I frickin’ want to? I don’t want owt to do with you, you bloody idiot.”

“Guys—” I start.

The teenage girl whose tote bag I’m signing frowns between us. “Hey. Why are you guys fighting? Is it because Layla cheated on you all?”

Josh and Zack both freeze, going silent.

I shut my eyes. “Maybe we should just go to the Green Room.”



The Green Rooms are a row of identical dingy dressing rooms set at the back of the building. We’ve been to a bunch of conventions, and they’re always the same — faux-leather couch, ugly grey carpeting, mini-fridge full of bottled water and a basket of cheap snacks. A bubbly twenty-year-old convention volunteer called Katie shows us around inside, and talks our ears off for twenty minutes before we finally manage to get rid of her. Then we sit in silence.

I watch as Josh fiddles with his phone, his face pale.

“You good?” I ask. Josh might act like an unfeeling robot, but he has the worst stage fright I’ve ever seen. Before our very first live show, he threw up before we went onstage. He’s gotten much better in the years since then, but right now, he looks like death warmed up.

“Fine,” he says, not looking at me.

“Scared?” Zack says with mock sympathy. “Seems to be an issue for you, huh?”

“Zack,” I interject. “Stop it.”

“Least I wasn’t too much of a damn coward to tell her how I felt,” Zack continues.

“At least I regret hurting her,” Josh shoots back. “Instead of acting like an absolute twat about it.”

“We all screwed up,” I point out, trying to calm them down. “All of us. Stop blaming each other.”

Zack’s scowl deepens. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

Josh shakes his head, looking at him incredulously. “You seriously believe that, don’t you?”

“Yes!” Zack crosses his arms over his chest. “I told her going into this that it wouldn’t be for real. How is it my fault that she chose not to listen?”

“You literally dumped her *three seconds after pulling out*—”

I’m getting sick of this. I slam my hand onto the table, shutting them both up. “For God’s sake,” I snap. “You two need to get over this. You’ve been best friends since you were children. You’ve helped each other through every bad and good thing that’s ever happened in your lives.”

“Well, he’s never acted like this much of a git before,” Josh mutters.

“And you’ve never been this much of a goddamn prissy coward,” Zack shoots back.

I throw my hands in the air. “Yes, you both have! Josh has always been bad at expressing his emotions, and, Zack, you’ve always been a stubborn bastard. You’ve forgiven each other for it before, and you’ll do it again. Because like it or not, you love each other.”

Zack scoffs. “We don’t—”

“Yes. You. Do.” I emphasise. “And I’m sick of hearing you bickering. I’ve already lost her, I’m not losing both of you, as well. Now pull yourselves together.” I wave at the door. “The people out there paid money to come and see us. Money they could’ve spent on food, or bills, or rent. Some of them have travelled a long way to get here. So stop bloody moping. You’re behaving like children.”

Josh looks down at the floor, his expression frozen. Zack looks like he's about to argue, but before he can, the door to the Green Room bangs open, and Katie bounds back in. Through the open doorway, I can hear the muffled chatter coming from the auditorium, and the beginning strains of our theme tune starting to play.

"They're ready for youuuu!" She practically sings. "The crowd is so big today, oh my God, I'm so *excited*."

"Great," I say through gritted teeth, standing. "Let's do it."

Josh and Zack get up, and we make our way to the stage.

SIXTY-NINE

LUKE

The stage has been set up following our usual specifications; three chairs sit facing the audience behind a long table covered in our recording equipment, all tested and ready to go. Bottles of chilled water are placed under our chairs. A projector is shining our logo onto the screen behind us.

The room is full of people, seated in rows of plastic chairs. As we reach the table and sit down, I scan the crowd grimly. Clearly, the drama of the past few days hasn't lost us any followers. The place is packed. There are even people sitting on the floor.

I tap gently on my mic, then lean forward to speak into it. Thanks to all of my years talking in front of classrooms of teenagers, I'm the best at presenting in front of a crowd, so I take the role of main host whenever we do live shows.

"Hello, London!" I call. The crowd whoops and shouts. "Thank you so much for joining us today. It's wonderful to finally see you all in person, instead of talking to you through a microphone. My name is Luke—"

"I'm Josh," Josh adds.

"And I'm Zack," Zack says, his voice rough.

I don't let my smile falter. "And we are Three Single Guys, who are absolutely unqualified to answer your relationship questions. So let's get on with it. Today, we're going to be doing advice as normal, but instead of reading your emails, we'll be taking live questions from you, the audience."

The crowd cheers and screams, stamping and clapping. I point to Katie, who's hovering on the main floor, clutching a wireless microphone. "Our lovely assistant Katie is standing at the front of the room. Can you give us a wave, Katie? If we pick you out to ask us a question, Katie will come to where you're sitting and give you the mic."

I glance between Josh and Zack. Neither of them add anything, both stony-faced.

I swallow a sigh. "Right. Let's get started, then. Who's got a question for us?"

Hands go up throughout the auditorium. I start scanning the crowd, but before I can pick someone to speak, a voice shouts: "Where's Layla?"

"Layla will not be attending," I say. "We've decided to... part ways. She won't be on the podcast anymore. I'm very sorry, if any of you came to see her specifically."

A ripple goes through the crowd. I can see faces fall. One girl raises her hand, and Josh points at her. Katie scurries forward and passes her the mic.

"So the rumours are true?" The girl asks in a hushed tone. "She did cheat on you?"

Jesus Christ.

"Layla didn't cheat on us," Zack mutters. "We weren't actually dating. You all got that, right?"

I give him a warning look.

The girl at the microphone narrows her eyes. "It didn't look fake in the pictures from the wedding," she accuses.

Zack shrugs. "What can I say? I'm a good actor."

The fan looks incensed. "So it was all acting?!" She demands. "The segment wasn't real?!"

Josh frowns. "It was real—" he starts.

“Then what happened?” She presses. “Why are you discontinuing the segment? We didn’t even get to find out what happened at the end!”

Zack opens his mouth, and I lean forward, cutting him off before he can speak. “Sorry to tease you all like this. Some factors that were out of our control occurred, which means that we cannot do any more episodes featuring Layla.”

“But that’s the best bit!” The woman whines. “I—”

“Next question,” Josh interrupts her. “You. The man in the white shirt.”

The woman scowls, but Katie gently moves her aside, offering the next man the mic.

He grunts as he stands up, smoothing down the legs of his pants. “It sounded like you were really falling for her,” he says. “Is that why she’s not here?”

My shoulders slump.

“An *advice* question, please,” Josh says, his voice strained. “Anyone?”

The next person up is a middle-aged guy wearing a bright blue PodFest t-shirt. “Did you argue with her?” He asks excitedly. “Did she not want to pick one of you? It seemed like she really liked you.”

Zack finally snaps. “For God’s sake,” he bursts out, slamming his hand on the table. “Is Layla all you guys are gonna ask about?” He turns to us. “Hell, we may as well tell them.”

Josh fixes him with a hard stare. “This isn’t the time or the place for you to kick off—”

“Why the Hell not? They’re asking. They obviously want to know, so why don’t we tell them?”

“Oh, shut *up*,” Josh says, his eyes burning. “As if you care about her. You don’t give a crap about her or how she feels, or you wouldn’t have—”

I reach across and put my hand over his mic. The resulting pop of static makes most of the audience wince. A few people clap their hands over their ears.

“Next question,” I say brightly. “Who’s up?” A bunch of hands raise in the air. I nod to Katie. “Katie, can you pick someone, please?”

She nods, running her eyes over the crowd and waving one man forward. He’s wearing a stupid graphic tee with the words SUCK IT GOOD LADIES emblazoned on the front, and a baseball cap jammed down over his face. I don’t even recognise him until he steps up to the mic and tilts his face up to look at us.

“Hey, Mr M!” Donny Pritchard says with a grin, and my stomach goes cold. “Remember me?”

I close my eyes, anger surging through me. “Donald,” I say flatly. “What are you doing here?”

Zack’s head lifts.

Donny grins. “After we met up in the pub,” he says loudly, attracting the attention of all the crowd, “I looked you up online. Great podcast, mate.” He runs his eyes over the table. “Pity Layla isn’t here, I really wanted to catch up with her.”

“You know them?” Someone shouts.

Donny turns and grins back at the crowd. “Aw, yeah. Mr M used to teach me in school. And me and Layla go waaay back,” he brags, his words heavy with innuendo.

Josh gives me a sharp look. The question in his eyes is clear. *Is this the guy Layla was talking about?*

I shake my head and reach for the bottle of water underneath my chair, trying to keep calm. “Sorry to disappoint you. No Layla today. Is that all you wanted, or did you have a question?”

“Oh, right, yeah, sure.” He chuckles. “Man, it’s weird asking this from a guy who used to teach me, like, Shakespeare and stuff.” He rubs the back of his neck. “So, basically, like, I’m seeing this chick. And for the past week, she won’t sleep with me. Every time I try, she says she’s got a headache, or whatever. And that’s not okay, right? Getting it on is, like, an important part of a relationship, you guys say that all the time.” He pauses, like he’s waiting

for me to agree with him.

“Go on,” I say flatly.

“So I told her that if we’re gonna date, I expect her to actually, you know, sleep with me, and she got really pissed and said I was like, ‘coercing her’, or some shit. And I said, woah, that’s a *really* unfair accusation, and then she left all huffy. So, like, what do I do? I don’t think—”

“What was your name again?” Josh interrupts, his voice level.

“Josh,” I mutter. “Don’t.”

He glances across at me. “You’re not seriously telling me it’s not him.”

“I’m telling you it doesn’t matter.”

Donny looks confused, but then grins. “Donny Pritchard. Good to meetcha. Anyway, as I was saying—”

Before he can finish his sentence, there’s a loud squeak as Zack pushes back his chair and walks to the edge of the stage. I frown, but before I can say anything, he vaults off the stage into the audience, walks up to Donny, and punches him in the face.

SEVENTY

ZACK

I'm not even thinking as I smash my fist into that little prick's smug jaw. My head is empty. I don't know what the Hell made him think he could come here. What, he wanted another jab at Layla? He wanted to make her life even more miserable? I saw how shook up she was the last time she ran into him. For the first time since the wedding, I'm glad she's not with us today.

Donny stumbles back, clutching at his face, his eyes wide. "Woah! What the Hell was that for, man?! You could've broken my nose!"

I grab him by the front of his shirt. "You think it's funny, do you?" I spit. "Making up lies about sixteen-year-old girls? Ruining their lives because they refuse to sleep with you?"

"What are you talking about!?" He shouts.

"Why are you here?" I demand. "Why the Hell would you come here!?" When he doesn't reply, I give him a rough shake.

"I heard you guys were performing," he babbles. "I just wanted to see Layla, and—"

I grab his shoulders and shove him back. He falls onto the ground, crying out. There are gasps in the crowd around me, but I can barely hear them through the ringing in my ears. "Stay away from her."

Firm hands wrap around my arms, pulling me back. "Sir," a woman's voice says in my ear. "Step back. You need to leave." I don't move. I can't. "Sir—" she repeats.

Donny writhes dramatically on the ground. There's blood on his face. "Security! Get him the Hell away from me!" He screeches. I can hear the crowd talking around me, their voices muffled by the ringing in my ears.

"Zack, leave him alone!"

"What's happening?!"

"Oh my God, are you filming this?"

I shake off the security guards and turn on my heel, pushing through the crowd towards the fire exit. Dimly, I hear Josh call my name, his micced voice reverberating around the room. I ignore it.

I don't care. I don't care about anything. All this stuff — the fans, and the podcast, and the sponsors — none of it means jack shit. I slam out into the corridor and follow it to the back entrance of the venue, yanking the door open and stepping into the cool outside air.

Letting the door fall shut behind me, I drop down onto the stone steps, trying to breathe. Dimly, I register that I'm sitting in a little alley. The narrow street is filled with bins. Bits of rubbish float over the cobblestones.

I don't care. I'm going to puke. My skin is aching. I want to smash something. Everything. I want to pick up one of the loose bricks scattered across the ground and toss it through the nearest window.

I run a hand through my hair, yanking out my hair tie. For God's sake, I don't know why I feel like this. My whole body hurts, more than my goddamn leg did when I tore my ACL. It's flat-out pain, but instead of coming from a muscle or a broken bone, it's just radiating through me in massive, heart-stopping waves. I'm choking on it.

I barely even register when the back door behind me creaks open again. I watch the floor blearily as two shoes enter my line of vision.

"Oh, Jesus," Josh says over my head. *"Zack. Are you crying?"*

I wipe my face, refusing to look at him. "Piss off."

There's a pause, and then he reaches into his pocket, fumbling around. His hand appears in front of my face. "Here. Will this help?"

It takes a second for my eyes to focus on what he's offering me. There's a small silver ring lying in the centre of his palm, gleaming in the grey light.

Anger roars inside of me. I lunge to my feet and grab the front of his shirt. "You had it?" I shout. My voice reverberates around the small backstreet, bouncing off the brick houses. "All this time, I've been looking for it, and *you've had it?!?*"

Josh doesn't move as I yank at the collar of his shirt, looking up at me calmly. "I only found it last night. I've not been hiding it from you."

It takes a few seconds for his words to filter into my brain. Slowly, I loosen my grip. "You... you found it? Where?"

"The hotel," he says, like I'm an idiot. "Where do you think I've been going every night, you twat?" He pushes my hand off his shirt. "Let me go, man."

I slump back onto the stone steps, leaning against the back door. I'm breathing hard. My vision is flashing in time with my heartbeat. "The hotel? I already checked—"

"It was outside, in the grounds. There were those pictures of you dragging Layla into the gardens, and you had it around your neck in those, so I figured that's where you lost it. It was in a tuft of grass." His mouth twists wryly. "You're lucky; they were planning on mowing today. It would've gotten ruined. I was gonna give it to you after the Con." He holds the ring out again. "Go on, then."

Slowly, I reach up and take it, closing my fingers around it. "I..."

He sighs, hiking up his pants and sitting down on the step next to me. "Don't thank me. Just pay me back for the metal detector, and we're good."

My eyebrows go up. "You bought a metal detector?"

He snorts. "I walked up and down the lawns with a metal detector like a treasure-seeking lunatic, yeah. The staff thought I was mental, but I promised to shout out the hotel on Twitter, and they let me do whatever I wanted."

Jesus. I close my eyes, rubbing my thumb over the smooth metal curve. I've been such a prat.

“I know I messed up,” I tell him, my voice rough. “I do. I know I hurt Layla. And I hate myself for it.”

Hating myself is an understatement. I haven't slept in a week. Every time I close my eyes, I see her wet, wounded face as I pull away from her in the rose garden, and it makes me want to rip out my own heart and hand it over to her on a platter.

And then I remember that I probably lost Emily's ring while I was balls-deep in Layla, and the guilt gets even worse.

“I assumed so,” Josh says drily. “You've never seemed completely brain-dead before.” He tips his head. “Why wouldn't you admit it?”

I look flatly at the ring shining in my palm. I've had this empty feeling in my chest ever since the wedding. I thought finding the ring would fill that hole. But no. I still feel like crap. It still feels like something is missing.

“Do you remember what she looked like?” I ask eventually.

Josh goes very still. “Emily?”

I nod.

He shrugs a shoulder. “Yeah. We have pictures.”

“Not in pictures. Do you remember what she actually looked like? When she was talking, or laughing, or... I don't know, tying her hair up?”

He shrugs again, his expression shuttered, and something in me dies.

If anyone would remember Emily, it would be Josh. The two of them were never super close, but they were friends, by proximity if nothing else. Both of them were usually round my house on any given day of the week. I know Emily thought Josh was kind of stuck up, and Josh was wary of how fast our relationship was going. I flip the ring over in my palm, remembering.

When I was seventeen, a couple months before our exams, I told Josh that I was going to propose to Emily, and he chewed me out. Told me that we were too young, and it was a terrible idea. I was so mad that we didn't talk for a week. Then we had a parents' evening at school, and his mum turned up looking all frail and red-eyed. I remember hanging back with my mum and

dad, watching as Josh's father barked at his wife, shouting at her in front of all the other parents. I remember Josh's closed, blank, utterly emotionless face as people turned and stared at him.

I'd known Josh almost all my life, but that was the first time I really understood why he was the way he was. So reserved and closed-off and alone.

Josh is watching me intently. "You still love her," he says quietly.

"I don't even really remember her," I admit, my voice cracking. "I can't even picture her face anymore. I can't remember her voice. I don't..." My eyes suddenly blur. "When I die, my Wikipedia page will still be online. People can watch reruns of my matches. They can listen to the podcast. Emily has none of that. If I forget her, then she may as well not have bloody existed. And she was important. She was so much better than me, and I..."

My lungs collapse inward. I put my head in my hands and try to breathe through the waves of emotion slamming through me, but I can't get the air in. Josh doesn't say anything, waiting patiently as I fist my hands in my hair, yanking. "Dunno what's happening with me," I finally get out. "I don't know why I feel like this."

"You're grieving," Josh says, as if I'm a bit thick.

I kick the stone step. My bad knee jolts, pain radiating through the joint, but I don't care. I want to smack my foot against the concrete. I want to hear the bones crack. "I'm not grieving. She died twelve years ago."

"Does it feel like she died twelve years ago?"

"Feels like it was yesterday," I mutter. "And a million years ago at the same time." Pain shudders in my chest, and I shove it down. "I'm not *grieving*," I repeat. "I don't have the damn right to grieve."

He frowns. "Of course you do."

"I don't," I say into my hands. "I really, really don't."

"But—"

“You don’t know what I did,” I cut him off. “After I left for training. You don’t know what I did to her.”

SEVENTY-ONE

JOSH

I go quiet. I don't know what to say.

We've never talked about this. Almost thirty years of friendship, but we've never talked about the seven years of utter radio silence after he joined the national rugby team. We've never talked about why he suddenly cut me off, or why I found him, all those years later, drinking himself to death in a hotel room.

"I'm sorry I ignored all your calls," he mutters, his head bowed. "Wasn't personal. I wanted to talk to you. Jesus, you were the only person I could talk to. But—"

"Emily," I surmise.

He nods, scrubbing his face. "I had to get away from this city. I had to get away from our school. When I was playing rugby, I could be a different person. I had new mates. A public persona. I just... threw myself into that, tried to leave all this shit behind."

"What did you do?" I ask. "What did you do that was so bad?"

"I cheated on her," he growls, kicking the step again.

I try to hide my surprise. "You cheated on Emily? Before she died?" Zack is the last person I can imagine being unfaithful.

"No," he says gruffly. "After."

I narrow my eyes. I'm not sure Zack is really using the word 'cheating' right, but I don't think now is the best time to mention it. "Okay."

"I started getting with girls two months after she died," he says, his voice breaking. "Two months. I couldn't handle it anymore, I couldn't sleep alone, I couldn't not... have anyone to hold anymore, I couldn't do it." He swallows convulsively. "And isn't that the shittiest thing I could do to her? Who the Hell has a one-night stand sixty days after their fiancée dies? Even my teammates thought it was harsh. Big rugby dudes who spent every night getting drunk and picking up women, and they were literally shocked that I was sleeping around so soon."

I don't say anything.

He looks down at the ring in his hand. "Wasn't just one, either. It was a new girl every night. For years. S'like I couldn't help myself." He swallows. "But the *one* thing I could say is that I never fell in love with any of those girls. Not one of them. So, no. I don't love Layla." He shakes his head, his voice rising. "I can't. I can't. It would be—"

"An insult to Emily's memory?" I ask drily.

He dips his head. "Yeah. That."

"Do you think it would be more insulting than what you're doing now?" I ask levelly. "Do you honestly think that Emily wanted you to ruin the rest of your life over her? You think she wanted you to treat a girl who loved you like utter crap, *in her memory*?" I shake my head. "Zack, if Em heard what you said to Layla in that garden, she'd probably be in tears herself."

"I don't know what else to do," he groans, wiping a hand over his face. "I can't just forget her."

"You don't have to forget someone to move on," I say, looking at the brick wall opposite us. "When my mum died, it consumed my life. It doesn't, anymore. Some days, I don't think of her at all. It doesn't mean she's gone."

He starts to protest, and I cut him off. "You didn't cheat on Emily, Zack. She was dead. And you were a lonely, heartbroken eighteen-year-old kid who had bad coping mechanisms. That's it." I reach out and brace a hand on his shoulder. "You've got to let it go. You're not honouring Emily, you're just

obsessing over her death. You gotta let it go.”

He grimaces, but before he can respond, the door behind us swings open again.

Luke almost trips over us as he falls out of the doorway. His shoulders slump when he sees the two of us. “Jesus. What are you two doing?” His voice rises with anger. “Why the Hell didn’t you answer your phones? I’ve been looking for you everywhere! Zack, what the Hell were you thinking, hitting Donny in front of everyone? It’s already all over social media, for Christ’s sake. As if we weren’t already in enough crap, now you’re assaulting people!? I—”

“I think I’m in love with Layla,” Zack tells him flatly, cutting his tirade short.

That takes the wind right out of Luke’s sails. For a moment, he’s silent, mouth open. “Oh.” He leans against the brick wall, obviously processing that. “Oh.” I watch him swallow. “Me too.”

My eyebrows raise. “When did you come to that conclusion?”

“At the wedding,” he says quietly.

“You knew at the wedding, and you still broke up with her?” Zack asks, coughing to clear his throat. “Mate, you’re worse than me. At least I was in denial.”

Luke dips his head in a curt nod. “I broke up with her because I was in love with her. I thought it was an irresponsible match.”

“Why?” I ask, confused. “I’ve never seen you happier.”

“Yes. Well. It was stupid. And after this past week without her—” he shakes his head. “I’m sick of being a coward.”

I nod. “Me, too.”

“Me, three,” Zack adds morosely. “Poor Layla. We romanced her half to death, then dropped her as soon as she got the balls to tell us how she felt. It’s not her fault she fell in love with three total idiots.”

“We were stupid to think we could teach her anything,” I agree, my mind flashing back to Mother’s Day. I remember Layla dragging me to her pretty pink flat and curling up next to me. *I don’t want you to be alone right now.* “She was already better at loving someone than all of us combined.”

The three of us are silent for a moment, reflecting. Unseen cars rumble down the nearby road. Horns honk and people laugh as they walk by on the street.

Zack slips Emily’s ring carefully into the pocket of his jeans and stands, taking a deep breath. “Okay,” he says, with more energy than I’ve seen from him all week. “So, how are we gonna get her back, then? ‘Cause something tells me she’s gonna be stubborn.”

SEVENTY-TWO

LAYLA

As I wait in line at the Heathrow baggage check, I can feel hundreds of eyes on me.

It's been like this for days now. I barely left my hotel room all week, but whenever I did venture down the street to buy food or tampons, people blatantly stared at me. At first, I thought I was imagining it. But now, as I glance around the queue at the busy airport check-in, I know that I'm not. People really are looking at me. A gum-chewing teenage girl by the coffee shop is squinting at me like she's trying to work out who I am. A cleaner has been absent-mindedly mopping the same square foot of floor for about five minutes straight as she openly stares at me. I meet her gaze, and she flushes, finally looking back down again.

"Excuse me," a male voice says behind me. I turn and look into the face of a balding middle-aged man in a green sweater. He studies me. "Are you La—"

"No," I say, turning back and glancing up at the huge clock hanging on the wall. My flight to New York leaves in thirty-five minutes, and I've not even checked my luggage yet. I'm running late. Me. Layla Thompson, the girl who's usually at every appointment an hour early, is running so late that she might not make her flight.

I don't even have an excuse. I didn't get caught up in traffic. My taxi didn't get lost. There wasn't an accident on the motorway. Ever since I broke up with the guys, I've just been slow. Sluggish. It hurts to move. It hurts to do anything but lie in bed and cry.

The queue moves painfully slowly, but I finally get to the front of the check-in line and heave my big pink suitcase onto the conveyor belt, passing my passport and boarding card to the smiling official. “Hi. Sorry, I’m running a bit late.”

“Let’s see.” She checks my card. “Oh, that’s fine. I’ll send you through the priority line at security. Let’s just get you checked in.” She scans my card and frowns at her computer screen. “Layla Thompson?”

I can feel the guy behind me turn and stare. I stand up straighter. “Yep.”

“Is this your boarding card?” She asks, tapping at her keyboard with her pretty, coral-coloured fake nails.

“Yes,” I say, trying to hide my impatience.

“Hmm.” She scowls at her computer. “Can I have the card you bought this ticket with, please?”

“I didn’t buy it myself. I’m being flown out for a work opportunity.” I glance up at the giant clock on the wall. The second hand ticks down slowly.

“Ah.” The woman clears her throat. “I see.” She folds my boarding pass and hands it back to me. “I’m sorry. It appears whoever purchased your seat cancelled this ticket last night.”

I stare at her. There’s a staticky sound in my ears. “What?”

“I’m afraid the booking is no longer valid. We can’t accept you onto the flight.”

“I—” My head is spinning. What’s happening? “It must be some kind of mistake. Is there anything you can do? Can I buy the seat back myself?”

“The flight is fully booked. If you like, we do have a flight leaving in six hours for LA...?”

“I don’t want to go to LA.” My heart is beating faster now. I’m starting to panic. “I need to be in New York. In, like, twelve hours.”

“Our next New York flight isn’t until tomorrow, I’m afraid.” She gives me a sympathetic smile. “If I were you, I’d contact your employer and explain.”

The ticket may have been cancelled by mistake. If that's the case, I'm sure they'll sort out alternative travel for you." She glances down at my suitcase. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

I blink at her stupidly. My blood pounds in my ears. I feel light-headed. "I... no." I force out.

She gestures to the side. "In that case, please take your baggage and stand aside, so I can serve the next customer."

I nod numbly, heaving my suitcase off the conveyer belt and dragging it out of the check-in queue. My hands are sweating and shaking as I head to the nearest bench, flopping down onto the seat and pulling out my phone. I feel sick as I switch it on for the first time in days. I never should have turned it off. I should have just dealt with all the disgusting texts and emails. What if Anna didn't get my call forwarding request? Maybe she tried to contact me, and it didn't go through?

God. I'm such an idiot.

My phone screen lights up, playing a soft little chime — and then immediately starts to buzz as notifications roll in. Calls. Texts. Emails. Most of them are from unknown contacts, but I spot a few missed calls from the guys. I swipe all of the notifications away and tap at my email app. Immediately, a slew of awful subject titles blink at me.

You broke zack's heart

Die you stupid bitch, you dont deserve josh

What the hell is wrong with you???

You need to listen to the guys' latest episode. It's APOLOGY TIME

My throat tightening, I scroll frantically through the messages until I find one from Anna Bardet Couture. It's from three days ago.

Subject: Appointment cancellation.

My stomach sinks like a stone as I read the short message.

Dear Ms. Thompson. In light of recent information, ABC has opted to withdraw interest in a collaboration at this time. As such, any upcoming meetings with the brand have been cancelled. Regards, Vivian White (PA).

I stare at the words until they blur into grey smudges. How the Hell is this happening? Hasn't the last week been bad enough?

Swallowing hard, I click on the phone number listed in the email signature. My phone rings for a few seconds, then there's a click on the other end of the line.

"Vivian White, Anna Bardet Couture," a cheery female voice says. *"How can we help you today?"*

I clear my throat. "This is Layla Thompson. I was due to fly out to visit your HQ today, but I just got to the airport, and they said that my flight had been cancelled?"

"Ah." There's an awkward pause. *"Yes, Anna said you might call. I'm surprised you're just finding out now, didn't you get our email?"*

"No. I've been a bit off-the-grid."

There's the sound of shuffling papers. *"Well, Miss Bardet has decided to go in a direction which doesn't include collaboration with your brand at this time. Sorry for any inconvenience! We wish you the best of luck with your future business endeavours."*

For a few seconds, I struggle to find words. In the end, I just choke out, "Why?"

SEVENTY-THREE

LAYLA

“As you know, trends come and go,” she says breezily. “It’s difficult to make statements with any certainty in this industry, and—”

“Yes, but why?”

There’s a long pause, then a sigh. “You’re on that Single Guys podcast, right? Anna loves that show, she listens to it all the time in the office. It’s where she first heard about you. I gather that she’s unimpressed with your recent... comportment regarding your co-stars on the show.”

My throat feels like it’s burning. “I didn’t cheat on them.”

“Ma’am, I don’t know anything about the situation. I don’t even like podcasts. All I know is that Anna is very temperamental, and she does not change her mind on these matters. She can be very... hard-headed. I’m sorry.”

To her credit, she actually does sound apologetic. Maybe this is normal for her. Maybe she’s used to turning down crying small business owners because her boss got pissed off about Twitter drama.

I take a deep breath, nodding. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, ma’am. Have a nice day.” She hangs up. My phone beeps in my ear as the line disconnects. Slowly, I lower it to my side, looking around the airport. The bright lights and crowds of people shimmer around me.

It's happening again. Once again, people are lying about me. They're spreading rumours, and making stuff up, and I can't talk back. At least when I was sixteen, it was only the school making fun of me. The guys have let me become a worldwide laughing-stock. Hell, this has probably been *good* for them. I bet their engagement has skyrocketed, while I've just been left to struggle and fight all by myself. Again. Because I was stupid enough to trust them.

I look down at my suitcase. I don't know where to go. I can't bear to see the guys right now, but I don't have anywhere else. I don't have any friends. Just a few weeks ago, I had three boyfriends; I had listeners tweeting and messaging and emailing me; I had more customers than I'd ever seen before. I've spent my whole life thinking I was unlikeable, and for the first time in almost thirty years, it felt like people genuinely liked me.

And now I'm alone again.

A wave of shame washes over me. How did I let this happen? How did I let the guys put me in such a terrible position? Yeah, they hurt me, and — intentionally or not — started a scandal which hurt my career. But *I'm* the one cowering away, afraid of going home. I'm the one who hasn't done any real work in a week. Who's spent days crying in a hotel room, too scared to check my own email. That's not on them, that's on me.

It's not like I haven't been through this before. I know what it's like to be bullied. I have years of experience. I've handled it once, and I can handle it again. I'm not going to let people break me down into pieces. I won't.

Something inside me hardens. I can't wallow in self-pity anymore. I need to face this head on.

I feel like I'm in a dream as I drag my suitcase to the nearest airport restaurant. I can't face my hotel room yet. I know if I let myself be alone, I'll break down. And I am so sick of feeling sorry for myself. Instead, I make my way up to the bar, sit gingerly on the barstool, and order a white wine.

"Do you have a pen I can borrow?" I ask the bartender when he delivers my drink. "I need to write something down."

He offers me a biro, and I nab a napkin, settling down to do what I do best: making lists. Sipping my wine, I start bullet-pointing my next moves.

First of all, I need to get back to work. I'm currently paying a warehouse courier service to quality-check, package, and ship all of my old orders, but I can't rely on them forever. Something tells me truckers aren't the best at checking lace hems for loose threads.

I'll probably have a bunch of angry ex-fans demanding refunds, so I need to go and deal with that. I need to make a social media statement.

And I need to find a new apartment. ASAP.

"Excuse me," a low male voice says at my side. "This seat taken?"

"Yes," I say coldly, not looking up from the napkin.

"... are you sure?"

"Yes."

"But—"

I cut a glare at the man. He's youngish, in his twenties, with a boyish face and red cheeks. He smiles at me hopefully. "For God's sake," I bite out. "I'm not interested. I don't want you to sit next to me. I don't want you to buy me a drink. I don't want to have a torrid hookup in an airport's public toilet. So *piss off.*"

He blinks. "I'm not hitting on you," he says slowly. "I'm here with my friends, and we don't have enough chairs. Are you using this one, or can I take it to our table?" He points behind him. I follow his thumb, spotting the rowdy-looking table of guys in football strips, chatting loudly and swilling back pints.

I close my eyes. I am such a massive prick. "Sorry," I mutter. "Bad day. Yeah, take the chair. I'm sorry."

He scowls at me, grabbing the stool and lifting it away. "Bitch," he mumbles under his breath as he heads back to his table.

My stomach sinks as I watch his retreating back. How is it possible that I'm now even worse at talking to men? After six weeks of fake-dating, I've somehow gone backwards.

I grimace. I don't want to think about the guys. It's their stupid advice that got me triple-rejected and bullied by every social media platform on the internet, for God's sake. I'm on my own now.

And it's time I faced what's really happening.

Deciding to take the bull by the horns, I pull my phone back out of my pocket and go straight to the Twitter app. Bracing myself, I open up the notifications page — and stare as the messages pour through in real-time. They're scrolling down my screen, too fast for me to read.

@HerTreatLayla LISTEN TO @ThreeSingleGuys noooooow pleeeeee

If @HerTreatLayla doesn't message in before the show ends i'm giving up on love

@HerTreatLayla The guys are live! Go listen!!

*@HerTreatLayla this is the cutest thing ever omg.
#givethemasecondchance #threesingleguyspityparty
#GetLaylaListening*

I frown. 'Get Layla Listening?' What the Hell is that? I click on the hashtag, and a ton more tweets come up. #GetLaylaListening has been used over a hundred times in the past hour. I scan through the tweets. They're all messages to me, pretty much begging me to listen to the guys' latest podcast episode.

For God's sake.

I really don't want to, but I follow orders and go to my podcast app, opening up the homepage for *Three Single Guys*. The top episode is entitled EPISODE 449: THE APOLOGY TOUR. The little red circle flashing next to the episode name shows the boys are currently recording live.

I stare at my phone, hesitating.

I don't want to listen. Judging by my notifications, this 'apology tour' is aimed at me, and frankly, I don't want to hear the guys' side of the story. I don't want to give them a chance to worm back into my life. I don't want to forgive them.

But this isn't just about them. It's about me. They're talking about me, discussing me in front of tens of thousands of strangers, affecting my business. I need to know what they're saying. It doesn't matter how scared I am. I'm not a tiny teenage girl anymore, eating her lunch in a toilet cubicle, overhearing the girls in my year gossip about me. I'm not that person anymore. I don't know when I became a coward, but I am sick of it.

I can't hide from this just because I'm scared. I won't.

Swallowing back my sigh, I down the rest of my drink, shove in my earbuds, and stab the *Play* button.

SEVENTY-FOUR

LAYLA

Immediately, Zack's gruff, scratchy voice fills my ears. Tears prick the back of my eyes, and I grip the smooth bar counter as memories wash over me. Him cuddling me on the couch. Him dragging me onto his lap to kiss him. Him spinning me around while we dance. God, I miss him so much.

I'm so distracted by the sudden wave of emotion, it takes a few seconds to tune into his words. "Grief isn't a straight line, I guess," he's saying. "Some days I still see Emily in signs. I still sometimes dream of her, or I get a memory that's so vivid that it just — makes the world disappear. And some days, I don't think of her at all. And those are the worst."

I sit up straighter. He's talking about Emily? Now? The last time we brought up the idea of him discussing grief on the podcast, he clammed up and stormed out. So why is he doing it now?

"How would you say losing a partner differs from a break-up?" Josh asks. A shiver runs down my back as his deep, cool voice burns through me.

"When you break up with someone, you can make them the villain," Zack says. "Bitch about them. Your friends will all tell you that you're going to find someone better, or whatever. You can move on." He takes a deep breath. "I have nowt but good memories of Emily. I never broke up with her. I never stopped loving her. So when I started falling for someone else, it felt like I was cheating."

My eyes widen as his words echo through my head. *When I started falling for someone else. When I started falling for someone else.*

Oh my God.

“You must have known that you weren’t, though,” Josh points out. “Realistically.”

“Yeah.” Zack’s voice is creaky. “I guess I felt like I didn’t deserve anyone else. She was The One for me, and I lost her, and that was that. I…” He trails off, coughing. “Shit. Sorry. Need a minute.”

“It’s not exactly the same thing,” Luke cuts in smoothly, his warm voice soft in my earphones. “But I had a similar feeling after my divorce. I’d been in love, I’d had the marriage and the house, I had my chance at a proper family, and I blew it. I couldn’t make my first wife happy, so I didn’t deserve another one.” He pauses. “More than that, though, I completely, one-hundred percent believed that I would grow old with my ex. I thought I’d had the fairytale ending. And when you believe something that deeply, and it falls apart, how can you ever trust your feelings again? I’d already proved that I couldn’t hold a marriage. Why go through the years of heartache?”

He trails off, and there’s a soft ding sound. “That’s another hour mark,” Josh says. “Thank you all for listening and messaging in. For those of you who are just now joining, this is the start of hour seven of our apology livestream. If you need a recap —”

“We screwed up,” Zack says. “So bad.”

“Yeah,” Josh says. “As you all know, we recently ran a segment called ‘The Fake Date Experiment’, where the three of us fake-dated our co-host to help her become better at dating. Unfortunately, it backfired pretty badly when all three of us started to fall in love with her.”

I sit back in my chair. It feels like a pile of bricks just landed on my chest.

Zack snorts. “Mate, ‘fess up. You already were in love with her. You had hearts in your eyes whenever you looked at her.”

Josh takes a deep breath. “Yes. I’ve loved Layla for a long time now. Well before she first joined us on this show. But I never told her. We’d been friends for years. I couldn’t stand the thought of losing her.”

Tears fill my eyes. The bartender passes by and gives my wine glass a cautious look, obviously making a mental note to cut me off. I smile at him weakly.

“I think I fell in love with her the first time she opened up to us about her past,” Zack says. “She had, like, tears in her eyes, and I remember thinking... ‘I’ll do anything to not see her cry again’.” He’s silent for a moment. “Then I made her cry even worse. God, what a prick. What about you, Lukey?”

“It was a gradual thing, I think,” Luke says. “I didn’t realise until I invited her to my ex-wife’s wedding.”

“We wouldn’t normally air personal issues like this,” Josh adds. “But when you make a public mistake, I think it’s unfair to expect someone to accept a private apology.”

“Plus, she won’t answer our calls,” Zack adds. “So we don’t exactly have a choice.”

“Right. Speaking of...” Josh’s voice hardens. “Rumours have been going around that Layla was unfaithful to one, or all of us. These are untrue. We were the ones who were dishonest. We led her on, then refused to admit we were falling for her. We hurt her, not the other way around.”

“Layla, honey, we are so sorry,” Zack says. “So sorry. We miss you.”

“And we’d like to apologise to all of our listeners, too.” Josh adds. “We’ve been telling you to open up, and be vulnerable and brave in your love life — all while the three of us were too scared to deal with our own issues. Trust me. After losing her, we’ve definitely learned our lesson.” There’s a brief pause, then he clears his throat. “Okay. We’re going to be taking some tweets.” He clicks his tongue, and I imagine him frowning behind his reading glasses as he scrolls down his feed. “From @sweetheartbaby23. ‘I still think she cheated on you. If all three of you fell in love with her, she obviously led you all on’.”

Zack snorts. “Layla doesn’t lead people on. She’s usually trying to make people leave her alone.”

Josh sounds less amused. “I know our listeners are accepting enough to not find a relationship involving more than two people strange,” he says icily.

“Monogamy is a social construct. It’s not wrong, but it’s also no more ‘right’ than multiple people choosing to be together. All three of us were openly dating Layla, so I don’t see how on earth it could be construed as cheating.”

“Shame on you,” Zack admonishes, “We raised you kids better than that.”

“From @ellabaloney17.” Josh continues. “Did you guys ever sleep together?”

“It’s none of your business,” Luke answers crisply. “Next.”

I sit numbly in my seat as they answer question after question, defending me, cutting down people who are rude to me, reassuring listeners over and over that this is their fault, that they screwed up, that I did nothing wrong. My heart is thudding. I can barely believe what I’m hearing.

They love me? More than that, they love me enough to openly admit they were wrong in front of tens of thousands of people?

I don’t think anyone has ever loved me that much. I look down at the phone in my sweaty hand. Before I can talk myself out of it, I tap out a quick tweet and hit send.

@threesingleguys I’m listening

Immediately, my notifications go crazy. Likes and retweets start pouring in. I blink in shock, watching the numbers skyrocket to one hundred, two hundred, three hundred...

I suddenly notice that the guys have stopped talking. There’s a few seconds of completely dead air. Then:

“Layla. Please come home,” Josh says, his voice soft as he talks directly into the mic. “Please.”

I don’t know what to say. My phone feels too heavy in my hands. I lay it down carefully on the bar and flip my napkin over, picking up the pen to write a new list. I carefully catalogue what I know about the situation.

1. The guys are in love with me. They weren’t pretending.

2. They're not using me as a tool to bolster their own popularity. They're taking responsibility. They're defending me, and people are believing them.

3. They're in love with me. They have been all this time.

My throat burns. I don't know what to do. I want to forgive the men, but I'm scared. They hurt me so bad.

"Please," Josh says again, and he sounds so sad that I'm standing and grabbing my suitcase before I even know what I'm doing.

I need to get a taxi.

SEVENTY-FIVE

LAYLA

When I get back to the apartment, the reception is dark. The porter has gone home for the evening, and the lift, as per usual, is broken, so I trudge up the six flights of stairs to our floor. When I reach the boys' apartment door, I see that it's been left ajar. I can hear the low murmur of voices. Pushing it open gently, I peer inside.

The guys are still streaming. Luke is hunched over his laptop with a massive pair of headphones over his ears and his head in his hands. Josh is frowning at his phone, and Zack is slumped in his armchair, looking absolutely exhausted as he speaks into the microphone set up on the coffee table. My heart aches as I look at them, emotion flooding through me. I've missed them so much.

I shift my weight, and all three of them look up. Zack stops talking immediately, his eyes going wide. He stands, and his massive knees knock his mic off the table with a clatter. He doesn't even seem to notice, staring at me like I'm a ghost.

He looks... destroyed. His eyes are swollen, and his thick beard is tangled. There's a coffee stain on his shirt.

In short, he looks like a man who's spent the last few hours recounting the biggest trauma of his life live on air. And for what? For me?

It takes me a second to realise Josh has stopped talking, too. Silence stretches between us, interspersed with gentle pings from tweet and email notifications on Luke's laptop. I glance at the glowing screen. They're getting multiple

comments and messages a second. How many people are listening to this right now?

“Hey,” I say, my voice scratchy. “Um. Your mics are still on.”

Apparently, my words break the spell. All three men blink. Josh sighs, turning back to his mic.

“Okay, guys. She’s just come back in,” he says, his voice like gravel. “I... I think it’s time for us to go now. We’ll be back this Wednesday. Thanks so much for all of your support, and have a good night. I...” his eyes trail back to me. “Thank you.” He disconnects the recording.

We all stand quietly for a few more seconds. None of us knows what to say. Eventually, Luke clears his throat, glancing down at my suitcase. “We weren’t sure if we’d catch you before your flight.”

“You were cutting it fine.”

“I know.” Luke points under the coffee table, where a bunch of water bottles and snacks have been stacked in a basket. “We were all set to keep going until you got off the plane. We said if you hadn’t contacted us in forty-eight hours, we’d call it quits.”

My eyes widen. “Forty-eight hours? You were going to stream for two full days?”

“What else could we do?” Josh asks, his voice sharp. “Jesus, Layla, we would’ve done anything to talk to you. Anything.”

“Well.” I look at the floor. “Here I am.”

“You’re not going to America?” Zack asks, his blue eyes still boring into me.

I cross my arms over my stomach. “The offer has apparently been rescinded. Anna Bardet is a big fan of the show. She didn’t want the cheater who lied and broke all of your hearts to be a member of her organisation.”

All three men flinch.

“Oh, God,” Luke says. “I am so sorry. One of the guests at the wedding released the pictures. We tried to get them taken down, but by the time we realised, it was too late. And then when that reality star tweeted about them... they were everywhere.”

I nod slowly. There’s another awkward silence, and then Zack finally breaks.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” he grumbles. “Why are we all just standing here?” He crosses the room in two big strides, opening his arms for me like he wants to scoop me up.

I take a step back. “No.”

He stops in his tracks, his face crumpling. “Layla?”

“I...” I look between the men, taking in all of their concerned faces. I don’t know what to do next. On the taxi ride home, all of my thoughts were focussed on getting back here. But now that I’m actually standing in front of the men, I don’t know what I want. Every atom in my body is screaming at me to just step forward into Zack’s arms, but I don’t think I can.

I’m scared. I don’t trust them anymore.

I take a deep breath. “I heard what you were saying on the livestream,” I tell them. “And I understand, now. I can see that none of you were trying to hurt me.” I glance up at Zack. His jaw is tight, his fists clenched at his sides. “I didn’t realise how bad your own issues were. But... that doesn’t mean I want things to go back to the way they were.”

“What?” Zack’s voice sounds strangled.

“I want to be friends again,” I practically beg. “You three are the best friends I’ve ever had. I want that part of our relationship back. I want it to be like this stupid podcast never even happened.” I swallow thickly. “But I don’t want to date you anymore.”

SEVENTY-SIX

LAYLA

Luke dips his head. Josh's face is a mask.

Zack looks utterly distraught. He runs a hand through his beard. "I mean, if that's what you want, we'll take what we can get, L. But I love you. We all do. And you said—"

"I love you too," I agree, nodding. "I do. But it's not enough, Zack."

He presses his lips together, his eyes pained. "I really hurt you, didn't I?" He says quietly. "When I slept with you, and then—"

"And then dumped me immediately after? You brought me into that garden knowing that we weren't leaving it as a couple. But you still insisted on getting it on with me, for what? To give us one last run?" I take a shaky breath. "As a friend, I can see that you were in pain, and I can forgive you. But as a partner — I can't. Okay? I can't let you treat me like that."

"That's not what was happening. Not in my head." He rubs his throat. "I just... we were at the wedding, and I was so happy with you. And when I realised what day it was, I felt like the worst person in the world. Because I hadn't just forgotten Em, I'd replaced her with another woman." He touches his chest. "I took you into that garden because I wanted to prove to myself that wasn't what was happening. That I wasn't... falling for you." I flinch, and he hangs his head. "I'm so sorry for using you like that. I broke up with you in the meanest way I possibly could've, and I can't apologise enough. But I do love you."

“It’s not enough,” I say sadly. “Jesus, Zack, I wish it was. But I won’t be your second best. There’s some part of you that’s always going to be wishing you had Emily instead of me. I don’t want to be your runner-up.”

“You’re not a *runner-up*,” he protests.

“I am, though,” I say, my voice breaking. “And I can’t blame you for that, you can’t help how you feel, but—”

“You’re not a runner-up,” he growls. “For God’s sake, just let me *speak*.”

The fire in his eyes makes me go still. He scrubs a hand over his face. “Look. I’ll always love Emily.”

“I’d never expect anything else.”

He takes a deep breath, puffing up his chest. “I’ll always love her... but she’s gone now. And the man that I was back then is mostly gone, too. We were children. And she will always be a part of me. But she was a part of my past, not my future.”

I shake my head. I don’t want to hear this. I don’t want him to chip down my defences. “Zack—”

“*Look*,” he emphasises, tugging down the neckline of his shirt. I stare at the few inches of bare collarbone blankly for a second, then realise what he’s showing me. My stomach sinks.

“What happened to your ring?”

“I dropped it at the wedding. When we were...” he waggles his eyebrows.

I don’t laugh. I’m horrified. “Oh my God. Did you lose it?” Was it my fault? Did I pull it off him by accident? My throat squeezes, choking me up. “I’m so sorry.”

He shakes his head. “Josh found it. It’s in the safe in my room.”

I frown. “You didn’t have to do that. I’d never ask you to take it off.”

“I know. But I realised... I don’t need to wear it on me.” He shakes his head, his eyes fixed on me. “Layla, I’ve loved you almost this whole time. And in the back of my mind, I knew it. I knew it when I slept with you. I knew it

when I kissed you. I knew it when I took you out. But I pushed the feeling away, because I was terrified of it. And I was using a dead teenage girl to hide behind.”

He takes a step towards me, and this time, I don't shrink away.

“I can't keep Em alive by remembering her. I can't bring her back — but I also couldn't erase her, even if I wanted to. She'll never go away. Not really. She's part of me.” He takes a deep, shuddering breath. “She'll still be here if I don't think of her every day. She'll be here if I take the ring off. If I go back to all the places we used to go together.” He takes my hands. His fingers are shaking. I clasp them hard, looking up at him. “She'll still be here when I meet a smart, sweet, gorgeous girl, and I fall in love with her. When I admit it to myself. When I let myself move on.” His voice breaks. “So, yeah. Layla. I do love you. I adore you. It's taken so goddamn long, but I'm finally ready to love someone. For the love of God, please forgive me.”

I don't say anything. I can't. My head is spinning.

He looks down. “Christ. I don't know how to convince you I mean it, but—”

Pushing up onto my tiptoes, I cup his cheeks and kiss him. He makes a sputtering noise against my mouth, kissing me back hard. Warmth flows through me in a slow, unfurling wave as our mouths move slowly together, soft and tender.

This is new to me. Forgiveness. I learned as a kid that it's so much easier to see the world in black and white. It's safer to stay away from people who have hurt you, because otherwise, they can just do it over and over and over again.

But I don't think Zack will. And I understand how all the pain and the hurt and the grief could have twisted his brain into thinking rejecting me was the right thing to do.

I trust him.

SEVENTY-SEVEN

LAYLA

Eventually, the kiss ends. I pull away from him slowly. He swallows, looking down at me.

“I love you,” I tell him. My heart is pounding so hard it hurts. “I love you. Love you.”

“God.” He clasps me against him. His chest shudders with hard breaths. “I could hear you say that until the day I died and it wouldn’t be enough.” He rubs his throat. “You know what Em would be saying, if she were here right now?”

“Get off my man, you bleach-blonde skank?”

He smiles, his eyes glistening. *“Congrats. Ya big idiot. Or something to that effect.”*

Tears fill my eyes. I don’t know what to say, so I just kiss him again.

When I finally pull away, my skin is fizzing. Zack stays at my back, stroking my arms as I turn to Luke. He’s sitting on the arm of the sofa, watching me, his face calm. The silvery strands of hair falling over his forehead are gilded in the low yellow light of the lounge’s side-lamp, and the sleeves of his white shirt are rolled to his elbows, exposing his strong forearms.

He looks edible. All I want to do is throw myself at him. But I don’t get to do that anymore.

His eyes run over my face, as if he’s drinking me in. “Is it my turn?”

“If you want one.” I meet his gaze steadily. “I meant it, when I said that I love you. I do. But I understand that a relationship with me looks bad to Amy, and the school, and your old teacher friends. It’s a bit of a shitty reason, in my opinion, but I get it.” I grit my teeth. “But if you have any concerns about me being too *hot*, or flighty, or easy, or whatever the Hell else, then you can go right to Hell. And I don’t think we can be friends anymore, either.”

He closes his eyes. “Love, this was never about Amy. It was about me. I was scared of you.”

“Scared of *me*?” I repeat incredulously.

He dips his head. “Yes. Please, believe me when I say that never for one second did I believe anything that Amy said about you. My decision to break up with you was entirely to do with my own issues. Going to that wedding, and seeing all those people again, just rubbed salt into a wound I thought I’d gotten over. I felt...” He trails off. “Well. To be honest, I felt stupid.”

“What?”

His grey eyes gleam. “I felt stupid for marrying Amy. Right before I broke it off with you, Amy told me that, during our entire marriage, she never once loved me. I was just a convenient choice. And everyone around me could see it. All of the signs were there. All the red flags. Hell, you were a sixteen-year-old girl who barely knew either of us, but I bet you knew she wasn’t a good person, didn’t you?”

I don’t say anything.

He sighs. “So, yes, I felt stupid. I felt like a total idiot, and I was defensive and embarrassed and scared of making the same mistake again. When Zack broke up with you, it felt like a perfect out. I chose wrong. I’m sorry.” He runs a hand through his hair. He looks tired. “I... I didn’t want to fall in love again. Right now, I’m content with my books and my friends and my work. This is enough. I wanted to keep it this way.” He smiles weakly. “But I couldn’t stop myself from falling in love with you, even if I tried. And I’m a coward for not admitting it to myself. Layla, you are so much braver than all three of us.”

I swallow thickly. “I’m scared of you, too,” I tell him honestly, and his face falls. “I’m scared you’ll change your mind about me again.”

“I’d marry you right now if I could,” he says evenly, and my heart flips.

Zack’s grip on me tightens. “Hey, I’m right here, can you not *propose* to my girlfriend?” He growls.

Luke ignores him. “I know you’re right for me, Layla. I’ll spend the rest of my life proving it to you, if that’s what you need.”

I nod slowly. “You trust me?” I ask. “Not to hurt you, or cheat on you, or—”

He shakes his head vehemently. “Jesus, Layla. *Yes*, always. It never crossed my mind not to.” Something tight inside me eases, and I step forward. He flinches, like he wants to reach for me, but doesn’t know whether he can.

“I trust you, too,” I tell him, looping my arms around his neck.

With a soft noise, he wraps his arms around me, tugging me onto his lap. I bury my face in his chest. He smells heavenly. Of books and tea and warm linen and home. I want to burrow into his shirt and never leave again.

“I love you,” he says into my hair, and I nod.

“I love you too. Do this to me again, and I’ll throw you on the street so fast you’ll find gravel up your asscrack.”

His eyes soften, and he pulls me in for a kiss. Behind me, Zack steps forward and starts making out with my neck. I sag between the two men, letting them hold me up. Their words spin through me, pounding through my blood in time with my heartbeat. *I love you. I love you. I love you.*

It’s almost enough. There’s just one piece missing.

SEVENTY-EIGHT

JOSH

I slip out of the lounge, leaving Zack and Luke to make up with Layla, and head back to my bedroom. Shutting the door behind me, I slump down into my desk chair, turning to face my open laptop. The room is dark, cut through with shadows, but I can't bring myself to turn on the light. My heart is heavy. My mind is whirring.

I absolutely hate myself.

The reality of what I've done didn't really hit me until Layla walked back in through the apartment door. Instead of falling into our arms, she looked around at us like she expected us to hurt her. Her face was guarded. Distrustful.

Of course she didn't trust us. Zack might have been acting like a prick recently, but he was right about one thing: I've lied to Layla non-stop for the past two months. I took advantage of her. I told her I was 'helping her', but really, I was just helping myself. I was in love with her, and I used these stupid 'lessons' as an excuse to kiss her and hold her and have my way with her. Layla shouldn't trust me.

Zack and Luke both made one-time mistakes in the heat of the moment. I've been lying to her for years. Ever since I started falling for her.

I hate that this is the man I've become. I didn't used to be like this. I wasn't always a coward. Before my mum died, I was almost painfully honest. I'd tell the truth, even if it hurt me in the long run. But now, here I am twelve years later, and I'm lying to get a girl to kiss me? I'm disgusting. Absolutely

disgusting. I don't deserve her forgiveness.

I don't know how long I sit there, listening to the muffled talking and laughing and kissing through the thin walls. Eventually, the noises stop. I brace myself as I hear my bedroom door creak open behind me, fixing my eyes blankly at my black laptop screen.

"You love me," Layla says softly.

I don't look up. I don't know what to say.

She leans in the doorway, watching me. "How long?"

"A long time," I admit.

"Look at me."

Steeling myself, I obediently spin my desk chair to face her. She scowls when she sees my carefully empty expression. "Don't do that," she snaps.

"What?"

"Don't..." she waves a hand over her eyes, exasperated. "Go blank. You look so guarded." Her eyes narrow. "I've been your friend for years. I'm one of the only people you let see what you're feeling, so stop trying to hide it from me. I've *earned it*, goddamnit."

I blink.

With a huff of annoyance, she stomps forward into the room, coming to stand right in front of me. "You lied to me," she accuses.

I nod slowly.

She crosses her arms, glaring. "Are you okay?"

I stare at her. "Am I... You're worried about *me*?"

"Yes, I'm worried about you! You let me use you like some kind of... crash test dummy. You let me practise kissing, and flirting, and sex with you, and it actually meant something to you. Hell, it must have hurt you!"

It did. It tore my heart apart. "It was fine," I say blandly.

Her cheeks flush with anger. “It’s not fine! I don’t want to hurt you, Josh! I don’t want you to let me hurt you! Why didn’t you tell me you had feelings for me?”

“My feelings didn’t matter.” My voice sounds robotic. “I wanted to help you. This was never about me.”

She glances around my room, taking in the books on my shelves and the collage of wedding invites pinned above my desk. “No,” she says slowly. “Nothing you do ever is, is it? God, you’re so annoying.”

I tip my head up, looking at her. “I wish I had a better reason,” I say honestly. “I don’t. I was a coward. I wanted you so badly, but I was scared you’d say no.” I swallow hard. “Being your friend was better than nothing.”

“You could’ve just told me.”

“You weren’t ready to hear it. There’d be no point.”

She looks startled. “What do you mean?”

I sigh, wiping a hand over my face. “If I’d told you that I was in love with you before this whole experiment started, what would you have done?”

“I would’ve asked you out for a drink.”

“No,” I say softly. “You wouldn’t. Try again.”

She considers for a few seconds. “I would’ve run for the hills,” she admits eventually.

“Even with your ten-year-plan?”

Her shoulders slump. She crosses her arms over her stomach. “I think we can agree that the ten-year-plan was just a crutch. You’re right. I would’ve left.”

I nod. “Before we started this, you weren’t looking to be loved. You wanted to find a boyfriend the same way you want to find laundry detergent at the grocery store. To cross an item off your list.”

She presses her lips together.

“I’m not blaming you,” I say quickly. “Not at all. This is on me, not on you. But that’s why I lied. Because if I told you how much I loved you, I would have lost you. And I couldn’t lose you, L. I couldn’t. I...” I trail off, rubbing my chest. Even the thought takes my breath away. “The last time I lost someone I loved, it almost killed me,” I force out, my voice strangled. “I don’t know if I can do it again. You’re the most important person in my life right now.”

Her eyes flick to the picture of my mum, carefully tacked to the bottom of my noticeboard. Understanding shimmers across her face. Another pang of self-hatred spikes through me.

After my mum died, I used to wish that the grief could hit me all at once. If it was just one massive wash of pain, I could’ve fought through it. Let it make me stronger. But it’s not like that. It’s like a tap dripping, steadily eroding you away. It doesn’t make you strong; it only ever makes you weaker. And now, over a decade later, I’m apparently so weak that I’ll lie to the person I love most in the world, just to keep her close to me. “Some days, there’s not much fight left in me,” I admit. “It was easier to lie. So I didn’t have to lose you.”

Her eyes gleam at me in the low light, completely unreadable. “So you pushed me away.”

“Yeah. I did. I’m sorry.”

She crosses her arms over her stomach. “Well. I guess I can’t really blame you,” she says. “I was doing the same thing, right? I was using that stupid list to push everyone else away. Including you.” She looks down, taking a deep breath. “You don’t get hurt by bullet points.”

“Layla...”

“I think you’ve probably noticed by now,” she says, her voice wavering. “I am so scared of people hurting me. But—” She steels herself. “I think I trust you, anyway.”

My heart jumps in my chest. I reach out and take her hand. She watches, curling her fingers into mine. “I can’t promise I won’t hurt you,” I say levelly. “I’m sure I will. But I promise that when I do, it will never, ever be

on purpose. And I'll find some way to fix it. I will."

Her whole face changes. As soon as the words leave my mouth, it's like the sun's come out from behind a cloud. "I believe you," she says slowly. "I trust you. I do."

And then she falls on me. Literally — her body just sort of collapses onto my lap. I wind my arms around her waist, pulling her close, breathing in her sweet scent. She tugs my mouth to hers, and for the first time in a long while, my body relaxes.

Kissing Layla feels like taking off a heavy backpack, or finally getting to lie down after spending hours on your feet. It feels like waking up for work, and realising that it's the weekend, and you can spend all morning in your warm bed. It feels like safety, and relief, and happiness. It just feels right.

"I'm sorry," she says into my mouth. "Sorry I left you. Sorry, sorry."

"I'm sorry I lied to you."

"I love you," she breathes, and my heart expands in my chest. I force myself to pull away. She looks down at me, her green eyes soft and dark.

I curl my thumb under her cheek. "I love you too," I say quietly. "I missed you so much, L."

A shiver runs through her. "Sap," she whispers, and I smile, pulling her mouth back to mine.

SEVENTY-NINE

LAYLA

We spend the rest of the evening together, tangled up on the guys' couch. I'm exhausted, but I don't want to go to bed. As early evening slips into night, the sun sets over London, washing our bodies with gold and red light, and then eventually fading into darkness.

We spend most of that time kissing. Slow and gentle. Hard and passionate. And everything in between.

A few months ago, I hated kissing. I thought it was boring. Now, every second takes my breath away. The hours slide away without me realising.

Even when our mouths aren't firmly locked together, we don't talk much. There's some idle chatter, but nothing deep or personal. It feels like we're inside a delicate little soap bubble. I'm scared of popping it and ruining the moment. I've been so heartbroken for so long, and suddenly, all of that pain has gone. I can breathe again. More than that — I'm *happy*. My whole body is thrumming with endorphins. It's like every cell in me was missing the guys, and now that we're back together again, I can finally relax.

A few months ago, the thought that I could be so attached to other people would scare me. To be honest, it still does. But I trust the men. I have to.

Sometime after the sun goes down, Josh's phone starts pinging. He pulls it out and frowns at the screen.

"You can let go of me, you know," I tell Zack, who has his arm around me like a vice as he draws patterns on my thigh with his fingertips.

“Can I?” He doesn’t move. He hasn’t for the past twenty minutes. Now, I think it’s clear that we’re not experts at this whole ‘group relationships’ thing — but I’m pretty sure it’s supposed to involve some more sharing.

“I won’t run away.” I try to stand, and he yanks me back down, settling me back into the crook of his arm and sighing happily. “Zack.”

“What do you need? Luke will get it.”

“Get what? A catheter? I need to pee, for Christ’s sake.”

He pats my knee. “You can do it here, I don’t mind.”

“Zachary.”

He heaves a massive sigh and lets me go. “Fine. I’ll miss you.”

I stand and shuffle along to the other side of the sofa, plopping myself down on Josh’s lap. His arms come to wrap around me immediately, and he buries his face in my hair, breathing deep. On my left, Luke takes my hand.

Zack makes an outraged noise and scoots closer on my other side. “You little liar.”

“You need to learn to share. You’ve had me for ages.” I kiss Josh’s cheek. “He looked sad.”

Josh doesn’t deny it, just tugs me closer into him, stroking my knee. “I love you,” he says into my cheek, and I just about melt.

“Me, too.” I twist in his lap, trying to get a look at his phone. “What’s up? Is there a problem?”

He sighs, tightening his grip on me. “Nothing we weren’t expecting. One of our sponsors for the next month has pulled out. They don’t want to be seen ‘associating with our brand’ apparently.”

“What? Why?” I sit up, alarmed. “Oh, God. Is it because of me?”

“No, no,” Luke soothes me. “It was Zack’s fault.”

“I forgot you didn’t know,” Josh says into my hair, nuzzling the base of my neck. “He got into an... incident at the convention.”

I raise an eyebrow. “That sounds ominous.”

Zack waves a dismissive hand. “It was nothing, really. Your ex was there. Danny What’s-his-name.”

I squint at him.

“Pritchard,” Luke supplies, watching me closely. “Donny Pritchard. Said he came to hear us talk, but I think he really wanted to see you.”

I stick out my tongue. “Gross. He is *not* my ex.”

“Damn straight,” Zack agrees cheerfully. “Anyway, I punched him in the face.”

“*What?*”

“He deserved it,” Zack says. “Are you mad?”

I snort. “No. Is there video?”

Zack grins. “Atta girl. Show her, Josh.”

Josh brings up YouTube on his phone and hands it to me. It’s a shaky video, taken by a fan a few rows back in the audience. I see Donny go up to the mic in a stupid baseball cap, smirking at the guys. There’s a few seconds of back-and-forth, and then my mouth falls open as Zack stands, jumps off the stage into the crowd, and smacks Donny right in the nose. There’s an awful cracking sound, and blood spills out of Donny’s nostrils as he falls to the ground and screams.

I’m entranced. When the video ends, I rewind it and watch it again. And then again. And again. I know it doesn’t make me a nice person to enjoy the sound of my ex-bully’s nose breaking — but hey, I never claimed to be nice. I want this video tattooed on the back of my eyelids.

Eventually, on the fifth rerun, Josh takes his phone back. “Okay. I think that’s enough.”

I turn to Zack, cuddling against his side. “Thank you.”

“You’re really not mad?” He mutters.

I shake my head, pressing my face into his neck and inhaling his warm honey-whiskey smell.

“It wasn’t the right thing to do, obviously. But I appreciate it. God knows he deserves it.” I twist to look back at Josh. “So, what happens now? You’re in trouble?”

Zack whistles. “Hoo, boy we are.”

“The convention is ‘looking into it’.” Luke says. “Zack and Donald both explained their sides of the story. I didn’t say anything about your time together in school,” he adds quickly, when I tense, “but I did say that he harassed you in a pub a few weeks ago. I hope that’s okay.”

I nod slowly. “And what did the staff say?”

“They’re sort of at a loss. I’m pretty sure they believe us. They’ve known Zack for years, and there’s no reason for him to risk his career by attacking a random audience member. And apparently Donny tried to flirt with the female security guard who questioned him, which didn’t exactly help his case. But without any proof that Zack was provoked, there’s not much they can do. We’ll probably be banned from future conventions and events.” He hesitates. “Our production company is talking about removing us from the roster.”

I sit up. “But that’s a big deal, right?!”

“It might mean going solo,” Josh admits. “No company to produce us or promote us or find us sponsors.”

“Oh, God. I’m sorry.”

Josh shakes his head. “It’ll be hard, but we can manage it. From the response we got from our livestream, we haven’t really lost many listeners. In fact, we’ve gained quite a lot.” His lip curls. “No one really gives a shit about one of our hosts punching a creep.”

“So you’ll be self-employed?”

“Finally,” Zack booms. “It’s not like we needed those twats at BuzzTone tellin’ us what to do and taking half our royalties.”

Luke nods. “There will be a lot of benefits, actually. We’ll be able to pick our own sponsors, organise our own events. Say what we want.”

I pat his shoulder. “Don’t worry, baby. I’ll show you how to pay your taxes. I am a font of small-business knowledge, after all.” He smiles, pressing a kiss into my hair, and I turn back to Josh’s phone. “What about Donny? Is he running his mouth on social media?” I bet he’s milking this for all it’s worth. He always was a greasy little attention-addict.

Josh snorts. “Oh, yeah. He’s already tagged us in about fifty tweets. And he’s threatening to press charges. Zack might end up in court unless we can convince him to drop it. Which is kind of unlikely.”

“What?” I’m horrified. “But you could go to jail!”

“Aye. I’m already pickin’ out my prison tats.” Zack sighs. “I miss bein’ on the team, man. Back then, if I got rowdy with some drunk fan, the club would just pay the guy off.” He slides his hand up my arm. “We could blackmail him, I guess. Or kidnap him. Set up a bear trap outside his house, then drag him here and hold him hostage until he promises to drop charges.”

An idea dings in the back of my mind. “Is it blackmail if he deserves it?” I say slowly.

“Yes, Layla,” Luke sighs, sounding exhausted.

I stretch out my legs, considering my glittery pink toenail polish. “I don’t think I care,” I decide.

“Wait,” Josh says. “What’s going on?”

I lean my head back, lolling against his broad shoulder. “Want to come to my high school reunion with me? I bet he’ll be there.”

“Me?” Josh asks, looking confused. “I mean, of course I will, if you want. But if you’re going to confront Donny, shouldn’t you be taking Zack?”

“I will.” I reach across and take both Zack and Luke’s hands, tugging them into my lap. “I want all three of you to come.”

“As moral support?” Luke asks. “Amy will be there, too. The headteacher always attends reunions. It could be awkward if I turn up.”

I smile, connecting our fingers. Now I've made up my mind, I know there's no going back. "You're coming as my boyfriends."

There's a few seconds of silence.

"Well," Luke says eventually. "This should be interesting."

EIGHTY

LAYLA

TWO WEEKS LATER

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Luke breathes in my ear, as we stand, shivering, in the cold car park.

I look up at him. The grey sky over his head is stroking highlights into his silvery hair, a light breeze brushing a curl into his eyes. He looks calm, but I can see the tension in his jaw. He doesn’t like being here any more than I do.

I nod firmly. “Yes.”

On my other side, Josh squeezes my clammy fingers. “You’ve got this,” he says. At my back, Zack gives a rumble of agreement. I nod, straightening my spine and turning towards the set of open doors.

We’re standing outside the front entrance of Emery High School. It’s a drizzly, dreary day, and all I really want to do is go home and cuddle up in one of the guys’ beds.

In the past two weeks, I’ve pretty much moved into the guys’ flat. We’ve been inseparable. And it’s been heaven. We could be wrapped up in bedsheets right now, leisurely making out, watching TV, ordering takeout — our usual lazy day routine.

But, of course, I live for the drama, so here we are, freezing to death in the parking lot of my old school. Emery High has barely changed at all in the last ten years. It’s still the same depressing brick building, with prison-style wire-glass windows and graffitied walls. Someone has tried to liven up the entrance with some coloured balloons stapled around the doorway. They’re

already saggy and deflated.

I shiver again. My clothes are way too skimpy for the gross weather. Under the jacket of my trouser suit, I'm wearing a lacy bodysuit from my upcoming collection. It's supposed to be a delicate, pretty piece, but right now, the silvery fabric feels like armour as it gleams against my skin.

In fact...

I shrug off my blazer jacket and hand it to Josh. "Can you hold this, please?"

He stares silently at the bared skin of my chest for a few seconds, his hot eyes travelling over the plunging neckline.

In his defence, it's *very* low. "Wow," he says quietly. "You look incredible."

"You might get dress-coded," Luke says. I snort, but he doesn't laugh. It takes me a second to realise he's not joking.

"What?" I sputter. "They can't dress-code me, can they?! I'm not even a student!"

"No," he says flatly. "They can't. But I wouldn't be surprised if they tried."

I glance back at the building. "You seriously think they might kick me out for wearing a low-cut top?"

"If the four of us go in there, they won't be happy," he says gently. "Emery is far too conservative to accept a relationship like ours. It prides itself in churning out politicians and news anchors. They won't want to see an ex-teacher dating an ex-student, they won't want to see a four-way relationship, and they certainly won't want to see an alumnus who's become a successful lingerie designer. They might be looking for a reason to make you leave."

The words hit me like a ton of bricks.

Even after all this time, these people could still reject me. I've fantasised about this moment so many times, but the second I step through that door, the daydream is over. It's stupid to be so hung up on a high school reunion, but this feels like a pivotal moment in my life. The most painful, degrading, dehumanising things happened to me inside this squat brick building. And if I go in there and nothing has changed — if I'm ridiculed and mocked and

thrown out all over again — how the Hell am I going to cope with that?

And now I can't breathe, and my vision is going funny, and the hot-but-professional high heels I picked out last night are stuck to the pavement. I can't move.

"*Honey*," Zack says, dipping to kiss the back of my head. "No. Let's not go in, if it's scaring you this much."

"Let's go home," Josh offers gently. "Pick out a movie. Order some food."

"I'm fine."

He squeezes my shoulder. "You're shaking, sweetheart."

"Am not."

Luke's hand slides up my bare arm. "You don't need to prove anything to anyone," he reminds me. "These people treated you terribly, Layla. You don't need their approval. We can just turn around and leave."

I nod slowly, curling my trembling fingers into fists. I know that. But it's not approval I'm after.

I'm doing this for myself. Emery High School has featured in my nightmares for way, way too long. And I need to finally face it.

I take a deep breath. "No. I'm doing it."

Without waiting for them to respond, I walk forward, pushing through the open doors and stepping inside the school.



The reunion is being held in the school gymnasium. The four of us follow a set of laminated signs tacked to the corridor walls until we reach the big sports hall. As soon as we walk inside, the familiar scent of sweat and disinfectant fills my nostrils, and I wrinkle my nose.

It's like nothing has changed in the last ten years. There's still the same pile of sweaty blue gym mats in one corner. The worn, stained vault horse. The

walls of green lockers send my heart flying to my throat.

Someone has obviously tried to spruce up the hall for the event; a homemade banner reading WELCOME BACK ALUMNIS!!! is hanging wonkily from the ceiling. Pop music is playing from a set of speakers in one corner, and there's a couple of cafeteria tables lined up on the linoleum, full of dire-looking snacks and stacks of paper cups.

I glance around, taking in the faces. It looks like most of my year is here. There are The Football Guys in badly fitting business suits. The Arty Girls in big earrings and long skirts. From the way everyone is laughing and chatting, it looks like a lot of people kept in touch with each other these last few years.

And once again, I'm on the outskirts, alone.

Nerves crunch me. Why am I doing this? I don't want to be here. I feel hot and cold at the same time. At the back of my head, a voice tells me over and over again to *run*.

"Want a drink?" Luke asks in my ear, and I relax minutely. "If I remember correctly, they serve alcohol at these things."

I let out a shaky breath. "For a twenty-pound entrance fee, they'd better," I mutter, letting him take me by the hand and lead me over to the refreshment tables. As we walk through the hall, I feel people turning and staring. I try my best to ignore it as whispers go up around me.

"Is that Layla Thompson?"

"Is she with Mr Martins?"

"So she really was sleeping with him? I thought that was a rumour!"

I grit my teeth and ignore the comments as we walk past a cluster of girls staring and gossiping in hushed voices. They all look so different now. One of them is heavily pregnant. One is holding hands with a huge guy in a suit. One has pink hair and tattoos all up her arms. As we reach the refreshments table, there's some more whispering and elbowing, and then one of the girls peels away from the group, making her way towards us. I recognise her immediately.

Emma Swann. The girl who threw all of my clothes out of the window on my last day at school.

She was the ringleader of all the girls who made fun of me. And now she's standing here beaming, as if she didn't once send around a class-wide text about me having crabs.

"Layla!" She exclaims loudly, all smiles. "I'm so glad to see you!"

"Emma!" I smile back at her blandly. "Look at you."

She looks crap. I remember pining over her designer clothes back in school, but now, I can just see that she's wearing a mishmash of labels that absolutely don't match. I guess you can't buy a sense of fashion.

"Cute, right?" She does a little twirl and a fake laugh, then bats her blonde lashes at Josh. He reaches out and untwists the strap of my bodysuit, completely ignoring her. "Yeah, I work for *Paisley* magazine right now. They give us loads of free clothes."

"Never heard of it," I tell her.

She blinks. "Oh, it's, um. A fashion magazine. It's pretty well known in London."

"Is it?" I say flatly.

She waves me off. "But enough about me. You've obviously done well for yourself. I saw you in *Couture Urban* mag, I love their stuff." She pauses. "Hey, I bet you're going to London Fashion Week this year, right?"

I shrug. "Probably." I've been to a few LFWs. They're easy enough to get into if you have enough followers on social media.

She shimmies a bit closer to me, linking our arms. "Reckon you could get me and my boyfriend tickets? I've been dying to go to a show, but they're all, like, invitation only, which blows." She pouts.

I smile at her as sweetly as I can. "No." I pull my arm out of hers.

She blinks. "What do you mean, no?"

“No,” I repeat. “I know you don’t hear the word very often, but surely you know what it means.”

She looks absolutely shocked. “But we’re friends,” she protests. “We used to be so close!”

“Did we?” I ask doubtfully.

“We used to sit together in Art, remember?”

I nod. “Yes. I remember us sitting together in Art for a whole ten minutes. Until I reached over you to pick up a paintbrush, and you started screaming about how I’d touched you and probably given you an STI. After which, I sat at my own table for the rest of the year, while you got to sit with your friends, just like you wanted.”

Luke startles behind me. “Emma? Is that true?”

Emma looks up at him with big eyes. “I... of course not, Mr Martins. I don’t know why she’d say that.”

“So you’re saying Layla is lying?” He pushes.

“No, I...”

I feel Luke’s grip on my hand tightening, and cut her off before she says something that will really upset him. “No, I can’t get you tickets, Emma.” I tell her, nodding at her circle of friends. “You can go now.”

Without waiting for a response, I turn back to the snack table. Luke leans in as Zack immediately hones in on the crisps. “She’s one of them, isn’t she?” He says quietly. I hear the strain in his voice.

“It’s okay, Luke. It’s over.”

“Did she hassle you in my class?” He demands. “Did I not notice?”

Luckily, before I have to come up with a reply, a familiar voice pops up behind me.

“Well, if it isn’t Layla Thompson,” Donny Pritchard drawls. All of the men stiffen simultaneously.

I sigh. “You know, you don’t *have* to talk like a movie villain,” I say, turning to face him.

He looks awful. His hair is greasy, his suit is too big for him, and he’s still sporting a fading black eye.

“Wow,” I say. “You look like crap.” I glance up at Zack. “Nice job.”

Zack puffs out his chest with pride. Josh rolls his eyes.

Donny scowls at Zack. “I’m surprised you’re not on house arrest,” he spits. “They shouldn’t let you out in public.”

“Oh, aye,” Zack agrees. “I should be in a cage, I reckon.”

Donny sneers. “Well, enjoy it while you can. I’ve already found a lawyer.”

Zack shrugs, picking up a plastic cup. “Okay, mate. Baby, do you want a lukewarm *sauvignon blanc* or a two-pound rosé?”

“Surprise me.”

“Aight.” He leans over to pick up the bottle, and then diverts his direction and kisses me hard on the mouth. I gasp against his lips.

“Zack!”

“I was surprising you! Sorry, wasn’t that what you meant?”

I reach up and tug at his man-bun, making him growl.

Donny looks between us with disgust on his face, taking in Josh’s hand on my back and Luke’s fingers clasped with mine. “Seriously?”

I pick up a custard cream and bite into it. “Seriously, what?”

“You’re sleeping with all three of them? I thought that was a bit for the podcast!” He turns to Josh. “You just let her screw other men in front of you? That’s the most beta shit I ever heard. Good lord, she must be loose.”

I choke on my biscuit.

Zack abruptly steps away from the table, squaring up to Donny, who looks startled, staggering a few steps back.

“Zack,” Luke says warningly. “Not again, please.”

Zack puts his hands up. “I’m just looking. I ain’t gonna do anything to him.”

Donny looks between us, sneering. “I guess I understand now how Layla got a spot on your show.” He turns to me. “Sooner or later you need to start working for yourself, you know. You can’t just sleep around to get what you want.”

“Maybe I *am* gonna do something to him,” Zack says thoughtfully. “Look. Mate, do you want me to punch you again? ‘Cause I gotta admit, I wasn’t in my best form the last time around. You kept all your teeth and everything. Pretty embarrassing. I’ll happily have another go.”

Donny’s mouth falls open. “Did you hear that?!” He raises his voice. People around the hall turn to look at us. “He just threatened to assault me! Again!”

“Donald,” Luke starts. “Please calm down. Zack—”

Before he can finish the sentence, I hear the familiar click of high heels against linoleum.

“Luke? Layla? *What* is going on here?” Amy asks behind us.

EIGHTY-ONE

LAYLA

A shiver runs down my spine. Slowly, I turn to face her.

Amy looks completely different than she did at her wedding. She's wearing less makeup, and I can see the age lining her skin. Her blonde hair looks dull and washed out under the fluorescent lights. I breathe out slowly.

"Amy," Luke says coldly. "You look well. How was the honeymoon?"

"*Mrs Martins!*" Donny whines, making Luke flinch. "Did you hear what he said?"

"It's *Mrs Tran*," Amy says, looking annoyed. "Luke and I aren't married anymore."

"Oh. Sorry." Donny points at Zack. "But he was going to punch me in the face! You need to make him leave!"

Zack rolls his eyes. "Oh, suck it up, ya big baby," he booms. "You're not fourteen anymore. Quit whinin' to yer teachers, it's pathetic."

Amy shakes her head, turning to me. "Layla. Do you want to explain why they're all here? The invitation said you could bring a *plus one*."

"Actually, it said 'partners are welcome'," I point out.

Her eyebrows shoot up. "So it's true?" She sputters. "You... you really *are* with all three of them?"

I nod. “Turns out, you can have more than one boyfriend! I’m starting a collection.”

“Aye,” Zack booms. “A lovely girl like you deserves more than one boyfriend.” He pours a cupful of wine, sniffs it, grimaces, then takes a gulp. “Gotta check it ain’t bad,” he tells me when I side-eye him.

Amy stands a little straighter. “Zack, you need to leave. I can’t let guests come into this school and threaten to assault one of our former students.”

“Donald here was verbally attacking Layla,” Luke points out. “Shall we throw him out as well? That only seems fair.”

“I was not!” Donny shouts. “I was just saying hello to her!”

“You called her *loose*,” Josh spits from behind me.

Amy sighs heavily. “You really haven’t changed at all, have you, Layla? You got here three minutes ago, and already the allegations are flying. You must be the most desired woman in London.” She regards Luke coolly. “Do we have any proof that Donald was harassing Layla? I have to say, given your circumstances,” her eyes drop to our joined hands, “I’m not particularly inclined to believe you.”

Luke’s face flushes red. He pulls away from me, squaring his shoulders, but I cut him off before he can really lose his temper.

“Oh, I have plenty of proof,” I say sunnily. “About four years’ worth, I’d say. Don’t worry, you’ve already got it all on file. Just pop into the staff room, you’ll find a folder full of complaints I’ve made, with all the proof you need. Emails. Scans of lewd drawings. Photographs of graffiti on my personal property. Hey, the janitor even helped me rip a couple of CCTV tapes that show Donny here trying to get under my skirt in the car park.” I glance across at Donny. “I think you were eighteen, then. A legal adult. I hear you’re in politics now, right?” I whistle under my breath. “Wouldn’t want that getting out now, would we?”

“*What?*” Luke barks.

Donny scoffs. “Does the tape also show you kicking me in the balls?”

“Ah. So you *do* remember it. Funny, you seemed to be suffering from some sort of selective amnesia when the school counsellor asked you about it.”

Amy takes a deep breath through her nose. “Well, this is a very concerning accusation, Layla. I’ll be sure to look into it. Although unfortunately, we’ve switched up our student records system, so it’s unlikely any of this evidence still exists.” She pulls a sympathetic face. “I’m very sorry.”

“Oh, that’s okay,” I say cheerfully. “I have copies of everything. Dated and time stamped. I even got most of them signed off by you and other staff members. I know these things can be tricky.” I smile at her blandly. “I wanted to make sure you couldn’t possibly lose anything.”

“Good,” she says through gritted teeth. “That’s great, Layla. But I don’t think —”

I interrupt her, pointing to the line of green metal lockers behind her. “Do you never get the lockers cleaned? It’s been ten years, and my old one still has *skank* scribbled on the door. God bless the poor kid who got assigned that one.”

“Of course we have the lockers cleaned,” Amy spits. “They’re scrubbed down every year.”

I squint. “Hey. You’re right. That’s not my locker. This one says *dirty slag*. Hey, Luke, isn’t that a hate crime?”

Luke draws himself up to his full height. “Yes,” he says, his voice icy. “It is. You know, Amy, this is very concerning. I think it would be best that I make a report to the council, so they can perform an inspection of the school’s student support procedures.”

Amy is livid. “Luke,” she snaps. “You are blowing this completely out of proportion. For God’s sake, you don’t even work here anymore.”

“I’m still on the student board,” he reminds her peaceably.

She turns her scowl on me. “Did you put him up to this?” She demands. “Why? Because I wouldn’t listen to you when you came whining to me every single lunch break, wasting all of my free time? Because I released those pictures of you whoring around at *my* wedding?”

Luke stares at her. “Wait. It was you who released the pictures? You said you didn’t know who did it!”

Amy rolls her eyes. “Stop looking at me like that. It was my right.” She jabs a finger at me. “She turned up without an invite, dressed like a goddamn hooker, and went around snogging my guests. It was embarrassing. And you’re so goddamn stupid, I knew you’d never see what kind of a person she was, so yes. I took some shots on my phone. I wanted to give you proof that she was cheating on you.” She throws up her hands. “And you don’t even care! I don’t know what the Hell is wrong with you, Luke, but this little four-way you’ve got going on is disgusting. You used to teach *children*, for God’s sake. What do you think parents will think when they find out one of our former professors is a damn *pervert*?”

Her voice rises on the last word, and I see people throughout the room turning to look at us. A couple of my old PE teachers share a knowing look. Luke flushes.

Suddenly, I’m starting to regret my little plan. I thought we’d get in here, show off a bit, and come out again. I didn’t think about how bad it could look on the boys to all be seen with me. Apparently, my reputation as a total slag is infectious. I don’t want that on anyone else. It hurts.

Behind me, Josh’s grip on me tightens.

Luke swallows. When he speaks, his voice is very calm. “This has nothing to do with me or Layla. It’s about the wellbeing of the students.”

“But—”

Luke frowns. “That’s what our main focus as teachers is, right? Because if I’m telling you there’s an issue with child safety, and your first instinct is to sweep it under the rug, we’re going to have an issue.”

“There’s no issue with child safety!” She protests. “She’s making all of this up!”

Luke finally breaks. “FOR GOD’S SAKE, AMY!” He shouts, jabbing a finger at the lockers. “Someone has painted a slur onto a young girl’s locker! Someone is harassing a *child*. A minor. The proof is there in black and white, and I’m not going to let you ignore it just because you don’t want to handle

the goddamn paperwork!”

Everyone else in the room goes silent. In the background, cheerful 90s pop plays through the CD player’s tinny speakers. Zack noisily scoops up a handful of crackers and starts crunching through them like they’re a tub of popcorn.

Amy takes a deep breath. “Perhaps we need to have a word in private, Luke,” she says coldly.

“I agree,” Luke counters, dipping to press a hard kiss to my cheek, and then stalking away to examine the lockers, leaving Amy to scurry after him in her little kitten heels. I watch them go, my eyes huge. What the Hell have I started?

“Nice,” Zack says, holding up a cracker to my lips and feeding it to me. “I love when he gets all righteous.”

“You probably shouldn’t crash the party and then eat all the food,” Josh mutters under his breath.

“Sorry, mate, you want one too?” Zack obligingly shoves a custard cream into Josh’s mouth.

Donny, who’s been watching everything go down with growing dismay, finally steps forward. “I need to speak with you,” he tells me lowly, not meeting my eye.

“Aight,” Zack straightens, dusting cracker crumbs off his hands. “Lead the way.”

Donny scowls. “Not with *you*,” he spits. “With Layla.”

“I assumed,” Zack counters. “If you think you’re going anywhere alone with my girl, mate, you’re even dumber than you look. She just told us you tried to grab her in a parking lot, for Chrissakes.”

“Yeah,” I say, amused. “And I almost broke his fingers. I don’t need a bodyguard, guys.”

Zack sighs dramatically. “Fine. Yell if you need me, love.” He smacks a kiss on my forehead, then turns back to the food. “These taste like shit,” he

mutters to Josh, grabbing another handful of crackers. “Reckon I can eat them all before we have to go?”

Josh ignores him, his fingers clutching at mine like he doesn’t want to let me go. I carefully extricate myself from his grip, stroking his lapel. “I’ll be fine,” I say quietly. He catches my knuckles and dips down to kiss them, then silently lets me leave.

EIGHTY-TWO

LAYLA

Hands jammed into his pockets, Donny leads me to the corner of the gym, out of earshot of everybody else. I glance around, wrinkling my nose at the bins of deflated basketballs and broken hula hoops.

“Listen,” he says quietly. “You can’t put that stuff online.”

I check my nails. “Can’t I?”

“No!” His eyes are wide. “For God’s sake, I was a kid!”

“So was I. That didn’t stop you from making my life a living Hell.”

“I didn’t know what I was doing!” He insists. “It was ten years ago, Layla, can’t you just get over this stuff? I’ve worked hard to get where I am, why the Hell would you want to go and ruin it for me now?”

“I don’t,” I say honestly. “I don’t want to ruin anything for you. All I want to do is leave this behind me. So here’s what’s going to happen.” I take a step towards him, my high heels squeaking slightly on the ugly beige linoleum. “You’re going to drop the charges against Zack,” I order. “You’ll make a statement that you antagonised him. And then you’ll stay away from all of us. You won’t mention our names. You won’t subtweet us. You won’t tell anybody *anything*. Or all of the shit that I’ve got on you gets blasted onto our social media. I know the boys’ followers are dying to know why Zack hit you at the convention.” I smile at him. “I will tell *everyone*. I will do interviews. I’ll make entire episodes on the podcast. I’ll scream it from the rooftops. I’m sick of being quiet, and now there are people listening to me. I’m not a shy

little sixteen-year-old anymore. I have a voice. Drop the charges, or I will use it.”

Donny’s nostrils flare. “That’s defamation. I could sue you.”

“It’s only defamation if it’s a lie. Maybe you’d know that, if you paid attention in PSHE instead of texting all of your mates about the imaginary handies I gave you in the loo.”

“It’s blackmail,” he counters, but his voice wobbles.

“Sure,” I say evenly. “Doesn’t make much of a difference to you though, does it? Either way, whenever anyone looks up your name online, the first thing they’ll see is a long list of all the disgusting, illegal things you did as a teenager. I doubt they’ll help your chances in the next election, will they?”

Donny swallows. He’s breathing hard. Sweat is beading on his forehead. “I’ll drop the charges,” he says eventually, his voice rasping.

“And make the statement,” I repeat patiently.

His face darkens. “And make the statement.”

I pat his cheek. “Good boy.” I nod at the sad little party. “Was that so hard? You can go play with your friends now.”

He turns to go, then hesitates, his eyes fixed on the floor.

“Yes?” I ask patiently. “Do you want something else?”

“I’m, like.” He rubs the back of his head, his mouth twisting. “Sorry. Or whatever. It’s not... it had nothing to do with you, like, as a person. You were just... there. You know? Everyone was doing it.”

For a second, I’m taken aback. I didn’t expect him to apologise, no matter how terrible the apology is.

But honestly, it’s much too little, much too late.

“You want to know the truth?” I ask. “I really, truly *don’t care*. I don’t care about any of you anymore. So piss off and leave me the Hell alone.”

Tossing one last glare over his shoulder, he goes to rejoin the rest of the group, his head dipped low. As he walks away, it feels like a weight is being lifted off my chest.

A warm arm wraps around my waist, and a soft beard tickles my cheek. “You’re so scary,” Zack says into my ear. “Where’s the bathroom? I need to jump out the window to get away from you.”

“Most of my dates feel a similar urge. Breathe deep, it’ll pass.”

“You did amazing,” Josh agrees, coming up to my other side and taking my hand.

I look up at him and smile, leaning back against Zack’s chest. “Thanks. Can we go get some real food now? Revenge is exhausting.”

Josh tucks a stray piece of hair behind my ear. “Of course. I think Luke is almost done yelling at Amy.”

My eyebrows raise. “He’s yelling at her? Seriously?”

He points to the corner of the room, and I turn to see Luke in a very heated argument with Amy. His cheeks are flushed red as he gesticulates furiously. She looks like she wants to crack his skull open.

I wince. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I should’ve told you what a harpy she was before your brother married her.”

Josh shakes his head. “Even if you had said something, he wouldn’t have listened. Rob can handle himself. He has a very low tolerance for BS.”

As we watch, Luke breaks off the argument, turning on his heel and stalking back to us. Amy shoots daggers at his back.

“Let’s get out of here,” he demands when he reaches us. “Before *I* start punching people.”

I pull a face. “That bad?”

“They haven’t even been logging student welfare complaints!” He bursts out. “I thought Emery had a low exclusion rate because there weren’t any issues with bullying here. But they’ve just been sweeping everything under the rug,

because they don't want to make the school look bad!"

He wipes a hand over his face. "I should've done this so much earlier. The way this place is being run is disgraceful."

I reach up and rub at the frown lines between his eyebrows, smoothing them out. "You're doing it now," I remind him. "Now, finally, those students have someone who cares about them." I link our fingers together. "And so do I."

"I love you so much," he says, and the sincerity in his voice makes my chest ache. "I am so, so sorry."

Without leaving Zack's grasp, I lean up and press my lips to his. He kisses me back hotly, pouring all of his anger and frustration and passion into the embrace. When we pull back for air, I twist, kissing Zack next, shivering when his tongue sweeps over my bottom lip. Then I do the same to Josh, going up on my tiptoes and trailing my lips over his cheek.

I can hear whispers go up around the hall. Someone gasps. I think I hear a phone camera click, and smile against Josh's lips. I bet every person in this room is mentally calling me every gross name they can think of. Easy. Loose. A cheater. A slag.

And I don't care. What they think doesn't matter to me anymore.

I pull back and wipe the glossy red lipstick mark off Josh's cheek with my thumb. "Let's get out of here," I say. "I'm done with these people. We've got shit to do."

TRANSCRIPT

THREE SINGLE GUYS, EPISODE 451: 'THE FAKE DATE EXPERIMENT'
RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

JOSH: And, we're back from the break. Okay, it's finally the moment you've all been waiting for. The conclusions to our very stupid Fake Date Experiment. In the last couple of months, I think it's fair to say we all went on a bit of a ride.

LUKE: We've certainly learned a lot about intimacy, dating, and what it really means to be vulnerable with new potential partners.

LAYLA: And we found out why these three strapping boys were still single. They were all just as scared of love as I am. At least I could admit it, you cowards.

LUKE: We probably deserve that.

LAYLA: Yeah, you do. Don't worry. I forgive you.

(Brief pause)

ZACK: For the viewers at home, Luke just gave Layla the sappiest look I've ever seen in my life. And now she's blushing... and now she is giving me the finger...

JOSH: Layla, what would you say is the main conclusion you've

learned?

LAYLA: I guess that... there's no formula to a perfect relationship. There's no checklist you can go down and cross items off. You'll never be able to get everything right. Everybody has their own issues and baggage and hangups, and there are so many ways we sabotage ourselves from finding love, even if we don't realise it. But it really is possible for everyone to find their person.

LUKE: Or people.

LAYLA: If you're very lucky, yeah, people. With some TLC, and a lot of respect and communication, even someone who is absolutely useless at romance, like me, can open up. You might have to work a little harder to make them feel safe. But that's okay. It's worth it.

ZACK: (*whispering*) Okay, for the viewers at home, Josh is looking at Layla like he's a dying man in a desert and she is an icy-cold glass of lemonade—

LAYLA: Zack.

ZACK: A very gorgeous glass, that's wearing a really pretty, very low-cut bralette. That I believe is available in pink, white, fawn, and black.

LAYLA: Aw, are you doing an un-disclaimed sponsorship for me? That's so cute, babe. Yeah, it's the latest release in my new Butterfly collection. Check it out on my website.

ZACK: If you like boobs, buy it for your girlfriend. Use the code GREATCLEAVAGE for a twenty percent discount. That's G-R-E-A-

(*Sound of static*)

JOSH: Sorry for the interruption, I had to briefly cut Zack's mic.

Technical issues. We've had a lot of questions about where this segment will go from here. Since we did, indeed, find Layla love—

LAYLA: For the record, we've been together for three months now, and it's great.

JOSH: Yes, now we get to hear her singing along to ABBA from within the privacy of our own flat, it's lovely. Anyway, I think we can call the experiment a success. However, we will not be doing any more of this segment. For the sake of our own relationship, I think that would be a terrible idea.

LUKE: But don't worry — this isn't the last you'll be hearing from Layla. Since we've parted ways with our old production company, we now have a lot more creative control over the podcast. Which means we're adding a new segment to the show. We thought it was about time to get a female voice.

LAYLA: That's right, ladies, the mansplaining is over. I'll be on the show once a week, talking about all the things that these guys really *are* unqualified to talk about. Like bikini waxes, and UTIs, and where you can find period pants that actually look good. And also what it feels like to have a ton of metal beads shoved inside your vag.

(Luke coughs violently)

LAYLA: Not that I would know.

JOSH: Right. Until then, do you have any last words for our listeners?

LAYLA: Everyone you love will hurt you, in some way. Most of them, I hope, will do it by accident. Some of them will do it on purpose. Don't let them win by letting it harden you. Stay trusting. And hopeful. Fall in love again, and again, and again. It'll be okay. I promise. And ladies, pee after sex.

(Brief pause)

ZACK: So, what happens next?

LAYLA: Well, for starters, I think you guys need to change the name of your podcast.

LAYLA: Also, I'm absolutely using that discount code.

EPILOGUE

FIFTEEN MONTHS LATER

Layla Thompson @HerTreatLayla ✓

update: we got married ♥

We get married on a flower-filled rooftop in central London, on the day of my thirtieth birthday.

The ceremony is beautiful. The guys all look delicious in dark suits, and I wear a creamy silk dress I designed myself, covered in tiny organza butterflies. We say our vows as the sun sets over the city, streaking the sky in a wash of gold and peach and rose-petal pink. As the last few rays of sunshine fade away from the blackening sky, and the boys each take turns kissing the bride, the rooftop lights up. Hundreds of glowing lanterns illuminate over our heads, and the foliage glows with strings of coloured fairy lights carefully threaded through the leaves and branches.

And then the party starts. Thanks to Zack's flat-out insistence on an open bar, soon the alcohol is flowing, and everybody is migrating to the flashing disco dance-floor we had set up. I hang back, savouring my slice of frosted birthday cake and watching people dance.

We have way more guests than I would have ever expected at my wedding. My parents are here, chatting to Luke's niece Lavender, who's clinging onto the hand of her heavily eye-lined girlfriend. Zack's parents are happily

drinking and jiving in the corner. Josh's brother Rob also made it, and thankfully didn't bring Amy with him. Josh told me privately a couple of weeks ago that the couple is currently on a break. She got fired from Emery High last summer, after the Inspection Board decided she was being negligent towards student safety. Apparently, after she lost her job, Amy started to let her sweet facade slip, and some of her usual nastiness began to show. Luckily, Rob is having absolutely none of it.

It sounds bad, but I hope they break up. Rob seems like a lovely guy. He deserves better than her.

Josh also took it upon himself to invite every listener who once invited the boys to their weddings. He said it was only fair. So now the roof is practically overflowing with energy and laughter as people drink and dance and mingle. It's a good reflection of how my life has been going recently. Ever since the engagement, my life has been a whirlwind of love and work and happiness.

It happened eight months ago. I was in New York to promote some new pieces in my Butterfly collection. It ended up selling incredibly; so well, in fact, that Anna Bardet got back into contact a few weeks after the release dropped. She asked if she could incorporate the design into her new spring collection.

I turned her down. I'm doing more than well enough without her.

The guys came with me to New York, and used the opportunity to do a couple of live shows for their American listeners. Their audience has only expanded since they went solo. They're regularly hitting the podcast charts, and were named the #1 most popular relationship advice show in the UK last year. Which, admittedly, was much easier, since *Sweetheart Soulmates* is now disbanded. Apparently, the couple who hosted the show weren't as perfect as they pretended. After it got leaked that both partners were having affairs, the podcast ended immediately, and they're now navigating a very messy divorce.

Shame.

New York was a great trip; the only thing that made me sad was that we were all too busy to really hang out together. Even though we were all living in the same hotel suite, I was always up before the guys were awake, and they

always seemed to be gone by the time I got back.

By our last night in New York, I'd pretty much given up on having any romantic time with the guys in the city. I'd gotten back to the hotel at three in the morning, absolutely exhausted after spending hours at an afterparty, and when I'd tiptoed back into our shared suite, my jaw had dropped. It had been completely transformed into some kind of romantic dreamland. There were bunches of flowers everywhere. Boxes of chocolates stacked on the bed. Lit candles flickering on the windowsills. And all three guys were down on one knee, each of them holding a little velvet ring box.

I hadn't eaten all day, and I was still very jet-lagged from travelling, so I'm very embarrassed to say I pretty much literally swooned. I had to sit down on the bed with my head between my legs for a bit. It was fine, though. Zack finger-fed me chocolates until I felt better, and then the guys tried again after dinner. And this time I said yes. Three times over.

And now we're finally married, and everything is perfect.

Well. Almost perfect.

I scan the rooftop. Josh is mingling with the guests, and Zack looks like he's started some kind of conga-line on the light-up dance-floor — but one of my shiny new husbands is missing. Casting around, I eventually spot Luke, half-hidden behind the pavilion we set up in case it rained. He's holding a flute of champagne and staring out at the London skyline, his expression tight.

My heart hurts. I wasn't sure if today would be hard for him. I had a sneaking suspicion it might. Hiking up the skirt of my dress, I float over to him. He looks down and smiles softly as I wind my arm through his, leaning against him.

"Hello, darling," he murmurs.

"Hi." I nuzzle close, greedily inhaling his warm books-and-tea scent. "Are you okay?"

"I'm perfect."

"You don't look perfect." His brow creases, and I correct myself. "You look hot. Gorgeous. Not happy."

He lets out a breath. "I am," he says. "I'm happy. Really happy. Just..." He looks out over the horizon, his jaw working. His shoulders are tight. "The last time I got married, I screwed it up."

I lay my cheek on his arm. "You didn't, Luke. It wasn't your fault. Sometimes, people just drift apart."

"I'd honestly rather it was my fault," he admits, running a hand through his thick hair. "If it was a mistake I made, then at least I could work hard to not make it again. But you're right." His eyes are hazy as he watches the city glitter below us. "Sometimes, people do just drift apart."

I tilt my head, looking up at him. He shakes himself, setting the flute of champagne down. "God. Sorry. I know it's morbid to be thinking like this on my wedding day, but I can't get the thought out of my head. Sorry, sweetheart."

I purse my lips, then move to stand in front of him, stroking my hand up his lapels. "Maybe it was your fault. Maybe it wasn't. I don't care. I know the divorce makes you question yourself, but the way I see it, it was a turning point on the path that led you to me. And I'm so glad it happened." Pressing closer, I wrap my arms around his neck. "And if you seriously think I'm letting you go, then you don't know me at all, Mr Martins."

He clutches at me, holding me in place. "You're perfect," he murmurs into my hair.

"Lucky you." I give him one last squeeze, then pull away. "I'm gonna go thank people for the presents. Take as long as you need, then come find me, kay?"

He catches my hand and presses a kiss to my knuckles before letting me go.

For the next fifteen minutes, I float around the rest of the party, chatting to people. Normally, socialising isn't my scene, but today, I don't feel shy or awkward at all. I feel like I'm on top of the world. I'm just winding up a conversation with a podcast listener about her dress when I feel two warm arms wrap around my waist.

"Baby," a low voice says in my ear.

The listener smiles and blushes, quickly scarpering, and I turn to face Joshua. He looks delicious in a white shirt, open at the collar. It's a hot evening, and his bow tie is hanging loose around his neck. He looks like James Bond off-duty.

I push the dark hair off his forehead, smiling at his bright eyes and flushed cheeks. "Are you drunk again? Is this your wedding tradition?"

He doesn't answer, threading a hand through my curled hair and tilting his mouth down to mine. His kiss is so deep and so fierce it takes my breath away. My stomach flips, and my toes curl in my heels as his soft lips press against me.

I finally pull back to a smattering of applause. My whole body is singing. My blood is thumping in my veins like I just ran a marathon. "Well?" I ask when I catch my breath.

"I'll give you a nine-point-five," he decides, stroking our cheeks together. "But only because it's your birthday."

I snort as he starts nuzzling down my neck. "Wow. Wedding champagne really gets you going, huh?"

He shakes his head. "Didn't have any."

"Sure."

"I *didn't*," he protests, pulling back and cupping my cheeks. His eyes are soft as they rove over my face. "I'm just happy."

My heart melts in my chest. I sometimes still can't believe that I can do this. That I can make one person — let alone *three* people — so happy, just by being me. It's a surreal feeling. "I have a present for you."

His eyebrow raises. "Oh?"

Leaning against him, I reach into the bodice of my dress. Josh clears his throat as he watches me extract a tiny envelope from my boobs. "This may not be the most feminist thought, but sometimes I appreciate the fact that your clothes don't have pockets," he admits.

I give him a flat look, handing him the envelope, and he shakes out the contents. It's a small, A5 piece of thick cream card, embossed with swirling rose-gold lettering and clouds of tiny butterflies. Our wedding invitation.

We sent them all out a couple of months ago, but I made sure to save one for him. I'll be damned if he has a collection of other people's wedding invites, but not mine. Josh's face is inscrutable as he traces his finger lightly over the embossing.

"For your wall," I say, when the silence stretches out a few seconds too long.

He meets my eyes, and the look on his face almost floors me. There's so much love and light shining out of him, all focussed on me. He tucks the invitation carefully into the inner pocket of his jacket, then curves a hand around the back of my neck, tugging our faces together until our foreheads are touching. My eyes flutter closed. I wait for the kiss, but it doesn't come. He just holds me there, pressing our skin together. We breathe each other's air.

"GUYS GUYS GUYS."

We break apart to see Zack enthusiastically jogging across the dance-floor, dragging a bemused-looking Luke by the wrist.

Josh sighs slightly. "I can't believe I just signed myself up to a lifetime of him, too."

"We're a package deal, I'm afraid." I pat his chest. "It'll be okay."

Zack skids to a stop next to us and pulls a pen out of the pocket of his trousers, shoving it at me. "Here, pine-nut."

I examine the cheap plastic biro. "Thanks, honey. I love it."

He checks his watch. "Baby, quick. We're running out of time! You were born at five-past-ten, right?"

"Um. Yes."

"Thank God." He pumps his fist. "Just made it!"

“Zack,” I say slowly, “I love you, but I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

“I do,” Luke says, reaching into the pocket of his trousers and pulling out a crumpled scrap of paper. He offers it to me, his grey eyes twinkling. “Will you do the honours?”

I glance at the page, and recognition jolts through me as I take in the long list of carefully ticked bullet points. It’s my ten-year-plan.

I pull a face. “God, why do you have that?”

“We’re very fond of it,” Josh says in my ear, kissing the top of my head. “It’s the reason you’re wearing our rings.”

Luke waves the page tantalisingly, and I sigh. “Fine.” I reach forward and grab it, scribbling a wobbly tick in the last box. GET MARRIED.

Zack watches with a look of deep satisfaction. “Think you should triple-tick it, babe,” he suggests when I’m done. “You really knocked this one out of the park.”

Trying not to smile, I obediently add two more ticks. Zack whoops, pulling me out of Josh’s arms and twirling me around. The city flies around me, all of London’s lights swirling together in a vivid stream of amber and white. I’m laughing hard when he finally sets me back down, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

“Now what, honeybun?” He asks against my temple.

I shrug. “I guess we do my thirties.” I glance up at Luke through my lashes. “And your, like, sixties, honey.”

“I’m not *that* old,” he protests. “What’s on the ten-year-plan, sweetheart?”

I hum, considering. I haven’t actually written one, but I have a few ideas. “Buy a house,” I decide. “Go to Japan. Teach Zack how to fold a fitted sheet.”

“Hey! They’re tricky!” Zack protests.

“I know, baby.” I think. “Hmm. Show in New York Fashion week. Reach a million sales on the website. Start a garden.”

Josh steps closer at my side, sliding his hand down to curve over my stomach. I get the not-so-subtle hint.

“Have a baby. Or two.” I glance between the three men. “Or maybe three would be more appropriate.”

Considering how different the three men are, they can act remarkably in-sync at times. As soon as the words leave my mouth, the same dark, heated look crosses all of their faces.

Zack looks to see if anyone is watching, then reaches around to grope my behind. “Why don’t we get a head start on that last one?” He asks, his voice suddenly gravelly.

“Right now?” Luke offers, taking my hand. “I’m sure we can make an excuse to go back to the hotel. It’s about time our honeymoon started.”

“What’s the rush?” I smile, tangling my fingers with his. As a light breeze sweeps over the rooftop, sending all of the lanterns swaying in the night sky, our joint future stretches out in my head. It’s so vivid, I can practically see it: the four of us growing older together, our faces lit up by Christmas lights, and birthday cake candles, and New Years’ fireworks. The seasons changing around us. Endless hot summer days and cosy winter nights. Kids, and pets, and houses, and new jobs. We have a whole new life ahead of us. And it’s only just started.

I take a deep breath, then look up into the faces of my three best friends. My neighbours, and my roommates, and my coworkers, and my partners. My husbands. I smile. “We’ve got all the time in the world.”



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Want MORE reverse harem? Read on for a sneak preview of one of my previous novels, *Triple Duty Bodyguards*!

TRIPLE DUTY BODYGUARDS PREVIEW

CHAPTER ONE - BRIAR

“Now, don’t be dramatic, darling,” my PR manager drawls, examining her nail beds. “It’s not like the man was trying to *kill* you.”

I close my eyes, rubbing my temples. It’s just turned four AM, and my head is still spinning from last night’s rosé. Red and blue lights flash through the window of my little pink-tiled kitchen, shining in from the police car parked in my drive. Over my head, I can hear the heavy footsteps and low voices of the police officers investigating upstairs.

I am tired.

“A stranger climbed the side of my house, broke my bedroom window, and jerked off in my bed,” I say slowly. “I’m not being dramatic.”

Julie shrugs from her position at the marble breakfast bar, fishing her compact out of her designer purse. “He didn’t even touch you, babe,” she mumbles, patting powder over her pert nose. “This hardly seems like a reason to fire poor Rodriguez.”

My eyes slide to Rodriguez, my home security guard. He refuses to look at me, shifting uncomfortably in his spot next to Julie. His hair is ruffled, his fly is undone, and his shirt is unbuttoned. Julie’s red lipstick is all over his neck.

It’s not too difficult to work out how the intruder managed to get past my gate.

“Yes,” I say flatly. “It is. Rodriguez, do up your trousers and go.”

His eyes widen. “But, ma’am—”

“Don’t *ma’am* me. You don’t work for me anymore.” I wave at the front door. “Go.”

He stands, puffing his chest out. “Ma’am, really, that’s not fair—”

“Of course it’s *fair*,” I snap. “You were too busy shagging my staff to notice the strange man *breaking into my bedroom*. I pay you six figures, and you still can’t get through an eight-hour shift without getting your rocks off. You’re fired. Now get out of my house, before I call your wife and tell her why you no longer have a job.”

I turn on my heel and leave the kitchen, ignoring the muttered ‘*bitch*’ behind my back.

Right. That’s me. I’m not the one who screwed around on the job and cheated on my pregnant wife. But as per usual, *I’m* the bitch.

Of course, most people would agree with him. I’m a well-renowned cow. I even have titles: you are talking to the proud three-time winner of *Goss* magazine’s ‘Biggest Celebrity Diva’ award. A major UK newspaper crowned me ‘Britain’s Biggest Bitch’ just a couple of weeks ago. I don’t think they’re actually *supposed* to be awards, but I’ll take them all the same.

I suppose it is kind of my fault. As I step into the corridor, I catch a glimpse of myself in the diamond-studded hallway mirror. Highlighted blonde hair. Veneers. Fake nails. I’m the kind of woman people *love* to call a bitch.

There’s footsteps on the stairs, and I look up to see a policeman stepping onto the landing, holding a clear evidence bag.

“You got a sample?” I ask, leaning heavily against the wall.

He nods. “Doesn’t guarantee we’ll find the guy, though. If he’s not a repeat UK offender, we won’t have his DNA to match with.”

“Don’t you have databases? Hospital records, or something?”

He rolls his eyes. “We might do that for a more high-profile case, ma’am. Nothin’ as minor as a break-in.” He pulls his phone out of the back pocket of his pants and wiggles his thick black eyebrows. “By the way, my daughter

was a massive fan of that TV show you were in, back in the day. You don't mind snapping me a quick pic, do you?"

I look down at myself. I'm wearing a stained Minnie Mouse pyjama set. Last night's makeup is smeared around my eyes, which are red, because I've been crying. Because I was just the victim of a home invasion.

"Yes," I tell him, trying to keep my anger under control. "I do mind, actually."

His face hardens. He turns towards the door, then pauses like he's remembered something. "Oh. I think this is yours." He hands me the clear plastic baggie.

I frown, taking it. There's a Polaroid inside. "What is it?"

"It was under your pillow. Very dramatic." He presses his lips together. "I have to wonder exactly *how* someone would manage to lift up your pillow and put something under it whilst you were sleeping. Unless the intruder was the tooth fairy, it doesn't seem very likely, does it?"

I don't respond, taking out the photograph.

It's a picture of me asleep. I'm sprawled over my sheets, my mouth open, my arms both flung out. Tight bands suddenly squeeze around my chest.

"The note was a nice touch," the man adds, grabbing his jacket from my coat rack.

"Note?" I say numbly. He makes a spinning motion with his finger, and I flip over the picture. Scrawled on the back in florid cursive are the words:

You look beautiful when you're asleep, my angel. And soon, we'll be sleeping next to each other forever. X

"Oh my God," I whisper, staggering back into the wall. I can't breathe. "Oh my God. Please, just—" I try to pass the photograph back to the policeman, but he steps away, putting his hands up.

"That's for you."

I frown. “You don’t need to take it?”

He shrugs. “Don’t know how much good it would do us, ma’am.”

“What do you mean?” I demand. “It’s evidence!”

He huffs a laugh under his breath. “Right. Do you know what the penalty is for wasting police time, Miss Saint?”

“What? I didn’t waste your time, this is your damn job!”

He gives me a nasty look. “And I’m sure the paparazzi who photographed our cars coming onto your property just *happened* to be hanging outside your house at four AM on a Tuesday morning?”

I’m gobsmacked. “Probably! It’s not *my* fault they make their living by invading my privacy! If I set all of this up, how exactly did I get a pile of come in my bed?!”

He shrugs. “You got your boyfriend to do it? I don’t know, ma’am, but I *do* know that my officers don’t appreciate being used in your publicity stunts.”

I gape at him.

There’s a scuffle behind me. Rodriguez and Julie both step out of the kitchen, whispering to each other. I snap my mouth shut and wave them to the door. “You. Both. Out. I’ll send you your severances. Enjoy unemployment.”

Julie runs a hand through her platinum curls. “C’mon, Briar,” she wheedles. “It was just a mistake. How was I supposed to know one of your creepy fans would try and break in tonight?”

I stare her down. Julie has been my PR manager for the last eight years. She’s a typical rich Chelsea girl: blonde, always made up, and constantly draped in a fur coat. During her time working for me, I’ve almost fired her about fifty times, but she somehow always manages to worm her way back into my life.

She apparently finds my silence encouraging, grabbing my hand. “Listen, will you forgive me if I get you a new security team?” Rodriguez looks hurt.

“No,” I tell her.

“But—”

“You got me *this* security team,” I point out. “And then you *slept with* my security team. So, no, I’m not letting you pick out my new guards.” I shake her off me. “You’re fired. Get out.”

She pouts. “But—”

My last fibre of control snaps. “For God’s sake, will everyone just get the Hell out of my house!” I shout. I’m shaking. The Polaroid drops out of my hand and flutters to the carpet.

There’s a few seconds of silence, then the front door opens, and everyone starts to file out. I swallow hard, feeling tears roll down my cheeks. I lift a hand to swipe them away.

There’s a sudden flash of light. I look up, and see the policeman facing me in the doorway, holding his phone up and snapping a nice little shot of my breakdown. He flashes me a smarmy grin. “‘Preciate it, Briar Saint.”

I step forward to grab the phone out of his hand, but he slams the door shut behind him.

I stare at the door for a second, breathing hard. Then all of the energy drains out of me, and I sink to the ground, wrapping my arms around my knees. The Polaroid lies on the floor by my elbow. The note on the back stares up at me.

Soon, we’ll be sleeping next to each other forever.

I bury my face in my hands. I’m so screwed.

CHAPTER TWO

MATT

I sit back in my chair, glaring at the file in front of me. “No. No way in Hell. Absolutely not. I’m never doing another celebrity case again.”

Our boss, a petite blonde woman named Colette, glares at me. “You haven’t even met the girl,” she points out.

“Don’t need to,” I say simply. “I’m not doing it.”

My partner Kenta pushes his cup of coffee across the desk. “Drink that and stop complaining,” he mutters, reaching for the cafetière to pour a new mug. He looks half-asleep, his white shirt crumpled and his long, dark hair falling around his face. As I watch, he scoops the loose strands back, tying them into a neat ponytail. I bite back a rude comment and pick up the coffee.

To be honest, I really need the caffeine. It’s five in the morning, and the rest of London’s *Angel Security* headquarters is silent and empty. I should still be in bed, but instead, our deranged boss called us all in for an emergency meeting.

A massive hand stretches over my shoulder and nabs the coffee cup right before it touches my lips. My other partner, Glen, heaves his huge body down into the chair on my other side. At six foot six, he can barely fit his legs under the table.

Colette glares at him. “You’re late.”

“Aye,” he agrees, taking a leisurely sip and smacking his lips. “That I am.” He runs a large-knuckled hand through his thick hair and stretches. The pink

dawn light filtering through the large windows catches on his face, lighting up the mangled scar cutting down the side of his cheek.

Colette sighs and pulls out a company-issue briefing file: a black folder with the Angel Security logo embossed in gold. She flips it open, showing us an A4-sized photograph. It's a paparazzi shot of a woman getting out of a car. Glen stiffens next to me.

"This is Briar Saint," she says. "Twenty-eight years old. Former child star, rose to fame when she was thirteen and starred in the TV sitcom *Hollywood House*. Now she does blockbuster movies."

Kenta leans forward, examining the picture. "She looks familiar."

I nod. She does. I could swear I've seen her before, but I can't put my finger on where.

I certainly doubt I'd forget her face. She's stunning. Honey-coloured hair, soft, tight body, tanned skin. In the picture, she's dressed in an icy white fur dress like Cruella De Ville, and her lips are painted shocking red. She's pouting at the camera like a fashion model.

"You've probably seen her before," Colette says. "She's got a very impressive IMDb page. She's been in ads, music videos, TV shows. Plus, the posters for her new movie are plastered all over the tube." She flips the page, showing us a close-up headshot. I take in her high cheekbones and perfectly sculpted lips. She has the most striking eyes I've ever seen, a bright turquoise colour, framed with long, fluttery lashes.

The picture has probably been edited in post, I remind myself. I doubt she actually looks this good in real life. No human could.

Glen tugs the photograph closer. "What's wrong wi' the lass?" He asks, his Scottish accent thickened by tiredness. "Someone hasslin' her?"

Colette shrugs, reaching into her purse for her compact. "I got a call from her PR manager an hour ago, begging for us to come and protect her client. She said it was an emergency." She flips the mirror open and checks her lipstick.

Even though it's the crack-ass of dawn, our boss is still perfectly turned out, in a full face of makeup and a pale pink dress that matches her nails. Just

looking at her, you'd never guess this pretty, doll-sized woman has spent half of her life defusing landmines in Mozambique.

“What kind of emergency?” Kenta prods, when she doesn't expand.

Colette sighs, snapping the mirror shut again. “She wouldn't say. Said that it's ‘confidential information’. She wants to meet so she can have you sign an NDA and tell you in person.”

I groan. I *hate celebrities*. What, does she think we're going to sell her private details to the press? We're a *security* company, for God's sake.

Colette purses her lips. “If I had to guess, I'd say Miss Saint has found herself an enemy. Her behaviour is... controversial.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

Colette flips to a new tab full of media cuttings. My eyes widen as I take in the headlines.

*Briar Saint Leaves ‘Emma’ Cast Mid-Way Through Shooting, Calls Director an ‘Absolute C*nt’.*

*Star Actress Briar Saint Told This Enthusiastic Fan to ‘F*ck Himself.’*

Mean Girl: Ex-Friend Describes Briar Saint as a ‘Reincarnated Regina George’

Bratty Diva Briar Saint Called ‘Ungrateful, Rude, and Condescending’ By Ex-Manager.

I look up at Colette, incredulous. “You want us to work with *her*? She looks like a nightmare.”

“Who's Regina George?” Glen asks. “Is she famous?”

Colette rolls her eyes.

I flip through some more press clippings, scanning over the photographs of

Briar scowling at the camera. Yes, she might be beautiful, but in most of these photos, she's sneering at the camera like she's just smelled something bad. I don't think I've ever seen someone look so openly snobby.

I glance over another article. "Hey, there's one about her previous security guard. Apparently, she fired him a few days ago for using the bathroom whilst he was on shift," I read. "Wow. She sounds delightful."

Colette gives me a flat look and pulls the file back. "Matt, this is tabloid trash. There's a good chance it's all just made up so magazines can make money off the girl."

"And if her security guard *sold a story to a gossip rag*, he was clearly shit at his job anyway," Kenta points out.

I shake my head. "I don't care. I told you. I'm not working for another celebrity. Especially not one with a reputation of acting like a spoiled child."

Our last celebrity gig was a total nightmare. The girl was a seventeen-year-old Instagram model who spent all day snorting drugs and trying to stick her hands down my pants. When we finally dumped her in rehab, I swore I'd never touch another celebrity case again.

I don't know why Colette is wasting our time with this. Glen, Kenta and I are the best-trained guys in the company. We've been working here for five years, ever since we got discharged from the SAS. Last month, we recovered the daughter of a British billionaire who'd been taken for ransom. The month before that, we were protecting an American presidential candidate after she got shot at a rally. We don't work for young, spoiled celebrities, shoving back overzealous paparazzi and carrying their shopping bags through the mall.

"I think we should at least check it out," Kenta says. "It's only fair."

"Me too," Glen chips in. "It's shitty to refuse to protect someone who's in danger, just because of their reputation."

I frown. "But—"

"C'mon," Glen rumbles. "Just a preliminary meeting. Face it, you owe me." He shoots me a crooked grin. The thick scar slashing down his cheek

stretches, and guilt slams into me like a freight truck. Without meaning to, my eyes drop to his arms, taking in the matching scars around his wrists. They're a few inches thick, raised and red. Even though we retired half a decade ago, they never really healed right. Spending months in shackles will do that.

Kenta shifts on my other side, and I can't help but envision the scars that I know are slashed into his back. My fingernails grip hard into the wooden table as memories flood through me.

"Matt. *Matt.*" Glen claps a hand on my shoulder, and I blink, snapping out of it. I don't even realise how hard I'm breathing until Colette passes me a bottle of water with a sympathetic look. I stare at it in my hands.

"I didn't mean it like that, mate," Glen says roughly. "I just meant, you've put me on the night shift for the last three jobs in a row. Not..." He pauses, redness climbing up his neck. "You know I don't blame you for what happened." He gestures vaguely at his face. "Neither of us do."

I shrug him off and rub my eyes. He's right. I owe him and Kenta. I owe them both a Hell of a lot more than this. If they want to meet the girl, we'll meet with her.

"Fine," I mutter. "But she better have a real damn problem."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lily Gold is a contemporary romance author living in London, England. A big supporter of unconventional relationships, she believes that *love is better shared*.

She writes stories about complex, strong women, and the harems of beautiful, protective men they fall in love with. When she's not writing, she's usually reading, accidentally killing her potted plants, or playing with whatever pet she can get her hands on.

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