



HUNDRED
SIMP

LAYLA
SIMON

HIRED HELP

A DARK ROMANCE

LAYLA SIMON

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PREFACE

Content notice: this story contains scenes of dub-con, CNC, bullying, spanking, exhibitionism, knife play, sharing, image-based abuse, and physical assault.

The book is set in New Zealand and is written in NZ English, which (mostly) uses British spelling variants. For story context, sex-work is decriminalised for NZ residents/citizens aged eighteen and over, the age of consent is sixteen, and the legal drinking age is eighteen.

CHAPTER ONE

BROOKE

SIX MONTHS AFTER LOSING MY VIRGINITY TO HARRISON, SEX feels like an exam that I'm failing. All the in-depth discussions, fear-filled confessions, and enthusiastic physical explorations beforehand didn't prepare me to be half a year deep into this business without an orgasm in sight.

"Does that feel good?" Harrison whispers before his teeth dig into his plump bottom lip like they'd sink into the juicy flesh of a strawberry. His gaze locks to mine while he slides into me inch by delectable, throbbing inch.

"It's fantastic." And it is. My eyes brim with love as the intensity of his gaze grips my concentration, holding it tight while it fidgets and fusses, an introvert desperate to sneak offstage.

We're in the bedroom of my childhood home, now the residence of stepmother number three, trying to be quiet. It's near the end of our two-week winter break, and with Harrison staying here the whole time, we've already had three narrow escapes.

Neither of us wants Alicia bursting into the room to catch us out... but the threat of that happening adds a frisson of excitement into the mix.

But those rippling sensations are transitory. The moment my attention slips from its razor focus, so do all the delicious tingles and friction and throbbing-so-good-it-aches.

"Fantastic," I repeat, the mantra a hollow offering as the sparks of lust fizzle.

I wish he'd stare at me longer with those dark hazel eyes, but they've already moved to admire the motion where we're joined, his girthy cock plunging into me. He's transfixed by the visual in a way I envy.

All I see is the wobble of my breasts, the jiggle in that poofy bit of my lower stomach that I can't get rid of no matter

how many times I cut carbs or add an extra circuit of the track to my daily run.

“You’re so beautiful,” Harrison murmurs, slowing to kiss me. The statement sends a pleasurable thrill snaking along my spine, and the sentiment goes double for him.

My hand splays across his chest, eyes feasting on the way his skin glistens from exertion. There’s the white stretch of a surgery scar along his sternum and I run my finger along it before flattening my hand over his heart; the firm curves and ripple of his muscles making every touch a delight.

His silky black locks are gorgeous, and they ignite a zap of lust as I twist my fingers into their length, clenching into a fist with strands caught between, tugging until the resistance ignites a shudder of exultation that pierces to my bones.

I’d welcome him doing the same to me. Would welcome an experiment with being rougher, treated carelessly, flirting with pain. I’ve asked him before, but he’s hesitant. He treats me like the finest porcelain, ready to slip through his fingers and shatter on the floor.

Stroking my hair is more his speed. Wonderful when I’m curled next to him on the sofa snuggling, but it does nothing for me mid-action.

I try to hold him in place for longer, enjoying the press of his lips, but his mouth moves from mine to fasten on my breast, his tongue licking across my nipple, their peaks only reactive to temperature, barely acknowledging any other sensations. The vibration of his moan across my chest is a thousand times better than the wet sucking of his mouth.

A renewed flutter of interest seizes my clit, and I tilt my hips better to meet his thrust, helping him go deeper, the drag increasing against my walls while I feast my eyes on his naked beauty.

His skin is shades darker than mine, with a rosy tint beneath that always gives him a glow of good health. Far better than my pallor, which means even after a week of sunbathing, if I lie still, I could be mistaken for a corpse.

“Fuck, baby. You’re so tight.”

A whip of pleasure cracks across my brain. I try to grasp it closer, but it’s already gone.

Anxiety spills forth in its place.

There are girls in the world who’d come with just a flicker of his finger across their clit. There are girls who’d gasp and clench and curl their toes, girls who’d squirt and make a spectacle, girls whose spasming muscles would bring him along for the ride, bonding with him in a shared afterglow.

The pleasure I get when Harrison gives that moan deep in his throat that means he’s close, when he loses the tight control he clings to and thrusts deep, hard, fast like his pelvis is possessed by a jackhammer, that’s the pleasure I deny him by resolutely failing to come.

Failing on his fingers, on his cock, on any toy he’s holding.

He withdraws, rolling me onto my belly, plunging his fingers inside me, and it’s good. Really, really good. I arch my back, trying to encourage them deeper and he meets the challenge with the perfect thrust, curling the tips as he withdraws so the drag against my walls intensifies while I rub my pussy against the clumped bedclothes.

“You like that, baby?”

“Mm-hm.”

“You want to try doggy-style?”

A sensation stirs deep inside my core as I mumble in agreement. A tiny ember but if I can just hold on to it, grab it firmly with both hands, I could gently blow it into a roaring fire.

I ease onto my knees, shoving my arse up, and Harrison withdraws his fingers while I whimper, earning a soft laugh that turns into a groan as he inserts his cock inside me, the angle creating more of that delicious friction as he slowly withdraws, then shoves it hard into me again.

“Like that,” I gasp. “Just like that.”

My lower back bows as I chase the sensation, moving until he hits inside me at an angle that gets my libido roaring.

The change in position grants him deeper access while the unexpected roughness of his stroke causes a building rush of pleasure and I counter his force, moving back against him so he slams into me even harder, until I clench my teeth and let loose a rapturous cry.

“So good, Harrison. That feels so good.”

His hands are on me, reaching under me, grabbing greedy palmfuls of my swinging tits, mashing them and moulding them, the pressure of his touch increasing and decreasing in tandem with each thrust.

He leans back, letting them go, sitting while he cups my hips, pulling me back onto him so the passage becomes smoother, the friction eases, and did I get the confirmation back from the dressmaker performing the alterations on my gown?

I can't remember. She was meant to have it back soon, but I don't recall seeing any texts from her. Perhaps an email?

The alterations better be done in time, otherwise that tentative order I placed for a fancy graduation dress won't come to anything. I'd rather try someone new than give repeat business to someone who's failed.

Especially since there's a chance graduation will be attended by my dad.

My body stiffens at the thought, back arching, and Harrison stops mid-thrust. “Are you okay? Did I get you at the wrong angle?”

“No. No, I'm good,” I reassure him, and he starts back up, right where he left me, harder, faster, the slurping sounds as his cock moves inside me making me shudder in the wrong way, filling me with low-level despair.

It's not my partner. I adore Harrison.

I love his quick wit and ability to laugh at anything and everything. Not because he doesn't take things seriously, but

because he feels things so deeply, he needs the humour as an emotional vent. I crave his adaptability, how he can move into any new situation and immediately make it his home.

And he's stable. He's steadfast. The year-long pursuit before I agreed to a first date taught me everything I needed about his character and his appetite for commitment.

I held him off for so long through fear, unprepared to handle the thought of falling for someone, of opening myself emotionally. A year was enough to see his fixation wasn't a passing fancy.

When I finally said yes, I fell for him hard, tumbling from a tentative friendship straight through to love with barely a pause, all in the space of a few weeks.

The freefall was exhilarating and terrifying.

Scary enough to make me press pause on escalating our physical relationship. We discussed our expectations and deepest fears for long months before moving to this level. I shared how my heart had been broken a thousand times by my parents and their constant rejection. The fear I have of getting close to people, the expectation they'll leave.

In turn, he whispered about his father cheating on his mother. How she'd taken years to recover. How infidelity was as bad as assault, except it was your emotions beaten to a pulp, insecurities pummelling your confidence until it lay in the gutter, bleeding.

We shared and grew closer than I ever thought possible.

Except for when we're in bed, our bodies literally joined while my mind drifts apart.

"Are you close?"

I thump back into my body, straddling Harrison, having changed to me riding him while my head was a thousand miles away.

I wish I could fake it, just so he'd have positive feedback for a change. But it's been too long; Harrison knows me too well for the ruse to succeed.

It would be another slap in his face.

“You go ahead,” I say, clenching around him while I increase my pace, feeling the satisfying tremor as he comes, pumping inside me while his cock twitches, his face contorts beyond control, and any hope of me achieving the same gallops into the distance.

“You want me to go down on you again?” he mumbles in the sleepy voice he gets every time he reaches orgasm. “I could try it with the toy.”

“And eat your own spunk out of me?” I wrinkle my nose. “Gross.”

“It can’t be that gross,” he says with a contented smile, rolling onto his side and pinching his nipples as a reward for a job well done. “You’ve had your fair share and never complained.”

Oh, ho. And wouldn’t he be delighted to know the sonnets my brain had written on how tastebuds should be disabled during sex?

“Besides, as long as there’s a hint of Brooke flavouring on my cum, I’m sure it’ll be delicious.”

I screw my eyes shut, wishing I had the same control over my ears. “I need a shower.”

“No, you don’t,” he declares, clutching my waist as I try to escape. He traps me in place but, as a concession, leans over to grab some tissues so the wet spot doesn’t grow any wetter.

“You just had a shower,” he mumbles, tossing the sopping tissues into the bin.

Any irritation from discomfort is lost to the thrill of him taking charge. If there was a button for that during sex, my thumb would jab it enough to grow a callus.

He gathers me in his arms, tucking my head under his chin so it’s engulfed by his broad chest. The heavy thrum of his heartbeat reverberates across my cheek, sinking into my bones.

In my head, I've already lived a thousand lifetimes with him, growing up together, growing old together, raising children, cradling grandkids in our arms. Now, I indulge in the vision again. Each thump of his heart teleports me forward another year; another year of worshipping this boy I adore until my eyelids flutter open to drink in the sight of him.

His face after sex is relaxed and beautiful. Sleepy lids, full mouth, colour splashing high up his flat, wide cheekbones. Gorgeous. He could have any girl he wanted.

That pinch of anxiety nips at me again, growing into fear as it feeds. One day, he *will* choose another girl. One day he'll come to his senses and realise he doesn't need a lifelong sentence of blah-ness in bed.

If I can't fix my problem, one day, despite his promises, he'll leave.

"You want a snack or something?"

Another Harrison trait. Sex makes him ravenous. It also makes me smile that he's the one acting as host. When Alicia told him on the first day to treat this place as his home, he took her at her word.

"A drink would be good," I say. "There should be a bottle of lemonade in the fridge."

"Coming right up."

I prop myself on my elbow to treat myself to a front seat view as he stalks over to his clothes, his naked body always tantalising. He dances on one leg, then the other, to pull on his jeans, then drags on a shirt, dropping a kiss on my forehead before he heads out the door.

It'll take him at least twenty minutes to come back. He'll mosey down to the kitchen, having a conversation with my stepmother if she's around, plus any staff he bumps into on the way. He's so personable, any stranger is immediately seized upon as a potential friend.

Then there'll be the deciding what to have, the preparation, the additional snacks in case his main snack doesn't have staying power, pouring a glass for me and him, followed the

trek back upstairs, once again involving conversations with anyone who crosses his path.

I smile at the thought, then slide off the edge of the bed.

He mightn't think I need a shower, but he's not the one with weird smelling fluids leaking from his orifices. I jump in before the water even heats, scrubbing and lathering every remnant of sex away, letting my mind drift to my boyfriend.

I never expected the joking prankster who first crossed my path to have the many dimensions Harrison does. One day, I'd attempted to tell Floss how I knew it wasn't just some teenage fling, ready to burst apart the first time a new hookup drifted into view, but I don't know that I convinced her.

A lot of it is unexplainable. All the thousand and one things that carve out his particular puzzle piece, and the joy at finding how my equal or opposite tastes fit snugly, each tab finding a matching blank.

I'm pulling on a sweatshirt to pair with my jeans, ready to go on a boyfriend hunt downstairs, when I hear Harrison on the landing.

Expecting his hands to be full, I open the door for him, and he storms into the room. His face is red, breathing heavy. His hands clench into fists.

"What's wrong?" A jolt of adrenaline makes my nerves scream with useless energy. "What is it?"

He stares at me. No, he *glares* at me, then moves to the wardrobe, grabs out his duffel bag, and begins shoving clothes into it.

"Harrison?" My voice sounds brittle even to my ears. "What is it?"

The two-week break hasn't been long enough for him to need much, so his packing's soon done. I sit on the bed, knees curled to my chest, heart thundering.

Something's wrong, but what? He was only out of the room for fifteen minutes.

“Can I help?” I sweep his EarPods off the bedside cabinet and hold them out for him. He stares at my outstretched hand for so long I think he’s going to refuse, then he grabs them from me.

I wring my hands, squeezing them together so hard my knuckles crack. “Please tell me what’s happening. Is it your mum? Is she sick?”

It’s the only thing I can think of to explain the rapid change. A phone call with bad news.

He finishes, zipping up the gym bag and hefting it over one shoulder. His eyes won’t meet mine. When he speaks, his voice shakes. “We’re done.”

“Done?” I shake my head, brain not computing. “Done with what?”

He’s at the door, half turned away from me. His face pinches, eyes hooded as he says, “I don’t want to go out with you any longer. We’re broken up.”

The door slams. Shock cements me in place, staring blankly ahead as he thumps down the stairs, crashing out the front door.

It’s a prank, right?

Harrison’s playing a horrible trick.

The stomp of his feet on the gravel outside is the aural key that unlocks my muscles. I fly downstairs, yanking open the door to stumble after him.

Halfway along the driveway, he gets into a taxi. I yell, but he doesn’t stop.

I run after him, sharp gravel crunching under my bare feet; no time spare to waste putting shoes on. No time to acknowledge the pain as my soles hit against the uneven stones, my wet hair whipping behind me, scalp tingling in the cold air.

My eyes are gritty, stinging as I sprint faster, desperate to catch him, my heart already shrivelling with despair.

But the car doesn't stop. It reverses onto the road and speeds away, leaving me panting, staring after him, mind numb, lungs burning.

Too frightened, too hurt, too confused to even cry.

CHAPTER TWO

HARRISON

I GRIP THE EDGE OF THE SINK IN MY DORM BATHROOM AND close my eyes, breathing in the combined steam and deodorant spray. Breakfast will already be serving, but I can't make myself hurry. Food isn't as appetising when your mouth is bitter with an aftertaste of bile. Even the lingering toothpaste can't erase it.

My hair is limp, the dark strands clumping together with yesterday's product. I need to wash it but can't be bothered, so add another handful of wax to the solidifying mess and call it good.

English is first lesson. Our new teacher, Miss Murchison—the second new English teacher this year—is nice but a stickler for rules. I should take the next half hour to familiarise myself with the reading again so I can float under her precisely tuned radar.

Fucking coward. You can't avoid her forever.

And the voice in my head is wrong. I could easily avoid Brooke. The trouble is most of me doesn't want to.

Most of me wishes I could erase the past fortnight and return to when my life was perfect again.

Even though I've promised myself over and over I won't watch it—it hurts me and helps nobody—I drag my phone from my pocket, scroll through to the link her stepmother sent me, and press play.

Brooke pops onto the screen in all her glory. Her dark hair falls in its natural waves over her shoulders, over her naked breasts, spilling halfway down her back. She smiles into the camera; blue eyes sparkling while she purses her plump pink lips, hitting a sexy pose.

Alicia's voice sounds in my head, soon blossoming into the full memory. "I'm sorry, Harrison. Please believe that I never wanted to hurt you or Brooke. I just couldn't..."

She'd faltered to a stop, and I'd told her it was all right. That I'd rather know now than find out later and any other gibberish I could think of to fill the silence until her conscience was appeased.

None of it was true.

I wasn't the slightest bit grateful to find out.

All I want is to go back to that morning. Go back so when Alicia mumbles she has something to tell me, I can shout at her to shut the fuck up and get out of my face.

Anything to not have to deal with this pain. More pain than I thought was possible without a physical injury.

I used to tease Brooke about not being able to walk around naked. The moment she left the bed, she would drag on some clothing, but there's no sign of that inherent shyness on display.

Oh, no. For the dude setting up the camera, she's a fucking exhibitionist, happy to display all the things she liked to keep covered when I was with her.

There are other notable differences. The first being how easily the man now crawling into the shot can make her orgasm.

I think that's why I have the bitter taste in my mouth. It's certainly how I feel watching her writhe in ecstasy.

The bitterness of failure.

No wonder she sought comfort outside our bed.

With a gasp of pain, I snap my phone shut and tuck it away. Not that it makes any difference; I've watched the footage so many times it's scored onto my retinas like the afterglow following an explosion. Seared into my corneas with expert precision, ready for repeat viewing at the flick of a switch.

The worst part is, she knew. Brooke *knew* how thoughts of a partner cheating disgusted me. How I loathed my father for having put Mum through it, eviscerating her trust, her love.

I punch the wall, full force, my fist digging deep into the weak plasterboard. Pain engulfs my arm; each knuckle burns like a white-hot flare. There's a crunching feel to my bones as I tug my hand free, splits across two of my knuckles already swelling with dark crimson drops of blood.

The ache in my chest recedes, overtaken by the physical pain of injury. I know it won't last but for the moment, I revel in the freedom. The ability to draw a full breath.

I want to cry, but it's been so long I can't remember how. The fury, the hurt, the devastation swirls inside me, pushing to be released, but there's nowhere for them to go.

A hundred times a day, I'll break into a sweat for no reason. My chest will ache like someone's cracking apart my sternum, my lungs seizing so badly that I've dropped from the rugby team, though it was only for friendlies.

Even for fun, I no longer have the stamina for a ninety-minute game.

Fuck this.

A burst of anger erupts, and I leave the room before it can dissipate, using it as a propellant to get to the cafeteria, joining the queue midway along when Everett waves me into the line.

Of all my friends here, he's the one I give a damn about. His dad knows my stepfather, so we'd met a few times before I came down here to school and naturally drifted towards each other, only finding out later how much we shared in common.

"You're meant to smile at the people behind you when you jump queue," he says with an elbow nudge. "Not glare at them."

"Sorry." I force a smile onto my face with no idea of whether it looks anything like it should, giving a wave to the students behind me.

Most of them couldn't care less or hadn't noticed, but at least when I turn back to my friend, he gives me a look of approval.

“Valerie’s giving you the eye,” he says, not bothering to adjust his volume any and the girl at the nearby table turns a sharp gaze his way.

“Don’t be a dick, Everett,” she snaps. “I was looking for the butter, not ogling you or your mate.”

I grab two single-serve packets and step out of line to pass them to her. Despite her protestation, she blushes as our fingers touch. It brings her prettiness into sharper focus, but I turn my gaze back to the food.

Valerie’s attractive, but she’s not who my heart hungers for.

“I’ve sworn off women,” I tell my friend, filling a tray with morsels I probably won’t eat, before following him to our usual table. A few other guys are already in place, grunting hello with a Monday morning lack of enthusiasm as I take a seat.

“Are you sure?” Everett points to a perky blonde near the door who’s also giving me the eye. “Because they sure as hell haven’t sworn off you.”

“You should fuck your way through the entire senior year,” another mate, Joseph, tells me with the wise expression of an old prophet. “That’ll get you over her.”

“Sounds like drinking your way to sobriety,” I mutter, picking up a spoon to feed myself a bite of fruit and yoghurt that might as well be wet sawdust to my striking tastebuds.

Everett stiffens and I don’t have to turn to know Brooke hovers nearby. Since our breakup, I’ve been oddly attuned to her presence. I could hear a pin drop a mile away if she were the one letting it fall.

I eat another bite, chewing savagely, though the preserved peaches hardly require the effort. I should have heaped my plate full of meat instead. The idea of tearing flesh apart with my teeth is far more compelling.

With a grimace, I push my leftovers away, gripping the sides of my chair and forcing my feet flat on the floor to stop my legs jiggling. Brooke’s friend Floss whispers to her, and

she trills with laughter. Of the two of us, I'm sure everyone's thinking I was the one who was dumped.

The video burning a hole in my pocket sure makes it seem that way.

"See you in class," I say, pushing my chair back so abruptly that the legs squeal against the lino. "I'm going for a walk."

"I'll come with you," Everett says, joining me before I can protest. As we leave, he deliberately walks on the side nearest Brooke, sheltering me from her.

I should be grateful, but the love-struck boy inside me who still thinks the world revolves around her beautifully curvaceous arse bristles at the obstruction. The boy who wants to see if she's as devastated as he is. If he ever meant anything to her at all.

When I do snatch a glimpse, I figure Brooke is reeling from the breakup because the perfect sheen of her nail polish ends in nibbled and misshapen tips.

Last year, she struggled to quit her nail-biting, painting them with disgusting chemicals to stem the urges. I made the mistake of sucking her finger once with it on and—gag—never again.

She fought hard to break the habit and now she's back at square one.

Good. You want her to hurt.

Except I don't. What I want is to return to the blissful ignorance when I had no idea of what Brooke had done to me.

To us.

"You've got a fucking nerve," Floss explodes at me out of nowhere. I hadn't even noticed her following us out to the lobby. "You know your friend just tipped a soda all over her lap."

I glance past her, back into the cafeteria and see Ollie pretending to wipe Brooke down while making an even bigger

mess. Kaden, Floss's stepbrother, stands nearby, cracking his knuckles like he wants to punch the boy in the face.

Floss clicks her fingers to get my attention. "And that's without the shoves in the corridor and the furtive whispers everywhere we go."

Okay, so my friends have been rather enthusiastic about trying to bring me out of my funk by subjecting Brooke to low-level torment. On the scale of one to fucked-the-chef-and-recorded-it-on-camera, their teasing falls somewhere around not-anywhere-close-to-enough.

"If your friend doesn't enjoy being teased in school, maybe she should move," I say in a purposely bored voice. "It's not like she's hard pressed for options. Her daddy can buy her a place anywhere she likes."

"So can yours," Floss snaps back, dots of crimson flaring along her cheekbones. "And who the fuck deleted her English essay from the submission hub? She had to redo the entire thing from scratch."

Everett sniggers, letting me know it was him. "If your friend can't handle the schoolwork, she shouldn't have enrolled in Kingswood. Go use your charms on Miss Murchison instead."

"This has to stop," Floss insists, her voice growler shriller. "It's bad enough you won't even talk to her any longer. This bullying needs to stop."

I catch Brooke from the corner of my eye. She hovers near her table, arms hugging her midriff, the stain from the spilled soda turning her pastel blue dress to navy.

Regret slices through me, spilling out a bout of self-hatred for what I've done to her. I can't stand to see it; the effects of what I've unleashed on the girl I *love*.

Then my inside eye watches her pout for the camera and my lips curl into a snarl. "You're screeching at me in the lobby, but you think *I'm* bullying?"

"No. I think your friends are doing it on your say-so." Floss's eyes narrow, the dots of glittering green eyeshadow

painted on the inside bridge of her nose making them appear lizard-like. “And the least you can do is call them off. She’s hurting enough.”

And rage explodes from me like orange lava spurting into the smoke-obscured sky. “No, she fucking isn’t.”

My face is only inches from Floss, but it’s Brooke I focus on. From my peripheral vision, I watch her mouth open, dragging in a gasp of air; see her hands clench into tight little fists, displaying the full extent of her ruined outfit for the entire cafeteria to see.

“Nice dress, Brooke,” I call out, needing to vent the building pressure somehow. “You look like you pissed yourself.”

She flinches again, worse than last time. For a second, she bounces on her toes, then strides towards me, face setting with determination.

“You’re kidding me,” Everett says, shaking his head. He stands a little in front of me, giving my own fisted hands a quick glance. “Take the hint,” he says as she reaches the lobby. “He doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“Harrison?”

Brooke’s voice is an octave too high, as gaunt as her sunken cheeks. The extravagantly perfect hair and thick makeup cover some of her distress, but it’s still visible. Her sadness, her confusion, is a palpable thing, beating in time with my dismantled heart.

“Hey,” she says in a voice that shakes with need. “Can’t I just speak with you privately for a minute?”

I don’t want to meet her eyes, don’t want to stare at the girl I thought was my future, but I do.

The gaze that used to burn so hot for her crackles as ice shards splinter across the surface of my corneas. Her expression is pure misery, pain scored an inch deep; past her skin, past her subcutaneous fat, gouging deep into muscles and nerves and tissue.

She falters, swallowing instead of speaking, and for the first time since Alicia's dreadful revelation, I experience a smidgeon of satisfaction. Nice to know there's a heaped serving of pain for both of us.

When she clicks that I'm not going anywhere *private* with her, she tries, "I just wanted to know—"

I snap my gaze away, lifting to stare blankly over her shoulder, scanning for anything, anyone, to distract my attention.

In reaction, she talks faster, babbling. "—if you could share why you don't want to go out with me any longer. Because if it's something I could fix, could work on..."

She trails off, her face blushing a furious red. Her complete insincerity riles me.

There is no way she doesn't know why this is happening. I mightn't have told her, but Alicia could never keep a secret. It would have taken Brooke all of ten seconds to extract the truth.

She could have come to me. Apologised. Even if I could never forgive her, we might have worked towards a future where we could tolerate each other inside the same school.

Instead of that, she's trying to save face with her friends. Lying to them the same way she lied to me.

It's cruel.

It makes me want to be cruel in return.

My voice drops low, becomes husky as I ask, "You really don't know?"

And as I expected, she can't hold my gaze. Brooke's eyes flicker to anything except me while her chest heaves in a breath.

I step closer, crowding her. The same height she used to appreciate, find reassuring when we were out on the town for a night, gets turned against her until she hunches her shoulders, shrinking even smaller.

“I really don’t.” Her diminutive voice whines like a blood-sucking insect, hungry to feast. “One minute we were *fine*...”

So fine she pouted at a camera, writhing in ecstasy with someone else, smiling, laughing.

Laughing at me.

Anger chokes my air passages until they’re so narrow my field of vision shrinks, the edges dark grey and ragged.

I reach for her, not sure until my hand lands on her shoulder if I’m going to fondle her or strangle her. My body bends down, so far down, until my lips are close to her ear, her hot panting breaths scalding my cheek. “You seriously want me to tell you?”

Guilt flashes in her eyes as I pull my head back far enough to read her face.

“Yes.”

I grab her hair, lacing my fingers through the strands until I can snap her head back with a vicious tug. Her eyes search mine like she’s desperately seeking answers, but Brooke always was a good actress.

Does she truly expect me to give public voice to my shame? Admit to my inadequacies by detailing her infidelity.

Fuck off.

“You’re terrible in bed,” I say in a mocking voice, loud enough to carry through the open door to the cafeteria, stuffed full of watching peers.

The wince isn’t enough. Nor is the dimple that means she’s biting the inside of her cheek.

My volume increases as I continue, “The thought of touching you again revolts me. Your clammy skin and flabby arse and the stupid noises you make. I hate having these memories crammed in my brain of fucking your body while you lie like a gutted fish, not even bothering to move. And the *smell*. I’d try to come as soon as possible in self-defence, so I could be done before I puked my guts out.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Everett has his phone out. When I shift my gaze for a second, I see others, their Monday morning gloom gleefully banished by the juicy gossip.

“If you didn’t like it, why d’you keep doing it then?” Her voice is low, a venomous whisper. “It certainly wasn’t for my benefit.”

I jerk back, wincing while she freezes, eyes full of sorrow.

Then Kaden is there, inserting himself between us. He doesn’t do anything, say anything else, but his presence gives me cover to move back, to inhale a breath, to pull my fragmented pieces together.

Brooke turns to leave, shoulders shaking.

“You should brush up on your technique, darling,” I call after her. “Then your next lay won’t be left so traumatised a lifetime of self-abuse sounds preferable.”

“You’re such a fucking prick,” Floss says, deliberately shoulder bumping me on her way past.

Kaden once again steps in, glowering at me.

“Here you go,” Everett says with a laugh, showing me his phone. “Posted on the senior year noticeboard in case anyone missed it.”

I smile but my insides are twisting, pulling so taut it feels like any second I’ll implode.

“I’ll catch you in class,” I tell him, moving into the corridor, heading for my room, in the opposite direction to Brooke’s. “Just need a minute.”

“Sure, man. You want to skip? There’s a demolition derby running over at the Ruapuna Speedway, starting at midday. My cousin’s got a few old clunkers he’s planning on racing, and I’m sure he’d let us destroy one.”

“No.”

I move away, adding nothing more, afraid of what will leak from my tense frame if I stay a moment longer. When I

reach my room, I enter just long enough to grab a small box, then stride along the corridor, slipping through the side exit.

There's a handful of students out here, one of them glancing over with a guilty expression, a cloud of vapour streaming from his lips.

I trudge past them, across the sodden fields, unreasonable anger surging when my feet slip on the marshy surface, choking with a recent run of heavy rain. I want to fight the lingering drizzle, the wind, the mud. Even squeezing my injured hand into a tight fist doesn't slake my bloodlust.

Behind the school, a set of train tracks run parallel to a cycle track. I swipe out of a rear gate, stomping grimly forward for twenty minutes until I reach the edge of a manufactured suburban lake, a flashy new subdivision that after five years still hasn't sold its vacant sections.

There's a public jetty, and I walk out to the end, staring at the mix of houses. Half of them are unoccupied, which makes the lived-in cul-de-sacs seem emptier.

I dig into my pocket, pulling out the black velvet jewellery box. It's soft, warm after being held against my leg for so long. I open it, examining the engagement ring inside.

The main stone is from my grandmother's ring, an heirloom my mum handed over at the funeral since, 'You're the only one here to carry on the line.' The coloured diamonds flanking the princess-cut stone are from Mum's original engagement ring from Dad. The one that never led to a wedding.

Even the yellow gold band and the platinum setting were fashioned from the heirlooms. Knowing how much value Brooke places on family and how little hers places on the concept in return, I liked the idea of presenting her with a piece that celebrated generations of love.

My parents' marriage might have failed before it walked up the aisle, but I know from how deeply my father hurt her, their shared affection once lit up Mum's world.

I even enjoyed the process of having it made. The way I got to think about how she'd react, not just to my proposal, but as I held her close and told her where each piece came from, how it confirmed her place in my family's line.

It pleased me to daydream about the proposal. I loved kissing her, being with her, and knowing that our future together was nestled in my pocket, just waiting to be brought out, presented to her, waiting for her agreement to set the relationship in stone.

And while I'd been enjoying those daydreams, Brooke had been enjoying the company of another man's bed.

The dull fury hits again, sinking into my belly like a sucker punch. The ring started this whole mess. On break, I couldn't stop taking it out to admire it, fiddling with it, snapping the lid open and closed any time Brooke was out of the room.

Alicia had spotted it the first day. Her jaw had set, nostrils flaring, while a sad expression camped in her eyes.

I thought it was sadness because her little girl was all grown up and about to start a new journey. In my worst moments, I thought she might think Brooke would turn me down or request a postponement.

Instead, she'd taken me aside ten days later and shown me a video that tore through my ambitions with a savage hunger, gobbling them until even the crumbs were gone.

I'd stared in shock, recognising the man in the video almost instantly. After Alicia mouthed her platitudes about regret and how she hated to have to do this, I stormed into the kitchen and pulled the chef aside, demanding an explanation.

The man had stared at the footage, face calm, clearly familiar with the images already. "And?" he'd asked when I couldn't stand to play it for another second. "Did you want an apology for not being enough for her?"

With a grimace, I snap the box closed, heft it in my hands for a second, then hurl it deep into the lake. The box sinks beneath the surface with barely a ripple. No fanfare.

Just like our relationship, nothing special after all.

CHAPTER THREE

DAEGAN

THE APPOINTMENT WITH THE MORTGAGE BROKER STRESSES ME so much, I turn up close to an hour early and spend the intervening time turning my nervous system into a jittery wreck.

Ten minutes out, I get a call and think it's going to be him cancelling on me, saying I'm not the sort of client they're after, but it's worse than that. It's my ex.

"Hey, Gwyn. What's up?"

She never calls without a good reason, but my impatience fires, propelled by the overdose of caffeine, as she obviously juggles her phone while doing something else. Something that involves dropping things on the floor from the sound of it.

"Ugh," she finally responds. "Has Harrison been in touch?"

"No," is my curt reply as I wince at the suggestion, the familiar ache settling in my gut.

My son last spoke to me three years ago at a family wedding where I had too much to drink and made the unfortunate decision to address every perceived wrong in history at the one event. My memory of the whole thing is patchy, but I recall the disappointment on his face with crystal clarity. Considering he hasn't responded to any of my overtures since, that's the image which seems destined to stay.

There's silence on the other end, and the query is so out of the blue that I ask, "Did you tell him to get in touch?"

"No, but he's—Martin!" she abruptly yells, her husband's name. "Can you take the dogs outside? They're giving me a headache."

I can't even hear the animals, but Gwyn has always been high-strung. She hears noises that nobody else notices.

"He's in trouble at school," she says, returning to the call. "I only just got off the phone from the head telling me she'd

had to discipline him, then he called, all upset, and asked if he could leave.”

“He’s eighteen,” I point out, swirling my cup so the last of the latte foam coalesces enough to swallow. “If he wants to sign out, he can.”

“And ruin his entire future?”

Her voice is sharp with worry, but I don’t know how much of that is because she wants him to stay or how much is dedicated to what her Devonport friends will think. Among the ladies-who-lunch brigade, I can’t imagine there are many whose children dropped out of high school.

“His marks last year were enough to qualify him for uni if he wants to attend,” I remind her, shifting in my seat. There’s a confident note in my voice, but my statement is mostly guesswork. Gwyn told me something along those lines, but I don’t know for sure. My ex isn’t above hyperbole, even in everyday conversations. “If he takes a break for half a year, it could be good for him. He might find a job.”

“Doing what?” She clicks her tongue against her teeth. “I can’t even get him to tidy his room.”

“Because you employ staff to do it for him,” I begin, then wince at the note of reprimand in my voice.

Given that my son wants nothing to do with me, I’m hardly a candidate for father-of-the-year. I have no standing to criticise her parenting decisions or who she employs in her home.

“Sorry, just...” I rub my forehead, then drum my fingers on the table. “What help do you want from me?”

“Back me up. If he calls asking permission, turn him down. If he, I don’t know, turns up on your doorstep or something, send him home.”

I’m down in Christchurch and she’s up in Auckland, more than half the country length away. A relocation that Gwyn always seems to forget when she’s stressed.

“He’s still at Dilworth, isn’t he? He’s hardly going to fly down here on a whim,” I remind her gently.

There’s a frustrated gasp, then a long pause. I sense there’s something more she wants to add, but I don’t know what. The distance between me and Harrison has never felt so acute.

“Plane tickets are cheap,” she finally says, snapping but that’ll be down to her anxiety rather than me, so I let it flow past. “And don’t start a lecture on how we give him too much of an allowance.”

“Could he go to your local school rather than boarding?” I ask, hoping my soft voice lands the right way. “Perhaps it’s a change of location he’s after?”

I don’t add how it aggravates me she sent him to a fancy establishment a ninety-minute drive from her place rather than keeping him home.

After the years-long fight we had about her decision to relocate to the North Island, it pains me to know he’s not even staying with her. That instead of being in a city with two parents on call, he’s stuck in a dorm room with none.

“It’s some girl,” she says in a scathing tone. “I can’t believe he wants to throw his life away over a girlfriend. I raised him to be smarter than that.”

I end the call soon after, smarting over her summary and the implied criticism.

I threw my life away over a girl. Gwyn. I dropped out of school far too early with skills that barely qualified me for the employment ladder, let alone gave me enough earning power for me and my suddenly-having-a-baby-we-knew-nothing-about-until-midway-through-the-last-trimester girlfriend.

My unpreparedness had sunk my chances of finding a good job. The employment centres couldn’t work out where I fit any better than I could.

Desperate, I’d answered an open audition call to become a performer in a male revue show. That salary alone would have covered our bills nicely, except when Harrison was six months

old, we discovered a congenital heart defect that needed urgent repair.

The hospital was free, likewise the surgery, but the cost of flying Gwyn to his bedside and putting her up in a hotel for the duration of his stay was far more expensive than our meagre savings could afford.

To the dancing, I added escorting. A career change I thought would be busy women without the time or inclination to date ensuring their sexual needs were met.

Instead, I found sex such a small part of the work it was more like an afterthought. My appointments were filled with people seeking connection, seeking conversation, friendship, reassurance; the emotional labour so intensive I had to space appointments far more widely than I first thought.

Even the appointments I took with men, a necessity to supplement my earnings, were filled with talk, with gossip, with laughter.

I thought it would be a short-lived career change. But the work was both more exhausting and more rewarding than I'd expected.

My worst mistake came from hiding the additional workload from Gwyn. A poor decision at the time. Even worse in retrospect.

She lost her rag when she found out, accusing me of cheating, of betrayal, of treating our relationship as a joke when all I wanted was to provide for her, for Harrison. It wasn't for *fun*.

We struggled along for a while, but I never gained back any of the ground that I lost with her. The moment Harrison was through his rough patch, she left, and my struggle for access began.

“Daegan?”

I dart to my feet, so lost in my thoughts I didn't hear Roger, the mortgage broker, enter. “That's me. Can I grab you a coffee?”

He smiles, tugging on the knot of his tie. A habit of his, judging by its angle. "I'm meant to shout you the drink. I'm the one earning a commission."

"Hopefully," I add since I'm not at all sure how this meeting's going to go. I notice he doesn't correct my impression.

When he sits, a dainty cup of espresso making his hands gigantic, I crack my knuckles. "Have you reviewed the paperwork?"

"It looks good," he says, eyes skirting to the folder on the table rather than meeting mine. "Did you have a particular property in mind? Sometimes knowing what you want helps to clinch the deal."

"This is the place I'm interested in."

I slide the printed listing across the table to him. The copy is pristine, grabbed last night from the realtor's office because the original is badly crumpled and stained.

He frowns at the details. "You'd be purchasing this as an investment property, is that right? Because it changes the parameters the bank checks for if it's a business."

"No." I take a beat, not wanting to talk too soon because when I get worried, I blurt out everything at once, close to babbling. I'm not sure what Roger's normal clientele are like but making the best impression possible never hurt anyone. "Although it's listed as a rental, it's my current residence, and I'd remain there."

The widening of his eyes is subtle, but my overwrought nerves catch it. So much for my first impression. My postcode apparently means more than my savings, my employment longevity, my appearance.

"The house is old, but it has good bones, and the landlord installed new insulation just a year or two ago."

"Sounds great," the broker replies with a smile that doesn't even attempt to reach his eyes. "But I won't bother to sugar coat it. The bank might have a problem with this property. There's a lot of gang activity near the address."

Ah, yes. My lovely neighbours. A subsidiary chapter of the Head Hunters that grows like bacteria, doubling every time I check.

“Safest place to live,” I say, forcing myself to relax back in my seat, to flash my most charming smile. “Nobody messes with the properties around a gang house.”

“Until you cross the wrong neighbour and come home to find your place torched. What’s the insurance like?”

“I have contents—”

“For the home. Does your landlord have it and is the company willing to transfer the coverage to a new owner?”

“I’m sure he does but I can easily check if you need to know.” I frown, shifting in my seat, worried this meeting is heading in the wrong direction.

The house is important to me. I like the idea of investing money in my own mortgage rather than my landlord’s, but it’s not just that. It’s the stability. I want to put down roots. I want to become a permanent part of my community.

Home and family were the core values my dad instilled in me. I let my family slip through my fingers. I don’t want to lose this.

Perhaps sensing he’s dragged down the tone of my day, Roger shifts in his seat, draining his coffee. “Your finances look solid, but your saved deposit is on the small side.”

I lean forward, about to object, but he holds up a hand to forestall me.

“It might work, I can’t tell until I approach the banks to sound out your offer, but there’s also... just a sec.” He scrolls through his phone, searching my application. “Alright. So, most banks have a moral clause, and your line of work might cause a few issues.”

I’m not even escorting right now. The stripping is enough to meet my bills. I swallow the first half dozen responses and go with, “My occupation is perfectly legal.”

“They turned down an applicant of mine a few weeks back because she ran a brothel. Not even worked in it, just ran it.” He catches my eye and inclines his head. “This isn’t *my* judgement; I’m just warning you. Reputational risk is one of the aspects they’ll consider.”

I don’t like it but he’s right. If I’m going to argue the point with somebody, he’s not the one.

“Okay, point taken. Aside from that, you think I have a shot?”

“A small one. What would really help is if you can shore up your saved deposit. They’re far less likely to turn you down if you’re in the eighty percent margin rather than ninety. At this level, they’re going to comb through every detail.”

A pit of aggravation dimples my stomach. Or perhaps that’s me growing an ulcer to add to my troubles.

“By the time I raise more, the house will be sold.”

He concedes the point with a shrug. “You might get lucky there. It’s not the most desirable neighbourhood.” He brings up a new app on his phone and spends a minute typing. “This says the last time it was available, it took seven months to sell, and that was in a buyer’s market. With it on the turn...” he trails into another shrug.

“So double my deposit and then wait for the banks to tell me I’m too immoral for a loan.” The frustration more than seeps into my voice, it drowns every word. “Is that about right?”

“If you can save enough, I’ll find a bank that fits you.” Roger gives me a broad wink, unfazed by my plummeting mood. “Perhaps not this house or this month, but we’ll get you on that ladder.”

It’s his job to be optimistic but some of my tension unwinds after he leaves. At least I have an actionable step I can take.

The best way to earn money fast is the same as always. I dig out my phone, flip to my account, and start the process of

reactivating my old listing. After a moment of intense calculation, I also increase my prices.

If I'm going to get back into it and weather the emotional brunt of that toll, better make it worth my while.

My phone vibrates to let me know the listing has gone live while I'm striding back to my car.

Six months, I decide. Six months back on the game to see how much I can fatten that deposit so I can move on to the next hurdle.

CHAPTER FOUR

BROOKE

I'M NOT LOOKING AT HARRISON.

Not looking at Harrison is my number one occupation. I have not looked at Harrison for *days* now and I'm close to becoming an expert.

Just today, I didn't look at him in class, when we passed by in the corridor, and I for-sure was not looking at his sculpted arse while he stood a metre ahead in the tuck shop line.

"Hey," Floss says, taking the seat next to me. "Are you eating your feelings or what?"

"Definitely," I mumble before shoving a fistful of hot chips into my mouth. "How many days until graduation? I can't wait to get out of here."

She gives me a one-armed hug and I rest my head against her shoulder for a few seconds. At least Floss still loves me.

After being served, Harrison sits at the corner bench of the outdoor food court, surrounded by a cluster of equally large, equally fit males as per usual. When I accidentally mistime a glance, he catches me watching. Every hint of expression falls off his face, leaving it as smooth and blank as a riverbed stone.

"Want to switch sides?" Floss asks, following my line of sight, then she squeals and waves. "Kaden, get over here."

Her stepbrother makes a show of ignoring her, pretending he can't hear her ear-piercing call. I smile as she stretches so far, she's dangerously close to tumbling off her bench, snagging the edge of his t-shirt and hauling him in like fisherwoman hauling in her catch.

"Sit. Provide your expert services as a blocking screen."

"Yes, ma'am," he drawls, winking at me and lifting my spirits.

As eye-candy goes, Kaden ticks a lot of boxes with his chestnut curls, large features, and slightly morose air. A

manner that's completely misleading as he immediately launches into a raunchy joke about a barber and a beautician, making Floss howl with laughter.

He also makes an impressive screen to shield Harrison from view. If I thought it would make my ex jealous, I'd sit in his lap.

But Harrison has made it perfectly clear he doesn't care about me in the slightest. Not only that, but his friend's video on our senior notice board ensures that nobody else cares about me either, unless it's poking fun.

I asked Alicia if I could leave school, come to live with her, but she gently suggested it would be better for me to finish out my final year.

It won't. Another six months of this is completely intolerable.

I need to go find a flat or apartment. Maybe get a cat whose offspring will eat my face in a few decades when I die alone.

"He's insane," Kaden says now while Floss makes a whole plethora of signals designed to tell him to shut it while he still has the chance. "You're one foxy lady. If my sister hadn't—"

"*Stepsister*," Floss immediately corrects him.

"Oh, sorry." He scrunches his nose at her. "Didn't realise you were ashamed to be related to me."

"You're in my same year. I don't want people gossiping about how we're twins or something."

"Yeah, wow. I can't think of anything worse." He dismisses her with a grimace and turns back to me. "Anyway. I think I was in the middle of describing all the wondrous things I could do to you—"

"Ew, Kaden. You're meant to be cheering her up not revolting her."

"You're lucky I don't go for older women," he finishes with a wink. "Just saying." I'm only a year ahead of him and Floss but he makes me sound like a cougar.

I smile while finishing my lunch—or the part of it I’m going to eat, anyway. Watching the two of them together makes me wish I had a sibling. Someone to lean on and spar with.

My phone buzzes with a text alert. A package is waiting for me in the student housing lobby.

I make my excuses and wander there. “Hey,” I call to the driver who’s loitering near his vehicle. “You have a package for Brooke Ellis?”

“Yeah, love. Sign here.”

I scrawl my finger across the portable device, trying to work out what’s inside the large box inside the door. But he reaches farther into the vehicle, pulling out a garment bag instead. “Here you go.”

It’s my dress for the senior dance. A rush of grief hits me like a sledgehammer. “Thanks,” I say, gulping back the disappointment. “Have a nice day.”

He waves, already reversing away from the door. I follow his progress until he’s left the grounds, then retreat to my room, hanging it from the hook on the back of the door, then backing away like it’s poisonous.

I consider throwing it in a donations bin. I consider setting it on fire.

Finally, with an irritated sigh, I tug the zipper on the garment bag, pulling it down and revealing the gorgeousness hidden beneath.

The high collar is white and shaped from hundreds of tiny pleats. From the moment I saw the design, I had to have it. The intricacy of that piece alone reminds me of the ruff collars from Elizabethan times.

From there, the dress is a snug fit to accentuate my figure. There’s a pleat in the back giving access in a straight line down to my tailbone. When it was being fitted, I’d imagined Harrison sitting beside me, sliding his hand through that gap, and teasing my bare skin.

I love it.

Even if I'd rather sit at home in a nice warm bath of sulphuric acid than go to the senior dance on my own, it doesn't detract from its beauty.

There's still time before class, so I pull it from the garment bag and shed my current outfit. The row of fastenings for the crafted neckpiece are tiny and fiddly, Lilliputian compared to my Gulliver sized hands.

When I turn to the mirror, it's worth the effort.

In the past fortnight, I've lost weight and gained spots. The constant worry means I don't eat, don't eat, then stuff my face with foods loaded with grease. My cheekbones are sharper, my skin even paler than normal, nearing translucence.

But the dress.

The dress is perfect.

I take a few pictures, delete them, then take a few dozen more at flattering angles before hunting through them for the best. I'm about to post my top three when a few new comments catch my eye.

There are rude remarks from people who barely know me. I shouldn't care about them but they're as distressing as any positive comment on my yet-to-be-posted images would be uplifting.

Instead of submitting the photos, I backtrack until they're deleted, then shut down the app.

No one's ever going to ask me out again. The girl who's sickened the only boy who ever deigned to sleep with her.

Just thinking about it makes the pain real, visceral. Sweat pops out on my forehead while my heart pounds. Each insecurity arches its back, bares its teeth, puffs out its fur.

I try to calm myself, try to steady my breath with deep inhalations, counting out the seconds for each release, but I start spiralling.

It doesn't matter what I look like in a pretty dress. It's *never* going to matter. No one's going to want to peel the fabric away from my body, to touch me, to run their hands over my bare skin. *To get close.*

Everything inside me rolls into a tight little ball. I can't imagine *ever* being that vulnerable with anyone again. Not with that as feedback from my one and only lover.

You could pay for someone to teach you.

I push the thought from my head as ridiculous. But as I stare at my phone, my chin raises, and it pushes back.

What's so ridiculous? When I struggled with introductory algebra, I hired a maths tutor. Gareth took six hours to teach me everything I needed after weeks of struggling alone.

The idea horrifies me and thrills me in equal measure. What is the point of my wealth if it can't solve my problems?

On the other hand... do I really want to pay a guy to fuck me? What if I book a gigolo and get the same feedback as Harrison?

Then you'll know.

I sit up, breathing heavily, then pick up my phone again.

It can't hurt to *look* at some sites. Even if I never go ahead with anything, it'll be interesting to see what's out there.

When I click on the page for escorts, the photo array makes me anxious about my cleavage. Page after page of curvy women.

I'm about to close out when I see the tab for males.

Large breasts are replaced by large dick pics. A few of the men have torso shots, showing how they fit in a suit or flexing to show off their muscles, but the rest are upfront with their favourite asset.

I scroll through them, quickly passing through the men for men channel and diving into the far smaller men for women, and that's when I see the listing.

It isn't under his real name, but I recognise Harrison's dad.

I've never met the man, but Harrison talked about him a little and showed me a few photos. They're estranged and from the set of my ex's jaw when he imparted the information, he wasn't in any mood to field questions about why.

His listing has a torso shot and I click into the body of the ad.

The photograph must be years old, or time has been extremely kind. Harrison's eighteen like me, so at a minimum his dad should be mid-thirties, more probably edging into the upper zone of that.

I know his parents had him young. I know they never married, and their relationship exploded apart with such force that his mum spent twelve years picking up the pieces. Aside from that, I'm relatively clueless.

Harrison's shamefaced confession that his dad stripped for women and 'did other things' only ever filled me with sympathy, imagining the distress of being in that situation.

Now, it fills me with curiosity.

He's the most expensive listing on the page; four hundred per hour. My imagination fires.

Why is his hourly rate so much higher? The nearest is fifty dollars cheaper but most of the listings are under two hundred. Is that a supply and demand thing? Is it not worth his while to travel for less?

Is he so much better than the others that women would happily pay the fee, no matter the cost?

I flick through the assorted images. Even if they're years out of date, he really is the most beautiful man. Dark hair, as silky black as Harrison's but much longer, spilling over his shoulders. Every inch of visible skin has markings, vibrant tattoos from the deepest black to the brightest crimson, some phrases, mostly images. My fingers itch to hold him down and examine the intricate details printed on his taut, muscular canvas.

You should ask him to the dance.

An evil smile spreads across my face as I imagine turning up to the prom on his arm, parading him in front of a gaggle of envious seniors.

And who really gives a shit about them? No, I'd be parading him in front of an audience of one.

My hands tremble as the idea takes a firmer hold. Could I do that? Knowing how everyone would stare.

It would be a public service, really. The beautiful dress deserves to have at least one good night out at a ball, being admired. It's only fair it's matched by someone equally beautiful at my side.

At worst, he'll refuse. The moment I say the name of the school, he'll probably cut and run.

Except... if he's as estranged as Harrison has led me to believe, he mightn't know the school.

He might say yes.

A shiver of deliciousness shakes me from head to toe.

If he agreed, then I'd get to make Harrison as uncomfortable as his recent actions have made me.

You said I was bad in bed, well...? I hired a professional. Isn't that the right action when you have a weakness? Hire someone to help you improve.

Deeper inside, my caution sounds a warning. Infidelity is Harrison's one cardinal sin. If I do this, things really are over between us. He won't forgive me.

And the petulant child, who represents far more of my personality than I'd wish, stamps her spoiled foot. He deserves to be hurt. He deserves to pay.

He didn't give a shit about hurting me.

I open a chat box, typing in a general query. We can meet, I can test him out, see if this plan is something I could go through with.

Maybe after one lesson with him, I won't care about Harrison any longer.

The money is nothing to me. With the first part of my disgustingly humongous trust fund kicking in at eighteen, I've probably earned a hundred times his hourly rate in interest while I've been browsing. If he hesitates, I can double his fee, triple it without flinching. Any counteroffer will be within my budget.

At ten times the cost, it'll still be less than the earrings I plan to wear.

With a growing smile of satisfaction, I swap the dress for my previous attire, then run for class as the bell goes.

My whole day rosier with one split-second decision.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAEGAN

THE FIRST THING I NOTICE ABOUT HER IS THE ARMOUR. SHE'S rich, that's part of it, but not the most important part.

Her suit is a perfect fit, perfect cut. Bespoke or she altered it herself after purchase. A chunky necklace that could be beaten silver but has the rigid sheen of platinum. Her hair is tied back in a deceptively simple ponytail with not a single shimmering strand out of place.

It's black, but the word doesn't do it justice, doesn't come close to describing the depth of its darkness, its lustre. It can't capture how it plays with the light—gleaming, rich, full, thick. Hair made to be felt, to be stroked, brushed, to tangle your hands into.

Hair that could turn a grown man into a salivating dog.

There are four in the café keeping tabs on her. The guy behind the counter I can understand, he's close in age. The others are old enough to know better.

A man near the exit looks near to seventy but he's tilted his wrist to display an ostentatious Rolex, like a peacock splaying its tail feathers.

He must know he's wasting his time but all I see in his eyes is the thrill of the chase.

It's five steps from the café door to her table. Five steps to decide that I want her after all.

I set up the meeting because of her age, thinking I would spend fifteen minutes convincing her this was a bad idea and sending her back to the schoolyard to pursue whatever age-appropriate boys are on offer.

Five steps and I've never wanted to land a client as much as I want this one. A strong warning sign I shouldn't take her on.

“Brooke?” I say softly, not wanting her to startle.

She turns slowly, eyes widening for a moment as she takes in my appearance, the only facial movement not under her rigid control. Even that settles in the blink of an eye, replaced with a welcoming smile so performative she might as well be on the stage.

“Jesse?”

The first rule of the game is never to put any true personal details anywhere online ever, but it’s still weird to hear the wrong name come out of such a pretty mouth. I imagine what it would sound like for her to moan the right name, *my* name, then snap my attention back to the task at hand.

I’m not here for fun or to pull a girl. This is a job. About time I put my work hat back on and got my mind straight.

“That’s right. Can I get you another coffee?”

The moment I offer, a barista is behind me with a cup topped with an elaborate work of art in foam. “Courtesy of the gentleman by the door,” the female server says, frowning in displeasure.

The old leech leans forward, an expectant expression on his face, but Brooke doesn’t even turn.

“Thank you so much,” she says in a loud voice, “but I’ll pay for it myself. Please keep the money or give a freebie to someone who looks in need of it, later.”

The barista’s eyes twinkle with amusement. “Will do.”

Brooke pushes the cup away from her with a moue of distaste, then meets my gaze again. “Can we move this someplace more private? I’m not really comfortable discussing things in public.”

“Where did you have in mind?”

Her lips twist for a second, then her gaze moves to glance into the lobby of the hotel next door. “I could book a room.”

I picked the café because it was central. The first-class hotel is far beyond what I’d expect a client to pay for. Usually, a first meeting would be a casual introduction, a chat outlining each other’s parameters. Nothing that can’t take place in a

public setting but with the way her eyes flick to the door every time someone walks past, I sense she won't take part in any discussion until we move.

“We can do that but it doesn't mean I've agreed to anything. This is still an exploratory meeting.”

She nods, already pushing back her chair and going to the counter to pay.

I trail her into the hotel lobby, waiting back while she strides to reception and sorts out a room. When the man at the counter tries to explain the features and services on offer, she impatiently holds out her hand for the key.

She walks towards the lift, only turning once she's there to check that I followed her. When we're inside, she presses the button for the top floor.

“You booked a penthouse suite?” I raise an eyebrow, wondering who's picking up the tab for this. Surely even a rich parent would think twice about funding their daughter's sexual adventures.

“Yes.”

“It's a chat. We could do it in their cheapest room.”

Her gaze swipes across my face before she faces straight ahead, exiting the moment the doors open. “If I can afford the best, why would I buy anything cheaper? Someone has to book these rooms, or they're wasted.”

If I can afford the best.

I guess that explains how she picked my listing. Not for my physical attributes or the highly rated commentary but because she scanned the service providers on offer and automatically took the most expensive.

The thought rolls some of my anxiety away. It's always better once I know the reason someone chose my ad from all those on offer.

“Are you from Christchurch?” I ask, detecting an accent from further north.

“I am now,” she says, inserting her key and opening the door wide to let me pass in front of her. “My father moved me all over when I was little.”

She follows through to the lounge, then overtakes me, moving to the curtains, which are half drawn, to fling them wide.

The large room is separated into a half dozen different uses with the assortment of furniture but instead of sitting, she moves through to the adjoining kitchen. There’s a kettle that she fills before switching it on.

I guess in places this expensive, no one washes their underwear by boiling it in the jug.

“Do you want a drink of anything?” She opens the fridge, pulling out a bottle of wine and wrinkling her nose.

“A cup of tea would be good.” I couldn’t care less about the actual drink, but the sharpness of her movements indicate nerves and I want her to relax.

I move to the wall nearest her, leaning against what would be the doorframe if the hotel had bothered to put doors in the place. The only ones in the open-plan space must lead to the bedroom and the bathroom.

My caution would usually lead me to check both, it wouldn’t be the first time a hidden surprise was waiting, but I watched her book the room. There’s no reason to suspect it’s not safe.

And she’s a teenager. Problem number one.

“What did you want my help with?” I shift my feet before adding, “I’m not used to being hired by clients so young.”

Her shoulders hunch, then she squares them and turns back to the kettle, the loss of eye contact apparently enough to make her more relaxed. “My partner said I was terrible in bed. I guess I wanted an expert opinion.”

There’s emotion lurking behind those words but even if she’d been a robot, I would wince in sympathy. Jesus, teens

can be cruel. Who the hell would ever expect a girl this age to be knowledgeable in the bedroom?

As I watch her fussy movements while she prepares our beverages, I also wonder what the fuck was wrong with whoever she was sleeping with. When I was that young, a face this pretty in a magazine would have been enough to get me off. Let alone, to be in the same room, in the same *bed*.

“You understand I’m not a rating service?”

Her jaw clenches and I guess there was far too much flippancy in the tone.

“And you don’t need one,” I add before this meeting can go any further south. “You’re a teenager. You’re meant to be finding out what you do and don’t like, not becoming an expert in pleasuring a man.”

Now her shoulders tense as hard as her jaw. “I don’t like any of it,” she confesses in a tiny voice, almost a whimper; a confession that makes me ache with sadness. “But I want to.”

With the cups in hand, we move back to the lounge. I take a seat on the sofa and although I pat the cushion beside me in welcome, she chooses the separate recliner, curling her knees up as she sits, cradling the mug against her chest like the world’s least adequate shield.

Her body has a tremor so fast, she’s vibrating.

“Well, what have you tried?”

She pulls at the skin of her throat, twisting it and letting it go before pinching it again. The crimson stain shows how savage the small motions are.

I put my cup on the table and lean forward, hands clasped between my knees. “You don’t have to answer if it makes you uncomfortable. You don’t have to do *anything* if it makes you uncomfortable. Any time you like, you can ask me to stop talking or change the subject or leave and I’ll do that, okay?”

Brooke gives a curt nod, then stares into her coffee for so long, I think the last of my proposed scenarios is about to be put into force.

But she doesn't. That more than anything, tells me how worried she is. I want to smack whatever boy eroded her confidence to this level until his face is black and blue.

"I guess..." A deep crease appears on her smooth brow. "You mean like positions and stuff?"

"Sure." Anything to keep her talking.

"Well, we tried like... missionary and me on top, facing him and turned away..." Another deep blush turns her face into a buffet of strawberry and cream. "I'm not sure of all the right words... the terminology..."

"Descriptions are fine," I assure her. "If I don't understand something, I'll ask."

She nods again, this time staring at the wall while she regains her composure. Her posture uncurls a little, relaxing into the soft stability of the luxurious chair. "I guess we haven't been all that adventurous but... I'm not sure..."

"It sounds plenty adventurous to me. At your age, I'd tried a standing up fumble and a lying down fumble and neither of them went well. And that was from my perspective. I'm sure it was even more disastrous from the girl's point of view."

Brooke tilts her head towards me, a signal for me to keep talking.

"I used to practice kissing a lot, in between practising other things with any magazine I could lay my hands on."

There's a fluttering laugh. "Magazines? How old are you exactly? A thousand?"

"My parents kept the family computer in the lounge and it's hard to watch porn in full view of your mum."

She mouths *family computer* and rolls her eyes.

"Hey, we didn't have your advanced technology, okay? Not everyone was raised plugged into the internet, twenty-four, seven. We didn't even use laptops at school and a mobile phone was something you could call or text on and it cost you twenty cents a pop."

Brooke resolutely fails to look impressed.

“And once your minutes were up, you had to wait till the following month before you could contact *anybody*.”

“Steady on, grandad. If you get too worked up, you’ll have a heart attack.”

“My phone didn’t have a backlit screen or a proper keyboard. If I wanted an S, I had to press the seven key *four times*.”

“All that after trudging three hours on gravel roads in the snow to get to school?”

I level a finger at her. “You know, polite people allow others the space to tell their own, ‘back in my day’ stories.”

She sinks farther back into the chair, openly laughing now. “I’m far too rich to be polite. There are people I can pay to do that if you need it.”

“Wow. Should you send in your understudy and once we’ve finessed the shit out of potential treatments, you can deign to join in the process again?”

My voice is teasing but for a second, I still think I’ve gone too far. Then she breaks into a grin. “My understudy,” she scoffs. “If my life were a play, I’d have the writer and director out the back, preparing to be shot. They’ve completely forgotten to add jokes.”

A cloud drifts across her face, then her lips twist with frustration.

“And here I am complaining when most of the world would much rather be in my position than me be in theirs.”

“You’re allowed to be upset, independent of how everyone else in the world is doing. If we weren’t, only one person would ever be able to complain at one time.”

“And nobody would listen to them when they did.”

“Exactly.” From her expression, the idea hasn’t found the most fertile soil, so I give it another try. “I’ve met plenty of

rich women and with most of them I wouldn't ever want to swap lives."

The flashy grin re-emerges. "But you're a gorgeous man who gets paid to have sex with people for a living. Of course, you wouldn't want to swap."

"Escorting isn't all I do." I arch an eyebrow and lean forward, smiling. "I also dance, so there's the Velcro trousers and cash getting stuffed in my G-string to contend with. I could get a shoulder injury with the number of women I manhandle around the stage. It's not all dark-haired beauties in penthouse suites, you know."

She lays the back of her hand against her forehead, feigning a dizzy spell. "Oh, the humanity."

"Get a few hundred worth of plastic notes shoved into your skimpiest underwear and you'll see what I'm talking about. Those edges are sharp."

"And I'm sure there'd be no shortage of grabby handed women ready and waiting with a sticking plaster." She lays her head back against the headrest, smiling sideways at me. "Do you have battle scars?"

I lean across, tracing a light circle on the exposed part of her knee. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you're asking to get a closer look at my cock."

Her fingers move to her lips, twisting them shut, eyes twinkling.

I flick the button of my jeans open, enjoying the mix of alarm and eagerness that flutter into her gaze. "Would you like to perform a thorough examination, or do you have staff for that?"

A sharp edge cuts into her smile and she doesn't need to shake her head or draw her knees to her chest for me to know the banter is over.

I lift my cup, draining the last of the tea before walking it back into the kitchen, leaving the button undone so she won't take its refastening as rejection. When I return, Brooke holds

her cup in her right hand while her teeth worry at the fingernails of her left.

“Do you want me to ask you more questions?” The query is more of a prompt than anything else. She’s skipped an important piece in our conversation. I can sense the desire for *something* pulsing from her but know that she hasn’t revealed it yet.

It’s often like that. Clients will have specific needs they’re too afraid to come right out and ask for. Texts and emails have made that easier. For many, putting words into a device and pressing send is a thousand times simpler than stammering the same truth out to a real person.

But Brooke didn’t disclose anything in her initial request. Just that she wanted to book a session and had never done this before. Not an opening that offered many clues.

She frowns, shaking her head, picking up the explanation of her sexual experience where she left off. “My boyfriend and I, we also went down on each other and we’ve... used our fingers and stuff.” A faint smile hits her as she says that, then she buries her nose in her cup for a moment, gathering herself. “We tried a toy for a while but even that didn’t help.”

“Help what?” I ask, a suspicion firming in my mind.

“I couldn’t...” she waves her hand, and I don’t want to put words in her mouth, but I also don’t want her to struggle unnecessarily.

“You couldn’t climax?”

She sags in relief and nods, taking another sip. “That’s what I want. I want to try sex with another person, with an expert, and see if that helps me to come.”

And god help me, I can’t think of a more tantalising prospect.

CHAPTER SIX

BROOKE

MY CHEEKS COULD HEAT A HOUSE FOR A FAMILY OF FOUR, they're so hot. I can only imagine what I look like to this gorgeous man. A man who sleeps with women as a *profession*.

Probably like a child, I concede as he miraculously stumbles across the right answer, even after my inadequate summary.

But perhaps I fumbled for the right words because it wasn't until he was here, in front of me, that I understood I didn't just want to parade this man in front of a school dance like another fancy toy I bought with daddy's money.

I want him to help me. To take away the horrible feeling I've had since I first had sex with Harrison. To remove the awful panic, the sensation I'm flunking a test everyone else in the world passes with ease.

Much as I should regret choosing Harrison's dad for my doomed experiment, that's the one area of comfort. I can't stop looking. He's gorgeous.

I shift position on the chair, feeling my attraction turn to arousal. Not just because every inch of him looks lick-able, but talking about sex aloud is its own kind of turn-on.

Even if the words I'm using make me embarrassed as hell.

"Have you ever brought yourself to orgasm with a toy?"

I put the cup on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest for comfort as I consider my answer. The question sounds easy enough, but I worry where my answer might lead. As though reading my mind, Daegan gives me a comforting smile.

"This is an information gathering exercise, it's not to judge you and any details you give me remain confidential, you have my word. All I want is to find out about your sexuality, what your body responds to. That will help us explore options that have a better chance of success."

A chance of success.

The idea thrills me. When I sat in the café, I thought this was possibly the worst mistake of my life, but this isn't anything like the discomfort when I first mentioned something to my doctor.

With every passing second, the conversation expands my erogenous zones.

My voice is muffled by my knees. "A logistical problem to be solved."

His laugh is low and smooth and kind. "Exactly. We're just finding out what's making that weird knocking sound under the hood."

I peek at him over my kneecaps. His beard fascinates me. The glossy black makes my fingertips tingle, aching to discover if it feels as good as it looks. His gaze is steady. There's no sign he's about to mock me, even though a dozen situations shuffle in my head, times where it happened, leaving behind thin scars.

"I have had a few with a toy." It's not enough of an answer but I can't give any more while he's looking at me. I take cover behind my knees again. "When I watch porn at the same time."

"Any porn or a particular style?"

My arms squeeze tighter, my thighs squeeze tighter, my pussy squeezes tighter, and I drive my forehead harder into my legs.

"Can you sit beside me?"

I jerk up my head, frowning, intrigued and nervous. Are we going to do it now?

"It might be easier to talk if we're closer. You don't have to look at me."

My shoulders stay hunched even as I agree. When I move to sit beside him on the couch, his weight pulls me into him. I try to shuffle away from the touch, but he spreads his legs and positions me between them, resting back against him. The

instant flush of warmth from his body eases the cold from my bones.

“You’re freezing,” he mutters, taking my hand between his and rubbing it until it’s warm, then swapping it for the other.

His large palms are warm and dry. My eyes are in heaven, tracing the thick veins and wondering if they’re just as prominent elsewhere on his body.

I turn side on, resting my head against his chest, letting my fingers rest lightly on his collarbone, then dart up to touch the underside of his beard before scuttling back to their original landing place.

The hairs are surprisingly soft and springy, bouncing back into position the moment I move.

“This is going to sound awful,” I say as a prelude, still unsure if the truth is going to come out of my mouth.

“I doubt it but try to shock me.”

My eyes screw shut as his arms close around me, supportive. “I liked one where the woman was pretending to be in pain. She made these noises and I—” My chest seizes, cutting off my voice and my breath, muscles tightening like a charley horse.

“You liked to imagine you’re the one inflicting pain?”

An image rushes to fill the filthy pit of my mind. Me, standing above this man with a whip, directing operations, hurting him when he doesn’t succeed.

There’s a small thrill that becomes larger when my imagination makes us switch places. “No,” I say having to fight past the lump in my throat. “I liked to pretend I was her.”

He moves and I stiffen, thinking he’s about to push me away, probably in disgust, but he pulls out a phone, swiping through the screens to find a browser. When he speaks, his voice is deeper, huskier. “Can you show me?”

I arch my eyebrow at him. “You think I have it memorised?”

His eyes lock to mine for a long second before he gives me an indulgent smile. “Yes.”

I mean, he’s right. I do. But, *the nerve*.

I take a few moments to navigate to the right place, his algorithm trained to produce a far different search list than mine. “Here,” I say, shoving it into his hands and folding in on myself as he presses play.

He watches it, skipping ahead to make the experience shorter and slightly less excruciating. When he finishes, he stows the phone away. His breathing is heavier, the times between shorter, the rise and fall of his chest more pronounced against my back.

“Are you happy to try something now?” His tone is so gruff, so low it forms a tantalising rumble. When I nod, he stands, grabbing a remote from the table. “I’d like to experiment while you’re watching this same clip.” He nods towards the gigantic flatscreen on the wall. “I can cast it to the tv if it’s easier.”

A wriggle of pure excitement shimmies through my body. “I don’t have my toy here.”

“Have you ever masturbated with your fingers?”

Part of me wants to say no. To postpone whatever it is he wants me to try until another day.

Another part of me shuts that girl down, dragging her off stage left, leaving only my enthusiasm in control. “Not with any success.”

“Then there’s no pressure,” he says, taking my hand. “Do you want to stay here or try the bedroom?”

I stiffen slightly at the idea, and he nods, squeezing my fingers. “At any time, if you want to stop, stop. If you need me to stop something, this is your safe word, okay?” He pats my hand against the cushion. “Tap twice. Any taps and I’ll check in with you so don’t worry about misremembering or getting it wrong. Would you like to pick a verbal signal, too?”

The knot of anxiety in the pit of my stomach twists, morphs into something else, a pulse of excitement. “You mean like red?”

“Sure. That’s a nice easy one. You want to use it?”

I nod, my voice disappearing as I tug at the skin of my throat, the flesh already stinging from the habit.

“Remember that no matter what’s happening to you, no matter what I’m doing, you’re the one in control. If you give me the signal, everything stops. If you want me to try something different, tell me. I’ll let you know if you reach any limits, but I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

My breath shortens, but it’s not from fear. It’s from anticipation. “What about the money?”

“If you can afford this room, I’m assuming you can afford my fee.” His smile is wide and welcoming and delicious. “We can settle up after.”

I nod.

“What I’d like to start with is you trying by yourself. Are you okay with that?”

My lungs seize. “You mean with you watching?”

“Yes. Is that okay?”

I want to say yes but I’m suddenly so confused. The old familiar sense there’s something wrong with me twangs and I can’t fight it off.

“Hey. Can I hold you, is that all right?”

My voice is gone, and I incline my head, shoulders so stiff I can barely move. He moves behind me again, arms linking around my waist as he leans me against his chest. “How about I watch from here? If you want me to concentrate on the video instead of you, just tell me not to look.”

“Okay.”

He reaches for my hemline, sliding my dress up until it’s at my hips. His free hand lands on my shoulder, then glides across until his fingers are lightly resting against my throat.

There's no force, no resistance, but my windpipe bumps against them as I swallow.

“Do you want me to pull your underwear down?” he whispers, his lips close to my ear. The warm breath makes me shiver as I slowly nod. “Use your words,” he says, tightening the fingers on my neck just a little.

“Yes,” I say, obediently, part of me wishing I wasn't in control. That he would just tear them away and deal with the consequences later.

The finger of his right hand slides under the topmost elastic while my clit throbs in a silent invitation.

“You don't have to go slow,” I tell him. A test that he passes when he yanks them off while I bend my knees and lift my feet to make it easier. Once they're gone, he cups my pussy with a hand so large it makes me shiver.

I close my eyes, wondering if he'll go further, if those gigantic hands will feel as good on the inside of my body as the outside, then it moves away. He grasps my right hand instead, raising my arm over my head to insert my fingers into his mouth, getting them nice and wet.

As though I wasn't already wet enough.

“Do you want me to guide you?” he asks in a low tone like a soft rumble of thunder. “Spread your legs farther apart if you do.”

They fall to the side like they've been waiting for his command. He grips my hand firmly while pushing my fingers where I'd prefer his to go.

“Is that good? Do you enjoy stroking your own pussy?”

I hum, words beyond my capability.

“You want me to start the video so you can show me how you get off?”

“Mm-hm.”

His body arches into mine as he retrieves his phone, nimbly clicking through the wifi registration and sending the

image to the large screen, pumping up the volume so I can hear every gasp.

My throat resents every moment his fingers are away, and I give a soft moan of encouragement as they rest against my windpipe again. “Could you press harder?”

“With which hand?” he teases, using one hand like a puppet, making me spread my pussy lips wide, the other tightening until there’s a steady pressure. “Is that good?”

And if it was Harrison asking, I’d say yes. I’d say perfect.

But because I’m paying, I find the courage to ask for more.

“Harder,” I say as the woman on the screen has her head dragged back, her partner’s hand fisted in her hair. When my breath rasps in my throat, I flex the knuckles of the hand he’s holding, so he understands where I want attention. “Give me more.”

And he forces my fingers to go to work. He slides one into my entrance, a tease that he repeats until I buck against myself to ease it deeper. The rub on the welcoming piece of flesh isn’t enough and I push back, moving to circle my clit instead.

“Try this,” he says, spreading my fingers and pushing until my middle one is buried inside me, up to the second knuckle. “Now use the heel of your palm.”

The sensation is strange, not just the different positions but him guiding me, the idea I’m not completely in control of where my fingers are pressing makes the familiar, strange. It makes my own movements unpredictable. Exciting.

All that before I turn my concentration to the screen.

The woman is on her knees, her partner dropping lube onto her arse, then spreading it deep inside her with his forefinger. When he replaces it with his cock, she gasps and pants in a higher pitch than before, her face twisting as her body resists him. As he forces himself into her.

And I know it’s fake. Or not fake but also not real, not the way it looks. But the idea that the man holding me, guiding

me, could at any moment do something just as forbidden, just as painful, sets my nerves on fire.

His fingers close harder around my throat, and I wonder how I'm meant to tap when my fingers are buried deep in my pussy... the idea I can't stop anything sending a fresh jolt of arousal into my core.

It takes half a minute to remember I have a second hand.

There's pressure on my lower back. His cock growing hard against me. "Grind on me," I order him, and he grips me harder with the hand at my crotch, driving my finger deeper inside me, increasing the friction against my clit as he obeys, shoving himself against me, jerking his body in time with mine.

The woman on the screen begs for the man to stop and he doesn't, he keeps going, his stroke increasing in force, in speed, a punishment for daring to ask.

"Do you want me to do that?" he whispers in my ear. "Do you want me to fuck your arse? Do you want me to use you any way I want while you beg for me to stop?"

His voice is so rough, it makes my nerves sing.

"Yes," I murmur, tensing a little because I don't know if I'm meant to be answering. But it's met with a low growl of encouragement, easing my fears.

"Do you want me to take off my belt and use it on you? Would you like stripes crisscrossing your tender flesh until you can't sit without a burn of pain?"

His body arches harder against mine, breathing so ragged he sounds on the edge of losing complete control.

My own desire soars in response, driving my finger deeper, hand pressing harder, my body thrusting back against his, my free hand moving to cover the one at my throat, encouraging it to tighten as the groans of protest on the screen become sharper, the shrillness increasing in tandem with the pain.

Then his finger no longer guides mine, it joins in, the thickness stretching me, increasing the friction while he grinds on me from below and forces me to grind against myself.

“Should I just flip you over and shove my cock into your arse while you’ve still got your fingers jammed in your cunt and keep going and going until you can’t bear the pain and you’re begging like a whiny little brat who doesn’t know when to keep her mouth shut, hm?”

It’s not just the words, it’s the tone, menacingly low, and the roughness, like his vocal cords are thickening at the same rate as his cock, the latter feeling big as a log, ramming against my buttocks and lower back. I respond to the crack in his throat as he spits words at me, like he’s losing it, his control snapping. Respond to the thought that he might soon grow sick of talking and start *doing* and there’s not a damn thing I could do to stop him.

He could fuck me raw, fuck me ragged, then leave me in pieces while he rewards himself with my fee.

His fingers jam farther into me, mine barely present in comparison.

The actress on the television mutters, “Come, won’t you please come,” while the actor grows rougher.

There is a flutter of disappointment as his hand leaves my throat, then his fingers are fumbling at the opening to my blouse, sliding inside my bra, squeezing my breast in his hand, then pinching my nipple with such force, it’s like he’s set off an explosion in my tits. Another of his brutish fingers shoves inside me, the skin so much rougher than mine, there’s more delicious friction than I know what to do with.

Tingles explode when he pants in my ear, taking the lobe into his mouth and biting it between his teeth, sending a sharp bolt of pain to meet the one from my nipple, the two of them entwining together before rushing straight to my cunt, throbbing in my clit, my entrance now sopping wet as his fingers increase their pace, rubbing, thrusting, caressing, pounding into and against me.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he rumbles as my thighs squeeze together, crushing our joined hands. “You spread those legs wide for me unless I tell you different.”

I try, I really, really try, but even with the pressure from the heel of my hand, my clit needs more, wants more.

The fingers on my nipple disappear and there’s a slap on the outside of my thigh, making me jump. Then another, harder, getting closer to far more sensitive places.

“You do what I tell you when I tell you or I’ll grow impatient and shove my entire hand inside you. Is that what you want? You want my fist inside you on our very first date?”

The stretch of his fingers is already running along the edge of pain. The threat blasts another wave of tingles through my core, turning it into a tightening, clenching mess.

After one final slap of warning, his hand returns to my throat, then higher to cover my mouth, the fingers mashing my lips against my teeth and gums, cutting my breath down to a fraction as I desperately suck air through my nose.

And the noise, the uncertainty, the awkwardness, the myriad sensations send me spiralling. Everything combines—the stinging marks on my thighs, the pain in my nipples, the carelessness of his fingers stuffed inside me, the rasp of his breath in my ear while I struggle to breathe and the woman on the television who now begs and pleads for her partner to stop, would you please stop—until I convulse, muscles spasming until pleasure spreads out in a warm gushy wave that envelopes me from head to toe.

Tears spring to my eyes because it’s good, so good that I never want it to end.

Then his fingers are gone. He practically folds my body in two and curls me against him, tucking my head against his chest while the television blares out what should so obviously be a private watch that it makes me giggle, mind still lost in ecstasy until I don’t really know where I am.

My tears start and don’t stop, the sobs shaking me harder as he rocks me back and forth, fumbling for the remote to turn

off the tv, so my crying spell is the only sound in the room.

Atrociously loud.

“You’re okay,” he whispers, planting a kiss on the side of my forehead as I try to curl into an even tinier ball. “I’ve got you.”

I should be embarrassed but instead I’m relieved; to finally let go with my body and my emotions. To grieve what I’ve lost while I’m still buzzing from what I finally gained.

Maybe it shouldn’t count. I’ve made myself come before, though the process is so unreliable it’s been a while since I bothered.

But nothing of this feels like something I achieved alone. Not when aftershave and masculine sweat fills my nostrils. Not when the fingers a man made me use on myself are being sucked clean in his mouth, the rough caress of his tongue another layer on my current ecstasy.

So, I let go and cry until the urge completely dissipates and I’m still held against a strong chest, my hand tiny as it curls up near my cheek, resting against the bulge of his muscles. Crying until I’m spent, then falling into a doze.

I jerk awake a few minutes later, sitting up and moving apart, blushing at my behaviour.

“Are you okay?”

I nod, not able to raise my head for the longest time. “Sorry. I don’t know—”

My words break off as he cups my cheek, rubbing his thumb along my jawline. “You have nothing to be sorry for. You don’t have to apologise or explain.”

His manner is so calm that I relax despite myself.

He strokes a few strands of hair from my face, whispering in his kind voice, “I don’t think you’re broken if that’s what you were afraid of.”

And it was but hearing him say that while the ocean waves of ecstasy have left their salt-encrusted imprint on my body

makes me laugh again, close to delirium. I'm hardly able to believe that the sensation, this entire capability, was inside me all along.

"Thank you." A thought gradually occurs to me, and I sit upright. "Did you...? Do you need me to do something—"

"You don't need to worry about me."

"Oh." I settle back against the couch, moving slightly apart, my embarrassment growing the more I recover.

My eyes steal further glances at him, scarcely able to believe how handsome he is. The physical appeal growing now I also know how good he can make me feel. So good, I want to offer him something in return.

"I don't mind helping."

He wrinkles his nose and breaks into the most beautiful smile.

I want to look away, I'm staring, but his features hold me entranced. So familiar but subtly different. There's a gentleness about him. Where Harrison is vibrantly funny, sometimes carelessly sharp, his edges are muted.

Most of all, he seems kind.

I still, my entire body calming, expecting a rush of guilt that never arrives. Instead, I bask in the appreciation of his gaze, feeling beautiful where it's usually just another label I ignore.

With a sleepy smile, I ask, "Did I pass your interview, then?"

He cocks an eyebrow and I get another delicious rush of tingles spreading from my core.

"It was an informal chat at most." I scrunch my face at him, and he laughs. "But sure, you passed with flying colours."

"Does that mean I can book you again?" His face doesn't change expression and a rush of nerves hits me at full speed,

continuing even after I drop my eyes. Like he knows I'm hiding something. "I don't really know how it works."

"Yes, you can book me again." He puts out his hand, resting it on my knee and I cover it with mine. "Did you want to talk about that now or get in contact later?"

I frown at the window. Now the euphoria of the moment is fading, other thoughts press into my mind.

Like wondering how many other people he has appointments with today, or this week.

Wondering if he has someone special at home, waiting.

He must do. Of course, he does. I grip his hand against my knee a little harder, feeling the first purr of possessiveness inside me. A purr that might soon turn into a roar.

The emotion fills me with despair. I can't get attached to anyone, not so soon. Maybe not ever again. I certainly can't get attached to a sex worker, to Harrison's *dad*. That's just ridiculous.

But the idea for the dance is still there, shimmering like a jewel in the back of my mind.

An evening where Harrison is the butt of the joke. Where our fellow students will point and laugh at him for a change. Maybe a few jokes about becoming his new stepmother and sending him to bed early.

That I can handle.

Making use of his dad's services until that built-in end date? Yes, please. And if I get attached, it's a problem that will sort itself, because once he discovers why I've asked him to the dance, this man—this gentle, sexy man—will never want to see me again.

"Could I book you exclusively?" When his brow knits together, I hurriedly explain, "I'll pay you for anyone you need to turn down. Just... I'm not used to this. I know you must take care of your health, but I'd just feel easier if I..."

My words falter, face reddening, but he's there with a reassurance. "I budget for six appointments per week. You're

welcome to book them all if that's what you'd prefer."

"Yes, thank you," I gush, all smiles again, my treacherous mind still wondering if there's someone else. Not that it matters. It's no business of mine.

Which means I'm horrified when my mouth spills out, "If you're sure your partner won't get jealous."

He appears mildly amused, but I don't care because he also says, "There's nothing to worry about on that score."

"I guess they'd be on board with what you do if there was someone."

His expression relaxes a little more. "Sure. Nobody's going to key your car for stealing their man if that's your worry."

I struggle to believe he doesn't have someone in his life, but he could be between girlfriends. Maybe he gets by with a few booty calls on the side. Maybe he hasn't told me the truth because it's none of my damn business.

Or this line of thought could be a tangent distracting me from the final question I want to ask. The important question.

One deep breath, and I force out, "Can I ask you for something special? It's all right if you say no because it's kind of weird."

"Ask away."

I put a hand on my midriff, the muscles underneath tensing into stone. "There's a social event coming up in just under a month and I wondered..." I frown into the middle distance for a second, stalling, then blurt, "Would you take me to prom?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

DAEGAN

THE MOMENT BROOKE PUSHES OPEN THE HOTEL ROOM DOOR with her shoulder, I leap to my feet, striding over to hold it ajar for her. She has a coffee tray in one hand and a paper bakery bag in the other.

“Thank you,” she says, ducking under my arm, laughing. “Sorry to be so late but there was a queue at the café.”

She texted me the room number earlier and I’d collected the spare keycard from reception. We’ve met another three times since the first appointment and each session follows a similar pattern. Each time we meet, I enjoy her more.

I find myself thinking of her at odd times, wondering if she’d like a show I’m watching, a song I’m listening to. I get far too much pleasure from planning out new experiences for her, imagining the ways she might respond.

She hands the brown bag to me, setting the coffees on the lounge room table while I peer inside. “Oat cakes.”

“You said you liked them,” she says, a flicker of nerves crossing her features like a muscle spasm.

“I do. Thank you.” The gesture is oddly touching. This room is thousands a night and the bakery items are worth about ten, but it’s the latter I find special. The bag in my hand shows Brooke thinks about me, too. A flutter of pleasure beats in my chest.

Although I’m still appalled by the expense, this penthouse suite has become our regular haunt. I glance fondly around the room, thinking of the varied places and ways I’ve already played with Brooke, plotting new adventures.

She stands by the window, staring down at the surrounding streets while she sips her coffee. I walk behind her, sliding my arms around her waist. She’s tactile, always responding to my touch even when it’s not overtly sexual.

A familiar warmth seeps into my extremities, the pleasure of spending time with someone I like, someone I enjoy.

There's no rhyme or reason to why. Brooke is aggressive, demanding, with an unexpected rigidity to her backbone. Her mind spins her from anger to sadness to rapturous peals of laughter without pausing. It's a pleasure and a strain to keep abreast of the whirlwind changes.

Of course, I could be enamoured because of how she collapsed in my arms on our first meeting. Sobbing her heart out while she clung to me, her body wracked with pleasure from her first partnered orgasm.

The satisfaction of being good at my job is overshadowed by the thrill of giving her a gift no other man has been able to give her. It's an indulgent thought to know that whatever else happens in her life, I will always own that prize.

"What are you thinking?" she asks now, wrinkling her nose as she glances over her shoulder.

The curve of her right breast presses against the window. If they weren't tinted, those passers-by downstairs would be blessed with a wonderful sight. A random thought that soon sparks into an idea.

"Lift your arms," I tell her, not explaining further.

Brooke reacts best when she has no idea what's happening next. When each new surprise creeps onstage while she's blissfully unaware.

She places her empty coffee cup on the floor, lifting her arms with instant obedience.

Sometimes she doesn't. Sometimes she fights, chafing against my instructions, acting out until she needs to be put into her place.

But today she acquiesces as I pull her top over her head, trapping her arms in the fabric and twisting her around so they're pinned behind her back. She isn't wearing a bra and the slight chill from the glass hardens her nipples. They harden even more when I lean my weight against her, pushing them flat against the glass.

“Let them see a show,” I whisper in her ear, my voice already thickening with desire.

I keep hold of the twisted fabric with one hand and reach around, sliding against the glass until I’m cupping her right tit, rhythmically squeezing it, a beat that my leg picks up, my knee sliding up the back of her skirt, pressing her hips, her thighs against the glass, applying more pressure until she has to part them.

With one last squeeze, I let go of her breast, moving up to encircle her throat instead, tilting her head back away from the glass.

“Close your eyes,” I tell her in a gentle rumble.

I see the shivers where my voice hits into the right parts of her brain, setting it alight, and make a mental note to source some gruff ASMR porn. Someone whispering their dirty talk with their lips practically kissing the mic.

“There are so many people down there,” I whisper, leaning her body against the glass and altering the pressure so the full-length stimulation changes with every heartbeat. “Some are looking up at this very window. They’re staring with hands cupped over their brows to shield the sun. Staring at a girl so horny she’s writhing against the glass.”

She makes a low groan that vibrates through my fingers as they’re clamped around her throat.

“Would you like me to pinch your nipples? Show those folks what my dirty girl likes?”

“Yes,” she breathes as I finish my sentence. Not pausing. Not thinking. Just responding.

My cock hardens and I nudge it against her, stroking it against her lower back. She likes to see me aroused; likes to feel how much I want her.

When I close my eyes at night, hers is the body my imagination conjures for company. We’re only two weeks deep into this arrangement and already she’s taking over my every waking thought. Last night, I couldn’t shake them. After an hour, I finally had to stroke myself as I imagined sinking

inside her, feeling the wet walls of her pussy grip hold as I treated myself, plunging until I was embedded so far into her, she'd forever feel the imprint of my phantom cock.

I rest my forehead against her shoulder, breathing heavily into the side of her neck, feeling the ripple of her muscles tightening in response.

“Is that good?” I ask as I clamp onto her erect nipple, rolling it between my fingertips, letting my rough prints catch on her tight tender flesh. “Does that meet your exacting specifications, or will you demand a refund?”

Her tits aren't sensitive and that's how I prefer it. It means I can pinch her harder, get more satisfaction from the grip than I could if she were shying away from pain.

“Your audience wants a performance. Are you going to give it to them?”

There's another vibration from her throat, this one more feeling than sound. I love that she's getting into this, that the thought of displaying herself, opening her body up to voyeurs, turns her on.

What I wouldn't give to take her to a club in town, strap her to the bed on a mounted platform, and give every member a glorious performance. Make them chide at not being able to bring their phones inside to record it for posterity.

I haven't had the chance to slide my cock into her sweet, tight pussy, not yet. She told me she wants her first time with me to be special and I sat there, listening to her, watching her cheeks catch fire with a sexy glow and didn't stop her, didn't explain that she needed to be careful where she puts her affection, didn't remind her I'm a sex-worker not a boyfriend.

Much as I try to tell myself I held back to spare her feelings, in reality, it's because her fantasy dovetails too neatly into my own thinking. It's hard to chastise her for treating me like a boyfriend when I've caught myself half a dozen times thinking of her as my girl.

Work has never left me in a muddle like this. A client's needs have never so neatly dovetailed into my own

preferences.

“They deserve to see all of you, don’t you think?”

She hums in agreement and I give her nipple a last rough flick from my thumb then head downwards, sliding into the waistband of her skirt, straining the seams as I thrust my hand far enough to cup her, rubbing the dampening underwear against her pussy until the fabric must be turning dark with the spreading stain.

“You’re so fucking horny for me,” I whisper. “Time to give the audience what they want.”

I release the fabric pinning her arms, stripping it from her shoulders until she can reach her shaking hands behind her to fumble the button of her skirt open, tug the zipper down.

Rather than pull at the fabric, she shimmies her hips, deliberately arching her rear end back against me, teasing my cock until I can barely hear over the pulse thumping in my ears, head abuzz with the deep-seated ache of lust.

“That’s my needy girl. Flash that pussy at the glass. Give everyone a show.”

She kicks the fabric away, following with her panties a moment later.

Her teeth worry at her bottom lip as she follows my instructions, shivering as the glass transfers its cold to her centre. I nuzzle into the crook of her neck, my teeth pinching the skin there, nipping at it, then laving it with my tongue to ease the sting.

Then my hands move to warm her, slipping inside, her pussy lips so wet there’s no resistance at all to my intrusion. I rub my fingers up and down, the arc growing longer, stopping off to circle her clit, to tease her entrance, feeling the muscles clench against my legs as she fights to increase the friction with every stroke, becoming more needy.

Her eyes are still screwed shut, depending on me for a visual story.

“Put your hands flat on the glass so everyone watching can see you don’t want me to stop. You’re not fighting to push me away.”

They slap against the glass, eagerness making her clumsy. My cock strains at my jeans, tenting the thick fabric until I have to adjust myself, then do it again, finally unzipping so it’s not constrained.

Brooke groans when I press her back against me, the thin briefs so different from the stiff denim.

“They’re waiting for me to fuck you against the glass,” I murmur, thrusting against her as my fingers increase their rhythm, slipping and sliding through her folds, feeling her muscles contract and release, urging me to tease them further. “Do you want me to shove into you while they’re all watching? To make you come in front of the crowd on my big fat cock.”

I won’t, her rules are clear, but the pulse of sensation running from the head to my balls doesn’t know that.

I clamp my hand across her mouth, enjoying the jerk of surprise. “Aren’t you going to tell me no?” I ask as she bucks and writhes against me, the pretence shooting her libido into high gear. “Aren’t you going to beg me not to fuck you while everyone watches? If you don’t tell me not to, I’m going to shove my cock into you in three... two... one...”

She convulses around my fingers, body sagging until I’m supporting half her weight. In a retaliatory tease, she flattens her tongue against the palm I have over her mouth, getting it properly wet with spit while her shoulders shake with laughter.

“Oh, you think that’s funny, little girl?” I remove my hands from her mouth and cunt, wiping them dry on her belly. Then I hug her, lifting her toes off the ground while she squeals. “How’d you like me to stick my tongue wherever I wanted?”

I change my grip, swinging an arm under her legs to carry her over to the sofa and dumping her there, smiling as she gives a startled cry, then bursts out laughing. I take off my boots and settle beside her, curling her against me, rubbing my

hands along her bare skin in long, soft strokes, bringing her down from her high.

This is our fifth session and each time, she's able to reach her climax with more ease. The pathways through her brain are cutting deeper with each repeat performance, guiding her where she needs to go.

Soon she won't need a helping hand and she'll cut me loose. I know it but I still push the thought away, preferring to stick my head in the sand and hope for the best.

"Thank you, Jess," she says, giving a small giggle like a bubble of happiness.

I open my mouth to correct her, the name I gave her was Jesse, then say, "It's Daegan. If you're going to get my fake name wrong, you may as well know my real one."

My stomach pulls tight; I've never given a client my real name.

"Daegan," she repeats voice gruff with post-coital sleepiness. A sound I instantly memorise to play back later. To put on repeat like an earworm.

And that's the reason I told her. To hear the emotion in her voice as she speaks my true name. To say it with reverence, like I'm someone to be worshipped instead of a man who'd gladly sprawl at her feet.

I hold her close, my breathing synching to hers, thinking of all the parameters I employ to keep me safe, to stop me from forming the wrong connection, to stop clients developing unsafe emotions for me.

All the parameters I've happily ignored in the past few weeks until my enjoyment of this girl has become deeper, more complex. A tangle of desire, friendship, and need that's rapidly spiralling out of control.

She slides from my arms, onto her hands and knees on the floor, then turns to me, crab walking closer. "Can I do something for you?"

The same offer she made the first time, but now I get to my feet, wanting that rush of power as I stare down at her from a greater height, reaching one finger under her chin to tilt her face back, to see that eager smile and those large eyes focusing on me like I'm the only person who matters in her world.

I stare down at her eager expression, tongue literally hanging out for me, and I move my hand on her head, fingers gently stroking her like she's a beloved pet.

"Are you sure?" I say, stomach muscles stiffening a little as I take aim at her worst fear, hoping I don't overshoot. "Because I've heard that you're rubbish in bed."

Her lips press together, flames springing from her gaze. She sits higher, responding to the challenge. "We're not in bed." She reaches for my fly, unbuttoning me, unzipping me, the touch of her fingers enough to make my head roll back on my neck.

A fantasy. It's a complete fantasy. This beautiful rich girl at my feet, begging to please me. Paying me a grotesque amount of money for the privilege of opening her mouth and taking as much of my cock as I want to dish out.

I shouldn't let her take me in her mouth, not without protection. I shouldn't capture her hands as she tries to cradle my arse, securing them above her head, one hand encircling her wrists while my other returns to rest on her dark hair, holding her steady as I watch her lips close around the head of my cock.

"Gentle," I whisper, rubbing my knuckles across her cheek to let her know how well she's doing. "That feels so good."

And because I sense her about to start drifting, I stop letting her blow me and start fucking her face, choking her with no ability to stop me, to say when, to call time.

I thrust deep enough to make her gag, closing my eyes as the vibrations of her cough, of her attempts to swallow, to breathe, travel along my shaft, lodging in a tight knot in my balls.

“Suck,” I order her, pushing slowly against her forehead to move her off me rather than me withdraw. She’s instantly obedient, the long slow pull back is almost as good as the first thrust inside, her tongue dragging against my silken skin as her lips form a tight seal, cheeks hollowing as I leave just the tip in place to tease her. “Now run your tongue around the head. Lick me like I’m a fucking candy cane.”

She watches me the whole time, adjusting the first tentative strokes of her tongue to my reaction, learning what pleases me the way I’ve spent the last few weeks learning what pleases her. My most eager student.

My internal alarm bell rings, and I listen to it without responding, reassuring myself I’ll do something about it next time. We have another session scheduled for tomorrow and it’ll make more sense to do it then.

It’s always next time.

BROOKE

He thrusts deeper than the first time, filling my throat until panic seizes me, desire flooding my pussy to match the saliva gushing into my mouth.

In response, he spreads his large hand behind my head, holding me in place while tears stream from my eyes, my throat convulsing as my gag reflex goes to town.

“You look so pretty with my cock buried in your face and your eyes flooding.”

When I think he’s about to relax, allow me to take a breath, his grip tightens, his voice croaking. “You can hold it for a little longer, can’t you? You can handle just this tiny sampling of my cock.”

And the frightening bit is he’s right. There’s so much more to take.

I nod, eyes still streaming. Nose stuffing until even if he pulls away, I won’t be able to inhale through it.

Through the breathlessness, the surprise, I warm to the light amusement dancing in his eyes, the playfulness that only emerges when he’s getting exactly what he needs.

Pride and panic war with each other and my throbbing clit comes out the winner. My thighs squeeze together, mercilessly wrangling all they can from the situation. I clench my internal muscles like I’m in a Kegel competition.

He pulls away, his cock slapping against his lower belly, the wetness increasing the sound. As I heave in breath after breath of the sweet, sweet air, long strings of saliva stretch from my mouth.

Daegan wipes away the mess, his thumb catching the strands and severing them, gently stroking my face as he cleans me.

“You want to go again?”

I breathe in as I nod, mouth opening at his thumb's command, thighs tensing ready for action. This time, he slides in slowly, inexorably filling my mouth, then my throat. When I gag, he withdraws a little, pausing, head tilted as he examines my reaction.

I want to do so well for him. The hand stroking my hairs back from my wet face is so gentle, so respectful, so loving, I could melt into a puddle. Although my mouth is full, there's enough space to suck in air, even when he begins a slow thrust, getting so deep that my throat muscles clench around him, trying to swallow him down like medicine.

"You feel so good when you do that," he murmurs, stroking the edge of my jaw, tilting to the side to get an eyeline to my bulging throat. "I wish you could see yourself the way I do. You take me so beautifully, even while you struggle."

A tight bud of pride blossoms at his words, my eyes locking to his, mesmerised as his thrusts pick up speed. He lets my arms drop so he can hold my head steady with both hands, and I immediately cup his taut arse.

"Since you can't lodge an objection, I get to pick if you spit or swallow."

My stomach clenches. Withdrawing just before and pumping him into a tissue is more my speed.

"You don't like that?" He strokes my cheek, eyelids drooping as he gets closer. His vocal cords thickening. "How about if you do this for me, I'll have a treat for you?"

He relaxes his fingers around my head, no longer thrusting into my mouth but letting me set the speed and the depth, trying my best not to shortchange him. I take more breaths, reaching to cup his balls, feeling their weight, hearing his groan of pleasure, finally unable to bear the increasing insistence of the throbbing between my legs, reaching one hand down to help myself along.

"No."

Daegan holds my head steady, grasping my arm and placing my hand against his stomach instead. He releases my

head long enough to capture my other arm, pinning them together before he returns his firm grip to my head, guiding me where he wants to.

The surge of his cock into my throat grows more insistent, increasing in speed until he issues a low groan, holds me steady, his release spurting into my throat, coating my tongue, making me cough as he withdraws, then coughing again until I can't stop.

"Hey." He kneels in front of me, face crumpled with concern, rubbing my back, placing an arm in front of my shoulders so I can't collapse. "I'm sorry. I should never have done that."

I hook my hand over his neck, resting my cheek against his chest, closing my eyes as another coughing spasm wracks me. "It's me," I sputter when it finally comes to a halt. "I'm not used to it."

"Not..." He gathers my hands as he leans me back against him, reminding me of our first meeting as he rubs them between his to warm them. "I meant I should never have restrained your arms. You had no way to tell me to stop, and it's unforgivable. I got carried away and I'm so sorry."

The apology makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. *I got carried away.*

It thrills me to know I had that effect on him; this experienced man who takes everything in his stride.

For a second, I think to take back my plans, to let Harrison go, to let my anger go, to shed the skin of pain and fear and abandonment in the excitement of this newfound attraction, of the growing realisation it might be shared.

Then reality reasserts itself. Even if I cancel the dance, I can't have Daegan. The moment he finds out who I am, how I'm connected to his son, everything I feel for him will be yanked away.

He brushes stray hairs from my face, cupping my cheek, staring at me with a faint frown. "I'm sure whoever you're practising for will appreciate it."

I laugh, half falling against him as the comment hits my funny bone. When I finally taper off, I shake my head, regaining what little composure I started with. “I’m not practising for anyone but you. Just walking around the school corridors, knowing I’m the best they could ever have, is enough for me. I don’t need to waste my talents.”

“Like you’re wasting your talents on me?”

“When it’s you, it’s not a waste,” I say before my brain can hit the brakes. I turn pink but can’t think of a way to take it back without drawing more attention, so let the words hang in midair.

Daegan hauls me into his arms, bundling me against his broad chest, unbuttoning his shirt because he knows I like to lay my head there, tracing out the inked shapes over and over, relaxing as my fingertips memorise the patterns.

He knows that just like he knows so many things about me. Except the most important fact of all.

After a few minutes, he falls onto his back, staying there as I straddle him, then knee walk higher and higher.

“And what’s happening here?” he asks, reaching out to slide his fingers under the hem of my blouse, grabbing me with steady hands on either side of my waist.

“Somebody swallowed,” I say, tipping my head to my side, nibbling at my lower lip until his eyes gleam. “And if I recall correctly, somebody else promised to reward her with a treat if she did.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAEGAN

THE BOW TIE IS NEEDLESSLY COMPLEX, AND I GIVE UP WITH A grunt of disgust halfway through tying it, escaping from the confines of the bathroom into the hallway, head tilted, listening to see if Gloria is done with her client.

Gloria's been a friend since I first started in this business. At ten years older than me, she's a fantastic listener with a tonne of practical advice. I'd once have been happy to turn her into more than a friend, but she doesn't 'do' relationships.

This is her place. It functions nicely as a pickup spot, so I don't have to meet Brooke at the dance itself, while protecting my home address. In return for sliding a twenty under her fruit bowl, my friend's always happy to oblige.

I'm still pretending I'm a professional. Still clinging to the old habits, the ones I employ to keep me safe.

In the living room, I find Gloria seated on the sofa, eating a chocolate bar, and scrolling through her phone. Her blonde hair is piled in a messy bun and her plump figure is encased in a matching pink t-shirt and shorts, her smooth legs bare.

She wolf-whistles as I walk into the room. "Damn boy, what's your hourly charge again?"

"Far too little if my past month's earnings are anything to go by. Could you lend a hand?"

She stares at the tie with about the same enthusiasm I have for it. "Better bring up the experts," she mutters, clicking on her screen until a YouTuber offers their enthusiastic advice.

"Pause it there," I say, leaning over her shoulder. "That's the bit I'm having trouble with."

Gloria gives a low snigger, and tugs on the loose ends until I sit next to her. "That's the first step. Now hold the phone and stay still while I get this sorted."

I comply, though I'm soon laughing as her efforts fall within the same ballpark as mine. "Anyone would think you

didn't go to school dances every weekend," I say as the knot miraculously pulls apart with one nudge. "Does it give it an air of casual machismo if I just leave it undone?"

She snatches her phone back, aborting the attempt with a raspberry. "Ask your rich new girlfriend. If she goes to Kingswood, she's probably been tying these things since she was in the crib."

"Please don't call her that. I'm struggling enough with my conscience as it is."

"Is that what you're packing down there," she says, arching an eyebrow at my crotch before tickling me until I collapse against her. "Jesus, boy. You're as giddy as a schoolgirl. Anyone would think you're going on a proper date."

There's a note of concern in her voice and it's not misplaced.

Brooke makes me feel eighteen again, but the eighteen I missed out on the first time round. The eighteen-year-old without family commitments to provide for. Without a baby to keep alive. Without a scared teenage fiancée struggling to cope as her world abruptly changes with no relief in sight.

More than once in the past month, I've considered asking her to stop paying. To see if that catapults us forward or forces an abrupt parting. The thought makes my chest ache and my hands tremble.

Each time, I let the uncertainty back me away from the idea, but it lingers.

I scroll through my device, looking for further help, then shove it back in my pocket with a sigh. "Guess I should've taken the elastic one."

"We live and learn. I'm having a shower. If she turns up early, lock the door behind you, yeah?"

"Yeah."

I can't stay seated. The moment Gloria leaves the room, I leap to my feet, pacing to work off my nervous energy.

When the knock comes on the door, I jump, then laugh in relief, moving to answer it. Brooke stands there, perfectly radiant.

Her eyes catch the overhead light and turn it into a kaleidoscope of scattered blues, from the palest pastel to the deepest navy. A thousand times more beautiful than the sapphires dangling from her ears.

The dark waves of her long hair are pulled back in some fancy arrangement that I immediately want to destroy by digging my fingers deep into it, yanking her head back to take my kiss.

The kiss I would *never* give a client.

My mouth is so dry, I have to break the seal of my lips with my tongue. “You look incredible.”

“Why, thank you, Daegan,” she says, curtsying. “You brushed up pretty good yourself.” Her gaze homes in my loose tie. “Oh, I can get that for you.”

She steps towards me, going on tiptoes to reach the trailing ends, a gust of her sweet perfume wafting forth as she expertly pulls it into place.

“Thanks,” I say, patting the resulting arrangement. “I’ve never worn one of these before.”

“No problem. My stepmother taught me how to tie them. Part of her learning sequence on how to make a rich man happy.”

A blush catches on her cheekbones, flooding with colour so strong it can easily be seen through the careful shading and toning of her foundation. Doubt pulls at her forehead, drags at the corners of her eyes.

I touch her, knowing it will push back whatever internal voice nags about her shortcomings, brushing a knuckle along the curve of her jawline, eyes zeroing in as her lips part, as her tongue darts out to lick them.

“Well, you’ve made this moderate-income man happy,” I assure her, watching as the words are absorbed. Her nose

scrunches, a smile hovering just out of reach. “Shall we go?”

She nods and I flick the catch on the door, letting it lock behind me as I hold out my arm for her to take.

There’s a limo and driver waiting. I make sure she’s seated with her dress safely inside before moving around to the opposite side. Her hand rests on the cushion a few inches from her body and I cover it with mine, giving a squeeze of reassurance.

Reassurance she doesn’t often need. Tonight, her nerves are on full display.

I shuffle as close to her as the seatbelt allows, moving my hand to rest against her back, finding an open seam there. She wriggles her shoulders and I laugh as the vent opens wider.

“Call the dressmaker. Somebody missed a few stitches.”

She smiles, but the gesture doesn’t reach her eyes. They’re still pinched with worry. After spending so much time with her in a far more relaxed state, the change alarms me.

“What’s the plan for the dance? I never went to mine.”

“The venue’s in town. They have a DJ and a dancefloor and a bar. We all get sorted into tables, but no one cares too much if we switch.”

I brush the knuckle of my forefinger along the curve of her shoulder blade. “Sounds nice.” Also sounds far too blasé for the stress she appears to be under. “Are many people you know going to be there?”

Her face drains of colour and I pull my hand away from her back, concerned. She nods, then shakes her head, turning to look out the passenger side window. “Yeah. My friend Floss and her brother Kaden are attending. They’re good fun.”

Fun.

Said with the same intonation medieval peasants must have used when talking about the plague.

“You know I’m completely at your disposal, right?” When she turns to me with arched eyebrows, I elaborate, “We don’t

have to go tonight if you don't want to. If you're having second thoughts and would prefer to go alone, that's also fine."

"I don't want to go alone," she manages in a strangled tone, turning her worried gaze back to the window.

For the first time in years, I feel awkward, like I'm out of place. Brooke is so far out of my league that this entire charade is bizarre.

When she meets me for sex, I'm in my element. I'm the one in charge, something she responds to more than any of my previous partners.

But tonight, I'm in uncharted territory. I need clarification before her nerves transmit to me and we both start freaking out.

"What do you expect from me at the dance?"

Her eyes stutter over my body on the way to meet my gaze. Her expression is winsome, like there were a thousand ways this evening could have gone, and she preferred the other nine hundred and ninety-nine options.

My thumb strokes the back of her hand, the skin plump and flesh with that gorgeous elasticity of youth.

"I don't..." she falters and shakes her head. "Really, I just want you to stay beside me and talk to me." Her expression alters to pleading. "Is that the kind of thing you meant?"

"Yes," I say because she needs the reassurance. "But there's also things like what should I tell people is my profession if they ask? Do you want me to spin a story about how we met? That kind of thing."

"Oh." She turns to glance out the passenger window, withdrawing her hand from mine. I rub my palm against the seat, the buzz from touching her still echoing through the thick skin. "I didn't think about that. Are you okay to not tell them?"

"That's fine. Anything you want."

I'm not used to the version of Brooke who displays her emotional frailty this clearly. She appears like the weight of the world is on her shoulders and she's collapsing.

It makes me uneasy. All I want to do is coax out one of her joyous smiles.

"My easiest lie is that I'm in real estate." I smile as she turns back to face me, her gaze sharpening. "It bores people so much they don't ask any questions."

She goes still for a second, then her face twists in delight as she laughs. "You've been hanging around with the wrong brand of teenager." Her voice is teasing. "With my classmates, they'll spend the rest of the night trying to pin you down and get an overview of your portfolio."

"Perhaps something closer to the truth, then. How about I say I'm a performer?"

Her eyes open wide, the change lighting up her face until I have to force my gaze away from her, on the verge of staring.

"That sounds fine, just..." Her forehead wrinkles as her voice trails to a stop. Then she shakes herself, squaring her shoulders like she's facing an opponent. "Just please don't tell them I'm paying you."

A flash of relief shoots through me. Is that all she's worried about? "My lips are sealed."

"And no running off with other girls just because they slide a few twenties into your G-string."

My heart thumps with an extra beat as she leans closer, finally smiling, the joy of our flippant exchange turning up the volume on her ravishing beauty. My hand reaches out for her before my brain can shoulder its way in front. I cup her cheek, marvelling at the touch of her skin, of the way her smile broadens and becomes sultry, pupils expanding until they eclipse so much of her irises the blue might as well be black.

Then her gaze drifts, she flinches back as though at a reprimand only she can hear, and she sits back in her seat, drawing her hand back into her lap.

A small rejection but for a man who has no business kissing her anyway, it's also a reprieve.

The car turns into a driveway, and I stare at the throngs of teenagers dressed in their finery, hanging around the entrance because at this stage of the evening, there's more entertainment to be had in watching people arrive than there will be inside.

Brooke stares at the scattered groups with increasing panic. Her breathing speeds up until she gasps for air, pressing a hand to her chest while her eyes reverse their previous changes, shrinking her pupils to pinholes, the whites expanding like a frantic horse.

"Are you okay?" I ask, frowning because she's clearly not.

If I cast my mind far enough back, I can remember caring a lot about what people thought about me. A trait I sublimated for years until it gave up and went away.

A few platitudes spring to mind but I don't give them voice. It won't help. Instead, I reach for her hand again, squeezing it tightly.

"We don't have to go in there, you know." When she turns her panicked gaze to mine, I expand, "We can go out for a meal or just go to a movie instead if you prefer. Unless the faculty made your school ball compulsory, no one's going to care if we slip away."

I see the idea taking hold, being rejected but giving her space enough to inhale a deep breath. "I haven't been to the pictures for a while, but I'm pretty sure these gorgeous outfits will be completely wasted on that crowd."

"Yeah. Sitting in the dark doesn't usually require evening wear, but it doesn't mean you wouldn't rock it."

"Well, of course I'd rock it." She smooths her dress over her abdomen, a slight crease appearing and disappearing as the delicate fabric pulls tight.

On impulse, I place my hand just above hers, feeling the gentle curve of her lower belly and wishing we were standing because I'd love to pull her back against me, spread my

fingers wider to hold her steady while the matching curve of her arse pulsed against my hardening cock.

Her eyes flick down, and I tilt my hips towards her. The stiffening bulge that absolutely shouldn't show in public is quite a different matter in the back seat of this fancy car.

She's not paying to have someone on her arm. She's paying to feel desirable, and I could tell her a hundred times over how attractive she is and never make the same impact as showing her how much I'd like to skip ahead to the culmination of the evening right now.

When her gaze moves higher, I let my body respond to her interest. My nipples harden as she stares at my chest. I move my hand lower, letting my fingers splay across her thigh.

She finally meets my eyes, and I can't help myself. I might wear the body of a thirty-six-year-old man, but the occupant has reverted to a teenage boy, barely able to believe his luck at getting a date with such an exquisite girl.

I lean into her, my free hand cupping her cheek again, this time holding her in place for long enough to receive my kiss. Her mouth is plump and delicious, her lips not succumbing to the press of mine but giving back as good as she gets, then parting to allow me entry.

When her fingers touch my thigh, I take her hand in mine to press it against me. She rests in place, then her fingertips move with her trademark curiosity, blindly examining my girth, sending a throbbing pulse through my body which starts in my cock and ends embedded in the centre of my brain.

The danger signals are blaring but I'm too lost in her kiss to give a damn. The kiss I've never given a client before. The kiss that's blurring my already smudged lines.

Then she gently tugs her hand and I release her, scraping my teeth over her bottom lip in a nip before I pull away.

I draw back slowly, heart thumping with enough force that my body shakes with each beat. The press of people at the entrance grows steadily. If she wants to make an impression, now's the time.

“Do you want to head in there or stay in the car for longer?”

“I—” Her posture straightens, and she stares at the clutches of teens with a faint frown. For a second, every inch of her body expresses doubt, then she squares her shoulders. “Let’s go in now.”

CHAPTER NINE

BROOKE

DAEGAN LOOKS SO GOOD IN HIS TUXEDO I HAVE TWINGES OF anxiety rocketing through me. I thought I'd be nervous turning up to the dance on his arm but it's such an understatement I don't know how to process my conflicting emotions.

I want him to look attractive, of course I do. But seated next to him, I feel like when I was a girl, watching dad and whatever-number-wife he was on getting ready to go out for the evening.

He's a man and I'm nothing but a child playing dress-up. A child he'll soon hate for what she's about to do.

The whole time I was getting ready, I thought I had myself under control. Then I turned up at his door and it felt like a frontal assault of my eyeballs. His hair is caught back at the sides, forming a small knot on top of the long strands at the back, which flow freely over his shoulders.

It contrasts beautifully with his crisp white shirt. Even with it buttoned, there are tattoos visible. The backs of his hands are decorated with intricate designs that continue past his cuffs.

I tear my eyes away, my stomach a mess of nerves. Inside the cage of their tangled vines, butterflies flit back and forth, the movement of their delicate wings making me shiver.

I need a drink but right now I don't know if I'd be able to keep one down. Floss walks past dragging Dex, a boy from my year, behind her.

No one watching is ever going to be fooled into thinking she's *dating* him. She looks irritated when he speaks and slaps his hand away when he tries to rest it on the curve of her waist.

Being the year below, she can't buy tickets directly. I guess Dex fulfilled her ambition to attend tonight without meeting any other criteria.

Kaden sweeps past, too. He's got Hilly clinging to him and appearing overjoyed to have him as her plus one, although his

gaze only warms when he glances over at his stepsister.

I can't see Harrison anywhere and instead of adding to my nerves, I immediately hope he isn't attending. The beautiful plan I concocted has come off without a hitch, but it led me to an area I'm still not sure I want to be.

If he sees me on his dad's arm, he'll never forgive me.

This isn't just cheating—the thing he hates above all else—this is fooling around with the person who implanted that hatred to begin with.

Except it's not cheating because he dumped you.

I pull at the doorhandle while the thought pulses in my head, letting it push me past the point of no return.

“Too quick for me,” Daegan quips as he arrives at my side from around the back of the vehicle. “How am I meant to show my flare for opening doors if you're radicalised enough to open them yourself?”

The simple joke makes me laugh, which makes me relax. His entire manner eases my tension, just like always.

I think losing his friendship will be the biggest blow of this evening, but it's too late to stop this trainwreck. It has been since I first put it in motion.

“Ready?” he asks, guiding my hand into the crook of his arm and stilling my tremor by putting his over top.

“Yes,” I manage, having to breathe twice as often because my lung capacity has shrunk to nil. “Let's go.”

A ridiculously small purse dangles from my wrist. It's got my credit card, my room keys, my phone, and the entry tickets. I couldn't even squeeze a lipstick in there to touch up my makeup.

The doorman accepts the thick cards and directs us inside. I wave to a few people, enjoying the double takes as they glimpse the eye candy walking beside me. Floss's mouth gapes, then she rushes over, leaving her date behind without a second thought.

“Nice to meet you,” she says, standing in front of Daegan so we both have to stop. “I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

“Real subtle,” I mock, then forget how to talk altogether as his large palm stakes the curve of my hip as its new resting place.

“A pleasure to meet you,” he says in a voice so warm it could melt the polar icecaps.

“This is my friend, Floss,” I explain to him, then have to expand that as her brother joins her, glaring. “And this is Kaden.”

“Who’s apparently not friend status,” he says with a bubble of laughter before curling his arm around Floss and dragging her away. “Stop drooling over other people’s dates and concentrate on your own.”

She seems oblivious to the scolding, eyes still drinking in Daegan’s lean form. “What table are you seated at?” she asks, wriggling free of her stepbrother. When he glares, she skips over to Dex and hauls him back to our group, then mugs Kaden. “Apparently, there’s a cool outdoor balcony we can use.” She glances around, then leans in, dropping her voice to a whisper. “Last year, some boy got himself stabbed out there. They had to call an ambulance for him and the whole dance ended hours early.”

She shivers with the joy of excellent gossip while I stare at her, vaguely alarmed. “That’s not the attraction you seem to think it is.”

“What? You don’t want to get stabbed on a private balcony,” she scoffs. “Where’s your sense of adventure? You’re in, aren’t you, Daegan?”

“That’s up to Brooke. This is her night.”

Floss appears to be melting.

I push past her on the pretence of studying the table chart. We’re right by the dancefloor. Great for visibility. Less great for deep and meaningful conversation but I’m sure I’ll live.

“We’re over here,” I tell Daegan, pointing the way. He takes over, striding fast enough that I have to scurry to keep up, something he notices and adjusts his pace to avoid.

When we reach the table, he pulls out a chair for me and I sit with a grateful sigh, rolling my eyes when Floss follows and quickly exchanges the seating cards with her assigned place two tables over. “That’s better,” she says, taking a seat beside me. “So, Daegan. How did you two meet?”

“Would you like a drink?” he asks, acknowledging Floss’s question with a nod but not answering.

“Gin and tonic, please.”

“And you?” he asks Floss.

“Won’t be drinking,” I interject as she goes to reply. “Because she doesn’t have a valid 18+ card.”

“I do so,” she retorts, indignant. “It’s just not in my name, that’s all.” She goes back to making eye contact with Daegan. “A minor oversight that you’re safe to ignore. I’ll have a vodka lemonade, thanks.”

“I’ll get that for you,” Dex says, looking pleased to have something to do. He scampers off before Floss can say another word, and she settles back in her chair, biting her lip as Kaden takes his place at the table next door.

“Hilly looks ecstatic,” I whisper as Daegan leaves to fetch our drinks. “Has Kaden been going out with her long?”

She dismisses the couple with a flick of her fingers. “Who knows? I don’t keep tabs on who he dates.” Then her eyes gleam. “You, though. Dark horse. I wouldn’t mind keeping tabs all over your date.”

“Fingers to yourself, girl. He’s all mine.”

“Hm.” She taps her finger against her lips for a few seconds. “This wouldn’t be a brazen attempt to show Harrison exactly what he’s missing by dragging a hottie around all night, would it?”

“If it was, would you blame me?”

“No.” She manages a smile as Dex places a drink in front of her. Before she can even take a sip, Daegan steals it away, replacing it with one from his tray.

“I think you’ll find this more appropriate.”

She takes a sip and crinkles her face in disgust. “This is straight lemonade.”

“And isn’t it refreshing?” He taps his own glass against hers. “Cheers.”

I take a cautious sip of mine, relaxing as I taste the gin. Too much will have me wailing in the little girls’ room, but right now it hits the spot.

We stay at the table for another hour, talking, Floss spreading gossip faster than a wildfire. She swaps her drink back to the one Dex bought her and grows noticeably more cheerful.

“No sign of your ex,” she says, taking another survey of the room. “Guess that means he’s not coming.”

Daegan smiles beside me but he doesn’t ask and there’s no way in hell I’m volunteering.

“Didn’t you say something about dancing?” I ask him, nodding as the DJ sets up and tests the mic. “You want to take these two gorgeous girls for a whirl?”

“Two of you?” He leans across and takes my hand. “How about I start with one and we work from there?”

“Deal.” I scramble to my feet as he’s trying to shift my chair out for me and I spill against him, palm flat on his chest to catch myself. His steady arms go around me and the usual spark of heat flares between us.

I didn’t consider how I’d feel spending the evening here with him. All that went through my head at the time I asked was how Harrison would react to seeing him with me.

The confidence he exudes as he leads me onto the dance floor is enough to make me salivate. One arm slides around my waist, guiding and supporting me. The other hand rests on

my shoulder, then, while my feet try to remember how dancing works, he takes my hand and clinches it against his chest.

“Are you okay?” he whispers as I trip on the flat ground. “You seem nervous. We could go outside and grab some air.”

“No, you’re good. I’m just...” The words dry in my mouth as I stare up at him, noticing the similarities with Harrison anew, perhaps because of the night.

It’s there around his cheekbones, the shape of his eyes, but his son’s good looks are subtler, they creep in step by step rather than slamming into me at full speed.

Our other meetings have been so concentrated on sex; I haven’t taken the time to appreciate him as the excellent companion he is. Sure, we’ve talked, we’ve joked, we’ve bantered until it felt like we were in a competition, but we haven’t just *been* together, not like this, in front of other people.

I feel a thousand times more awkward than I did in the hotel room on our first day.

“Oh, this is a good one,” he says as the music changes to a song with a thumping tempo. “We play this one at the club a lot. It’s a fan favourite.”

“Sure,” I tease him. “You talk a good game but if this is the best you can do, it’s not convincing anyone.”

“You want to watch my whole routine, do you?” He swings me around, picking up the pace. “Because I have to warn you, that can’t happen with this non-Velcro-seamed outfit you made me wear.”

“Made you.” I roll my eyes. “Please. You sound like I dragged you to the store and told you it was this or going buck naked.”

There’s a pause in the music as I say that last, my voice the only sound echoing across the floor.

Daegan dips down to whisper in my ear, “You have the most spectacular timing.”

“When’s the nudity happening?” Floss calls out, obviously having wrangled another alcoholic drink. “Do you need encouragement?”

“I need a chair.”

“What?” I stare at him in shock. “You’re not serious!”

“Not unless you want me to be.”

My skin buzzes. Most everyone in the room already knows what Harrison said. Those who didn’t witness it firsthand caught up on the video that remains floating around the school even if it’s long disappeared from the notice board.

All I want is for me to go back to my old status quo. I want to blend into the normalcy of the middle ground. Rich but not richest. Pretty but not prettiest. Smart but still squarely in the middle of the pack.

I’m sick of hearing whispers follow me along the school corridors. Sick of walking into rooms only for voices to cut-off mid-stream, for people to stare beneath lowered lashes.

I’m sick of being a laughingstock.

Since Harrison’s declaration no longer allows me to fade into the background, then my time in the foreground needs to be spectacular.

“Okay,” I say, reading his face carefully to make sure this isn’t a windup or a joke. Wanting these moments to last forever because the moment Harrison shows, our bond will be completely broken. “I’ll grab a chair and you can show me what you’ve got.”

CHAPTER TEN

HARRISON

THE NOISE FROM THE VENUE PUMPS OUT A RHYTHM THAT vibrates through my arse. I sit on the top step of the side exit doors, looking like a pre-emptive fire drill escapee. My ticket is still in my pocket. For every metre of the trip here I was sure I'd go straight inside but the moment I saw the crowds and heard the noise, that determination abandoned me.

Brooke will be in there, flaunting whatever date she found. I know because Jackson sold her two tickets a month ago, then ran to tell me, 'So I didn't hear from another source.'

As I've done since returning from winter break, I pretended not to care. In reality, part of me shrivelled further. The same part of me that reads through her texts to get myself to sleep. The bit that can't stop scrolling through old photos.

I want to go inside. My date's already there; Lissie, a girl from the year below us who jumped at the chance. It made me feel better for all of three seconds then the booster rocket to my ego fell away and my mood plunged back to earth.

Brooke will be in there dancing with someone else. Kissing someone else. Enjoying someone else.

Getting from someone else all the things she couldn't get from me.

"Yo, Harry," a gleeful voice calls out. "Wrong entrance, bro. You need to do a circuit and find the one where the doors actually let you inside."

I stare at Magnus with no expression. We've hung around together for close on two years and right now the only thing I can remember about him is that he's the first person to sell me drugs.

"Got any weed on you?"

He pats the pockets of his dark maroon suit, pulling out a roach that's so tiny it barely deserves a name. "Got a lighter? Mine quit."

“Nah, you’re good. Keep it.” I get to my feet, shaking my legs out. My butt’s gone numb from the cold of the concrete step.

I should have gone inside the moment I arrived. By now, I’d be settled in at a table, surrounded by people who know better than to mention Brooke. I might even have my hand down my date’s top, fondling her lovely breasts.

A prospect that arouses me about as much as the cold dregs in a coffee cup but would be a boost to my reputation. Since I barely know who I am anymore, my rep’s about all I have left.

“Your new girl’s nice,” Magnus says, eyeing me cautiously.

For three years, I’ve been the class clown, never taking anything seriously. These days, I’m as likely to explode in a temper as in laughter. A trait that’s driving people away but which I can’t seem to help.

“If you like her, you’re welcome to her.” I wince, hearing the words aloud. It’s the kind of sexist nonsense I used to call out regularly. It doesn’t sound right coming from my mouth. I try again. “Lissie and I are just here as friends.”

“Right.” He shakes his head. “I wasn’t putting a move on her. I meant it was nice to see you with someone new instead of...”

He trails off and I clap his shoulder as I move past him. “Sorry,” I say, sick of hauling friends into my misery. I need to get inside and act like the boy I used to be until I can fit into his skin again. “Just having an off night. See you inside, yeah?”

At the door, my mood brightens. I wave to some friends at a table just inside the door, not bothering to check the seating plan because the first kids to arrive always upset it, anyway. I take hold of the first seat without someone’s bag or jacket on it and haul it over to join them.

“Looking good, my man,” Louis calls out, high fiving me and missing as he drunkenly leans too far to one side.

“I take it you’ve had a great time, then,” I say pushing out a grin that used to come naturally but now takes effort.

“Your girl’s partying hard,” Everett tells me.

“Lissie’s not my girl,” I tell him, scouring the room for the bar, and calculating how long it would take to reach the counter if I headed there now. “She can dance with whoever she wants.”

There’s a catcall from near the DJ and I glance in that direction but can’t see a lot. Someone must be showing off their moves or making a dick of themselves because there’s a wall of people surrounding the dance floor in a semicircle, clapping in time.

“Not Lissie,” he adds. “You want to head out somewhere else? I’m nearly done with this and Darla’s fine staying with her friends.”

Darla’s his on-again off-again girlfriend. Every time I think they’ve run the course, I’ll spy him slipping out of her room in the wee hours of the night.

I want to accept his offer, I really do. The caution in his glance decides me. There’s more sympathy there than there was this morning. It means there’s a lot of stuff about Brooke that I simultaneously do and don’t want to know.

“Where is she?” I ask in a low voice, and he stares me full in the eyes for a couple of seconds, before jerking his chin towards the clapping crowd. “She’s dancing.”

I appreciate his sympathy, his kindness, even as I resent he needs to use them. With a massive effort, I get to my feet and head off, clapping his shoulder when he tries to stand, so he retakes his seat.

“I’ll grab a drink,” I tell him. “You want anything?”

“Another beer’ll go down nicely.”

“You got it.”

The crush of patrons isn’t as bad as it looked. When I get nearer the counter, most of the bodies are waiting beyond the

queue, thinning down to just a few between me and the bartender.

My eyes move back to the circle around the dance floor. Most of them are girls and they all look like they're having a great time.

You don't want to know.

No, I don't.

Not any more than I wanted to know what Brooke looked like being fucked by her stepmother's employee or how her face twisted when he made her come.

I push away from the bar, all pretence I'm here to have a good time, gone. Brooke has a habit of punching out when she's hurt, and I know I hurt her. Whatever is going on tonight will be designed to hurt me just as badly.

That's not ego, just a thorough understanding of her psyche. A familiarity that took me two and a half years to build and about two seconds to destroy.

"Hey, Harrison," Kaden says, deliberately blocking my path. "You want to come back to the bar, and I'll shout you a drink?"

"I barely know who the fuck you are, mate," I growl as I try to shove him aside. "I sure as hell don't want to drink with you."

And it's a low blow. I know he's looking out for me, the same way I've seen him in action looking out for Floss.

I should take him up on his offer and spare my already wounded pride another stab in the guts.

But the list of things I should do is long and varied and gathering a thick layer of dust. When I move until our noses are almost touching, he accedes to my unspoken demand and shifts to the side while I push my way into the line of dance voyeurs.

There's a male stripper doing one of those sexy dance routines and my breathing comes a little easier. Brooke is in a

chair, or out of it now, being laid down on the stage while he writhes and gyrates on top of her.

From the appreciative calls and glances, I understand the females in the audience think he's giving her a good time. It just looks uncomfortable to me. Like something she'll soon regret.

Especially with the pale cream of her dress. It must be picking up every piece of dirt from the floor.

I stand still for a second, pain wringing my heart in its massive fists.

She'd been so excited when she returned from shopping, having ordered her dress for the ball. Not showing me, except for a swatch of its colour so I could get a matching cummerbund.

It's beautiful.

She's beautiful.

I press the heel of my hand hard into my chest, struggling to breathe through the pain.

The idea flashes in my head. Talk to her. Get her side. *Forgive* her.

It seemed an impossibility from the moment I laid eyes on the video but now it's all I want. To forgive her and move past this, reconnect. Pick up whatever the tattered remnants are of our previous relationship and try to forge them into something new.

And spend the rest of your life waiting for her to betray you again.

I turn away, not wanting to see. My stumbling footsteps carry me past the bar and out to the rear hallway. A corridor leads to the bathrooms at one end and a sign marked staff only at the other.

Everything is too far away. I sag against the wall, struggling to catch my breath.

This is insane.

Even in the moments where I'd played what-if, I never realised there could be pain like this. What-if she finds someone more attractive. What-if you can never satisfy her in bed. Back before she first said yes there was what-if she's a lesbian or asexual or just not into you.

None of those scenarios had prepared me for this.

"Harrison?"

Everett pops his head through the door and I wave to him. "Just needed a break," I say, though it's ridiculous. I've only been here for ten minutes. "I'll be back in a few."

"You need anything?"

"Nah, I'm good, man."

He nods and withdraws, knowing me well enough to understand I'm not even close to good but also well enough to know there's nothing he can do.

She hired a male stripper. That means she's not dating anyone.

The twinge of hope somehow makes everything else worse. And what's the best that hope could lead to? That she cheated on me once, but it meant nothing?

I move along the hallway, into the bathroom, taking a cubicle just so I can sit out of sight and gather my thoughts.

Back when I was trying to get her to say yes to me, yes to *anything*, even being her friend, I'd thought once I was over the initial hurdle it'd be plain sailing the rest of the way. I watched her, clocked her every movement. Knew her inside and out from a year of observing her before she ever got close to saying that first, tentative yes.

Everything I learned during that time pointed to one surety. Brooke got almost nothing from her family. Not love. Not security. Not affection.

I knew I could become that for her. Could be the first person with the label of family she could depend upon.

I thought once I had a foot in the door, she'd never leave. That the siren call of a stable partnership offered her something better than she'd ever had.

Manipulative? Check.

Borderline stalker? Check.

But I wasn't following her to hurt her. I recognised the instant we met that her broken joins aligned to mine. All I wanted was for her to recognise that too.

And she did.

And she still broke my heart.

I leave the stall and splash water on my face. There's a stench coming from another closed stall, and it hurries me from the room. I stride down the corridor like I'm a man who knows what he wants and where he's going instead of one who's lost the person who mattered above all else.

When I reach the connecting door, it swings open and Brooke is standing there; eyes bright, cheeks flushed. Looking like somebody just satisfied her with a glorious fuck.

"Hey," she murmurs, edging a step back too late as the door swings shut. "I thought you weren't here."

"That's why you paid your man whore to come along, is it? Because you thought I wouldn't be here for you to parade in front of?"

Her jaw clenches, eyes gleaming as she fights back tears.

I want to exult in hurting her, even at this petty level, but I can't. All I want is for us to go into the past a few weeks. Back to Alicia, in the kitchen, and when she offers to show me something, I can still say no.

She backs up a step, and the anger surges in me. I grab her neck, pulling her forward, her face an inch away as the fear blossoms in her eyes. "You wanted to make a fool of me, is that it?"

My thumb brushes against the ruffles surrounding her neck to find the edge of her windpipe, pressing into the flesh beside

it, her back stiffening as the pain spreads. Then I slide it over the rocky outcropping of cartilage, moving my lower body until it touches against hers while I let my thumb press harder.

We were meant to be happy together.

Her hands clasp my wrist, fingertips digging in as she attempts to pull me away. She says something but her voice is a broken whisper, barely audible.

I lean forward, bending until my forehead rests against hers.

Just open your mouth and tell her. Tell her you love her anyway, that you need her. Tell her you'll suck up whatever she's done if she'll just take you back, you fucking coward.

“Alicia showed me—”

And I break off with a croak like I'm the one whose windpipe is being crushed. I lift my thumb, smoothing it over the skin, feeling horrified at what I've done, at wanting to do far worse.

The words stick in my throat until I'm choking, coughing to get rid of something that doesn't even exist. My eyes burn. My chest heaves.

I hate this. I hate this. I hate this.

There's a moment where I think I'd rather I just ceased to exist than keep stumbling under this burden.

“Harrison, I...”

But I can't listen to her any more than I can talk. I push past, shoving the door open so hard it nearly swings into the girl on the other side. Floss jumps back, giving a yelp, then her eyes widen. She leaps to stand between me and Brooke, even though I was heading away.

“Don't you touch her.”

I hold my hands out to my side, seeing a few students edging closer in response to the loud panic in Floss's voice. “I'm nowhere near her.”

Underneath the fancy collar, her throat is probably red, possibly bruising already. Her dress hides my crime, and she doesn't rush to show her friend. "It's okay. He wasn't—"

"Harrison?"

I spin around, the voice familiar but coming from too far back in my memory to be sure.

My battered heart takes another punch. There's a high whine in my ears and my lungs shrink away to nothing.

The years have barely touched him. If not for the tux, he'd look exactly the same he did the last time I saw him. The time when he was drunk, shouting and screaming at a family wedding, about how dreadful my mother was, how she deserved her pathetic husband, fuming about how she'd restricted his visitation, conveniently forgetting how many times he'd failed to show.

"Dad?"

Beside me, Floss gives a startled squeal and I glance at her, a horrible suspicion dawning. "What are you doing here?"

"I..." His face goes blank. My only consolation to the awkwardness is that he appears as puzzled as I am.

His eyes move to Brooke. There's a plea in them, like he's begging her to tell him it's not what he thinks it is.

"What did you do?" My voice is quiet, so low it barely rates as a frequency. I inhale through my nose, struggling to pull the breath into lungs that refuse to accept it. "Brooke? What did you do?"

My father shakes his head. Brooke stares at me, the blankness in her face morphing to sadness before sparking into fury.

"I upgraded to the deluxe version," she spits at me. "Which is nothing more than you fucking deserve."

My vision shrinks to a darkened pinhole. The whine in my ears increases until I can't hear another sound. I haven't had anything to drink but the floor lurches and recedes like it's a frail ship caught in a torrential storm.

Everywhere I look, students are staring, pointing, laughing. For a split second, I believe every single one of them understands how I failed her, how no matter what I did I couldn't satisfy the needs of the only girl I've ever loved.

A hundred teenagers getting a front-row seat to my failures.

The whine in my ears grows intolerably loud. A black hole sucks away my vision.

Brawny arms haul me away as I yell at her, "Come near me again and I'll kill you. I'll fucking kill you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DAEGAN

THE MOMENT I'M THROUGH THE FRONT DOOR, I STRIP OFF MY tux, change into jeans and a t-shirt, grab the vodka from the freezer, and pour a couple of fingers into a glass. My hands shake, so I knock it back in one, barely feeling it as I pour another, not even bothering to cap the bottle as it goes the same way as the first.

I can't believe what just happened. When I close my eyes, all I see is Harrison's puzzled face. His whispered, "Dad?" like he hoped I had an explanation for him different from his first thought.

And how I wish I did.

Anger erupts and I slam my hand flat on the counter, the sting deepening into a tight ache that makes my bones feel like they're melting in acid. Of all the disastrous thoughts I'd had for this evening, that my date to the dance was my son's girlfriend hadn't crossed my mind.

Funny that.

I grab my mobile out, scrolling through the contact list and jamming my thumb on Gwyn's number like I want to jab it into someone's eyes. She takes eight rings to answer, seven of them probably pulling a face at the screen when she recognises who's calling.

"If this is about Harrison—"

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me he was down here, attending Kingswood?"

There's a gasp, then a long pause.

"Gwyn. Don't you dare try to bluff your way out of this. You told me he was at Dilworth. He's meant to be staying every weekend with you."

"Kingswood is a better school."

“I don’t give a fuck about his education! I want to know why my son is living in the same city and why, instead of telling me, you lied.”

“You don’t have to yell.”

The whiny note in her voice makes me want to strangle her. Only my ex could think that being yelled at for actively keeping me out of my son’s life for the past three years was a situation warranting sympathy.

“I swear to god, I’ll do a fuck of a lot worse than yell if you don’t start offering an explanation.”

“He didn’t want to see you,” she blurts, and I close my eyes, breathing through my nose so I don’t hyperventilate. “That’s all. It’s nothing nefarious.”

“Nothing—” My throat chokes to a close and I stab at the off button. I have so many things I want to say to her right now and not a single one of them will do my case with Harrison any good.

A pain strikes my elbow, and I force my hand to relax. The tendonitis that’s plagued me off and on for the past five years needs to take a backseat to everything else.

Instead of calling Gwyn back or tossing the phone away, I scroll more carefully through my contact list, finally summoning the courage to press Harrison’s number.

Voicemail. Of course.

I quickly text, “*I’m sorry. I didn’t know,*” then toss my phone aside, dragging my fingers down my face.

He won’t care. I just showed him up at a social event in front of his peers. It would be bad enough if my date had just been some random girl from his class, but his ex?

Brooke’s face flashes in my mind and I want to groan.

Fuck me. I knew I should’ve vetted her more carefully. One stupid rush of lust for a beautiful girl and all my best-practices had gone straight out the window.

She made a fool of me but only because I let her.

At my age, in my profession, I should have known better. I'm appalled at what happened tonight but as I pour another inch of vodka into my glass, I know a lot of the blame falls on my shoulders.

I add ice to my drink this time and tilt my head to hear the snap as the alcohol seeps into its cracks, weakening its structure, making it swell, sweating water until it's diminished.

Then I replace the vodka in the freezer, forcing myself to step away, sinking into the couch in the lounge. I've never been a great drunk and the last time I got on a bender, I lost my son.

The shock doesn't settle. It keeps growing, spreading its numbing tentacles anywhere it can find purchase.

A knock at the door startles me, far louder than my intrusive thoughts. Given my normal timetable, it's not unusual for friends to drop by at all hours of the day and night, but I'm seriously not in the mood for company.

But the lights are on. Whoever's standing out there will know I'm home. With a sigh, I move to the door to answer it.

Brooke stands on the front doorstep, a light drizzle settling like diamonds on her midnight black hair.

"Nope." I try to slam the door, but she wedges her foot in the jamb, shrieking when it bangs against her. "Get your foot out of the way," I say without sympathy, then reopen the door, about to shove her back when she darts under my arm and inside.

"We're not doing this now," I tell her, turning and feeling a wave of sorrow. Not for her but for myself.

Even with her red-rimmed eyes, her dress twisted, and her skin blotchy from crying, she's desirable. Part of me just wants to shove her onto the sofa and give her something to really cry about.

"I just wanted to explain," she says, her chest hitching between every word. "I never meant to—"

“To what? Never meant to hurt me. To embarrass my son. To treat us both like worthless pawns in whatever game it is you’re playing.”

I push past her, topping up my drink again and pouring her one to feel better about my consumption.

She takes a sip, wrinkling her nose, then opens her throat and downs the entire glass, holding it back out to me for a refill. I oblige, biting my bottom lip to keep from speaking. An endeavour that’s instantly thrown out the window as I realise she *really* shouldn’t be here.

“How do you know where I live?”

She gives a lopsided shrug. “My dad employs a PI. I gave him the few details I had on you and asked for more.”

“When?”

Her eyes flit to mine, then drop to her glass. She takes a sip, licking her lips afterwards like she can’t stand to waste a single drop. “Before I met up with you for the first time. I wanted to make sure you weren’t...” She ends with a shrug.

It makes sense someone with her resources would be cautious but it’s another sting. I thought it was such a big deal to tell her my real name but all along, she knew exactly who I was.

“Nice to know I passed your test.”

“Harrison hurt me. I wanted him to tell me why.”

“And now you’ve hurt me, too. I’m so happy you dragged me into your vendetta.”

She takes another sip, her knuckles white with the force of her grip on the tumbler. “I didn’t know you.”

“You didn’t know me a month ago,” I correct her, my white-hot fury receding into a bubbling morass of despair. “You sure as shit knew me four hours ago when I suggested we could go to a movie instead.”

Her jaw clenches hard, nostrils flaring, but she doesn’t cry. Her eyes seek mine out, holding the gaze steady, taking

ownership of what she's done.

It would be admirable if I didn't want to wring her tiny neck. Maybe in the morning I'll be able to think of it that way, but not right now. Not while I'm still reeling from shock.

"Once you've finished your drink, I want you to go," I tell her just in case she had other ideas. "I'm exhausted."

"I can't go back to school. Not while—"

"Then book yourself a hotel room. You've got the funds."

Her face crumples in on itself in slow motion, starting a tremor that soon vibrates through every limb. She gulps the last of the drink and I take the glass from her fingers before it can drop and shatter on the floor.

"Please can I stay?"

I shake my head. "Even if you haven't irreparably fucked things for me and my son, I never want to see you again."

There's a sharp intake of breath. "I've still paid you for the rest of the week."

For a tiny moment, I think I've misheard. I think she must have said something witty, a light joke to ease the mood, but my brain untangles all the separate syllables and reworks them, unable to find another way they fit.

"You're kidding me."

She shifts her weight, cupping her elbows again. "I paid through Wednesday. We have a contract."

I shove my glass onto the counter and grab her arm, pulling her towards the front door, picking her up when she tries to drag her feet and unceremoniously dumping her outside.

"I'll refund your money. Now, fuck off."

It doesn't go far towards giving me reparations, but I get a small measure of satisfaction when I slam the door in her face.

The locks go back on, and I retreat to the kitchen, tidying up and tipping the bottle out in the sink to stop me drinking

more. The evening keeps repeating on me in rancid burps, flurries of sounds and images.

My dance in front of the circle of teens, an attempt to woo the girl I adore. The twist of annoyance on Floss's face when I gave her a soda instead of a real drink. The beat of the music, the pleasure of watching the stress fading from Brooke's face as she leaned into my body. The way her hand kept reaching for mine when she gave a nervous laugh. How her knee jiggled until I gripped it tightly, then let my fingers wander farther up her leg while her head fell to rest on my shoulder.

If Harrison hadn't shown, we might have gone to a hotel room afterwards. I remember my daft idea to ask her to stop paying me, to treat me like a romantic partner instead of a service provider.

If I hadn't already poured the vodka down the sink, that memory alone would have poured it straight down my throat.

My life is a disaster. I should put up warning tape to scare people away.

BROOKE

Outside, I slap my palm against the door, then turn and sit on the top step, half hoping he'll change his mind and open the house to me again.

A horrible feeling rises in my stomach, worse than the first stress ulcer I got at twelve, worse than the crippling panic attacks that sent me careening to a psychologist for help, aged fourteen.

This time, it's not something done to me. Not neglect, not the complete and utter disregard of my family. Not the handsy gardener who kept trying to show me something in his shed. Not the string of minimum-wage nannies who thought they could smack me into righteousness.

This time, I created the scene, I auditioned its cast, and I prepped the script ready to go. My 'fun' revenge against Harrison that was never about fun and always about pain.

The light drizzle of earlier strengthens into rain and I shiver. Tomorrow I might be able to contact Daegan again, to apologise properly and offer something, anything, as a symbol of my remorse.

Tonight, I need to find a safe bed, perhaps cry myself to sleep. After Harrison's dumping, tears have often been my sleeping pill of choice.

I stand, brushing the dirt from the back of my skirts as best I can, then discover I don't have my purse, which means I also don't have my phone or credit card or keys.

When I turn to knock on the door, I hear Daegan swearing at the top of his lungs, then the dull thump of something hard being kicked or punched.

My fingers curl into a loose ball, arm still raised in the air, then I let it slowly drop to my side.

Daegan sounds like he wants to kill me right now, and I deserve it. I treated him appallingly but now I'm out the other

side of this infatuation, through to the part where I always knew he'd never want to touch me again, I want him back.

The joke's on me. In taking revenge, rather than healing from the boy who hurt me, I still love Harrison just as hard, but now I've fallen for his dad as well.

Instead of getting my own back, I now love *two* men who hate me.

I can't bring myself to knock on Daegan's door, but that's okay. I can walk home. I've done it before.

Halfway along the front path, I grab hold of the realtor's sign for balance as I take off my high heels. The sign pitches farther into the ground just as I'm leaning most of my weight against it, spilling me into the softening mud. I rage attack it with my bare feet, then struggle upright and push the whole sign over, jumping on the smiling agent's face until it's as coated with muck as I am.

By the time I'm finished, I feel slightly better, but that's as likely to be the two drinks Daegan gave me. Compared to the one I had at the dance, chugging two much larger vodkas in five minutes flat mightn't have been the greatest idea.

I lean against his front gate, staring in either direction, trying to work out the best way back to school.

There'll be a new problem there since without my keys I don't have access, but if someone's around to let me into the lobby, I can crash in the common room for the night. At the very least, there'll be security on duty. Maybe they'll let me shelter in their truck so Harrison can't make good on his threat.

I head to my right, straining to keep an internal map front and centre in a brain that struggles with the real thing. The houses opposite are nondescript. Along my side, there's an extensive property with coils of barbed wire above its reinforced walls.

A wrecker's yard? Storage? It looks like that kind of place but with an added air of menace. When I walk past a gap where there are no boards behind the chain-link fence, I see a

bonfire in the yard, circled by heavysset men dressed in layers of denim and leather that look like they never come off.

I cross the road, cupping my elbows, then force my arms to my side so I don't broadcast to everyone in the neighbourhood how nervous I am. When I turn into a side-street, I choose a cul-de-sac in error and waste five minutes of hard pavement under my soft feet before returning to the exact point I entered.

The next street along is better. I can see the long line of lights leading into the town centre. There's a bit of traffic to keep me company but not so much I need to hug the fenceline.

After ten minutes of progress on my new path, I relax into the exercise. The sting of my feet grows until I walk on the berm, chancing the occasional discarded toy or random sneaker in exchange for the comfort of grass underfoot.

I allow my thoughts to return to earlier in the night. To dwell on the fury that twisted Harrison's face as he screamed about wanting to kill me.

In the corridor, it had been different. With just the two of us, his anger didn't spiral into destruction, it channelled into me, as tangible as his love had once been.

I thought he was close. With just the two of us standing there, I thought he might finally open up to me. Then he rejected me again, fleeing the conversation.

Now I might never get the chance. In taking my revenge, I might have ensured I never get the answers I so desperately want.

Even worse, tonight I saw something in him, a cave man lurking. Amid his hurt and his fury, I saw signs of a man I want to know better. It's deranged. I'm disgusting. My throat is so sore I can barely swallow but I still have the urge to infuriate him. To do something to see that spark again.

A car passes, a light spray spinning from its wheels; no match for the gentle rain that's falling steadily.

Then pinpricks poke my shoulders. The sensation of being watched.

I turn, scanning the darkness for signs of life. Another vehicle sweeps by on the road, the headlights picking out the hunched figure of a man hulking down in the shadows between streetlamps.

With my senses on high alert, every noise causes a cascade of alarmed signals inside me. I try not to turn, not to strain my eyes searching for the figure again in the darkness. I try to keep my eyes fixed ahead, my ears remaining cocked for sound.

He could just be squatting there, having a rest.

He could be pondering his life choices while feeling on the ground for something he dropped.

My mind insists he's a rapist. Perhaps a murderer, too.

Why else would he be lurking in the darkness by the side of the road? Unless he's also a figment of my imagination. Something my mind pieced together in the blinding glow of the headlights.

I turn despite myself, peering back along the far side of the street.

There's the faint glow of a cigarette tip. The figment of my imagination is smoking.

My steps have sped up but the glow easily keeps pace with me. I walk by a side street, wondering if I'd be safer to duck along there, but my feet keep going forward, carrying me past. Another nervous glance over my shoulder reveals the glow is still present. Still tracking me.

"Is somebody there?"

My voice sounds stronger than I feel. The glowing cigarette tip is nearly level now. Is angling towards me, the full shape of the enormous man emerging from the shadows, growing larger and larger, looking big enough to crush me with one hand.

The panic breaks free, spinning me on my heel to run back the way I've come. My feet hit against the berm, then the

concrete footpath as I forgo comfort for speed, for the ability to see ahead of me in the low gloom of the night.

I lose sound. All I can hear is my rasping breath and the thump in my ears as my pulse rate increases with every heartbeat.

He could still be heading along the road, amused by my flight. He might be chasing me, gaining ground with every step.

His hand could be about to lurch from the darkness and fix on my shoulder, long fingers circling my neck.

A fresh burst of speed propels me forward. I scan the upcoming street, praying for a vehicle to appear. They won't see me waving in the darkness, but I can jump into the road, flag them down. Hope their reflexes are good enough that they stop rather than running straight into me.

I risk a peek over my shoulder but see nothing. Would a cigarette last this long? Did he throw it away the moment he gave chase?

My thighs complain as loudly as my feet. Despite the circuits I run most days at school, that's a controlled surface, a controlled sprint. This is a free-for-all. I'm not pacing myself. I'm pressing against my upper limits and striving to go beyond them.

With each breath, it's like the oxygen evaporates before it reaches my lungs.

A pulse beats behind my eyes, bright flashes on my cornea. I stub my toe on a dip in the concrete, pain making me run-hop for a few steps before I can override the agony to keep going.

Finally, I round the corner, glancing over my shoulder, seeing nothing and no one behind me.

When I turn my gaze ahead of me again, there's a group of three men standing, blocking my path, so close I don't have time to stop and barrel straight into them.

“Need some help there?” the closest man says, gripping hold of my wrist to stop my forward momentum.

“There’s a man,” I blurt, turning to look behind me again. But there’s no one there.

I’ve run away from nothing and sprinted straight into trouble.

“A man,” the first voice mocks. “Oh, no. Not a *man*.”

“There’re men right here if you need them,” another responds, following it with a low chuckle. They surround me, so large they block my entire view.

I try to think how far away Daegan’s house is, but I can’t remember. Nearby is the best my brain can provide.

The pause from running allows the pain signals to catch up with me. The soles of my feet hum, then sting, then burn like they’re being held to a flame. I switch from foot to foot, but there’s no relief. A stitch hits me deep in the side, twisting behind my ribcage. My chest heaves with breath after breath but I still feel like I don’t have air.

Even if I could squeeze through a gap to run again, I won’t be able to outpace them. My body’s on the edge of collapse. I don’t even have the energy capacity to cry.

“You want to come inside?” the third man says. “We’ve got a fire in the yard to warm you.”

“But there’s an entry fee,” the first voice rumbles, following it with a harsh laugh. His hand grips my wrist tighter, the bones squealing in protest. I tug it as hard as I can and break free, but only because he lets me.

“Leave me alone.” I back up a step, but there’s another man behind me. I feel tiny.

The only weapon in my possession are the shoes in my hand. I switch to one in each, fingers curled around the soles, arms trembling as I get ready to punch out with the three-inch heels.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DAEGAN

ONCE BROOKE LEAVES, I SPEND A FEW MINUTES ROARING AT the blank walls and aiming kicks at the side of the sofa, neither doing much to release my tension. I sag against the living room wall, hands covering my face, despair settling in my gut.

The room seems a thousand times emptier than when I arrived home. Brooke's brief visit carved out all the warmth, all the peace, and smuggled it out the door with her. As my mood plummets, my brain sends out a pang for the lost alcohol. I think about ordering some in but push the urge away.

A better deal might be to pop down the road and see if they'll sell me some weed, then I snort with laughter. How long's it been since gangs dealt in cannabis? I'd have far better luck scoring some meth, not that I'd take it.

With a groan, I collapse onto the sofa, twisting around to lie flat, punching the cushion underneath my head until it's moulded to the right shape.

When I try the same with my feet, they knock against something scratchy, and I sit up, snagging the small purse that Brooke must have tossed down when she walked inside.

There are only a few things inside. A credit card. Some keys. Her phone. The bare essentials for a night out.

Without them, she probably doesn't have a way to get home.

Fuck.

I'm not in the mood but I can't leave an eighteen-year-old girl out on the street at night, dressed in a thin dress in the rain, fending for herself. I step back into my shoes, calculating I've drunk too much to drive.

When I open the door, I half expect her to be standing there, cold, shivering, shamefaced but too stubborn to knock on the door and ask for help.

A far worse sight greets me; no one. The real estate sign looks like it's been in a fight but, other than that, there's no sign of Brooke at all.

I clasp my housekeys tighter in my hand, locking the door behind me before walking to the gate. She's not on the footpath in either direction. I try to work out how long it's been since I slammed the door on her. Five minutes? Ten? Twenty?

It's hard to tell. The swarm of emotion that took me over left little room spare for timekeeping.

Presumably, she's heading for the school on foot. If I was in a fit state to drive, I could kerb crawl to catch up to her, trying out each direction until I found the right one.

As a pedestrian, I'm limited. If I pick the wrong route, I'm never going to find her.

The drag of comfort from the house I've just left pulls at me. If she'd been in sight, following her and making sure she was all right would be a no-brainer. Now, I could stumble around on these cold, dark streets for hours and never accomplish a single thing.

Pick the main route, I decide. If I can't find her in an hour, I'll come home, but I won't forgive myself if I don't *try*.

I head left, squinting as I pass each side-street, looking to see if she's turned up any of them, unable to see a thing. At the corner, I stand with my hands on my hips, nerves turning my shoulders into pincushions.

Any reasonable person would turn right here, heading towards the city centre, then veer left into the wealthier suburbs that have Kingswood nestled in their well-kept streets.

But I can't make myself move forward. I tilt my head to one side, listening for any sounds out of the ordinary. Far away, a dog howls. Cars swish by with regularity, their wheels spinning all the gathering moisture from the road into the gutters.

I do a slow turn, trying to see what's plucking at my nerve endings like they're an emotional harp.

There are low voices at the edge of my hearing. I stand as still as I can, trying to pinpoint where they're coming from, then a sharp squeal cuts through.

I turn back the way I just came, picking up speed, ears alert for any further noise. Within the length from one streetlamp to the next, I start jogging, cursing myself for not checking first with the largest group of troublemakers on my street.

By the next pole, I'm flat out sprinting, pushing myself harder, faster, desperate to close the gap.

“— hands off me.”

Brooke's voice is a knife cutting through the darkness. I home in on the sound, swivelling to the new angle, my house flying past on my right-hand side while my shoes slap against the footpath, breath heating in my lungs.

“There's no need to be like that.”

I recognise the voice. A man I've heard calling out from the gates of the gang house. Not someone I could put a face to but his vocal signature registers loud and clear.

My pace slows as I see the grouping. Brooke in the centre, her cream dress muddy, hair bedraggled with rain, looking for all the world like a doll left behind in the park after a long day's play. Around her are three large men, dressed in worn leather and denim, two with shaved heads, one with a mullet, the back longer than mine; every piece of visible skin covered with tattoos.

The anger I felt earlier resurges, multiplies, and gets directed to a new source. Our conflict disappears beneath the weight of indignation that these men are toying with my girl.

Mine.

With a possessive roar, I launch myself at the two men with their backs to me. My first punch smashes into the rear of the first man's head, knuckles crunching into the hard bones of his skull. The sharp jolt of pain spurs my second punch to go harder, crushing into the second man's face as he turns to see who assaulted his friend.

Adrenaline jolts through my body. Brooke stares at me, wide-eyed, tiny compared to the hulking male behind her. I grab her wrist, tug her forward and shove her behind me. “Run.”

Her fleeing shape is a blur in the corner of my eye as I duck a punch from the first man I hit. My feet remember this dance. They know the steps, have the choreography down pat.

I dodge another blow, letting the momentum carry the man halfway past me, sending him the entire way with an elbow to the back of his neck. Then another punch to the second man, the third now looming in my peripheral as I lunge forward, then cut to the side, twisting so I’m side on to the largest of them, hands raised in defence, feeling good, feeling aware, feeling alive.

The second man twists, tracking Brooke, and a wave of the purest energy propels me forward, shoulder striking him mid-chest, using my weight and momentum to knock him off balance, stomping my foot into his lower leg as he falls to the ground.

It’s so freeing to release the aggression that swelled within me tonight. So fucking *good*.

A blow catches me on the side of the head, eyes watering, numbness soon thawing into pain. I turn as the first man darts towards my house, towards the girl shivering near the gate. Another punch glances off my ribs as I spin to give chase, barely felt as I slam into the figure, planting my feet, driving the weight of my body into him. I force him against the wall, making the boards shake, the chain-link fence beyond rattle.

My brain dumps another vial of adrenaline into my bloodstream. I hold the man steady, jab, jab, jab in his face, the blows too quick, too short to do much damage but still enough to split his lip, burst apart his nose.

Hands grab my shoulders, haul me backwards. My feet tangle, nearly tumbling me to the ground.

“Get off me,” I roar, linking my hands together and jamming my elbow back into his stomach. His muscles are

held so tense, it's like cracking bones against a rock wall. "And get your fucking hands off my girl."

"Daegan?" The hands let me go, push me forward. As I stagger, a face shoves close to mine. A familiar face to match a familiar voice.

The red swirls of anger fade from my vision long enough to recognise the man speaking. We spent a few hours together back in January, repairing the damage to our shared fence when a large wattle tree was stuck down in a summer storm.

"Shit, man. She came from the opposite direction. We had no idea she was with you."

God knows what his name was, but it doesn't seem to matter now. He gestures to his mates, and they retreat.

"We're good, yeah?"

I stare into his heavily tattooed face, the lines of his moko following the curve of his brow, cheekbones, chin.

There's a stinging pain in my ear, swelling near my eye, blood in my mouth, my shoulder joint is screaming. I spit to the side, glaring at him, then turn to check on Brooke who's now sheltering on my front step.

"Yeah." I give a single curt nod to him. "We're good."

He sends me an eyebrow wave of acknowledgement, then peels back a piece of corrugated iron and the three disappear behind their fortified wall.

Brooke waits for me beside the front door and my residual fear makes me rough. "Get inside." I grab a handful of her dress and toss her forwards, following closely behind her and slamming the door.

She leans against the hallway wall, chest heaving, face painted with bright spots of colour from her adventure.

I should send her home. Call a taxi and make sure she gets into it.

But my blood is pumping, my skin tingles. Endorphins chase each other, spurred on by the pain in my hands, my ribs,

my ear, my face. My body just triumphed in battle and wants to claim its reward.

I turn, slowly clicking, twisting, sliding each of the door locks into place as Brooke stares at me, eyes alert to every motion, the tension increasing until it feels as much a part of the room as the walls, the chairs.

When I face her, she has her back to the wall, palms pressed flat on either side like she's about to launch herself into the room.

With adrenaline still roaring from the fight, the bones in my hand aching, I stare at her, letting my eyes drift over her face, over the opulent curve of her tits, nipples poking at the thin fabric like they're trying to cut their way free.

I watch her lick her lips, tilt her head back. The high collar is conservative, but the rain has turned her dress see-through where it's not caked in mud.

She might as well be naked.

All the blood in my body relocates to my cock.

"You're filthy," I snarl, enjoying how her eyes widen at the double meaning, how her mouth sags open before her teeth find her lower lip, biting hard enough to make me wince.

I place my palm against the wall above her head, leaning in until my face is almost touching hers. My gaze scans her features, watching as the doubt and insecurities pile on top of one another while underneath, there's a yearning expression in her eyes.

With my free hand, I touch a knuckle to where a rivulet curves from her wet hair along her cheeks, tracing a gleaming path like it's a tear. Her nostrils pinch together, her forehead creases, her lips relax, parting.

"You've been paying me but we're not going to do that any longer." I brush some wet strands of hair away from her eyes, pulling them away from her cheeks. "After tonight, you owe me a debt and the only way to pay is by being my fucktoy. If you don't want to be treated that way, don't bother contacting me again, are we clear?"

Waves of relief and concern chase across her features, her eyes darting to a dozen different places on my face, reading everything to judge how serious I am.

“Open your mouth.”

Again, her eyes search mine, then she gently widens her mouth until I can see the pink tip of her tongue resting inside, the flash of white from her perfectly set teeth. Her chest heaves with each new breath of air, she shifts her weight from side to side on her bare feet.

I grip her jaw in a pincer movement, tugging her forward while her eyes widen in alarm, then I spit in her mouth, enjoying the struggle as she twists to get away from the foamy bubbles resting on her tongue.

“Swallow it for me. That’s what good toys do.”

The internal push and pull plays out across her face, nose wrinkling, eyes wincing as she makes herself swallow, the effort clear in her wriggling shoulders, the way her chin moves inside my grip.

I watch her fighting herself to please me and it’s like she’s sliced into my chest, sternum cracked wide, leaving every vital organ exposed.

I can feel every part of her struggle. It becomes mine.

“From now on, you’re going to swallow anything I give you, understand?”

She nods, face tilting forward so she looks at me through her dark, rain-clumped lashes.

“Say it.”

A flash of colour heats her cheeks. When she obeys, her voice is soft, steady though the rest of her trembles. “I’m going to swallow anything you give me.”

“Good.”

My eyes rest on her again, in no hurry to go anywhere. I should have taken control of her at the start, this girl with all

her money, all her power. All the things that men fight and die for, none of it bringing her a lick of happiness.

I rub the pad of my thumb against her lower lip. So plump. Already swelling where her teeth bit their deep marks into the tender flesh. I lick my lips and watch her mirror the gesture. When I step closer, pressing against her wet dress, wet body, she tilts her head back to keep her eyes fixed to my face.

My fingers grip her chin harder, adjusting her position so I can kiss her. Not the gentle way I did at the dance but to take my fill of these lips that I've stared at for a month but never tasted until tonight. I kiss her like it's a full frontal assault, devouring her mouth, bruising her lips, engaging in out and out warfare with her tongue.

I ravish her and she opens for me, giving me access to everything I need, taking everything I force on her and waiting for more.

Of all the scripts I've written for her, all the scenes I've choreographed, guided her through, this is the best one. This is the one perfectly edited to meet my needs. I grind against her then have to stop, have to lever my body away because I'm already overdosing on desire, balls tightening like they're one second away from release and I don't want to stop so soon.

I push away from the wall, stepping back, hands on hips.

My eyes skate along her figure, seeing the streaks of mud on her legs, the damp hair clinging to her chest, the fabric so wet against her skin I can see every freckle, follow every curve.

And my mind still goes to what I think she'll like, what escapades she'll enjoy, still trying desperately to be worth her while so she doesn't move on to someone else.

“Do you think I didn't see you flirting with those men? Did you think you were hiding how excited you were when they promised to drag you inside and let everyone have a turn at you on the slab.”

Her eyes widen in surprise. “No, I was trying—”

“No?” I move another step back, jerking my chin at her. “Why don’t you take off that dirty dress? Why don’t you peel down your knickers and prove to me you’re not dripping wet.”

A thought wriggles in the back of my mind. I shouldn’t. She belongs to Harrison.

But I slam it away.

What we’ve done already has no doubt fucked any chance I had to win back my son. If I’m going to lose even the few scraps of hope I’d kept after all these years, better make it worth my while.

Brooke is frozen in place. A flush of arousal sneaks from beneath her collar, creeping its long crimson fingers across her cheeks, the heat making her eyes sparkle.

“Did you need step-by-step instructions?” I tease, my voice thick, rough, grimy with need. “Have you forgotten how to remove your clothes?”

Her arms finally move, hands reaching to the back of her neck to undo the long row of fastenings holding her high collar in place. Once they’re freed, the fabric sags forward, the long vent in the back giving enough freedom for it to fall in soft folds around her waist, revealing her marvellous tits.

It only takes one tug more for the dress to pool at her feet.

“Now your underwear.”

She hooks her thumbs either side, making a slow show of pulling them down, delicately stepping out of them.

I surge forward, snatching them from the floor, spreading the thin fabric across my fingers, showing her the dark patch of moisture, shoving them right in her face.

“Now tell me, is this for them or for me?”

When she doesn’t answer quickly enough, my lips skim her ear, growling until a shiver runs across her torso. Until she whispers, “It’s for you.”

“An answer that would have been believable if you hadn’t hesitated for so long. But now it sounds like a lie.” I roll the

fabric into a ball, taking a long sniff that she flinches away from, shoulders hunching.

“Open your mouth.” My voice comes from so deep in my throat, it sounds guttural. A snarl. “Open your treacherous, lying mouth.”

The moment Brooke parts her lips, I wad the panties inside, tucking in the small tufts that poke out, then covering her mouth with my hand so she can't spit them out again.

“Since I can't trust you're telling the truth, you lose speaking privileges. For tonight, any sound you make will either be punished or ignored.”

I ease the pressure against her lips, then trace my thumb along her windpipe, seeing bruises from where another man got there already tonight.

My son.

The rage seizes me again, shot through with regret. This girl pitted me against my own child.

I step back, hands fisting at my sides while my throat works, unable to get words out because there's too many of them to say. I force my fingers to unclench, let the aggression flow down my arms, along my fingers, dripping onto the floor.

Brooke stares at me, lips parted, following every movement with focused precision. She's dishevelled, dirty. I can't remember a time I wanted someone with the same raw need that grips me now.

“Get on your knees, brat.” My voice is barely above a rumble. “You want me to take care of you in the bedroom? Crawl there.”

Her chin juts into the air and for the longest time, she locks eyes with me, neither of us retreating. Then she drops to the floor, still keeping that contact. Her neck cranes backwards as she fights to hold my gaze from the low angle.

“Crawl. Or do you want me to give you a kick in the backside to help?”

My skin fizzles as I watch her. This is the enjoyment I crave when I'm having sex to order, when I'm not the one being paid. Sex that fulfils every urge in my primitive brain.

Brooke slides one hand along the floor, the glare from her eyes so hot I can feel the nerves on the back of my neck sizzling.

“Hurry or there won't be anything left of this cock when you get there.”

One knee moves delicately forward and my patience snaps.

“Spread your legs wider. If you're going to take your time, the least I deserve is a show.”

She parts them, her arousal visible, and I palm myself with long strokes, urgency growing until it's close to unbearable.

Fucking hell.

As she moves forward, her movements lithe as a panther, I see her crumpled underwear on the floor where she must have spit them from her mouth.

“Do you think I'm your servant, here to tidy after you?” I move in front of her, stopping her with my shoe against her forehead, pointing behind her. “Pick those up from the floor.” When she grudgingly extends one hand, I bump her head again. “With your mouth.”

She retreats, glaring as she circles around to face forward again, ducking down to snag the edge of the fabric between her teeth.

“You're making a big performance of defying me, but you must know I'm keeping track. Everything you do now is mollifying me or adding another blow to your punishment. Pick wisely.”

Brooke lifts her hand to stuff the panties inside, eyes aflame as she resumes her slow forward momentum.

“Get a move on. That fountain between your legs will have run dry at the speed you're going.”

Another glare but this time it's so molten I have to glance away before she makes me cream my jeans.

With each move forward, her pussy flashes its glistening lips at me. The mud from her excursion rubs against the worn carpet but I don't care. She could coat the entire house in a layer of filth, and I wouldn't pay the slightest attention.

I rub my hand against my crotch, easing my straining erection into a more comfortable position. Brooke pauses and I move forward, giving her a stinging slap against her right arse cheek, the sharp crack turning it as rosy red as the cummerbund hanging with my tux on the wardrobe door.

Finally, we're in the bedroom. I shut the door, trapping her within its confines, cock so hard I'm dizzy. My fingers continue to grip the doorhandle once its shut, needing the stability, the balance.

“Get on the bed.”

She kneels on the edge and immediately tries to fish the underwear from her mouth. I shoot her a warning glance, raising my finger. She visibly swallows, then settles on the bedspread, legs folded under her, palms resting on her knees.

Looking every inch the regal princess, staring at a commoner.

She's radiant. A flush lights the skin of her chest, feeding it so much colour her hands look as white as plaster in contrast. Her nipples are tight buds even though the room is warm. Her arms are still rough with gooseflesh from her journey outside.

Any residual anger from the myriad shocks of the night is subsumed beneath a rising tide of arousal.

I move a step closer, hands shaking as I fight to stop from grabbing her, shoving her face into the bedclothes, and shoving my cock deep into her cunt—one thrust probably all it would take before I poured my load into her.

Much as I want that, I also want the pleasure and pain of waiting, so I count backwards, then imagine my ex screaming at me—a trick usually guaranteed to soften the hardest erection—but it doesn't work.

Brooke's long hair cascades from her shoulders like an evil waterfall, the ends damp from the rain, curling against the soft creamy rise of her tits. When I move to stand directly in front of her, touching distance, her eyes widen, and the edge of her silken underwear pokes in a tuft from her mouth.

I touch my knuckle under her chin, tilting her head back even farther, angling my upper body to get as wide a view as I can.

She's moulded from the clay of my raunchiest dreams, so perfectly crafted it should be illegal.

Then Harrison's contorted features flash in my head. My lips twist into a snarl. "Undo my belt."

Her hands shake so much it's difficult for her fingers to find purchase. To help her, I thrust my hips towards her, then another urge overtakes me, and I shove her face hard against my cock, her breath warming me through the fabric, each sputtered exhalation hotter than the last.

When she struggles, breath already restricted by the underwear in her mouth, I press harder, smothering her against my erection while the blood continues to pump, grinding my throbbing length against her face while her flailing hands slap at me, barely more than a tickle.

She becomes so frantic that I relent, shoving her away and directing her hands back to my belt.

"Quickly," I snap. "The longer you take, the more straps you're getting."

Brooke's chest hitches, her nostrils pinching and flaring with each breath, her nipples tightening until they could score glass.

But her fingers rally, working out the buckle and sliding the tongue from the leather, letting it fall open, her hand briefly curling to rub the backs of her knuckles against my straining length.

"Pull it all the way off."

The lick of the cured leather as it's dragged through the fabric hoops makes my throat go dry. I push her hands away, unable to bear the slow speed any longer, tugging it free, then doubling it, snapping it in her face until the only colour in her face is the swelling redness of her lips and two raging streaks of crimson along her cheekbones.

“Turn around. Balance on your hands and spread your legs apart.”

She follows the instructions, no sign of her defiance in existence now. Her posture's meek, obedient, perhaps realising the monstrous cruelty of her actions tonight. Finally apologetic for what she's done.

You're the one choosing to fuck your son's girl.

But it doesn't feel like a choice. My vision narrows to her hips, her exposed buttocks, the soft tender flesh on the inside of her thighs.

It feels like if I don't have her, I'll die.

I fire the belt across her rear with no warning. A cry catapults from her throat, caught and muffled by the panties still balled in her mouth.

A red streak appears on her skin. I pause, tracing its appearance with my thumb, then rubbing my palm against it in a soothing motion until Brooke's tension releases.

The moment it does, I crack the belt hard against her arse again.

I reach into myself, trying to find my work persona, to pull it on like a flexible garment capable of transforming myself into whoever a client needs me to be.

But I've never needed that with Brooke, and it doesn't help me now. Her proclivities have always perfectly aligned with mine and tonight isn't any exception.

She acted out and needs to be disciplined. I'm wearing the wounds from her appalling display and need to dish out the blame.

I close my eyes. *I should have walked out of that café the instant I felt that strong pull of attraction.*

I should have...

I should have...

But I didn't and here we are.

I raise the belt, ready for another strike.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BROOKE

THE BELT LEAVES A TRAIL OF FIRE ACROSS MY BACKSIDE AS I bite down on the sob that wants to erupt.

Another scalding mark burns my tender skin, this time across the back of my thighs. I scream around the underwear wadded in my mouth, the ones from a set that cost hundreds of dollars to be handsewn to my exact specifications. The ones that made me shiver as I pulled them on earlier tonight, the silky fabric cold against my skin.

Back when I still had the ability to make rational choices.

Back before I infuriated everyone I care for.

“Calm down.” Daegan’s voice rumbles with amusement as I renew my struggles. “You’ll only end by hurting yourself.”

His fingers are inside me and I wince at the intrusion. Then the slow pumping strokes cause a flood of wetness and I flinch away from my body’s natural reactions, curling my shoulders in distress as he makes a guttural groan of pleasure, fingers now slipping in and out with barely a lick of friction.

My nose closes as I fight back tears and I tug the underwear from my mouth again, gasping in air, hoping he doesn’t shove them straight back in to choke me.

“Please...” I mutter. “I didn’t mean to...”

And I can’t continue because of course I meant to do everything I did tonight. It didn’t go my way but I’m still the one who set it all in motion.

“Do you know what you are?” Daegan’s voice is muffled because his lips are right against my ear. “You’re a spoiled little brat, and it’s about time someone spanked some good sense into you.”

My hips tilt, driving my arse harder into him. His cock feels about a foot long as he chuckles, deep in his throat, the reverberations spiralling across my scalp until they dissolve in a mass of tingles.

“Oh, you like that, do you?” He draws in a large breath, exhaling in a warm gust against my neck. “Does daddy’s little princess like it when her man stuffs his fingers in her dripping cunt to make her squeal?”

A breath hitches in my throat, stalling while my heart beats a thunderous solo in my chest. Nothing works on autopilot any longer. I have to remind myself to breathe, to swallow that mass of saliva suddenly pooling in my mouth.

Then he’s moving me, sitting upright and hauling me across his lap. I grab at the edge of the covers, using the grip as leverage to pull away. The few inches I win are immediately lost when he drags me back into position and smacks his hand against my bare arse.

The sharp crack is mercifully less painful than the belt but a long way from being okay.

Instead of scrambling forward, I brace my hands and push back. Before I gain an inch, he sweeps his hand across the covers, knocking my wrists out from under me so I fall flat, and he spanks me again. And again.

“Stop,” I plead, gathering the bedclothes into my fists to ward off the pain. “I’m not a child.”

“You’re a spoiled brat,” he says between clenched teeth. “Whether you’re five or fifty, that’s not going to change.” His palm strikes me again, each addition igniting the previous burning prints and strikes until they collaborate into something sharper, hotter, each sting fiercer than the one that came before. “And when brats act out, wanting attention, they get disciplined until they remember their place.”

Another six smacks rain down one after the other until I’m openly sobbing, humiliated by the situation and how easily the pain breaks me. “Let me go.”

“So you can torment my son instead of me? I don’t think so. I think you’re staying here, with your cunt dripping into my lap and your arse turning rosy red until you learn your lesson.”

At the words, my hips tilt further, my crotch mindlessly grinding against him. Another flurry of spanks lands on me, my skin now so burning hot it goes numb.

Then he shoves his fingers back inside me. Not one but two or three of them, I'm not coherent enough to count.

"Does this fulfil your contract?" He withdraws them while I cry out at the loss, then puts his other arm around my chest, across my tits, tucking me close enough to force the fingers into my mouth. "Suck on them."

I try to push them away with my tongue, my stomach miserable at thinking where they were, what's on them.

But he won't let me. If anything, he slams them deeper into my mouth. Finally, I suck on them, not following his instruction just wanting to breathe.

"That's better. Obedience isn't so hard, now, is it? If you calm down and stop fighting me, I'll give you what you're begging for."

I want to fight harder at that statement. My brain sends out the instruction and my body, the same body that's obeyed every instruction I ever gave it even when it resulted in incredible pain or embarrassment, that body disobeys me. It turns into putty just waiting for firm hands to mould it and it doesn't change, even when his amused laugh makes me burn with the agony of shame.

Shame for wanting the things I shouldn't.

"That's better."

He strokes my hair, pulling it back off my face where it's glued with spit and sweat and a few escapee tears. Whatever rage had him in its grip earlier has dissipated. The soft caresses come from a completely different man.

"If you're a good girl, you get rewards and if you're a brat, you get punishment. Those are the new rules."

If I close my eyes, he smells like Harrison.

I can't do anything about the deeper voice and the beard tickling my neck but they're not enough to stop my

imagination painting him into the frame.

The build of his body is similar. His son is leaner and the work Daegan's put into building his muscles has altered the shape of his shoulders, but they're the same height. They both pull my head against their chests in the same way.

It could be Harrison holding me, fingers running through my hair to loosen the tangles. It could be his breath blowing its soft warmth across my cheek. His arms cuddling me closer. His cruelty lurking, ready to break me in two.

I push away from him, straining to get free. "Call that a service?"

Daegan's powerful hands haul me back into his lap, one of them circling my throat, applying light pressure. "Calm down or I'll really hurt you."

I don't know if that's because what he intends to do will hurt me more if I'm tense or if it's a threat to force compliance. "I can't calm down when you're choking me."

"Says someone who's clearly not choking if she can speak."

His weight shifts and he eases me onto my stomach, stripping before straddling me as he unwinds my limbs and splays them apart, such care and attention in each detail that my breath catches in my throat.

"Isn't that better?" His palm caresses my right butt cheek, one leg on my left side, the other pressing between mine, angling them apart. His drags the tip of his nose up the back of my neck, behind my ear, then tilting his head to suck the lobe into his mouth, letting it go with a wet plop.

"You made so much noise in protest yet here you are, dripping wet for me." His finger slips inside my folds, sliding back and forth, making me wetter, even as I pray for him to leave me alone.

He lets out a heavy breath that's almost a groan and the sound might as well be a vibrator the way it excites my clit, making me drenched.

I shift my hips and his finger glides past my entrance, inserting to the first knuckle. When I tilt them at a steeper angle, he retreats and I bite the inside of my cheek to stop a cry of protest, unable to do anything to stifle the tremor shaking me, making my thighs twitch, desperate to clench together to stop the escape.

“See? It’s so much better when you just do what you’re fucking told.”

And it’s like the phrase ignites my rage. I twist and turn, trying to buck him off and all I succeed in doing is to make him laugh as his cock grows harder, grows fatter.

Fear coils in my stomach, mixing into its usual cocktail of arousal. “I want to stop.”

“Then use your safe word.”

His hand delves into my hair, getting a grip then savagely tugging it back until the bones of my neck grind together. “But you’d better be sure that’s what you want because you’re the one that forced this. You’re the one who should’ve known better than to come to my door after the stunt you pulled tonight.”

The threat might as well be pinching every erotic spot on my body. I don’t want to lose the effect even as I challenge him, “You said I was in control.”

“You are. That’s why I’m telling you the consequences. If you stop me tonight, that’s it. No more payments. No more service. You want a chance to explain? The only way is to wait until I’m done with you.”

I screw my eyes shut, every cell of my skin reporting back the tangle of sensations from the real world. It’s too much. I’m in overwhelm.

But I don’t want us to end.

“I want to be face up.”

Daegan burrows his head into the side of my neck, and I tense, waiting for the rebuke, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he

flips me over, the movement so quick my startled vision takes whole seconds to adjust.

“Is that better, hm?” He straddles me. “Are you going to spread those legs for me?” He drops until his face is an inch from mine, supportive hands either side of my head. “Or are you going to make a bid for time, acting like I don’t know what you’re doing?”

“No, I wasn’t. I just—”

My voice breaks off as he squeezes my jaw, mouth opening like it’s a milk carton. He spits into my mouth again, outwaiting my outraged squeak before he falls on me, kissing me like it’s a punishment, tongue thrusting so deep it might as well be his cock.

Fingers push into me again, two spreading my lips wide while the third bangs me. My mind barely has the chance to wander along the tangent, wondering where someone gets that dexterity, before he pulls back and slaps the top of my thighs. He pulls his mouth away from mine, a long shimmering trail of spittle still binding us together, then he knee-walks down my body while I clamp my thighs together.

The automatic defence system of resistance is the wrong choice. Once my brain finally engages again, I try to reverse it but it’s too late.

“Dealer’s choice, tonight,” he drawls, spreading the fingers of both hands wide across my torso, easily covering the entirety, then stroking my tits, my abdomen, the chunky part of my belly.

I don’t know what he’s going to do next... and it’s everything I need. The fear, the tension, the anticipation.

His knee roughly shoves between my thighs, becoming more forceful as his weight shifts onto it, so much weight I have to spread my legs apart just to stop the pressure. He laughs low in his throat, gripping my thighs with fingers that might as well be a metal vice, hauling them wider until my hips scream and my muscles whine in distress.

“Keep them like that and I might take pity on you.”

Fingers are inside me again, too many to count. It's like he's got both hands shoved up there but that's not possible because one of them takes my arms and positions them across my chest before wrapping its long fingers around both wrists to hold them in place.

I shift my legs, letting my knees fall to each side, gravity spreading me wider in a pose that makes his eyes gleam as they meet mine, one eyebrow raised in a question.

"You ready for me, hm?" He draws out the m until it makes his lips buzz and an earworm of deliciousness takes root deep in my brain.

I nod.

He removes his fingers, leaning forward to push them into my mouth. This time, I don't wait for the instruction or the threat, I suckle at them like a newborn trying to get its first feed. With each second, he shoves them deeper, until tears stream down my face and drool slides from the corner of my mouth in a silvery trail.

"Are you choking?" The voice is a mocking tone that simultaneously sets me on fire and sends a gush of water between my thighs to put it out. His mouth curves in amusement as I gag, then gag again, terrified that I'll retch and aspirate and die. "Wouldn't you prefer to choke on my cock?"

The offer makes my legs spread even wider while I try to shake my head because I might have had him in my mouth before but there's no way—no way at all—I could ever take that... that gigantic *thing* into my mouth tonight and still breathe. Not with my nose and throat already stuffy from crying.

It would shove into my throat and burst apart my windpipe like an overfilled sausage would split its casing.

Then his fingers are gone. I'm hacking into the air, spit flying with each coughed expulsion until my face is as wet as my pussy.

He wipes his palm across the mess, smearing it around before wiping his hands on the covers. The grip on my wrists

tightens as he lays half on me, half beside me, palming his dick with his other hand. He slaps it against the inside of my thighs, teasing me, leaving a glistening trail of pre-cum on my tender skin.

Then he shifts his weight, aiming it towards my centre, drawing the tip along the outer lips of my pussy, then pushing inside them, sliding it up and down in my wetness, teasing me, taunting me, making my walls clench and my clit throb in anticipation so when he withdraws, I release a strangled cry of need while he smooths on a condom, then he's back.

He grips the base of his cock, pulling the rubber sheath tight. His jaw tenses, eyes focused on my pussy as he drives into me, not stopping, not slowing. A single controlled thrust that embeds his entire length in me in one go with no warning, no remorse; filling me with too much, then making me take more. One long, relentless thrust and it feels like he'll explode out the back of my head.

The sensation is overwhelming. Skirting the edge of pain while nerve endings I didn't know I have shriek in combined pleasure and alarm.

My cunt stretches with his girth while my walls drag against his cock, trying to keep it in place while it's equally determined to withdraw.

There's a pang of loss, then he pushes into me again, further this time, the stretch inside me far greater than anything I've experienced before, pouring into me until I'm filled to the brim, then overflowing and still there's more.

"Here," he says, releasing my wrists and guiding my right hand to where we're joined. "Grab the base and you get to decide how much of me you get."

The slippery sensation of my wetness on him barely has time to raise a shudder before he's drawing back and thrusting forward again. Even with my hand encircling his shaft, it skirts the edge of too much. Nothing hurts but there's the thrill of the unknown, that at any moment, he might sweep my hand aside and give me everything, not caring if I'm ready or if I could open deep enough to take him.

It sharpens my senses, sending wave after wave of shivers through me until they're no longer unpleasant harbingers of doom but rippling bands of ecstasy, teasing pleasure from places that shouldn't even be wired that way. My scalp crawls with tingles from where he pulled my hair, my nipples clench into tight peaks to make my tits firmer. Spasms hit as my thigh muscles pull, driven beyond where I placed them by the on/off thrust of his weight.

So good, I plunge my fingers into his hair, dragging at the roots, causing him the same pleasure pain as he causes me.

And he reciprocates. Easily understanding that I'm doing to him what I want done to me; something I could never tease from Harrison.

A hand goes around my back, supporting me, while the other tugs at my hair until every nerve is on fire. When I whimper, he doesn't release me, instead yanking harder until my neck feels like it's doubling back on itself, the pain and pleasure growing in tandem while my cunt stretches to absorb his cock, maybe not even half his cock, knowing if I need it, there's more.

"Is that what you wanted?" he growls in his deep vocals. "You don't have your daddy at home wanting to fuck his little girl, so you have to beg your ex's dad to fuck you."

An avalanche of desire pulsates in time with my heartbeat, his voice hitting me like premium ASMR, firing nerves in my neck and scalp until I'm a crawling mess of pleasure and need.

"Do you want me to be your new daddy? To fuck my little girl long and hard like she needs it?"

I groan, subsumed with a deep, twisted joy, and finally my hand falls away from his shaft, not wanting control, not anymore.

The fear of how it might burn, might stretch me with an ache I can't resolve, is as delicious as any other sensation he's releasing from my body.

My stupid overthinking body that only ever stays out of its head for long enough to reward me when he's the one touching

me. To reward me with an avalanche of pleasure that keeps pushing higher, higher, mounting a peak I didn't even know existed because its tip is obscured by clouds.

He sinks deeper into me and the stretch and pull of my cunt overloads me and each muscle twists and strains and finally pulls tight in a clench of ecstasy; so many nerves firing I can't think, can't see, can't hear, can't sense anything but the waves of pleasure as an orgasm hits me at full throttle, driving me, carrying me with it as it curls in on itself, doubling down, leaving me shuddering and shaking in his arms.

Daegan nuzzles into my ear, whispering, "Did I tell you to come? Do you think you're allowed to do whatever you want, whenever you want, just because your daddy gave your overprivileged arse a bucketful of money?"

"If you want to refund me, go ahead." My arms are too weak to lift, and I let them fall above my head, my body fully exposed, open for his pleasure as his stroke continues at its unrelenting pace. "Pay me back every cent I gave you if my money offends you that much."

A hand clamps across my mouth while embers spark into flames, turning his brown eyes toasty.

"Try to talk that shit, now." He grinds into me, this time far enough inside it flirts with the edge of pain. "If you want to speak again, you better clench those muscles, honey. Until you make me come, there's not a peep out of you."

I immediately attack, my fingers prying at his large hand and making absolutely no difference.

After a few thrusts, he lets his full weight fall on me as he uses his supporting hand to capture my arms and pin them so I can't move.

"And now you've lost touching privileges," he murmurs, head level with mine, nuzzling into my ear then drawing back to smirk at the expression of panic in my eyes. "Better get a move on before you lose anything more."

I relax, loosening all the muscles that want to tighten. His smile widens and a pulse of fear beats in my neck. This isn't a

man I can fight against and win.

He lets go, pulling back and out of me, releasing my mouth and hands, then gathering me up and twisting me to lay face down on the bed. He shoves my head into the mattress, slaps my thighs until they widen, my brain still not caught up with the new angle.

Then he's back inside me, riding me harder and harder, his thrusts beating me for my act of defiance, his cock a weapon more punishing than his belt.

The lack of air terrifies me. I scrabble at the covers, but he just gathers my hands again, locking my wrists behind my back and pressing so much weight onto them, any air left inside my lungs is expelled in a burst.

“Is this what you wanted? I keep giving you options and you keep ignoring them, so I'll have to guess this is what you need.”

The stretch between my legs is too much, my nerves crying out from the overstimulation. I struggle, trying to turn my head but it's impossible. Stars dance in front of my eyes.

Then he lifts me, hauls my torso back against him as he rises to his knees, the thrusts so powerful they jolt me into the air. I haul in a breath, seeing stars worse than ever, then my cunt clenches, gripping him harder than I ever have before, contracting until a cramp dances in the wings, waiting for the chance.

His fingers find my clit and rub, too hard, too much, too fast. I come again, riding into the surge with no regard for safety, my orgasm a masterclass in self-defence.

And during my frantic ecstasy, I bring him with me. His cock plunges deep and holds, twitching as his release bursts forth, an arm across my midriff squeezing me until I'm close to bursting before he roughly shoves me away.

I lie, jumping with each new muscle spasm, the sudden loss of him leaving me empty, my cunt throbbing with despair.

He's out of the bed, striding to the bathroom and I choke back a cry, curling my knees and hugging them to my chest to

ward off the desolation that wants to claim me.

Where are his soft arms holding me? Where are his words of praise and encouragement, his offer to continue playing even though I'm a novice, terrible at this game?

The next cry escapes but offers no relief.

I tuck my head into my knees and bite my lip hard enough to raise bruises, but the pain does nothing. My body is wracked with a dozen different aches, too distracted to focus on a new source, especially one that's under my control.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DAEGAN

IN THE BATHROOM, I SNAP OFF THE CONDOM AND TOSS IT IN the bin before washing my hands. When I stare at my reflection in the mirror, I still look like the same man I was before I left the house to go meet Brooke.

Inside, it feels like a different story.

Inside, it feels like I fucked up the relationship between me and my son, and now the one between me and Brooke; both beyond the point of repair.

The vodka I drank earlier has lost its buoyancy, instead dragging down my mood.

I want to stay in here. Lock the door and wait for my frustrating house guest to leave, but no part of me believes that would work. With a deep breath, I let myself back into the bedroom and find Brooke curled in a ball, crying.

Fear springs into my chest.

I started by wanting to hurt her and moved to wanting to please both of us, but perhaps her head didn't make that same leap. She's young. She might have been lying there terrified the whole time while putting on a brave face.

It's not what her body told me, not what her actions told me, but she's distraught.

I lay behind her, now worried that any move to touch her will make matters a thousand times worse, but I don't have another plan. My arms go around her, hugging her as tightly as her awkward positioning will allow.

And just as I'm about to apologise, to ask her what's wrong, she bursts out with, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you. All I wanted was to make Harrison as angry and upset as he made me."

I scoop her closer to me, one arm around her shoulders to hold her steady while the other strokes her gorgeous hair like I'm petting an exotic animal.

The force of her tears makes me feel like a monster. She might be an adult, but she doesn't have a lot of experience at it. The moment she turned up, I should have rung for a taxi and forced her into it, not engaged her in conversation, not kicked her out, leaving her at the mercy of the night.

"Harrison looked absolutely livid, so I guess congratulations are in order."

She snorts out a laugh through her tears, smiling though it looks like it pains her.

"I should've sent you home. This is on me." Brooke settles, her misery as quick to depart as it was to arrive. "Why don't you wash your face? I'll get the car out and drop you back."

She stiffens against me, her hands clutching at my chest. "Could I stay? Just for tonight. I can sleep on the sofa, just... I really don't want to go back to school right now."

And I remember again that I can't drive, not with the amount I've had to drink. "You're boarding, right?"

She nods and I shuffle back on the bed so I can rest against the headboard, taking a firmer hold on Brooke, brushing the hair back from her face so I can read her more clearly.

"Is Harrison boarding, too?"

Her palm flattens against my chest, and she closes her eyes, a faint frown pinching her forehead. "You don't know?"

"No. I don't... We're not in contact and the story his mother fed me is quite different."

"Why aren't you in touch?"

The list of reasons is so long I don't even know where to begin. "I got into trouble a few years back and Gwyn thought it better I stay away."

"What kind of trouble?"

My hand strokes her hair again, teasing out the tangles from the long strands, closing my eyes to lose myself in the

sensation. It's been ages since I had a girlfriend with long hair; I hadn't realised how much I missed it.

“There was a family wedding, and I aired grievances that weren't meant for polite company. Everything turned into a big fight and the last thing I remember is trying to punch the police officer who'd been sent to keep the peace.”

Brooke ducks her head, and it's only a faint shake of her shoulders that tells me she's laughing.

“Didn't realise my rock bottom would be so amusing.”

“Sorry,” she mutters, her palms flattening against my chest. “Just thinking how sad it is that tonight isn't even the worst father-son event you've attended.”

A surprised chuckle bursts from me and I love she can jolt me into laughter where Gwyn would have brought me to tears of rage.

I rest my cheek against the top of her head, pulling her shoulder closer, loving the smoothness of her skin under my hand, her breath warming my collarbone. I have enough experience to know tonight's emotional rollercoaster is far from over, but I'm grateful that this is part of the aftermath.

Whatever else happens, I'm glad I'm not on my own.

“I tried to keep in touch, but he never answered my calls, barely ever responded to texts, and he blocked me everywhere online. The few times I flew up to see him, he'd be out, and I couldn't afford to keep flying up there.”

The explanation is inadequate, but it's hard to go into more detail without going into *everything* and then we'll be here for hours with me talking.

In the end, the truth is Gwyn didn't want me to be his father and the longer she pretended I wasn't and put roadblocks in front of me, the less I felt like his dad.

Even before the disastrous wedding, on the few occasions I saw him, we'd have gone months without catching up and would basically have to start from scratch. Any time I felt too

estranged and panicked, making plans, texting with arrangements, he'd withdraw.

I didn't know how to keep him close. I didn't know how to sift Gwyn's lies from the truth.

Six months after the disastrous wedding, he asked me to stop texting, and I was so hurt by the request, I did.

"But he's a ten-minute drive away."

I lean my forehead against the top of her hair, wrapping my arms tighter around her. "Gwyn told me he was boarding at a private school in Auckland. I had no idea he was down here."

It pains me to know the girl I'm holding has probably spent more time with my son than I have. It hurts to ask her questions when I should know the answers.

I'm ashamed I didn't do more to stay close, that I didn't fight harder to remain in his life.

"Has he been down here long?" Brooke tenses, and I whisper, "It's okay. If you're awkward talking behind his back, I understand."

"It's not..." She breathes out a long sigh, then says, "I don't mind answering your questions, but I'm worried it'll hurt you."

I don't know how to respond to that. While I'm still trying to come up with an answer, she admits, "He's been going to Kingswood since year ten."

Three years.

He's been in the same city as me for three years and I never knew.

Rather than an annoying buzz, this wake-up call is a hard slap across the face. "What did he say about me?"

She pulls away, turning inside my embrace so she can read my expression. "That you weren't in his life. You'd cheated on his mum and left to be with another woman."

The story is so bizarrely unrelated to my actual story that I'm confused into silence.

"I don't know much more than that," Brooke says apologetically. "He told me your profession once, but he didn't want to talk about it, so I didn't ask."

She shivers and I pull her back into position against me, holding on like she's the last solid thing in my life.

"I'm sorry if I mucked things up between you two."

I laugh because it's that or have a complete mental breakdown. "We were in trouble long before you came along." The anxiety is still pumping off her in waves and give her a tickle until she squirms. "But I'm happy to blame you if you'd prefer that. All part of the service."

She laughs, relief in every note. "Your service is very thorough."

"Mm-hm."

"Does this mean...?" She squirms again, this time the architect of her own discomfort. "I know it's awkward, but can I keep seeing you? As your fucktoy?"

The word sounds so strange coming from her mouth that I laugh, hugging her close to me. "You're not a toy, Brooke. You're more like an explosive device."

It's not an answer but I close my eyes, burying my face into her hair, wishing she was nothing and no one to Harrison so I could ask her to be whatever I wanted.

"You know, I only restarted my listing to earn the money to buy this house." Even I don't know where I'm going with this, but I hum to clear my throat while I wait to see what my mouth will produce next. "My dad always stressed the importance of home and family to me, and after my family didn't want my any longer, I think I chased this goal because at least it was still attainable."

The pain behind the loss sweeps through me, thoughts I don't often allow the space to take root in my mind. Brooke's

fingers curve along the side of my cheek, brushing from the skin to my beard, offering more comfort than she knows.

“What you did to us was awful.” I speak the words softly, but they carry a powerful blow. When I lift my hand to cover hers, I feel it trembling. “It was awful, but it would be terrible to lose you, too. I’m just scared to hurt my son more than I have already.”

“I could hide it from him.”

The confidence of her youth shines through; too inexperienced to understand there are some debts you can’t evade so easily. “No. He’ll find out if he wants to know and I don’t want you to lie to him. Not on my behalf.”

Her tension transmits to me, my muscles stiffening until I shift on the bed, trying to find a more comfortable pose.

The image of Harrison from earlier in the night fills my mind. I try to see through the haze of shock and fury, to see the man he became without me.

I will reach out to him again. I must. And I’ll keep pushing this time, not letting the pain and fear rebuff me. I make the promise and breathe a little easier.

There’s every chance he’ll never let me reconnect and I have to accept that, but that knowledge offers its own freedom.

It gives me the courage to reach for what I want.

I hug her tighter. “If you want to do this, then we would have to do it properly. No payments. No appointments. No lying. No pretending.”

She twists, moving far enough away that she can look into my eyes. That she can see the hunger there, the longing that pushes aside my misgivings to capture what I need.

“But I need you to be honest with me. Whoever I date must be onboard with what I do for a living. I really enjoy your company, Brooke, but I don’t think that’s what you want. Not after you spent a month paying me not to see any other clients.”

“But I could still pay—”

“No.” My voice comes out sad even to my ears. I rest my forehead against the side of her head. “No more payments.”

“Maybe it will upset me but it’s not...” She twists to fully face me, and I watch the colours shift in her eyes as she struggles to form the words. “Can’t you let me try? I really like you. I thought...”

And I know where her sentence is going. “You thought I liked you? I do. But I’ve had relationships where my partner couldn’t handle my profession. It ends with everyone unhappy.”

She gives me a watery smile, eyes shimmering as she whispers, “I’m already unhappy. Being with you is one of the few things I enjoy.” She shifts on the bed, turning so her ear rests against my chest. “Why can’t you accept my money? If we’re in a relationship, shouldn’t we share?”

It’s a valid question. My pride insists I can’t, setting rules and parameters that mightn’t make sense from a logical standpoint but that I also can’t shake.

But even if I could accept it, money isn’t the only consideration.

“I’m twice your age,” I argue. “We’re at completely different stages in our lives. You’re gorgeous, you’re rich and smart and young. I’m sure any boy at your school would be ecstatic to fill the same role.”

Her shoulders pull tighter. “Is it...? Do you not want me because...?” She shuts her eyes while I try to decipher where she’s headed. “Harrison told everyone I’m terrible in bed. That I was disgusting and smelled awful.” She hitches in a breath that’s eighty percent sob, holding herself so tightly, the wrong move could snap her. “If that’s why, could you just tell me, even if it’s hard to say?”

I groan against her neck, appalled at how far divorced from reality her fear-filled question is.

The tension in her body tells me the story is true, but I don’t know how to reconcile those statements with the joking, laughing Harrison I remember.

Then I close my eyes and see him screaming with rage, shouting threats. I fell out of touch with my boy, and he's changed.

“There isn't a single thing about you that's disgusting.” My words are true, but I don't know if she believes me. Instead of relying on my speech, I spread her out on the bed, having to massage her stiff arms and legs until they relax enough to lie flat.

I start at the top of her scalp, sniffing, then move farther down, nuzzling in beside her ear where the crook of her neck and the long hair form a soft and inviting cave.

It's lovely, I want to stay there and inhale her intoxicating warmth, tease the hairs on her cheeks with my soft breath, but I take another long sniff and press on, wanting to reassure her, knowing those words must have cut deep. Wanting to heal her and accepting that to do it, she'll have to stay.

I turn her onto her front, straddling her with knees either side, my arse kissing against hers as my mouth works its way down her body inch by glorious inch, inhaling an olfactory sampling at every step.

Once I reach her ankles, I twist her again, onto her back. Then I return to her neck, kissing across her pert breasts before traversing her stomach, rubbing my beard against the soft skin there until she laughs, pushing me away.

When I reach her lower belly, I lever my arms under each thigh, pushing them up so they're splayed open and bent at the knee, then I feast on her.

My tongue pushes into all her nooks and crannies, stroking her clit with my tongue, licking and whirling and finally sucking while she writhes beneath me.

I come up for air and her hands push me back into place, making me laugh, the vibrations sinking into the tender skin of her inner thighs.

“Are you laughing at me?”

There's fear in the question and suddenly I'm transported back in time. Back to when my self-awareness swung wildly

from far too little to far too much. My emotions on a hair trigger.

The certainty that everyone knew what they were doing apart from me. The self-consciousness that made every interaction a new level of awkward.

I tilt my head up, keeping my grip on her thighs so they stay open. “I’m laughing from enjoyment because you’re perfect, you smell like the world’s best dessert, and I’m fucking starving. And now, I’m formerly requesting my newest fucktoy shut her goddamn mouth and let me eat.”

My mouth dives back into its work as my fingertips dig deeper into the meat of her thighs, only loosening when I need to put them to work, sliding two in and out of her juicy cunt.

When she twists her fingers into my hair, I move up her body, kissing her all the way until I’m high enough to meet her gaze. “You’re serious about trying this for real?”

Her face fills with eagerness and relief as she nods, teeth worrying her bottom lip.

“Okay. Then lie back and if you’re a very good girl, I’ll let you come on my face rather than sending you home.”

Her eyes light up, a kaleidoscope of emotions, each one reflected in mine.

When I move back into position, Brooke thrusts her pussy higher while fisting my hair to control where she wants my tongue to go. She’s close, then her muscles stop clenching as hard, her fingers soften.

It’s like she’s been distracted by a new shiny object and the loss of focus needles me. We’re literal seconds into our new relationship and she’s ghosting me while I’m doing some of my best work.

I pull back far enough to slap her inner thigh, the sharp retort against her flesh jolting her attention back where it belongs.

“Lose focus again and it’ll be a bite,” I growl in warning, growling so hard in response to the shock in her wide eyes that

I might have to take this foray further than expected. A trip
I'm sure will have delights in store, every step of the way.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HARRISON

EVERETT DRAGS ME TO AN AFTERPARTY, BUT WHEN EMPTYING a hip flask of tequila down my throat doesn't lift my mood, I abort the scene and grab a car back to school to hide in my room. My soul is like a wounded animal, needing to retreat somewhere safe to regroup, to heal.

Intrusive images keep barging their way into my thoughts, taking up all the space I need to process what happened tonight.

Brooke snarling. My father's shocked stare. Kaden and Everett uniting to keep me from doing something foolish, something I couldn't ever take back.

And the crowd of onlookers feverishly devouring every morsel of gossip, salivating over the feast.

My mind is stunned. I know Brooke presents as meek, respectful, but she's got the hind kick of a donkey. The cheating was bad enough, but to haul my father into our private business, playing him like a trump card, is deplorable.

I want to believe that Brooke just hired him for tonight. A show-stopping performance to humiliate me the way I humiliated her. But I saw how he instinctively moved to protect her from me, even as he demanded answers. That wasn't rapport with a client, that was the stance of a man stepping up to protect his girl.

They both fucked me over. Each abandoned me in their own way. I should wash my hands of them.

But I must be a masochist because all I want to do is hold Brooke in my arms, to talk day-to-day nonsense with my dad.

They hurt me, but my tequila-addled-brain is still in love.

While I still have courage circling my bloodstream, I walk to her room, not sure what I'm going to say, how I'm going to frame it. I just know I want to touch her, hold her. I want her to

drive this misery away. When I knock, no one answers but I let myself in using a copy of her key that I had made.

She's not here. She's probably with my father.

My father, who told my mother he'd moved to Dunedin but apparently didn't do that at all. Seems that was just a lie to avoid his only son.

The knife twists in my chest, thinking of how lonely I was when I moved here. The struggle to adjust to a new school compounded by the move back to a city I'd become estranged from. A place where I didn't have any friends, any family.

Of course, this was the same dad who spent years making promises and arranging elaborate outings that always fell through at the last minute. The man who promised me he'd stay in touch by text, even if I never answered. Even if his behaviour at a family wedding had been inexcusable and he understood perfectly well why I didn't want to talk.

He promised me, yet it's been well over two years since I last received a message. Until tonight: a short text that swears he didn't know.

I cross to the bed, nudging off my shoes and lying down, pulling the pillow sideways, hugging the bottom half while my head rests on the top. It smells of Brooke. Everything in the room carries her scent. With each inhalation, memories of her swirl through my mind.

When she comes home, we'll be too tired to fight. She can lie down, and I can hug her instead of this thin pillow. If she resists, I can overpower her until she figures out a way to make me feel better; to ease this constant pressure, this self-hatred.

She crushed me. It's only fair that she puts me back together.

WHEN I WAKE on Saturday morning, a light pulse of anger still buzzes through my veins. Brooke didn't make it home last

night.

My mouth is dry, saliva turned to a gummy paste. I roll off the edge of her bed, stumbling into her bathroom to assess the damage.

Bloodshot eyes. Skin with a grey undertone. Hair doing god-knows-what at the weirdest angles. I splash water on my face, then drink some from my cupped hand.

Better but the starting point was so low, it barely counts.

I stagger the few steps back to the bed and fall facedown onto it, groaning. I'm still dressed in my suit but I loosen my belt, undo the top button on my fly, and generally make myself comfortable.

When the clock's gone past eight, I slink to the cafeteria, not bothering to return to my room to shower, change, or shave. The few other students who've made the effort to grab breakfast aren't in any fit state to point fingers. I'm not the only one nursing a hangover, nor am I the only person still dressed in last night's finery.

"Good to see you, man," Everett says ten minutes later, spying me skulking at the corner table and joining me despite the clear warning in my gaze not to do so. "You got home okay, then?"

"Guess so."

"You weren't in your room when I checked," he adds, head cocked and the start of a smile fluttering at the corner of his mouth. "Does that mean Lissie got treated to an afterparty?"

"Who?"

The query isn't a wind-up. For a moment, I genuinely have no idea who he's talking about. Then I remember the last-minute date I'd set up for the senior dance. The girl I'd abandoned to her friends.

Did I spend five minutes talking to her? Probably not even that. She'd gone off to sit with her friends and I'd baled, heading out the back of the venue to sulk.

"Whose bed did you spend the night in, then?"

Everett's teasing but there's a wary expression hiding at the back of his eyes. I shake my head. "I crashed in the common room."

He doesn't believe me. Nor would I in the reverse situation. But he also doesn't pry further.

"Got any plans for the day?"

"Thought I might treat myself to a shower at some point."

"Wow. The rich tapestry of your social life leaves me dizzy."

"Fuck off," I retort in a jocular tone, his teases working. "I feel like someone poisoned me."

"Someone did." He crams toast oozing with an overload of butter into his mouth and chews, not bothering to close his lips on the spectacle. "You. And you paid an exorbitant price per shot for the privilege."

A wave of nausea grips me at the roots of my hair, then slowly drips down my body, coming to rest in my churning gut.

"Maybe we should talk about something else."

He pulls a tab of Berocca from his pocket and drops two into my water. "There you go. All better."

The fizzing, bubbling addition soon turns my drink electric orange. Not a shade that looks like it'll help me, but I force it down, along with a cooked breakfast that thankfully settles my stomach rather than doing battle with it.

Everett relaxes back in his chair, giving me another of those wary glances, then apparently winning some internal fight. "What Brooke did was really fucked up."

"No shit." I wipe a piece of bread around my plate, soaking up the last greasy remnants of my meal before shoving it into my mouth.

"You call your dad yet?"

"I wasn't speaking to him before. I'm definitely not speaking to him now."

“He looked as surprised as you were.”

A vague outline of the night forms in my head, fuzzy but clear enough to see, and yeah, his face had been shocked.

Probably not as shocked as mine. I don't know how much Mum talks to him these days, but he must know I attend Kingswood. He must have known there'd be a chance I was at the senior ball.

“I doubt it. There's what...? Two hundred enrolled in the senior years. Hardly mind-boggling odds.”

Everett shrugs. “You've fallen out of touch, haven't you? Maybe he wanted to see you.”

I push my plate away, closing my eyes and rubbing my hand over my face. “Pity he didn't phone first.”

“Does he still have your number?”

The reasonableness of my friend is not what I'm in the mood for. I want to throw axes at targets or try to punch a bag into oblivion. “He does but even if he didn't, he could call Mum for it. It's hardly a state secret.”

“And would you have taken his call?”

“I don't know because he didn't give me that chance, did he?” My voice dismisses the volume control to come out far louder than it should at this time of the morning. “There aren't any missed messages from before the dance saying, ‘Heads up, son, but I'm taking your girlfriend to the ball then fucking her into oblivion afterwards.’” I pull the device out and toss it across the table to him. “Go ahead. Check.”

He slides it back to me, not showing the slightest bit of discomfort at my yelling. “I believe you.”

“And Brooke didn't make it back to her room last night.”

He raises his eyebrow at that. “And how d'you know?”

“Slept there.”

Everett finishes eating and wipes a hand across his mouth, settling farther back, hands flat on the table, staring at me. “Don't you think it's a good idea to return her room key?”

I shrug. She thinks I have and I'm not about to enlighten her about the copy I had cut.

"There's a friendly between the Merivale and Papanui teams this afternoon. Want to head down to Nunweek Park to catch it?"

"I'm busy."

"Sulking in your room doesn't count." When I don't give him anything in return, he adds, "Neither does sulking in Brooke's room. I think it's a good idea you two stay away from each other. What classes do you share?"

I'm reluctant to disclose that, even though he's right. The thought of just letting go of this resentment, this anger, seems like a sweet balm. It would calm the riotous thoughts in my head, stop the never-ending twist in my gut.

But I'd never get to see her.

I understand that's what Everett's saying but the part of me that's still her boyfriend, the one who thought last night about going for a late-night swim and rescuing the engagement ring so I could put it to use, he's alarmed.

That boy is starving for sightings of Brooke.

That boy would do anything to stay near her, to change the past or, failing that, to mould her back into the girl I thought she was.

The girl who never existed outside your head.

"English class I know about, what else?"

I shift on my seat, dragging a hand through my hair and getting caught in its tangles. It needs a wash, just like the rest of me.

"I can't just alter my entire class load because my girlfriend turned out to be a gigantic slut."

The words are out of my mouth before I realise what they contain. My eyes dart to Everett, widening with the easy panic of a hangover; my heart thumping double time while my vision frays around the edges.

Everyone thinks I dumped her for being bad in bed. My ego can't take the blow of people knowing the truth. Not on top of the other blows it's still reeling from.

And Everett gives me an easy out, just like the good friend he is. "You don't know she hooked up with anyone last night. Plenty of students booked hotel rooms, so they didn't need to organise rides home. She's probably looking just as crook as you, sculling water and hitting the mini bar to take the edge off."

An excellent idea in and of itself.

"He took off without her," Everett adds. "Michael saw him leave while Brooke was still sobbing into Floss's shoulder. Like I said, he appeared more surprised than you."

The information carves some of the sharper edges from my anxiety. Far more than his short text. Of course, he wasn't about to fuck her. Not after the appalling display she'd engineered.

Brooke probably ended the evening in much the same state as me. Regretting every life choice that got her to this state while crying alone.

"Come on." Everett reaches across to tap the back of my hand. "What other classes? You can get it sorted in the office. The secretary's got nothing else going on."

"Just that one," I admit. It's always been part of the reason I paid even less attention in English than I do in my other classes. A habit I need to break, otherwise I'll be back on remedial and then the one parent of mine who actually *parents* will never let me forget the shame.

Everett cajoles, threatens, blusters, and finally forcibly marches me to the student office. I find him hard to ignore when I have my wits about me; hungover and wanting to die me doesn't have a chance.

When I walk away with my new schedule sorted, I am lighter.

A state that lasts until evening when I pace the confines of my room while most other students are sensibly sleeping.

Finally, I break all the promises I concocted throughout the day and let myself into Brooke's room again to lie on her bed, waiting.

She doesn't come home on Saturday night, either.

It's late Sunday when I see her sneak past the common room, wearing a loose t-shirt and cargo pants I've never seen on her before.

She stayed at a hotel. Probably had a concierge arrange the spare clothes.

Sure. And if my brain thinks that's a convincing argument, it deserves to be expelled.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BROOKE

ON MONDAY MORNING, MY BODY HUMS FROM DAEGAN'S attention, with another two days of pure pleasure to look forward to in the coming weekend.

The knowledge of our relationship upgrade is like a secret jewel I carry around with me. A treasured gemstone I can take out of my pocket when I'm low, its sparkle guaranteed to flash some brightness back into my day.

"That's a wide smile for a girl with a target on her back," Floss greets me cheerily as I file into the cafeteria line behind her to grab breakfast. "The last I heard, someone in this school wanted to kill you."

"Only one?" I raise my eyebrow and shoot my hip out to the side in a pose. "I must be losing my touch."

Floss's gaze disconnects to check over my shoulder and I don't need to look to know who's standing there. Her stiffening posture works as well as any signpost.

"Don't engage," I tell her. "Just pretend he's not there and one day he won't be."

Wise words but I don't take them to heart, peeking around the room with a dozen furtive gazes by the time we're served and seated.

Harrison appears normal. There's no sign of the rage that cascaded through him on Friday night. Each time I glance in his direction, I half expect him to be looking back at me, but he isn't. From the way he's joking around with his mates, I can't even be sure he's noticed me.

"Bodyguard appearing for duty," Kaden says with a wide grin as he dumps his overflowing tray next to mine and takes a seat, blocking my surreptitious view. "You don't even need to pay me."

"Oh, we pay," Floss says, rolling her eyes at me.

For a surprise, I'm in a good enough mood to roll them back and she relaxes, happily turning her attention to her food. It makes me wonder how hard my breakup has been on her. For the few months prior, every meal had been her, me, Harrison, and a table full of his closest mates. Kaden too, once he got here.

Even taking Harrison out of the equation, I miss the comradery of his ever-expanding multitude of friends.

“Did you finish your essay for English?” Floss asks. It's my first class of the day and the new teacher, Miss Murchison, is pleasant, encouraging, and a stickler for the rules. When my paper was deleted from the student portal, she was supportive and easy to talk to, but still dinged me for handing it in two days late.

“All done.”

She exchanges a glance with Kaden and I stiffen. “Was there something else you wanted to mention?”

“Just...” she fumbles for her words, face flushing. “Stay away from Harrison for a while, yeah? He might look like he's cooled down but...”

“That was a low blow,” Kaden fills in for her. “I think we should have a new policy for getting back at exes. Everything gets run past me for a stamp of approval first.”

“Sure, good plan. I want to suck Harrison's dad's cock during English class. Is that okay with you?”

“Jesus Christ.” He shakes his curly hair, face reddening until he looks on the verge of a stroke. “Can you imagine if he came over here and started talking about going down on your mum?”

“Good luck finding her. Geography was never Harrison's strong suit.” But my thoughts drift to Alicia who's the next best replacement. Even thinking about him touching her causing a shudder of distress.

But I'm not the one who started this. I'm just the one currently winning.

“It was just a dance.”

Floss bursts into laughter, even when Kaden shoots her a warning glare. “It was not ‘just a dance,’” she insists, tapering into a wide grin. “I thought the boy getting stabbed last year was going to stay top gossip for the event but this...” She shakes her head in wonder. “This is the kind of gossip that never goes stale. You’re a fucking legend.”

“Glad it amuses you,” Kaden says stonily. “But even if I’d take a bullet for you, I’m not extending that offer to your friend.” He points his sausage laden fork at me. “Stop winding him up. You’re over. Get used to it.”

The brief jollity falls out of the day. I shove the rest of my plate away, no longer hungry. “Yes, sir. If I promise to be good, can I be excused?”

“I’m trying to be helpful,” Kaden grumbles. “You think just because you’ve got money, driving a boy absolutely crazy is a safe idea?”

“I don’t want to be safe,” I say, standing. “I want my fucking revenge.”

“And you’ve had it,” he immediately snaps back, eyes hooded. “Now settle down or I’ll phone your parents and tell them what you’ve done.”

For a second, I’m taken aback, then I burst out laughing, Floss joining me a second later. “Knock yourself out,” I say to his confusion. “Lead with a reminder who I am. It’s been so long, they’ve probably forgotten.”

I walk out before the sadness lurking behind that statement has the chance to catch up with me. Although I try to keep my gaze focused straight ahead, my eyes betray me, scooting to the side for one last glimpse of Harrison.

He’s staring straight at me. His jaw is clenched so hard the entire shape of his face changes, becoming sinister.

A shiver of awareness skitters down my spine. There’s no trace of his sweet, happy-go-lucky class-clown persona. This glance is from the man who bruised my throat at the dance. A

new side. A menacing side. A personality change that intrigues me more than it scares me.

But it does scare me.

Oh, well. First period English is one of our only shared classes, then the rest of the day will be free of his molten glares.

A thought that fills me with a sliver of regret.

IT'S five minutes after second bell before I reluctantly concede that Harrison isn't coming to English. When we're meant to be listening to a recitation, I send a text to Everett, and receive word back they've switched teachers.

My stomach pulls so tight at the information, I think I'm about to heave. I excuse myself from the class, sprinting to the nearest stall and barricading myself inside.

The discomfort doesn't ease, but it doesn't progress. After ten minutes spent waiting, I flush the unused toilet and wash my hands at the sink, staring in the mirror before heading back to class.

Up till now, I kept thinking our relationship wasn't really over. There'd been a mistake, a misunderstanding, and if Harrison would only swallow his anger long enough to talk to me, we could work out the problem and reconnect.

But you ballsed that up, didn't you?

I could contact Daegan; tell him we're finished. Except right now, he's the only bright spot. If I take that away, there's nothing for me here in Christchurch. School doesn't matter. I attended because I had to. Now the first part of my trust fund has kicked in, that no longer applies and the urge to stay was entwined with the desire to be close to Harrison.

Floss is a good friend, better than I deserve, but she's a year below me. Unless I get an apartment down here, we'll drift apart no matter what I do. Maybe if I head to university,

we can pick up where we left off once she graduates, but I don't have an inkling what I would study. Tertiary education has never been part of my plan.

As I stare miserably at my laptop, barely following along with the class, I realise Harrison had been my only plan.

My ambition had been to love him, marry him, have children with him. To grow old, teasing each other, throwing popcorn at the tv when the characters didn't behave the way we wanted, falling more deeply in love with each passing year.

I don't know if I can transfer that to his father. Daegan probably won't let me. He'll come to his senses soon enough, realise I'm not worth the loss of his son.

"Brooke," Miss Murchison says in a quiet voice, tapping the back of my wrist to get my attention. She's holding a box of tissues, looking concerned. "Do you want to take a moment? You can leave class again if you need to."

I don't understand what she's talking about until I feel the wetness on my face.

Pathetic.

I'm sitting here crying and didn't even notice.

"I'm fine." The words come out laden with so much aggression, they're almost fist-fighting. "Just sinuses."

I tilt my head forward to hide the worst of it, but it does nothing to stop the sensation of the other students staring. Watching my meltdown is far more entertaining than deciphering the recurring themes in Patricia Grace's work.

When class is over, I breathe a sigh of relief. Short-lived as I hustle to get across campus to my next class, Chemistry.

The equations involved in the class soothe me. No matter how many years pass or how much fads change, the immutable nature of the universe and its matter never changes. The stability is exactly what I need right now. Cold hard facts that don't randomly alter the course of my life on a whim.

I have a free period leading up to midday and force myself to go to the library when I'd rather hide in my room. The stiff

upper lip my dad instilled in me can't abide the thought of skulking in the shadows, hiding.

For lunch, I meet up with Floss in the quad. She's got another few friends with her, lightening the atmosphere. Rather than wanting to monopolise her, I'm grateful. Their casual chatter is easy to fall into.

Now the outfits being worn to the senior ball are in the rear-view mirror, talk turns to the upcoming Halloween party. Still months away, but that isn't about to stop anyone.

It's so nice to talk about costumes and our favourite fanfic rather than face my heartache.

"I'm going as Wednesday Addams," a girl named Lexa says. She's small and shy and reminds me of a mouse. Her voice comes out at about the same volume. "I found a dress and blazer that's exactly right in an op-shop on the weekend."

I can already picture it. Her hair is as black as mine and would look just right braided into pigtails.

"You should go as Enid," I tell Floss. "There's a wig you can buy that'll make you look the part."

For some reason, Floss hates the warm brown curls she was born with and uses any opportunity she can to pretend they're any other colour and style.

"Heads up," she answers, and I frown, not understanding what she's talking about. "Do you want to go watch the rugby practice instead of hanging around here?"

Usually, I'd be down for that in an instant. Watching the largest boys flex their muscular thighs as they hurl themselves into a tackle is always on the cards.

But my gaze finds the same reason that prompted her suggestion and I instantly dig in my heels.

Harrison is seated one bench over. His back is to us right now but at any moment he'll turn. At any second there could be a new confrontation. If I push him hard enough, the man I saw in him on Friday night might reappear.

"No thanks," I say in my loudest voice. "I'm good here."

Floss puts a hand on my knee, squeezing it then letting go. “Kaden isn’t a genius at relationships,” she says in a whisper. “But he’s on the money with this one. It’s time to let things go.”

She’s right about her first point. If Kaden were a relationship guru, he might notice that his stepsister’s gaze warms ten degrees every time she looks at him... and only him.

The rest of her statement I ignore.

“Did you find a good afterparty?” I ask her.

“Brooke,” she says in a warning voice.

“What? It’s just a question.” I turn to the new girl Lexa instead. “What about you? Were you at the dance?”

“Mm,” she says, frowning in confusion at the undercurrent. “But Finn wanted to leave early to go to a gig playing in Sydenham, instead.”

“Finn Riley?” My eyes widen in surprise. He’s too slim for my taste but the boy’s hotness is still off the charts. Lexa isn’t ugly, but she’s nowhere near his level. A note of admiration sneaks into my voice. “Girl.”

She wrinkles her nose, shifting uncomfortably on her seat. “The band were fantastic.”

“Oh, the band,” Floss says with a chortle, sending me a wink. “I’m sure ‘the band’ were fabulous.”

Lexa catches the inference, and her colour deepens. I’m about to add to the tease when Everett taps me on the shoulder, large torso blocking the view of his friend. His dusty blond curls are tangled from the breeze, pale blue eyes squinting with concern. “Don’t you think it’s time you found somewhere else to eat your lunch?”

“If you don’t want me in your view, you’re welcome to find your own spot,” I tell him in a voice guaranteed to carry. “But no, I don’t have plans to move.”

“Although you usually eat by the fields.”

“Stalker much?” I eat the last of my sandwich and screw up the paper bag. “Perhaps you should concentrate on your own table instead of mine.”

“We can go sit near the gym,” Lexa suggests, hugging herself. A barometer for tension. “There’s a seat no one else uses.”

“Because the fans make it uncomfortable,” I say with a flick of my hand. “Does anyone want to know how *my* afterparty went? My date went AWOL, but I tracked him down in the end.”

“Brooke!” Floss stands, appearing truly horrified. She grasps my wrist and tugs at me. “Don’t do this.”

“Why not? Why should I have to change where I sit just because someone doesn’t like the fact their daddy’s a better dancer than they are?”

There’s a roar and I don’t know what it is until Harrison grabs my blouse in his fist and physically lifts me from the bench.

Fear stutters my heart for a second, then it dissipates. My vision sharpens.

He drags me ten metres while our friends shout and butt heads behind us. Dragging me through the exit door for the gymnasium, shoving me against the wall inside and knocking away the wedge so the door swings shut, unable to be re-opened from the outside.

Knocking away any easy offer of help as a wild man stares at me from Harrison’s eyes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BROOKE

“WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING?” HARRISON ASKS, AND HIS voice is strangled, barely legible. “Do you want me to hurt you? Is that what this is about?”

“Like you haven’t hurt me already?”

His eyes narrow, his face flushed and contorted with anger.

There’s barely a shred left of my good-natured boyfriend, but I can’t make myself stop. I keep digging this hole, waiting for the man who flashed his true colours on the night of the dance to reappear.

“Did you fuck him?”

Even with the emotions cavorting through my body, I know better than to answer that question honestly. Even if not for my self-interest, I want to limit the damage to Daegan. I’ve done enough to punish him for the simple mistake of publishing an ad.

“No, not that it’s any of your fucking business.”

There’s a click and I don’t understand the noise until a blade appears in Harrison’s hand. He raises it slowly, making sure I see it before he presses the tip beside my left eye.

Terror has a stranglehold on me, my breath barely inflates my lungs. My eyes bulge with a rush of blood pressure and I try to flinch away, shift from the danger zone of his knife, but I’m already flat against the wall. There’s nowhere to go.

“I’ll ask you again and this time, I want an honest answer.”

My lips tremble as I stare into his eyes and see the darkest rage peering back at me.

“Remember, you’re a terrible liar and if I see the slightest hint of deception, you’re walking back to your room half blind.”

A strong tug of arousal pulls at my centre as I move my head, eyes flickering between his hand and the dull fury of his

face. His grip on my blouse tightens, the blade piercing my skin enough to cause a pinprick of pain, possibly a pinprick of blood.

“Was that a shake or are you gathering yourself?”

I can't answer. My tongue lies heavy in my mouth.

Harrison bends farther down, moving his lips to my ear, the knife bumped gently by his cheek. “Give me an honest answer now or I'll hurt you just to get you to speak.”

And my last wall crumbles.

I believe him. Even if he returns to being the boy I know later, right now he's a vicious sadist who means to keep his promises, his threats.

“Yes,” I say, my throat so tight my vocal cords ache to push that one syllable free.

“Before or after the dance?”

My world has shrunk to the tiny cage of my face, his face, the knife. There's nothing else but the threat, both spoken and unspoken. The realisation he might hurt me for lying but will definitely hurt me for telling the truth. “Both.”

A sound escapes his throat, a keening noise like an animal suffering a fatal shot but not yet exhausted enough to fall to the ground.

The sound makes my chest ache.

But the blade presses more firmly against my skin. Colours flash in my eyes in time with my heartbeat, swamping my vision whether my eyes are open or closed. His fingers sink into my hair, pinching, blunt nails scratching at my scalp. “Get on your knees.”

That twinge of arousal fires again, bringing a flash of heat to my core. “Harrison, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—”

His hand twists in my hair, tugging strands out by the roots. “Get to your knees. I won't ask you again.”

He pins me so firmly against the wall that when I try to bend, his pressure keeps holding my torso in place. It's not

until he shifts back, releasing my hair, that I can sink to the floor, eyes fixed to his, searching for the scraps of the boy I love. Craving that connection.

The hand with the blade presses it flat against the wall above my head. With the other, he fumbles at his fly. I take over from him, my hands shaking as I unbutton him, pulling the zipper down.

When I pull out his cock, it's already erect, throbbing so hard the head judders in time with his pulse.

“Open wide,” he whispers, and I hold him near the base, turning my face aside from the angry red blushing his tip as my throat closes, anxiety shrinking it to nothing, needing just a moment to gather myself.

But he doesn't give me time. His hand twists into my hair again. “Didn't you hear me? Open your fucking mouth.”

I do, gasping in a breath as he shoves himself into me, driving hard so the head bumps against my upper palette, hits the back of my throat until I gag, chest heaving with the spasms, but he still doesn't stop, doesn't quit. I close my eyes, picturing Daegan standing above me, hearing the gentle tease in his voice while his massive cock chokes me, constantly reminding me I'm in control.

And I take control now.

My head tilts as I open my throat, moving to take more of him, swallowing even as my oesophagus closes and tears stream down my face, saliva dribbling as my throat muscles clench and clench again, my body's protective instinct trying to force out the obstruction and utterly, utterly failing.

The colours flashing in my eyes turn darker and a high whine pierces my eardrums. My attempts to inhale and swallow cause the muscles to ripple along my neck, along my windpipe.

I grab his arse, pulling him closer while my other hand cups his balls, squeezing gently, then moving to his base as I slowly suck along his length, moving far enough back to draw

a breath, pumping him with my hand while I pause, then guiding him deep into my throat again.

“Fucking hell, Brooke.”

There’s a scrap of the old Harrison in his voice and I shift on my knees, trying to tilt my head back, trying to make eye contact.

Between the tears gumming my lashes and the lights fading to black, I can barely see him. When I blink, there’s an instant of clarity, of watching his mouth hang open, eyes narrowed, an expression close to rapture.

I pick up speed, finding my rhythm. Harrison’s hand loosens from my hair, stroking against my cheek, the sweet gesture somehow harder to bear than his threats.

In penance, I take him deeper, holding him inside like I’m trying for a record.

When I withdraw, I come off him completely, using my hand to keep the same pace, my saliva providing all the lubrication needed.

“No one said you could stop,” he whispers, hand cupping my skull while he eases his cock back into my mouth.

The urgency is gone but the gentleness is a lie; his hand relentlessly pulls me forward while his hips thrust him deeper into me, filling my throat and then stopping, holding me there while his eyes close to slits and a low moan escapes his mouth.

“Anyone would think you’d been getting lessons,” he murmurs, laughing at his own joke. “Did you tell Dad who you were studying so hard for?”

His fist twists in my hair as the words reignite his pain. He holds me steady, thrusting rougher than before, the carelessness setting off ecstatic ripples through my body.

“Hold it right there,” he groans, the fingers cupping my head turning to steel clamps as he plunges into my mouth, picking up speed, the movements so relentless it feels like his cock is clawing at my tongue, my soft palette, bruising the tender area at the back of my throat.

Tears continue to flow, obstructing each breath, and I push against his thigh again, harder this time, trying to break free for long enough to cough my lungs out and get a decent breath.

“If you use those hands for anything except cupping my balls, I’m going to pin them against the wall, understand me?”

And that terrifies me enough that I comply, fondling him instead, my fingers circling his base to offer a counterpart to his thrusts inside me, restricting how deep he can go, finally giving me a chance to snatch small breaths as I meet his fierce rhythm.

“Harrison?”

He almost falls out of me as he turns, Everett striding into my peripheral vision. For a second, Harrison grabs the back of my head, forcing himself deeper, impossibly deep as my world closes to a pinhole.

Then he withdraws, tugging my hair back, my lips making a popping noise as he pulls free.

There’s a moment where he meets my eyes. A second where he looks at me like he used to, igniting an ache worse than any other torment he could inflict on me. Then he steps back, turning to his friend, saying, “You want a turn?” and my brain misfires.

Everett moves closer and my body finds a new stock of adrenaline, shooting it into my veins until every cell in my body vibrates. With fear but also with excitement.

I have no clue what’s going to happen next.

“I’ve bolted the other set of doors to hold off her friends, but you need to cool it.” There’s a short pause while Everett’s eyes linger on me, tracing where saliva plasters hair to my cheek, smiling softly as he memorises each detail. “She doesn’t look into it, man.”

Harrison rests his hand on my head, stroking my hair. The movement I always thought a waste of time is soothing, easing away the last of my fear. “She’s into it, aren’t you, Brooke?”

I can't see the knife any longer. My knees ache from the hard floor as I stare deep into his eyes through a film of watery tears.

"The bell will go soon," Everett says as he inches closer. "We should head to class."

"Stand up," Harrison whispers, and I scramble to fulfil his request. "Turn around," he adds. "I don't want to see your face."

The slap of that remark makes my cheeks burn but I obey, turning to face the wall, closing my eyes as I rest my forehead against the thick soundproofing panels. He reaches around to cup my chin, breath warming my cheek, cock hard against my hip, then he releases his hold and moves back a step.

"Lift your skirt. Everett's staying to supervise so show him how much you want to be here."

My heart doesn't know what to do. Misfiring and skipping beats until my pulse is erratic, making me uncomfortably aware of each mistimed thump.

But I obey him, pressing against the wall harder, until my forehead aches. I open my eyes, sneaking glances over my shoulder as I hitch up my skirt, inch by inch. Everett shuffles closer to Harrison, surveying the view from next to his friend, rubbing his forefinger over his top lip.

Harrison's voice turns gruffer as he says, "Now pull your underwear down."

A cord attaches to my core, tugging until I can feel it in my clit, my nipples, my tightening throat.

I slowly hook under the elastic, dragging them down over long seconds while Everett's gaze rests on me, locking to mine while I remember the blade glinting in Harrison's hand.

"See?" Harrison takes over the heavy lifting on my dress, yanking it upward when it would have fallen to cover me. "This is all Brooke wants, isn't it? She's gagging for it so much, night and day, she even pays for it."

His cock nudges my arse as he lets go of the fabric and cups my pussy, grinding as he forces me hard against him, turning me, aiming me towards his friend.

“Do you want my friend to have a turn?” I shake my head and his voice becomes mocking. “Don’t worry. I’ll negotiate a good discount on your behalf.”

Everett laughs while saliva dries to a thin film over my cheeks, my chin. My mouth is so dry it won’t work but I shake my head again, wishing I didn’t have a pulse of arousal growing stronger between my legs. A gush of wetness flows until my pussy is heavy, waterlogged.

The tangle inside my head grows thicker, more complex. Every second that passes, less of me wants this to end.

“Why don’t you say the magic word?” Harrison voice is a low rumble in my ear, more vibration than vocal. It judders along the pathways of my existing arousal, turning every volume control to the max.

He rubs the head of his cock against me. There’s a shift as he leans his torso away to look at himself, teasing me with his tip while my spit dries on his shaft.

He doesn’t repeat himself. He doesn’t need to. I twist my face away from Everett, closing my eyes against the shame as I obediently whisper, “Please.”

And in a second, Harrison’s inside me, bucking with such a quick and savage rhythm that my entrance screams in protest while the rest of my pussy screams in ecstasy. The frantic pace hits every spot, turning my arousal into a deep-seated need. Until I can’t bear for him to stop or slow down.

Finally, he fucks me the way I always wanted to be fucked. Like I’m some dirty slag in a pub bathroom stall rather than a princess he can only touch with kid gloves.

With each stroke, he both satisfies me and leaves me hungering for more. My hands close around the forearm slung across my chest, while my pussy stings from the pressure as he slams home again and again, forcing himself deeper and deeper.

“Come on,” Harrison says, and I squeeze my muscles hard as I can before I understand he’s not talking to me. “She wants you to, don’t you Brooke? One guy isn’t enough for her.”

He must have tucked the knife away; one arm continues to support me as his fingers work at my neckline, dragging the blouse off my shoulders while Everett stares straight into my eyes.

“No,” I say but it’s a tiny sound. Unequal to the pulse pounding in my ear. Barely audible.

Then my hands are wrenched behind my back. Harrison hooks one elbow around them while his other hand unhooks the clasp of my bra.

“Tell him, Brooke.” Harrison’s cock thrusts into me with a new urgency, the drag increasing against my walls until pleasure surges inside me. His girth stretches me as I tilt my hips, timing it so with each thrust, my thighs clench, eager for my clit to enjoy any source of friction. “Tell him how much you want his hand on your tits.”

I can’t speak. My mouth doesn’t remember how.

Harrison changes his grip, flipping up the cups to my bra to expose my breasts, then twisting the shoulder straps together to form a harness across my shoulders, bending me forward, my skin burning as he adjusts his grip.

Everett steps closer, running a knuckle along the edge of my jaw, holding my gaze as he slowly licks his lips. He doesn’t even glance at my tits, just reaching for them while he continues to stare into my eyes like a psycho.

The boy fucking me might hold a knife, but the new frisson of fear comes straight from his friend.

His fingers close around my nipple, tugging, pinching. My useless, sensation-free nipple that only ever responds to temperature but pebbles under this strange boy’s touch, reacting as he twists it, drawing a loud gasp from my mouth which might sound pained but is riding high on an increasing wave of ecstasy.

“You know what’s about to happen?” Harrison asks, wrenching me closer by my makeshift harness until his lips are against my earlobe, his movements growing ever more savage. “The bell’s about to go and the junior classes are going to spill in here to see you begging us to take turns fucking you.”

Everett releases me, then flicks my nipple, the pain sharp and oh-so-sweet. Harrison gives the guttural moan that means he’s close. As Everett’s hand cups my breast again, squeezing it, moulding it in his rough hand, I open my eyes, see him staring fixedly into my face, scrutinising my reaction, analysing each change, storing it all safe from deletion in his brain.

My eyelids flutter, neck creaking farther back, exposing its long length to his fervent gaze.

Then I close my eyes, painting Daegan in his place. I picture his enormous cock, imagine him stroking it while his son pounds into me, getting ready for his turn.

And my body convulses, coming around Harrison’s cock with such force that my limbs lose control, only the harness and the hard length thrusting into me keeping me upright.

He releases my bra, hand closing around my throat instead, lips straining against my ear as he snarls, “Now you come?” in a voice wrung thin with despair.

Then his cock twitches, his fingers sink deeper into my flesh. Everett lets go, stepping away as Harrison jets inside me. Half of his cum is driven out, dripping down my thighs as he gives another, final thrust.

I think he’ll move away, leaving me sagging to the floor, but he half turns me so we’re facing away from his friend. The knife reappears, the tip of his blade dimpling my throat before he follows the curve of my collarbone, the red marks that show where my bra dug in, the recess under my ribcage.

“Guess we finally found your secret,” he breathes in his softest voice, the words meant for me and me only. “Treat you like the whore you are.”

The knife presses harder against my flesh, enough to draw a bobble of blood to the surface, beading there like a ruby expelled from my skin.

I can barely swallow past the lump in my throat, the devil on my shoulder making me whisper, “Your daddy does it better.”

For a split second, his face fills with absolute darkness, then Harrison pulls the knife away, snapping it against the wall to make it retreat into its casing, tugging his jeans into place while my blouse remains open, my bra twisted to expose my tits, pants still down at my knees while my skirt is hitched around my waist.

“Come on,” he says, clapping Everett on the shoulder while I slide to the ground, onto my hands and knees, legs barely working. “Don’t want to be late to class.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HARRISON

OUTSIDE THE GYM, BROOKE'S PARTING TAUNT RINGS IN MY ears. Everett follows close behind me, his presence causing a slew of irrational thoughts. Once we're alongside the Science block, I can't stand it a moment longer and slam him against the wall.

"That wasn't a free pass to touch my girlfriend," I warn, my throat sticking as it tries to force out the words. "You ever lay a finger on her without my permission, I'll kill you."

He rolls his eyes, pushing against my shoulder until I back up a step. "Don't place that shit at my door. If I had my way, neither one of us would touch Brooke again."

I bridle at the perceived insult, then a bubble of laughter bursts free, my emotions turning on a dime. "Well, that's not happening either."

At the block entrance, I peel away from him, heading for my room, unable to contain myself enough to go to my next lesson. While the two bells go, I lie on my bed, staring at the ceiling. I can't close my eyes, every time I do I see the video footage play out, see the rapture on Brooke's face.

The same expression I just saw in real life—a hundred times brighter, a thousand times more arousing.

All those times I'd held back my wilder side during sex, not wanting to scare her or hurt her, anxious to demonstrate each time how much she was loved... and now I find out she didn't want that.

She just wanted someone to hurt her, insult her. Treat her like she's nothing. Offer the use of her to his friend.

A tiny reminder uses its inside voice, telling me how she liked to pull my hair. How she once mentioned I could do that to her, but I never had.

My instant rebuttal is that I didn't because she's a fucking princess and deserves to be treated like one, but I also realise

that's something that came from me rather than something she wanted. My anger is accompanied by a flicker of shame. Had there been other things she'd asked for, indicated she desired, which I just ignored?

Like a friend helping himself to a handful of her tits. It didn't escape me that her muscles clenched harder, her breath became rougher as Everett touched her.

She liked it and I wonder if I could do that again. Not in the heat of the moment but with planning and preparation.

Could I let another man touch her, fondle her, grope her with my permission? Stand back as another man fucked her, waiting patiently for my turn.

Or not waiting. If Brooke liked the extra partner, could she take him in her cunt while I held her head steady, fucking her face with my cock?

I'd been rough with her that way once. While giving me head, the sensation had got away from me, and instead of letting her direct operations, choosing how to move her mouth on me, I'd pinned her to the bed while I thrust into her, making her choke, making her gag.

Making me ashamed of my own behaviour. So ashamed, that when she suggested doing it again, I withheld, going down on her twice as often in penance.

Now a squirm of regret wriggles through me.

Another request I'd ignored.

I turn, punching the pillow to make it more comfortable, then jabbing at it, a flurry of blows because it can't complain.

For months, I'd worried our unequal endings were signs she wasn't into me. That we were great as companions, as friends, but becoming lovers was a step outside our relationship lines.

If I just need to change things up, really tune in to the messages she's sending me instead of overwriting them with how I think she should be treated, could we get past this?

She could have come to you. She could have explained or threatened to break up with you.

And I'm left back at my starting point. Because the one thing I know for certain Brooke understands about me is that I hate cheating. Infidelity is my one true line in the sand, and I know she knows this because I've flat out told her.

But if you asked someone to join in... that's not cheating. That's sharing.

The thought spins me out, but it excites me, too. An idea to consider if we ever get past this dreadful stalemate.

And after today, for the first time, I think there is a way past it. For me, at least.

If she likes it rough, if she likes it dirty, I'm willing to oblige.

The solution Joseph presented to me in the cafeteria a lifetime ago recurs to me. His suggestion had been to fuck the entire senior year until I was free of her, an idea I still can't stomach.

But to fuck Brooke out of my head? That might work.

If I treat her like the panting slut she is for long enough, I might free myself of any lingering dreams about a future. If I treat her with the disgust she deserves, that might become my primary emotion when I look at her.

In the absence of any other bright ideas, it's worth a shot.

I LEAVE IT A FEW DAYS, letting my idea settle. There's no repercussion from my lunchtime meltdown, not so much as being called into an office for an informal chat.

Which means Brooke didn't complain to anyone. A development that makes me think my next step might be okay.

I watch her closely in the cafeteria each morning and each night. Lunchtimes, she's gone back to her previous haunt, out

by the playing fields where the girls can sit back to ogle the rugby team.

There's more than one glance in her direction where I see her eyes rapidly cut away from mine in an attempt not to be caught looking. An attempt made far too late.

On Thursday, the urge still hasn't gone away. As I walk out of my final lesson for the day, I decide it's as good a time as any.

The worst thing she can do is say no.

It's an hour past the last lesson before Brooke drags herself back to her room. I'm on her bed, waiting.

From the look of her, you wouldn't know that anything was off kilter. In the week since the dance, all the nervousness, the shitty nail-biting habit, her unkemptness, have gone into remission. Even her hair is back to its customary perfection, pulled back into a ponytail so tight it gives me a headache to look at.

"You returned my key," she says with a frown, closing the door and tossing her main set onto the desk at the foot of the bed. "How'd you get in?"

"Magic," I respond, putting my arms behind my head like I don't have a care in the world. "Thought you might prefer a private chat."

She snorts, a sound of amusement which never reaches her expression. "Now you decide to talk privately? After spilling your lies to the entire senior class."

"What lies?" I stretch out my leg to touch her as she presses herself flat against the wall, pretending nonchalance. "You were terrible in bed." I tilt my head to the side, studying her for signs of shame, of regret.

All I see is the mask she wears when she doesn't want anyone to notice her. The one she uses when she tells a lie or pulls on as cover, preparatory to being hurt. It's a mask she used to wear when calling her father. She'd long given up on her mother before I arrived on the scene.

My chest pulls tight at the thought that's where I sit now. In Brooke's big list of people who've hurt her, abandoned her.

I'd be sorry if I hadn't already spent all that sorrow on myself.

"I don't want to continue on the way we have been." I sit upright as I talk, pretending my attention is elsewhere when it's arrowed in on her face. "This hatred is exhausting."

Brooke gives a guarded smile, her eyes cautious as she examines me, trying to see whether I'm telling the truth or feeding her a lie.

I must pass her test because she offers a short nod. "I agree."

Slowly, I stand, straightening my back as much as possible to get the tallest possible height advantage over her. "Since I'm not about to throw myself back into the dating pool with less than five months left until we finish school, I thought we could come to some arrangement."

Her nostrils pinch together, a crease appearing on the bridge of her nose. "Arrangement?"

My hand touches lightly on her shoulder. When she doesn't squirm away or throw it off, I increase the pressure, forcing her back against the wall, amused to see a flicker of lust leak through her staunch façade.

"The arrangement where I come here and fuck you any time I need a release."

Her chin juts out, mouth twisting. "And what do I get in this *arrangement*?"

"You get fucked."

The double meaning has her jerking her eyes to meet mine, before they lower again. I know she's avoiding the contact as part of going into hiding but it makes her look demure. The exact opposite of what I need her to be.

I touch my forefinger to the underside of her chin, applying light pressure until she's once again locked to my

gaze. “That’s better. I prefer you make eye contact when I’m speaking to you.”

“And why should I give a damn about your preferences?”

I lick my lips, watching her eyes widen as they catch the gesture from their periphery. Her chest angles towards me, a response I doubt she knows she’s making.

“Because if you fall into line, I’ll give you everything you need.”

This time, it’s her tongue darting out to wet her lips. I move my hand so my thumb strokes along the line of her jaw, feeling the muscles bunch in behind her ear as she clenches, trying to fight her automatic response.

“And what do you think I need?”

My fingers curl around the back of her neck, reaching up to tug at the band holding her ponytail, freeing her hair until it spills across her shoulders, curls cascading down her back.

I’m gentle, far too gentle as my hand delves farther into the long, dark strands. When her teeth worry at her bottom lip, I let my mouth curl into the snarl it wants to form, closing my hand into a fist and savagely twisting her hair until it strains at the roots.

Brooke’s mouth opens wide, and I spit into it, watching the recoil a second before I follow it with my tongue, jamming it as far into her as it will go.

She responds, doing battle with her own tongue, fighting for dominance. When I don’t relent, she tries to turn her head, to escape, but I easily hold her in place with the leash of her hair.

I make her stay until my cock is hard against her lower belly, straining at my jeans, fighting to be freed, so it can find the home it longs for.

When I pull back, gasping for air, I watch her eyes turn hooded, their crystal clear blue smothered by dark thunderclouds, pupils expanding to eat their fill.

Her lips are red where I've devoured them, teeth marks filling with a deeper crimson though I don't remember biting her.

She's so pretty. Breathtaking.

I stare at the stark contrast of her pale skin and crimson cheeks until she shifts from foot to foot, nervous energy making her hands flutter up to press flat against my chest.

There's hesitation in her eyes. Hesitation edged with longing.

With a sharp jerk of my arm, I twist her head, lead her past me and toss her onto the bed. My hand tugs her hair hard enough that when I disentangle it, long strands cling to my palm. I wipe them off against the bedcovers, before covering her mouth with my left hand.

Not that she's screaming.

Her shoulders hunch in a defensive posture, but that's it. There's no struggling, no fighting. My stomach plunges to the floor in annoyance.

I want her to fight me.

With a snarl, I press my knee between her thighs, forcing her legs apart. There's a growing patch of damp arousal on her underwear. I drag them down, haul them off her and toss them over my shoulder.

The rush of blood to my cock makes me dizzy, draining whatever's left of my brain away to maintenance level functions as I put my hands back between her legs, getting there just in time for her to clench them. I rejoice in the sharp moan she makes as I slap them apart, then slap the insides of her thighs just to make her repeat the sound, barely audible past the makeshift gag of my hand.

My fingers burrow, digging into her pussy with no regard to her comfort, shoving through the gathering wetness, forcing myself inside.

She shifts her hips, trapping my wrist at an awkward angle and I growl, low in my throat, a sound more animal than

human.

And that fits the rest of me. Turned into a rutting mammal, mind lost in the urge to bury my cock deep inside her, to pin her in place while I take what I want, until she gives me what I crave.

Brooke bucks her hips, perhaps another way to struggle but it whites out my brain with a rush of pure desire. Better than snorting a line of the purest coke. Better than the lush suction of an opioid dragging me into a warm pool of mindless relaxation.

I fumble at my jeans, everything working against me as I struggle to remove the barrier between me and what I desperately need.

When my cock enters her, she clenches her muscles tight, trying to force me out. The drag against the smooth skin of my throbbing erection sends lightning bolts of pleasure to short out what's left of my brain. I force my way into her, feeling the pull and release as she fights me, fights what her own body demands.

Then there's a new sensation. The flutter of an orgasm sending her into rapturous spasms around the thrust of my cock.

"So fucking fast," I gasp, my lips seeking her ear, nibbling and sucking at her lobe before I thrust my tongue into the hole, feeling her jerk away from the sensation as she's always withdrawn from the messy sticky physicality of having sex.

And damned if I'll let her escape. Not now this is all we have between us.

"Were you saving that one up, Brooke? Hm?" I adjust my stroke, moving faster, harder, my pelvis slapping against hers. "Did you have that one locked and loaded, ready to go?"

Her eyes blaze at me and I reach into my pocket, pulling out the same knife I used Monday, tapping the hilt of it against her forehead until she flinches away.

I snap out the blade, feeling her muscles clench harder around me, her hips thrust higher. With it pressed flat against

her cheek, I stare at her, drinking in the reactions, the micro-expressions: the fear, the tension, the lust.

And it's not enough. I don't want consequences, I want answers.

I pull my hand from her mouth, rubbing her lower lip with my thumb from habit, sadness welling behind my eyes.

"Is this what you wanted all along?" My head bows, lips seeking the ear opposite where I'm holding the knife. "Did you want me to throw you down and fuck you with no regard for your welfare?"

"Call this a fuck?"

My free hand squeezes her chin, then I jam my fingers into her mouth, holding them against her tongue, stopping her speech. "You want to watch that filthy tongue," I tell her, the words staccato where they time with my thrusts. "Or you might find it cut off."

She seizes my wrists, eyes watering, trying to move me, then hitting me when I won't withdraw. Her legs cross behind my back, heel thumping into my arse. The two sides of her fighting harder inside her than she's fighting me.

"All I ever did was love you, Brooke." My voice cracks and I heave in a breath, withdrawing, flipping her onto her stomach, cramming her face into the pillow that I'd curled against me on Friday night.

The Friday night when she didn't come home because she was too busy fucking my dad.

My cock plunges into her again. The hand holding the knife is a tight fist, pinioning me to the mattress as my stroke gets rougher, harder, faster. I fuck her like it's a punishment for each of her transgressions. A punishment she responds to a thousand times more than any loving embrace.

And my teeth chew on her earlobe, my incisors digging so deep I can hear her scream into the mattress. I let go, moving to hold her throat as I let her head raise far enough to drag in a breath.

Long enough for my plaintive cry, “Why do you keep hurting me?”

She coughs out a laugh. Turning her face to the side. Eyes screwed shut. “And telling the entire senior year, I was crap in bed was loving me, was it?”

“I didn’t need to see them fighting to be your rebound. You’re mine. You were always meant to be mine.”

And the truth of that socks home.

No matter what she wants for herself, she belongs to me. She always has. She always will.

“Since you didn’t understand the guidelines the first time around, here are the new rules. You want to fuck other men, you get my permission first,” I tell her, enjoying the shudder as I growl into her ear. “If I want someone to fuck you, better raise your skirt and plaster a smile on your face because, regardless of whether you want it, that’s what’s happening. Understand?”

Her hand whips behind her, slapping against my hip. Given the angle, there’s no leverage but the show of fight spurs me onwards, settling a familiar ache deep in my balls.

An ache that deepens when the first flutter of her internal muscles spasm around me again. Even though I’m not trying. Even though I couldn’t give a shit about her pleasure.

“You give me what I want, when I want it. You do what I tell you, in bed and out of it. Most of all, you remember that you’re not the one who’s in fucking charge here. Until or unless I tell you otherwise, you’re mine.”

“Fuck off,” she sobs, punching at my head and landing a glancing blow against my ear.

I tilt her head back, settling my fingertips hard against her throat, digging my cock deep inside her and resting it there while my ears whine and my vision darkens and my head spins like it’s on a tilt-a-whirl.

“I love you, Brooke. I’m never leaving. You break my rules, you fuck someone you’re not allowed to fuck, and I’ll

cut them to ribbons, I'll cut you, and I'll cut myself.”

I draw back for the sole pleasure of sinking into her again, so deep, so hard my balls tighten, trying to cram themselves into the same hole.

The pleasure is incredible. Sensations flooding me until any orgasm before now feels like play. A simple spasm. Not this thing that builds from the base of my spine and cascades out in ripples. Not this thing that hooks deep into the meat of my brain, whiting out everything that isn't me, that isn't Brooke, that isn't my cock buried deep, deep, deep inside her cunt.

“Fine,” she gasps, and I can barely track her. “I want permission to fuck your dad.”

It should be a cold slap of contempt, but I inhale the request with a long breath, my orgasm still building, muscles clenching and driving me into her, hips pounding in a building rhythm, the thrust and push and pull and squeeze and release too much for me to handle as I go shuddering over the edge, pouring myself into her, so much, so fast, I can imagine my cum catapulting past any goalkeepers, chemical or physical, striking into the goal.

I can't breathe.

My body collapses onto hers, shaking from exertion, from an avalanche of sensations too numerous to track.

When I can, I push myself away, rolling onto my back, staring at the ceiling with wide eyes, wondering what I've been doing before this moment because fucking Brooke just now was more addictive than smoking crack.

A rush of gratitude overtakes me, and I pull her into my arms, cradling her head against my heaving chest, stroking her hair back from her wild eyes.

“You feel so fucking good,” I whisper, moving the knife from one hand to the other. A sense of contentment greater than I've ever known swamps me, drowning me in satisfaction.

A weird connection enters my head. That I could only achieve these heights of pleasure because someone taught her how to get what she wants.

The anger, the resentment, the burning rage I've harboured for my father mixes with the new emotion, diluting all that fury, leaving me calmer than I've been for weeks, leading me back to myself.

If I deny her, she might leave. She has more resources than anyone I know.

I could be left holding nothing. The last six weeks of hell just a taster for the main course of lifelong misery.

"You want to fuck my dad?" I whisper, not sure if it's a real question or just a restatement of her claim. "No one else?"

"I sure as hell don't want to fuck Everett if that's what you're asking."

For the first time, I wonder if she was faking it on the video with the chef. If she pretended to orgasm on camera, simply to move the focus away from the same old issue she'd always had.

Warren could have been nothing more than a check-in to see if her problem was with me or with herself.

For everything we've been through, at least I have that. Brooke never pretended to be someone in bed that she wasn't.

She's mine. The ownership is such a strong sensation it might as well be tangible. I could deny her request, force her to stick with me and only me. Let us slip back into the same rut that held us stuck fast for the entire first half of the year.

I sit up, gently rolling her onto her stomach. She goes, trusting me even though I haven't done anything to earn her trust in such a long time.

"You can sleep with my dad," I agree, smoothing the skin of her arse, gripping the fleshy part of her cheek and squeezing. The finger marks left behind are good but fleeting. I need something better. Something clearer.

Something to point out that even if I loan her out on occasion, she's still one hundred percent mine to lend.

“And once you're finished, you can come back here and tell me every detail.” I grip the knife close to the tip, so it won't accidentally cut her deeper than I mean to. “We don't keep any secrets from each other. Not any longer.”

When I ease the edge of the blade into her skin, I pause, letting her grow used to it, tracing out the mark I want to make with my eyes so there's no mistake.

Then I quickly carve out my initials, strengthening my hold on Brooke when she tries to buck me off, anticipating her moves so I don't hurt her any more than necessary to get the job done.

“There you go,” I whisper when I finish, licking the wound and watching the crimson beads appear again the moment I move away. Watching the drops grow fat before I affix my mouth again, this time applying gentle suction until the metallic tang against my tongue is gone.

It still leaks a little blood but nothing serious.

I press the blade against the headboard and hold the button, letting it slot back into its home before I tuck it back in my pocket and pull her into my arms again, feeling sleepy for the first time in forever. Feeling generous. Feeling kind.

“You can visit him as many times as you like, just so long as he knows where to return you once he's done.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BROOKE

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, FRIDAY, I WAKE HOURS BEFORE THE alarm. The comfort of Harrison's brawny arms confuses me, leaving my head spinning through time before it remembers the specifics of what happened last night.

His passion. His declaration. His permission.

My arse cheek throbs where he marked his initials. A sign he cut as much for his father's benefit as for himself or for me.

I slip from the bed, straightening my clothing as best I can, taking my keys and letting myself out, heading for the common room because I need space to think.

My body is as satisfied as it's ever been. Harrison's roughness turned me on in excruciating ways; ways that excite me still. It's like he levelled up, unlocked a new skill set, and is now learning all the ways it can be used.

In itself, that would be enough to make my heart beat faster, but to add his father to the mix is more than I thought possible.

My tease had been to spur him on, to make him reach for more of the aggressive, dominating persona that he'd kept hidden for so long, to unleash a new torrent of degradation, to make him play my favourite game.

Instead, it became something entirely different. Permission.

The permission to think beyond the strained edges of our existing relationship. To think of forming a different connection, one to encompass more than I ever dared to dream.

But I need to be careful. I need to be sure. I need to not fuck it up the same way I've fucked so many things in the past.

I insert my credit card into the vending machine, punching in numbers until the spirals threaten to tangle. With my snacks

in hand, I make myself comfy on the large sofa. The absence of other students makes the space larger. Sounds echo along the corridors, unencumbered.

The static that's crowded thoughts from my brain for the past month has disappeared. I finally have room to think, to plan rather than react.

Harrison could be mine again. All his anger, his ridicule, his weaponisation of his friends could be over.

After the long weeks of devastation, my impulse is to jump at the chance. To forgive him without question, losing myself in his embrace and putting a full stop to this terrible part of my life.

The more sensible pieces of me rear back at the thought. The bits of me still in pain, that still need to know what happened. What I did to make him push me away.

I eat my way through the snacks, doom scrolling on my phone, then clicking into my messages. There's one there from my solicitor, really my dad's but agreeable enough to perform a piece of work for me, knowing the certainty that he'd get paid.

The results of what I asked him are there in black and white.

The certificate of title to Daegan's home.

I know he wants to purchase the property himself, but the crawling uncertainty that's littered my recent history means I feel safer having control of it myself. To have control of *anything* is such a radical departure from the status quo that it gives me a sense of accomplishment, even if I haven't done anything except move some of my trust fund around.

I curl my legs up, wincing as the cut Harrison made in my flesh sends out a stinging word of warning. Maybe not a sign of endearment to anyone else, but it sends a warm pulse of satisfaction into my heart.

School doesn't mean enough to me to worry about skipping a day, so I send a text to Daegan, asking if I can bring our planned Saturday meeting forward to today. I finish my

snacks, except for a packet of Twisties, Harrison's favourite, and head back to my room.

When I unlock my door, Harrison sits on the edge of the bed, tense shoulders relaxing as I walk inside.

"Here," I say, tossing him the bag. "After missing dinner last night, I needed something to eat."

He opens it as I join him on the bed, his fingers turning orange with cheese dust. "Lie down," he orders me. "Take off your clothes."

"I'm not having sex with you," I tell him while complying with his request. "Just so you know."

He ignores me, placing a line of individual twisties along my body, sticking out of my belly button, resting along the line of my sternum.

"Oh, so you're one of *those* millionaires, are you?"

"What millionaires?" he asks before dipping his head to bite one of the snacks off my chest.

"The type who insist on putting food on top of naked girls like they've mistaken them for serving platters."

"Mm." He sucks another one into his mouth, swallowing, then licking off the few crumbs of bright orange with far more attention than they deserve. "They sound like dicks."

"Says the man eating food off his naked girlfriend."

My stomach clenches as I hear the word slip out, tensing until he moves onto the next snack, cleaning me with the intensity of a cat.

"It's a pity these packets are so small," he complains. "There are so many other places I want to eat tiny treats off you."

He snatches the belly button one with his lips, moving up to offer it to me, smiling as I eat it despite where it's been. "So obedient," he murmurs. "What was that you were saying before? Something about staying in bed all day to have sex."

I feel the temptation. To pass the day and the coming weekend with lazy games and tall stories, getting lost in each other the way we used to.

But if I act like nothing's changed, nothing will.

I cup his head, giving him a long kiss, then push him off the bed, moving into the bathroom to shower and locking the door to make sure I don't have to share my tiny cubicle.

Once dry, I put two plasters across the wound on my rear, hoping that'll be enough to keep it clean. Daegan has replied to my message, saying he has time free this afternoon.

Until then, I can go to a library café in town and sit for hours while I think about what I want to ask him. Back in my room, I quickly dress, smiling as Harrison sprawls on my bed like he's forgotten the way back to his own.

"I need to go," I say, kissing him goodbye. My hand lingers on his chest, eyes searching his expression for confirmation that it's okay, my core heating at the thought I'm travelling from son to father. Each perfect for me in their own way. "I'll catch up with you at dinner. Save me some lasagne if you get to the cafeteria before me."

WHEN I ARRIVE at Daegan's home mid-afternoon, the real estate sign has a large sold sticker across it. The change is hard to see from the street because it's broken in two and tossed on the far edge of his front porch.

A flutter of doubt hits my centre. There are so many things that could go wrong. But if you don't ask, you don't get.

Daegan answers my knock and practically drags me inside, an enthusiastic greeting which divests me of most of my clothes. He carries me through to the bedroom, dumping me on the bed while moving to grab a blindfold from his chest of drawers.

There's something on the floor behind him, but he blocks it with his body. A new chair but covered with a drop cloth like

it's waiting for a big reveal. A frisson of excitement stands the hairs of my arm on end as he covers my eyes, then cuffs my hands in front of me.

“Well, hello to you, too,” I murmur, a wedge of trepidation grabbing me. The sensation isn't unpleasant, quite the opposite. It's the never quite knowing what he has in store which makes every visit worth it.

He plunges his fingers deep into my hair, angling my face to receive his kiss. “All the hellos,” he mutters after subjecting me to a punishing kiss that makes my lips swell, top and bottom.

“I thought you might appreciate a gift,” he says, the tease in his voice so similar to Harrison's that for the moment, I imagine he's standing in the room.

Another rush of pleasure swamps me at the thought, my nipples tightening in response.

“Someone's thinking wicked thoughts,” Daegan says with a tinge of amusement as he drags a heavy object across the carpet, bringing it closer to the bed.

A moment later, I feel him kneel on the mattress, positioning himself behind me, all his clothing divested so when he folds his arms around me, consuming me in his embrace, his naked skin kisses against mine.

“I was feeling lazy,” he whispers, the vocals puffing against my skin. “So, I brought a machine on board to help us out.”

“You're delegating sex to a machine?” My voice is incredulous.

And scared.

And completely fucking on board with this plan, whatever the hell it turns out to be.

“Mm-hm.” He lifts my cuffed wrists and presses a hard plastic object against my right palm. “This is the remote and pressing these buttons is going to be the only exercise I do today.”

“It’s like your service levels have dipped since I stopped paying you.”

He picks up on the shrill notes I’m desperately trying to keep from my voice.

His arms move to embrace me again, one hand cupping my forehead, so my head is held securely against his chest. “I promise to deliver the same number of orgasms,” he says, leaning into the tease but in such a way I know the fun won’t be at my expense. “If I delegated that to—”

“The rise of the machines?”

“Just one but yeah. It’s rising to the occasion in all the right ways.” He shuffles me forward, and I let him move my limbs, position me to his liking. Then he shifts off the bed, humming under his breath so I know where he is.

Again, there’s a brush of movement over the floor, then his hands are on my lower back, thumbs rubbing the dimples either side of my tailbone. He slides one hand between my legs, levering my thighs apart.

“That’s my girl,” he murmurs in encouragement, in appreciation. “That’s my beautiful girl.”

A breath catches in my lungs, my chest aching at the words. I’m glad my eyes are covered, my head facing away from him to hide the uncertainty in my expression.

My body trembles. Every nerve ending switches location to the outside of my skin, reacting violently to the slightest shift in the air.

“Can we stop?” I ask, all thoughts of safe words and gestures departing in a rush of panic as I tremble from head to toe.

“Of course,” he says, the teasing note gone from his voice and replaced with concern. “Do you want me to take your blindfold off?”

“No, I—” My voice cracks and I whip my head back and forth.

I don't want to see anything but more than that. I don't want to be so exposed.

“Could you hold me?”

A second after I ask, he's there, the mattress sinking under his weight again as his arms encircle my torso, turning me and pulling me into his embrace, removing my cuffs as he leans against the headboard.

His hand strokes my hair as I try to hold myself together. I don't know where the avalanche of emotion came from or what further weight might tumble down the slope.

“You're okay, Brooke. I'll always take care of you.”

And he does, cradling me to his chest like I'm precious. His voice is soft, husky as he asks, “Can I do something more for you?”

I don't know. My throat is dry, and my head gives a sickening thump. I don't understand what's happening at all.

“How about I tell you about my day?”

I hum in agreement, words still beyond me.

Daegan settles me more firmly within his grasp, his thumb brushing against my cheekbone where the blindfold sits in place. “First thing in the morning, I went to the coffee shop on Harris Crescent, where they have the city's best coffee and a barista with a terrible memory and a habit of not writing down orders. It makes every cup an adventure, but I haven't had a bad one yet.”

The story is softly soothing. “What did you order?”

“An Americano but I got a lovely flat white made with oat milk. Then I went to the gym and used up all that energy doing cardio.” His voice drops lower. “I hate cardio days. If I end up in hell, I'm sure they'll have treadmills as soon as I get through the door.”

“I bet you looked hot.” My imagination is at the ready, placing him in scanty workout clothes, making his skin gleam with sweat.

“Of course, I looked hot. I ran for forty minutes. By the end, my face was so red it looked like I live on the sun.” There’s a brief pause as he rubs his cheek against my hair like he’s a cat rubbing his pheromones all over me. “After that, I went to an antique shop in Brighton to pick up some brass taps to match the ones in the garden, then spent a few hours swearing at my wrench. Just before midday, I had a choreography session. We’re adding new routines next month and it takes me ages to learn all the new moves and positions.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm. My brain sometimes feeds me directions the wrong way around, so until my body get so used to the movements that it automatically creates the right patterns, I look clumsy as hell.”

The image of him at the prom spills into my head. Him pulling a routine out of nowhere to the delight of the crowd. “Nobody would know that to look at you.”

He gently rocks me. “Then all my extra rehearsal time is well spent. But it’s also easier when I dance solo, and my audience are an impressionable bunch of teenagers.”

“Glad I made it easy on you.”

“You’ve never gone easy on me.” His low chuckle sends delicious vibrations across my skin. “Then I had a fitting for the new outfits, then I hurried home to make sure I’d be here in time for my favourite girl.”

His stroke along my arm slows. He cups my shoulder, restricting the movement to just his thumb.

“You’re so tense,” he murmurs when my silence stretches until I don’t know how to break it. “How about I draw you a bath, then wash every part of your body thoroughly?”

“That sounds nice.”

I finally sit up and take the blindfold off, uncertain if I should dress again while we wait for the tub to fill, or if I should just stay naked since I’ll have to take my clothes off again.

Daegan goes through to the bathroom, setting everything in motion, then comes back, leaning against the doorframe, looking at me with a tender smile on his face.

Nothing else. Just looking. Smiling.

It's perfect and I don't even know why.

A moment before his glance would become uncomfortable, he moves to the bed and scoops me into his arms. I tense, giving a little shriek, then laugh as he takes me into the bathroom and tosses me in the tub.

It doesn't seem possible that we'll both fit, but as he snuggles in behind me, the water stays a centimetre below the rim of the tub. He pours in some suds, splashing the water about to raise a nice head of bubbles, then lathers up a washcloth and cleans my body with long, languorous strokes.

The motion is seductive. I close my eyes as he cleans between my fingers, slowly moving up to my elbows before giving a tickling cleanse of my armpits. When he soaps across my breasts, my nipples react to the rough surface of the cloth, turning into hard peaks.

My mind returns to the room behind us where a machine waits for me. I have no idea what the contraption might look like or how it will work, but I know because Daegan picked it, whatever it does will feel good.

Then his hand reaches out of the tub, picking something from the floor, and all thoughts of the machine in the bedroom are forgotten as I arch an eyebrow at the device in his hand. A clit sucker.

I look on with interest as he presses a button and the machine hums into life. Then it's gone from sight, dipping below the level of the water.

He spreads the lips of my pussy apart with one hand, the other steering the bud of the machine against my core. As the vibrations tease at my clit, I close my eyes to enhance the sensation. When I try to place my hand over his, he clicks his tongue against his teeth, whispering, "You're not the one in control here."

With the sucker settled in place, he moves his other hand up to my throat, clasping it lightly with his fingers, increasing and decreasing pressure in tandem with the beat of the device.

His hands on me are like a master playing an exotic instrument, bringing me to life with such gentleness that I half expect my mind to go wandering. But the moment it tries, he's there with a faint crush on my windpipe, a reminder that when Daegan's in control, my brain's not allowed to leave the building, not until he's brought me to the exact spot he wants me to go.

So, I surrender completely, experiencing the same dazed bliss he always brings out of me. My body relaxes into his arms, trusting him, relying on him, even though every part of my history screams not to.

His arms tighten around me, keeping me safe, catching me before I've even started to fall.

CHAPTER TWENTY

DAEGAN

BROOKE'S BODY LOSES ALL ITS UNEXPLAINED TENSION. IT'S probably the toy, the heat of the bath working its magic on her muscles, but in the moment, it's like she's letting go for me.

A dangerous idea, addictive, and I would warn myself away from the sensation but it's too late. Its claws are already digging deep into my flesh, my brain, making the idea of releasing her back into the wild absolute torture.

"You're so beautiful," I whisper, knowing it will bring that frown of annoyance to her brow. A girl who's been told that so often only to have the words followed by indifference or outright cruelty.

Not that she thinks it's untrue, but she knows that, in the end, it doesn't matter.

So I search for other words, others truths about her, ones that won't come with the same heavy baggage being dragged behind them, seams loosening, zippers bursting open to reveal the unkempt packing while an embarrassment of dirty knickers spill on the ground.

Words that will connect with my burgeoning emotions for her. The respect for how she navigates in a world that seems determined to twist and turn to keep her out.

"You're so determined." And that's better but not the level of complimentary I'm going for. "I love how courageous you are, going ahead with your plans even when they unleash utter mayhem."

Except that makes her sound like a rich bitch, doing what she wants with no thought to the consequences and it's not that, close but no cigar.

My fingers tighten on her throat when she tries to reply, a gentle reminder she's not allowed to take over. Not when she sought me out to make her feel good.

“I admire how you can be so vulnerable and open, even though you’ve been hurt. It’s brave. I hope you never lose that ability, to keep trying to get what you need even when the people around fail you.”

Her hand grips the side of the tub, squeaking against the porcelain as her thighs clench around my fingers, around the toy, making the bones in my hand grind against each other as I fight to keep it in place.

I swap, leaving the perfect resting spot of her throat to take the toy, shaking my other hand out underwater before rewarding it with a soft stroke of her arse. My fingers find a plaster, loosening in the water, and I tug it off, curious how she’s hurt herself in such an unusual place.

My fingertips seek the injury while I twist her to the side, clinging to the edge of the bath, mouth hanging open, the squeeze of her thighs still intense but my swapped hand placed at a far better angle.

“You’re so smart and so funny,” I whisper, not even sure if she’s listening any longer. But that’s just as good. Let my words sink into her subconscious while the rest of her mind is occupied with the pleasure rolling across her body in waves.

She makes a small cry, swallowing the sound before it can get going. “You’re so fucking sexy when you make those noises,” I tell her, lifting my hips so she knows what she’s doing to me. “When you make those sounds, all I want to do is sink my cock so far into you that you’ll feel it for the next month.”

Her head drops back, exposing the full length of her throat.

My fingers desperately want to head back there, but I continue to tilt her, bumping her hip to the surface, reading the small lines carved in her tender flesh.

HP.

I doubt she got the carving because of a deeply held love of printers, which means the other obvious option is someone’s initials.

Harrison Powell.

A reminder that she's not mine, no matter how it seems that way.

I'm just an add on she comes to when she needs more and a surge of possessiveness bursts like a flash, whiting out my head until my control vanishes.

I let go of the toy, letting it bob to the surface, plunging my fingers inside her instead, curling them so hard as I draw them out again that she flinches.

Too hard. Or is it just that somebody else is using her more than me?

As her head rests against the edge of the tub, it exposes the white expanse of her shoulder, a clean slate for me to mark with *my* message, *my* sign of ownership. My teeth sink into her flesh, gouging her skin, tasting the soapiness where I cleaned her while the rest of me sits back, watching in horror.

This is the exact situation I've always explicitly avoided. Now, instead of managing my emotions, keeping my distance, I've tumbled headfirst into an actual relationship.

Worse, our interactions are clearly training her for use by another man.

"Stop," she says with a tiny snort, twisting away from the punishment of my teeth. A mark I shouldn't be making and not only because she's not mine but because this isn't what she needs from me.

She needs someone to soothe her, stroke her, calm her.

Last month, she needed me to dominate her, to show her she wasn't malfunctioning. Today, she's fragile. She requires careful handling.

Harrison has left her in such desperate need of aftercare, every inch of her begs to be treated with kid gloves, with the gentle tenderness she deserves while she floats back to equilibrium.

Once I've taken care of her, she'll understand that's what she needs. She can take that information back to him, use it to forge a more balanced relationship.

It's time for me to step back. Retreat.

Instead, I continue marking her, starting a territorial war of ownership with my son.

Brooke whimpers and I relax my jaw, releasing her and snapping my teeth to shake out the glorious sensation of biting into her flesh. "You're so fucking perfect for me," I say when I should tell her to go back to her teenage boyfriend, even if he's a selfish fucking jerk. "I've never wanted anyone as much as I want you."

Her thighs clench harder around my hand, and I withdraw, not wanting her to climax until I'm inside her, just as selfish as my son. "Lean back into me," I direct her, spreading her wide to take me, sloshing a wave of water out of the tub, close to delirium as I listen to it gurgle down the floor drain.

My cock slides into her, the wetness of her arousal flowing enough to counter the grip of the soapy water, so I don't need to be careful, to be slow.

And I'm a prime asshole as I offer her the reassurance she craves above all else.

"I'll never leave you. Even without the money, if you want me, I'll never stray an inch from your side."

Her hand clenches into a fist as she strikes me, the angle so awkward for her there's no force behind the blow. I grab hold of her, my cock thumping home with such a hard stroke that another surge of water spills onto the floor.

"You belong to me, do you hear me?"

The toy bobs by and I grab it, firing it back into life and pushing it against her, so close to coming that I need her to hurry if I'm to bring her along for the ride.

"Whose are you?" I demand, thrusting again, hearing the water patter onto the tiles.

She doesn't answer and I'm furious, so incensed that I nip her earlobe, wanting to torture her the way withholding the answer tortures me.

“I said, whose are you?” I growl, snatching the toy away from her clit just as she’s about to peak.

“Y-yours,” she stutters, voice aching with need. “I’m yours.”

And I bite into her shoulder again as I apply the toy, thrusting my cock as far inside her as I can go, readying to pump my release into her when I know better, when the golden rule of my profession is protection.

But she’s not my client, not any longer, and my cock is desperate to take her as my girl.

When she clenches around me, her whimper becoming a loud gasp of pleasure, I let the toy go, fingers claiming her pussy and swirling around her clit to extend her ecstasy while my cock twitches inside her, firing a warm jet to secure my possession.

I finally release my jaw a second before my teeth would break the skin, growling, acknowledging the elephant in the room.

“I’m not a fucking savage, so I won’t carve my name into you, but you can take that one back to Harrison to show him my claim.”

WHILE BROOKE BLOW dries her hair and whatever else it is she does to look as fabulous as always, I slice, dice, and grate vegetables, ready to toss into a stir-fry.

There’s a nagging worry in the back of my mind. Worry that I can’t remember discussing birth control with her and while she’s probably on something already, *probably* isn’t the greatest standpoint to work from.

She *probably* won’t have my baby growing inside her doesn’t have the same reassurance as *knowing* her body has devices or chemicals to ward off the bloody thing.

And a deeper part of me rejoices in the idea. I didn't capture the first woman I impregnated for long but this one... this one I'm sure I could coax into staying around.

When she walks into the kitchen, I pull her close to me, encircling her in my arms while I wait for the oil to heat, then guide her into adding the different piles of vegetables at different times, keeping them from sticking with the constant motion of the pan.

"I've never cooked before," she admits as I eventually have to move her out of the way. Her eyes are bright, dancing with mischief. A warning sign in anyone else, but with Brooke I'm excited to see exactly what ideas have sparked in her mind.

While I complete the meal, she answers a call, ducking into the bedroom for some privacy, then helps me set the table, following directions until she has a handle on where everything is located, then sorting the rest herself.

There's a lull while we eat. Once I'm through the bulk of my plate, I slow a little, pausing between bites, moving one hand to rest on her knee.

Once she's finished, she takes her plate into the kitchen to rinse in the sink, then turns in a puzzled circle while I watch through the gap between cabinets and bench.

"There isn't a dishwasher," I tell her. "Just leave it on the counter and I'll get to it, later."

"You didn't use protection," she says when she walks back into the room, leaning against the wall, frowning at the floor.

"Are you on birth control?"

"Yes." She digs her toes into the carpet, not making eye contact so I have no idea what she's thinking. "When you said about me telling Harrison—"

"I—" My throat closes, panic igniting a spark of fear. "Maybe not. Sorry, I don't know what the fuck I was thinking."

"He already knows."

Which explains what his little carving trick was about.

“He gave me permission to be here.”

The idea spins through my head, trying to find a place to stop, to let me examine the possibilities.

What does that mean? Permission to be here and do what? Sit on my sofa. Have a cup of tea. Permission to fuck her until she can't walk.

I rage at the idea he *gave her permission* at all, like it was something she needed. It's layered atop the gratitude that she's here, the fear this is a prelude to her saying goodbye.

“I love Harrison.” Brooke tilts her head to the side, frowning into mid-air, while I struggle with how to answer or even if I should. “He's the only man I ever slept with until you.”

A new roar of possessiveness erupts inside me at the admission. Even though it shouldn't matter, I must admit I like being in such an exclusive group. I like it a lot.

I stand, moving towards her but she hunches her shoulders. “Sorry. I just... I have a bunch of stuff to say, and it's awkward, and I need space to say it.”

With a nod, I retake my seat, tension in every muscle, sure I know where this is going. She's breaking up with me.

I stare at the edge of the table instead of looking at her, a pulse leaping in my throat. She fights for words, and I plunge into the gap, not wanting her to work for this any harder than she needs to.

“I love you. It'll break my heart to lose you but if you need to be with my son instead, I'll understand. I won't make things difficult for you or stand in your way.”

When I glance at her, unable to stand the silence, she's frowning at me, teeth worrying her bottom lip though it's already red and swollen. “Harrison let me down and I still don't understand why. I can't—”

She breaks off, striding into the kitchen and pouring a glass of water, drinking the bulk of it in one go, staring into

the sink afterwards, the tumbler curled against her chest. I count off a full minute before she places it down, walks back into the dining room, this time close enough to take a seat.

“I’m so nervous,” she says with a small laugh. “I’m scared I’m going to get this wrong.”

When I reach for her hand, she lets me take it. My fingers massage the tension from it while giving my eyes a place to rest.

“What do you want, Brooke?”

She smiles, like no one ever bothered to ask her the question before. “You love me?”

“Yes.”

“Good, because even when I tried hard not to, I fell in love with you, too.”

I cup the back of her head, pulling her close as my heart swells, needing to kiss her, touch her, taste her, to cement her declaration in my head. The poor swollen lower lip takes it in stride, even when my attempt to be gentle fails.

“I want to marry you and I’m not—” she breaks off while I’m stunned, unable to think of anything to say. “My dad would flash an enormous engagement ring or something as an incentive, but I didn’t think that’d work with you.”

She smiles, a gesture only for herself, secretive even though it’s on full display.

Meanwhile, my brain is in freefall. “You want to what?”

“To marry you. I know it’s too quick and we haven’t...” She breaks off, rubbing her chest, really digging the heel of her palm in like it’s aching. “I need something solid. Something real.”

Her head tilts forward and I shift, guiding it to land on my shoulder. I understand some of what she’s struggling to say. She needs security because falling in love is exhilarating but it’s also fraught with danger, it makes everyone vulnerable.

My thoughts skip back to earlier, in the kitchen, when I wondered if she was pregnant, thinking how Brooke's emotional fragility would make her easy to keep close. Not in a mean way, just an acknowledgement of how her unique traits make it harder for her to walk away.

I understand she's not asking to marry me because she wants a ceremony or has a binder full of dream wedding images tucked under her bed. It's not a romantic gesture to win my heart. It's not to satisfy a fairytale craving.

She wants surety because her heart is already bleeding in a hundred different places. She wants a guarantee, something physical, a ring on her finger, a signed certificate in her hand.

A commitment that isn't just words or fleeting intentions.

When she raises her head from my shoulder, her gaze is steady. I can't see any traces of doubt.

A tingle runs across the back of my neck; the first inkling this could be what I want, too.

"I didn't think you'd appreciate a ring," she says, her lips twitching with amusement. "So as an engagement present, I bought you something I knew you wanted instead. This house."

The idea floors me. The ability to click her fingers and have something I strived so long for and still couldn't reach amazes me and scares me in equal measure. "You bought me a *house*?"

There's a faintly puzzled air about her, like even she doesn't know why she's doing what she's doing. Then she pulls back a little, her smile growing.

"You don't have to. I'm not even sure marriage is really what I mean. It's more..." she flails a hand like she's trying to pluck the right sequence of words from midair. "You asked me what I want."

I nod, floating a smile in encouragement.

And her expression changes from struggling to confident. "I want both of you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

HARRISON

ALL FRIDAY LONG, MY ATTITUDE THAWS. MY MOOD RISING from the depths of the ocean, slowly, cautiously, anxious to avoid the bends.

I crack a joke over breakfast and Everett shoots me an incredulous glance before bursting into laughter. At lunchtime, when Ollie suggests a quick boot around, I jump at the chance, though the twenty minutes spent on the field are guaranteed to leave us muddy for the rest of the day. Not the most pleasant way to sit behind a desk.

In English, I wonder how sore the teacher would be if I asked to return to Miss Murchison's class.

Probably not at all. It's not as though I've made an impact on the few lessons I've had since. The school secretary might flash the wrong type of heated glance my way but it's their job. What else would they spend their time doing?

Either way, it's a question I can safely leave to be answered on another day. After changing, I saunter to the common room, finding a spot on the sofa and falling into the old embrace of friendships, talking, laughing; the return to my old good humour as comforting as the grey sweats I pulled on after lessons.

When dinner comes and goes without a sign of Brooke, a pang of tension winds my stomach tight. After she sends a text message saying change of plan, she's staying out overnight, it resolves but my mind soon insists on forming images that threaten to send me into a tailspin again.

To counter it, I accept Everett's invitation to a night out, relaxing with a couple of beers, chatting with my friends and whatever strangers hover long enough to get pulled into a conversation.

I purposely limit my intake, not wanting a fuzzy head tomorrow, not wanting to wake midway through the night with

cotton in my mouth and my head spooling images I'd rather not see.

When I get back to my room, I crash, falling straight into sleep like I don't have a care in the world, and waking so late on Saturday morning, I have to rush to make breakfast.

Afterwards, I head to Brooke's room, tapping lightly to see if she's in there. She's not but I don't mind waiting. I'm aware my buoyant spirits are down to her, reconnecting with her, even if I've been awful. Really, truly awful. Even if I still haven't discussed the things I need to talk through with her, afraid this reconnection is too fragile to bear the strain. Scared there won't be a good outcome. Aware that the conversation, what might be the hardest conversation of my life, is ready and waiting in the wings, growing ever more impatient as it listens for its cue.

To stay here, waiting, knowing where she is, who she's with, what she's probably doing, is a small penance towards the larger punishment I owe.

And part of the anticipation isn't punishment at all. It's losing myself in thoughts of what he might teach her, what she might bring home to me.

Thoughts of indulging more than my surface level desires. Of delving deeper into where a caveman paces, wanting to do more, control her more, leash her, cage her, take her down to the depths of depravity then hold tight to her as we slowly ascend afterwards, bobbing to the surface.

Finally, there's the scrape of a key in the lock and I sit up on Brooke's bed as she lets herself through the door, my eyes darting from her clothes to her hair to her hands, trying to decipher any clues.

"Hey," I say when she doesn't react beyond a faint sigh. "You're lucky there wasn't lasagne, or it would've gone rancid by now."

"Sorry. Things took longer than I thought." She tosses her keys on the desk and leans against the wall, hugging her arms across her chest. The skin on her cheeks is blotchy, like she's

been crying, but her eyes aren't red-rimmed or swollen. "Did you want something? I need a nap."

I had. Until the moment she walked through the door, I had wanted a million things from her, none of them savoury. But seeing her standing there, looking exhausted, I have a rush of my old tenderness and pat the bed. "Come over here. I promise I won't maul you."

"That's what all the lions say," she mutters, toeing her shoes off and joining me on her bed.

I lie down and, after a moment, she stretches out beside me, arms crossed over her chest like the world's rosiest-cheeked vampire. I turn onto my side to keep my eyes on her, reading her like I'd scan an escape room for clues.

"Here, I got a breakfast bar for you." I pull the muesli and chocolate creation from my pocket, tearing open the wrapper to expose the contents before I hand it across.

She frowns at it, hesitating for a second before she takes it from me. "Thank you."

While she's eating, I pull her onto her side, too, so she's facing me. My arm automatically finds its old position around her waist, and I hug her closer, dropping a kiss on the top of her head. "I'm sorry if I went too far the other night. Did I hurt you?"

She wrinkles her nose and I pull up the edge of her hem, lifting the side of her knickers as I roll her farther towards me, blushing at the puffy red flesh surrounding my initials, hoping it's just irritation from the cut and not an infection setting in.

After chewing her second bite from the bar, she struggles to swallow. There are bruises on her throat, probably bruises on her upper arms.

Shame at the part I've played in this goddamn mess overwhelms me, and I shut my eyes, only opening them when she nudges my hand, offering the bar back to me. "I'm not really hungry."

I finish it for her, tossing the wrapper into the rubbish bin, then hugging her with both arms.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” she murmurs, most of her soft voice lost to the curve of my shoulder. “You won’t like it.”

“You blitzed my history essay from the student portal and I’m about to get booted from the school?”

“Like you did with my English assignment?” She gives me a short sideways punch with absolutely no force behind it. I catch her hand, stroking the knuckles, wishing I still had that white-hot anger I’ve been carrying around since term break.

I thought that rage and despair were torture. But this—being near to her while she seems miles away—this is the true agony.

“I had a long talk with your dad about everything that’s been going on.”

My arms close tighter around her, hugging her against my chest like she’s a giant snuggly, offering her inadequate comfort against the cruelty of the world. “About us double dating?”

She doesn’t respond to that and of course it’s not what she meant. I close my eyes, trying to concentrate on the sensation of her against my body, under my hands, within the circle of my arms.

“Don’t do this,” I beg in a whisper. “Whatever you’re about to say or do... please don’t.”

“I thought we were going to be happy forever,” she says instead, switching tracks to one just as painful but at least a known journey.

Her hand seeks mine, tapping the back until I release her side and she can entwine our fingers together.

“Why won’t you even talk to me?”

This isn’t fair.

The world shouldn’t come into alignment again just to change direction and send me spinning out towards the edge.

“I could ask the same question of you. If you needed something else in bed, why didn’t you tell me?” My nose is running, and I untangle myself from her enough to wipe it on my sleeve. There are pinpricks in the corner of my eyes, and I bite the inside of my cheek, forcing the automatic reaction into retreat.

There’s far too much caution in her eyes as she answers, “Because you’d broken up with me.”

“Before the breakup.” I have to force my throat to release each word, straining my vocal cords because they’re tightly clenched, trying to hold everything in the way they’d used to. “Instead of going to somebody else, why didn’t you—”

“There wasn’t anyone else.” Brooke stares at me with... I don’t know, pity? Sympathy? Confusion? “I’ve only been with you and your...”

She lets that one float away, and a hand squeezes my heart in its fist, the pain too unbearable for me to even gasp for air. I jump from the bed, striding across the room, leaning my back against the wall. Wanting to run a million miles away. Wanting to crowd even closer.

Brooke sits upright, then slowly stands, slowly approaches. Her expression is sharp with anticipation, relaxing as I grab hold of her, where I’d expect the opposite.

I push her against the wall, clasp her chin in a pincer grip I hold hard enough to strain my knuckles. “I don’t want to discuss this. We have an agreement, remember? Get back on the bed. I need to fuck you.” My voice drops half an octave and halves its volume. “I need to be inside you.”

“And you need to listen to me. It’s important.”

“Really?” She’s so easy to manoeuvre. So easy to make her do what I need her to when I need it. All it takes is my steel fingers on her face to pull her away from the wall, to walk her backwards until her knees hit against the edge of the bed. It only requires the faintest pressure to make her sit.

She tries to slap my hand away, but I barely register it. I want to punish her, but I hurt her on Monday, on Thursday. I

can't keep doing it.

There's a darkened patch of skin on her throat where the topmost button of her blouse has slipped open. When I pull it to the side, I can see the bruises I gave her the other night.

I bend my head, running my tongue over the crimson indents, sucking at the deepening browns and purples where blood has leaked under the skin, leaked out from the imprint of my fingers. I lick my tongue against her in one long stretch from the marks up to her ear.

"You want to watch your mouth," I growl, seeing the shiver spread across her exposed flesh as it rises into goosebumps. When did she become so fucking sensitive? Another glut of blood fires into my cock. "Otherwise, it might get you in trouble."

"It's already got me in trouble," she pants, shoving the heel of her palm into my chest, pushing as hard as she can and getting nowhere.

The thrill of overpowering her takes hold. I finally release her chin only to pin her arms above her head, grinding myself against her, watching the twin delights of anger and desire go spiralling across her face.

"Got you into trouble how?"

Her lips peel back in an evil grin. "I mouthed off to your father but luckily he knows when to spank me."

I know it's a lie, I *think* it's a lie, but I'm engulfed in a wave of fury so palpable it makes my muscles tremble and my limbs shake.

"You want a spanking?" I pin her wrists with one hand, reaching for my belt buckle with the other. "I'll give you a fucking spanking."

"I don't want anything from you until you tell me what I want to know."

She writhes underneath me, one of her legs rising far enough for her knee to stray into danger territory near my balls. I unbutton my jeans, pulling my zipper down, then shove

her attacking leg flat on the bed, using my weight to keep it there.

“Really,” I drawl, pushing her skirt up high enough to get a finger inside her panties, rejoicing as her hips buck against me, at her arousal slick between my fingers. “Because it feels like you need fucking.”

“Pity your dad got their first.”

Part of me can't stand to hear her mouth off to me while the rest of me likes it, enjoys the way it spurs me to ever more dizzying heights of desire.

It was her smart mouth that first attracted me. Not the class clown, that was my role, but I loved how she'd roll her eyes at a teacher, mumble some droll witticism under her breath. A complete epitome of a spoiled brat. And once I noticed her, I couldn't stop; she was everywhere, my eyes seeking her out at every turn along the school corridors.

My eyes that could never stop searching for her, even when the pain of her betrayal hurt the most.

I try to drag her underwear down but the elastic catches and I'm too eager to wait it out. I push the fabric aside and nudge the head of my cock into her, the movements of her body under me growing more frantic until I ease my full length inside her, gripping her thigh so tightly with my fingers that she whimpers, a cry I catch with my mouth, pressing my lips tight against hers.

“Is this what you like to do with my father?” I ask her, nuzzling into her hair, seeking her earlobe and sucking it into my mouth, laving it with my tongue. I rock my hips forward, getting deeper, settling into her until I'm fully encased. “Does the old man have to get you off quickly because he doesn't have the stamina these days?”

“You're the one who struggles to get me off,” she shoots back at me.

“Oh, yeah?” I reach under her blouse, inside her bra, fingers finding her hard nipple and giving it a savage tweak, watching the wince of pain contort her face. Doing it again,

slower, watching as this time, her head tilts back, exposing her throat, while her muscles clench around me, pumping me like she can get off from just soaking.

I withdraw, gasping at the loss of her wet warmth but taking my pleasure from denying hers. There's a glassy tint to her eye as she stares at me, her expression altering from pleading to snarling and back again, changing so fast it gives me whiplash.

Instead of entering her again, my cock slides along her folds, grinding against her, almost as good as being inside. When I slip too far, Brooke wraps her legs around me, centring me where it feels best for her and I can't move, the joy of refusing her lost against the far greater signals of joy pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

"You can't even find the hole," she says, tilting her hips as she thrusts against my buttocks with her heel, trying to nudge me back inside. "How about a week's worth of lessons? Just to get you started."

"That's a lot of lip for someone who can't even get her arms free."

I move my hand from her tits so I can hold her down with both as her struggles to escape increase until she's panting from the effort.

This time, when I rub myself against her, she tilts her pelvis and I'm slipping inside, the passage so wet I don't even need a guide.

I lift my torso, trying to remove the pressure against her clit, to deny her pleasure even as I increase mine, but she's squirming again, wriggling and writhing until she gets part of what she needs. Not all but it must be close to enough as her eyes become steadily more glazed and her mouth sags open.

As it gapes, I lean forward, taking her bottom lip between my teeth, biting to hurt her, to mark her, to claim her as my cock finds its rhythm and plunges into her again and again, speeding to a savage stroke.

The need to have her naked breasts against me is overwhelming and I let go of her wrists with one hand, fumbling at the buttons of her blouse, giving up and tearing at the fabric when they don't instantly obey my clumsy commands. Flipping her cups up rather than fiddling with the clasp.

My hand squeezes her tit, watching her face to see the moment she winces, recording the pressure so I release, then squeeze harder again, riding her up to the point of pain and keeping her there, edging her, so many pieces of the puzzle finally falling into place.

The ecstasy on her face, the way her breathing hitches and gasps, her eyelids hooding, her cheekbones flushing until they appear streaked with crimson warpaint, with blood.

All those months spent being careful, being cautious, not wanting to hurt her. I slam my cock into her, hard enough to sound like a clap, turning our fucking into a rapturous round of applause.

I tug the fabric farther apart, exposing her shoulder, exposing a bite mark.

My blood runs cold at the sight. My ears buzz like a fly's trying to make an emergency landing.

I gave her permission, I know where she went, but the evidence of it still makes my heart seize. My body jerks like someone attached an electric wire.

“Who marked you?”

“I told you,” she says through gritted teeth, ecstasy banked up in her throat, squeezing out of her lungs, spilling into the air. “Your daddy says hello. Your daddy wants you to know you changed your mind too fucking late because I belong to him now. Better get your fun in before he takes exception to you fucking his bride.”

A roar surges from my throat, catching in her mouth as I crush my lips against it, desperate to stop her voice from clawing into my brain.

I fuck her, so hard, so fast, so rough that it feels like I'm possessed by another person. A wild man clinging fast to the tattered scraps of something he once thought belonged to him, learning too late it was a transitory delusion. Learning the truth only once his heart and soul were long gone.

Then her walls grip me, muscles spasming while she rides a wave of pleasure through to its stuttering, fluttering conclusion. I still, resting inside her while the convulsions grip me, exulting in the sensation that escaped her for so long.

And when it's over, I start again, knowing it's too much for her, watching her features pinch with the pain of nerve endings strung too thin, too near to the peak to appreciate such rough handling.

When I take that final thrust home, hauling on her shoulders to pump as high into her as possible, there's a fleeting sense of peace, of fulfilment.

Her body and mine playing their joyous sympathy until we both sing.

Then the questions flow in to fill the gap.

I roll off her, my arms automatically pulling her close to me, still living in a past that can never be reclaimed, still looking out for their girl. I bury my face in the side of her neck, hiding from the light until I can regroup just the tiniest sliver. Gathering myself ready for a battle I no longer have the stomach to fight.

My thumb strokes against the curve of her hip, moving in wider circles until I'm brushing over her arse, finding the mark I put on her body. Even without looking, I can feel the puffiness of the damaged skin, trace out the shapes I cut with my knife.

When I'm ready, I hitch myself up onto one elbow, resting my head on one hand while using the other to pull the fabric away from her neck, away from where she's pulled it to cover.

I could pretend it doesn't bother me. Could take my cue from Joseph and pretend she's nothing more than a hole to stick my dick into, one better than the others on offer.

But the saliva in my mouth dries. Brooke looks away from me, staring at the wall, her eyes shiny. Hiding from me.

And the question in my head is how much of what she's said tonight is shit talk, designed to get a rise out of me—literally—and how much is real?

“How many times have you seen my dad?”

Her eyes flick back to mine, nervous teeth worrying at her swollen lip, a frown betraying her concern. An answer before she even opens her mouth. “I don't know. I didn't keep count.”

“When did you start?”

“After you said”—her face twists like she can't bring herself to say it—“the things you said.”

A shiver runs through me as I recall the cruel taunts I yelled at her in a moment of weakness. The way I lashed out, wanting to cause pain... and here it is. Pain. For her and for me.

“I just wanted to hire someone to see... to check I wasn't like you said I was.”

“And how many times did you check?” She doesn't answer and I lift her farther towards me, cupping her shoulder, trying to keep a firm clamp on my anger because if I scare her now, if I hurt her now, she's really gone.

“I didn't want to have to worry about him seeing other clients, so I booked all his appointment times, but I haven't kept track.” She pinches her lips together with her fingers like they're independent contractors, trying to keep the words from spilling out her mouth. “I asked him to marry me. I bought him a house.”

A laugh bursts out of me, just the one. It's lunacy but as I check her expression, I don't see the telltale signs of a lie.

“You can't *marry* him, Brooke. He's twice your age.”

She gives a single shrug. “That doesn't matter when I'm the one chasing him.”

The words hit my solar plexus, making my legs retract and my head spin. I'm in a conversation that could affect the rest of my life, but I haven't prepared, my brain isn't in the mood for thinking. "If you want to piss me off, you've succeeded. You don't need to go any further. There's no need to ruin your life."

"I like him."

"I like Alicia but I'm not going to marry her."

"You can. She'd probably be grateful."

I close my eyes, grabbing her hip, stroking lower where I put my mark on her, remembering that she belonged to me first. "That's hardly the fucking point."

"Well, what is your point, then?"

"He's my *dad*."

"And you *left*. You left me when you promised you wouldn't and now you won't even tell me why. If I want to marry him and spend money on him to make sure he stays, I'm allowed to do that."

"You're *buying* him? Jesus."

"Get out." She shoves her hands at me, one catching me off guard, so the air whooshes from my lungs. "Give me my keys and get out of my room. I don't want to cheat on my fiancé so whatever the fuck this was, it's over."

"You don't want to cheat?" I grab her wrists, holding them tightly while she struggles to get free. "Isn't that a bit fucking late?"

"Says the boy who's got half the girls in the school fighting each other for dibs."

I pin her, straddling her, putting my knees onto her shoulders so she can't escape. "You know what I haven't done? I haven't touched another girl since we first got together, that's what I haven't done. Whereas you—" I dig out my phone and find the right link, shoving the evidence in her face.

For a second, I get a glimpse of hope. The puzzled expression makes my chest hollow out like I've made a mistake.

Then her face hardens.

"*This* is why you broke up with me?" She holds up my phone and when I try to snatch it back, she shoves me away, thumbs flying over the screen before she tosses it back to me.

"We agreed, no cheating." And my voice sounds like it's coming from a million miles away because she's not denying it, she's not giving me the sliver of hope that there's been some gargantuan mix-up that we'll laugh over one day.

Instead, her face is strained, on the verge of collapse. Her eyes are creased with concern. "Where did you get this? How did you find it?"

The last of my composure shreds.

Not, 'I'm sorry.'

Not, 'It was a mistake.'

Not, 'I'll never do anything like that again.'

Where did you get this?

Because she doesn't even care that she's been exposed, all she wants is to stop the video circulating any further.

"Alicia showed it to me." The pit opens its maw, ready to swallow me whole. "She saw me fussing with the engagement ring and thought I should know before things went too far." I shake my head, hair falling forward to shield my eyes. "She was looking out for me."

"Engagement ring?"

I glance up and have to look away again. Brooke's eyes are hard, splintered with shards of sea glass. She's in damage control mode, perhaps the only useful thing she ever learnt from her father.

The pain twists, finds a new way to wring another level of agony from me. It's debilitating and the only thing that lessens it is to share.

“I was going to ask you to marry me. While you were fucking the *cook*, I was out putting together the perfect engagement ring.” A harsh laugh tears from my throat. “The only thing I thought I had to worry about was you saying no. Guess that was a lucky escape.”

But she’s gone. The door slams behind her like she’s storming from my room rather than hers.

I get to my feet, adjusting my clothing, slowly following her. So slow that by the time I reach the student housing lobby, Brooke is outside, getting into a car.

She’ll go to my dad. Ready to spill a wealth of lies so he won’t be as blindsided as I was by the revelation.

Good riddance. They deserve each other.

Except those thoughts don’t stick. They don’t plant roots and grow.

I imagine spending the rest of the year hearing on the grapevine about Brooke’s wedding plans. The whole school abuzz with the news, students jostling each other in the corridors as I walk by. The boy who got cucked by his own dad.

My fury surges again. Fuck them both.

If I can’t have Brooke, bugged if my father can either.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

DAEGAN

THE HAMMERING ON THE DOOR IS SO LOUD, SO URGENT, THAT in the few moments I take to answer it, I think open warfare has burst out on our street. Instead, another form of battle waits for me on the front step.

Harrison stands there, bedraggled, hands clenched in fury. A grenade that Brooke pulled the pin on before tossing my way.

As I open the door, waving him inside, I peer over his shoulder, searching for her. That she's not there confuses the hell out of me. Surely, she wouldn't leave me to explain our news to my son on my own.

I indicate a seat, but he remains standing, every muscle in his body held tense. "Where is she?"

I shake my head, but he doesn't accept the answer, stomping through the house, investigating every room. "There's no one here," I tell him twice, then move to the couch to wait for him to confirm it for himself.

"She told me you're *dating*. That she wants to get married."

Again, I shake my head, with less confidence this time. "Maybe. We've only just begun to talk about it." His face is mottled, dark circles are smudged under his eyes. "I guess you've got a lot of opinions on the subject."

It's not meant to be a taunt but I'm uneasy, unsure of myself. Harrison is a different kid than the one I remember, the one who last stayed with me. Perhaps because he's not a kid, not any longer.

In the time we were separated, he's grown into a man. One who looks like he'd do more damage to me than any of my rough neighbours. Maybe worse than all of them combined.

"Is she still on her way?"

I shrug, not liking my position on the sofa because it gives him such a height advantage but not willing to move. Unwilling to show him how unsettled he makes me. “Brooke’s already been and gone. I doubt she’ll be dropping by again today.”

“She didn’t text you?” He pulls out his phone like it’s a reflex, staring blankly at the screen.

“She hasn’t been in contact,” I assure him. “What’s happened? I guess she talked to you. Can you tell me what she said?”

“Talked.” There’s a hard smile on his face that I don’t want to see there. This is worse than seeing his initials on her skin. I don’t want my son to explain that smile any more than he wanted to find her waiting here in my bedroom. “Yeah, we talked.”

“If she’s on her way here, I don’t know anything about it, but you’re welcome to wait.”

He continues to stand, tapping at his phone, each passing second cranking my nerves tighter.

“Would you like a drink or something to eat?”

“I’d like you to stop fucking my girlfriend.”

“Same.”

His glare is sharp enough for me to want to take back the retort, then his lips twitch. A tiny gesture that he immediately captures and puts to death, but it was there.

“I could make pancakes.”

It used to be a Saturday morning ritual. When he was young, Harrison would wake at the crack of dawn on the weekend, eager to get started on all the fun he’d been planning during the week.

Gwyn sent him to me regularly back then, always a fan of a sleepy lie-in on the weekend. I’d get up with him, sometimes before five, always before six, and make pancakes while my son, ‘helped.’ Afterwards, he’d sit in front of the television, watching the children’s programming while I repaired the

damage done to the kitchen, rewarding myself with a coffee once the cleaning was done.

I expect him to turn me down; in the short time he's been here, his excess energy has burned off, leaving him with the shakes.

But he says yes, following me into the kitchen, leaning against the wall, watching my every move as I get out the ingredients.

It's crowded, the two of us and the enormous elephant in the room, but the simple process of pulling the recipe together relaxes me. The flour looks too old, the sugar is some organic stuff that I bought to make myself feel better about still craving it, the milk is high protein, but the process is the same. The first one off the pan is still rubbish.

"I didn't know," I start with, a repeat of the message I've already texted him. "She contacted me, asking for help."

"You help a lot of eighteen-year-olds, do you?"

There's broken glass in his voice but I dance around the sharp edges. "I arranged a meeting first, just a chat at a café in town. Before I went, I expected it would take all of ten minutes then I'd send her home."

I insert a spatula under the leading edge of the pancake, jiggling it to get further under, then flipping it, loving the sound as the surface sizzles against the low fat spread that I can definitely believe is not butter.

"But you didn't."

I glance to the side, nodding to the cabinet below the counter. "There should be some lemon juice in there or some sugar-free maple syrup."

He bends, rooting through the mix of eclectic items until he stumbles upon the right ones. While I shake the second pancake onto a plate, he squeezes some lemon juice over, using the organic sugar to take the edge off the topping.

"She was beautiful," I say, picking up where I left off. "And she was hurting." I glance over, accidentally catching his

gaze, and we both look away. “When she told me what you’d said to her, I didn’t know it was you, but I wanted to wring your neck.”

“Yeah, well.”

He’s halfway through the rolled pancake and now stuffs the rest in his mouth, focusing on chewing while he sorts out his answer. I flip the next one in the pan, and keep my eyes averted, letting him get there in his own time.

“She hurt me first.” He opens his mouth to continue, then stops, his throat working, new blotches blooming on his face as he struggles to get the words free. “She cheated on me.”

“No.” The denial is out of my mouth before I can give it a second thought.

But Brooke, cheating? The broken girl who trembled while she told me she didn’t like anything about sex, but she wanted to. It’s unthinkable.

“Yes. I have the proof. It’s not... she didn’t even deny it when I showed her.”

There’s a whiff of smoke as I stare at him, my attention diverted away from the pan for too long. I flip the pancake with its extra-crispy edges, guessing that’s one for my pile. “What proof?”

“A video. He filmed her.”

That gets a sharp glance. “He who? Did she know?”

“It’s the chef her stepmother uses. *Warren*.” The limp sound of his name suggests just saying it brings along a haul of baggage. “She watched him set up the cameras. She got really into it.”

There’s a small jolt as I remember the hotel room and how excited Brooke had been, pressing her naked form against the glass while I told her stories of the people watching.

I enjoyed finding that exhibitionist streak. At the time, I’d thought about calling in a favour and getting along an extra helper. Not to participate, but to watch. I thought she’d get a kick out of it, testing out the limits of another hidden desire.

“What is it?” Harrison narrows his eyes at me. “Did she tell you?”

“No.” I continue to shake my head as I finish another pancake, adding more low-fat spread to the pan, ladling out another spoon of batter. “I just...”

Of all the awkward conversations I’ve had with my son over the years, this is by far the awkwardest. Nothing else comes close.

But I’m still marvelling that we’re having a conversation at all. That I have the luxury of taking peeks at Harrison, charting the differences between now and the last time I properly saw him, years ago.

Everything has altered, his height, his build. The chubby cheeks have thinned out while his jaw grew wider, his brow more prominent. The planes of his face so similar to mine that I wonder what happened to all the markers of his mother that I used to see there.

I don’t want to wreck anything. But holding back information feels like the damp cloth that would smother the first sparks of a rekindled relationship.

“I thought she might have a few leanings in that direction, that’s all.” My face smiles of its own accord, remembering. “When she found out what dogging meant, she had one of those moments when her face went like this”—I screw it into a gesture of disgust—“then like this”—I change it to one of intrigue—“then she asked a whole lot more questions.”

“What’s dogging?”

My mouth twists and I force it steady. “Having sex in the back of a car, in full view of anyone who wants to watch through the windows.” He wrinkles his nose enough that I laugh. “Just another of the delights we inherited from British culture.”

“And she wanted to do that?”

There’s a pinch of apprehension in my gut. Not for Harrison to hear this but for me to tell Brooke’s secrets. This isn’t like the chatter between sex workers discussing their

clients, it's closer to a betrayal. If she were here now, I doubt she'd let me divulge as much.

"She was interested in theory. We haven't got anywhere near putting it into practice."

"Did you do a lot of that?" When I raise my eyebrows at him, he elaborates, "Talking about sex. About the kinds of things she might like."

"She was scared there was something wrong with her," I say gently, imagining her sore point might be an issue for him, too. "So, yeah, we discussed a lot of different things. I wanted to gauge her reactions and see where she was most responsive."

He nods, wiping his second pancake around the plate to gather up the escaping sugar crystals. "Is that... do you do that with all your girlfriends or is that a client thing?"

"It's both," I answer, wanting to drop it but he's talking to me. My *son is talking to me*. Even in this discussion, fraught with tension, it's nice. Something I thought in my darkest days, I'd never get again. "I guess the work feeds into the practice. Once you get used to having the discussions, why wouldn't you? It's always better to be aware of what the other person likes."

There's a sheen in his eyes that I don't want to explore. I don't want him to tell me how much my actions have hurt him. To explain what it felt like to have a sex worker for his dad.

I clear my throat, angling away from me, not wanting to second guess my behaviour. "How old's this chef?"

Harrison frowns, then blinks rapidly, returning his empty plate to the bench, ready for the next one. "Around your age, I guess. Maybe older."

"Even if she did experiment with him, you're both young. You're both going to make plenty of mistakes."

His jaw hardens. "It's not a stumble. It's not getting drunk and hugging someone too long when she said goodbye. She fucked a member of her household staff on camera. Maybe

I'm wildly off base, but it doesn't seem like the kind of thing you'd do the first time, so it's not even a one-off."

"Perhaps she wanted to see if she was doing something wrong."

"She *was* doing something wrong. She was cheating."

The facts are hard to deny but taking the losing side of an argument is second nature. "She was worried about her inability to orgasm."

I hope Brooke never knows I divulged her private secrets like this. He might be my son, but he's her ex—though that label no longer seems to apply. Either way, I promised to protect her privacy. I promised to keep any details she told me to myself.

"Yeah. That problem lasts until about three minutes into the show."

I slide the second to last pancake onto his plate, frowning as I work through his statement. "Can I see?"

My phone beeps a second later. "Knock yourself out."

He takes the spatula from my hand, impatience making him turn up the element, though it'll just cause the last one to burn rather than cook. I move back against the refrigerator, clicking onto the link, reminding myself whatever's on here isn't anything to do with me. That we didn't know each other at the time. The only person with a grievance here is Harrison.

And my stomach immediately lurches when I see Brooke filling out the image. See her laughing, moving around on the bed, responding to the man's touches.

"Could you turn the sound off?" my son asks in a strangled voice, and I immediately comply, grateful for the suggestion. The images are bad enough, sound would undo me.

Then I see the point that apparently sticks in Harrison's craw. Not the setup, not the camera, but the way she comes with barely any prompting.

And the utter certainty flows into my mind. It looks like her. Pieces sound like her. But there's no way the woman on

the screen is the same girl I've spent time with, grown accustomed to, fallen in love with.

“Brooke wouldn't cheat.”

HARRISON

He hasn't changed. All the old arrogance is there. The complete self-assurance that even if he doesn't know all, he knows best. Overriding my decisions, my conclusions. Just like he used to do with my mum.

Why can't Brooke see through this act? She must know he would leave her at the drop of a hat. The same way he abandoned my mother. The way he rejected me when I needed him most.

"Maybe you don't understand the concept," I fire at him, wanting to wipe the smirk off his face. I hate that five minutes after watching that clip my life had turned upside-down but here he is, taking it all in his stride.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I turn, folding my arms. "Since you regularly shagged other women when you were engaged to Mum, perhaps you see nothing wrong with Brooke fucking someone else. After all, he was there, and she wanted it. That's all the reason you ever needed, isn't it?"

"I never slept around on your mum."

"You were fucking other people every day, what do—"

"For *work*. Not sneaking around behind her back."

"Oh, for work," I say with a snigger. "Like Brooke's *for work*."

"Brooke's different."

"How? How is this any different from what you were doing?"

But he weasels into another question instead of answering mine. "Is that what Gwyn told you? That I was cheating on her."

I want to hurl another round of invectives into his face but there's something in his expression that stops me. Hints of

sadness lurk in his eyes. He appears genuinely *hurt*.

Before I can answer, he says, “You know, the sole reason I went into stripping was because it was the only thing where I could earn enough money. I was eighteen. I didn’t have any qualifications.”

“Why’d you go into sex work, then? If you were already making money.”

“Because you got sick, and the bills got higher, and nobody would give us a loan. Nowadays, you could go online and start a funding drive, but I didn’t know about things like that back then.”

He swipes the hair away from his face with short, stiff gestures, forehead creasing so deep it looks like someone’s slashed at him with a knife.

“If I hadn’t earned the extra, Gwyn wouldn’t have been able to stay up in Auckland with you. It was unbearable enough for me to remain down here, it would’ve destroyed her.”

A pinch of guilt hits. “So, it’s my fault.”

He gives an exasperated sigh. “Of course, not. I’m not assigning blame, just telling you what happened. It’s nobody’s fault. These were the cards we were dealt, and I thought...”

He breaks off, pinching at the bridge of his nose before spreading his fingers wider to rub at his eyes. When his hand drops away, there’s a shine to them that wasn’t there earlier.

“I thought I was doing the right thing.”

Mum hadn’t told me that. I knew I’d been ill, that I’d needed surgery as a baby, but the rest of it is new information.

When she explained, it sounded like something he got into because he already had sex with other women on the side and wanted to get paid for it. A lifestyle choice that he made with his own needs in mind, not caring what anyone else thought.

She never told me if he hadn’t, I would have been on my own. A scared baby having painful surgery while the parents I depended upon were stuck in another city.

But I cling to the familiar. “That was when I was less than a year old. You’re still doing it.”

“Because I find it easier. The stripping is more physically demanding, so I like to be able to oscillate between them. In less time than I spend in rehearsals, I can earn the same money or more by sucking a few cocks.” He shrugs. “Or having mine sucked.”

My gaze darts to his face, eyes widening. “You’re *gay*?”

He stifles a laugh. “No, I’m not gay. I told you, it’s work. The gig is about my client’s pleasure, not my own.” When I continue to stare at him, he utters a long sigh. “The demand is there. Even when I only list for women, I get a steady stream of requests from men. If I didn’t accept some, I wouldn’t make rent.”

Comprehension clicks. Like a shift in my brain where all the odd slots and protrusions suddenly line up and slide into place. When he says work, he means it. “Why is it different with Brooke?”

“I don’t know.” He folds his arms and I unfold mine, rinsing out our plates in the sink. He must sense my frustration because he tries again. “I was attracted to her. She was... We like the same things. In bed and out of it.”

He stops talking but I wait, the answer nowhere near what I need from him, a realisation he must come to on his own because he inhales a deep breath, then continues.

“Right from the start, she didn’t feel like a client. That’s an enormous red flag but I couldn’t make myself stop seeing her. Part of it was not wanting to hurt her but mostly...” He tilts his head back, staring at the ceiling like it’s full of answers. “I thought it would be easier to fix the broken pieces when it was over than give up before we got started.”

His gaze meets mine, then flick away, darting around the room before coming to rest on the floor.

“I wanted her and by the time I worked out I shouldn’t, it was too late.”

“Too late.”

He zooms in on the dismissiveness. “There isn’t a rhyme or reason to it. I like her. I’ve liked her from the start.”

The worst thing is, I understand. She’s quick, funny, intelligent. I fell for her over a few quips in a classroom, following her around like an eager puppy, unable to move on even when I thought it was hopeless.

Of course, he likes her. There’s probably a joke in there about being genetically disposed to love Brooke but I’m wound too tightly to find it.

“You should’ve stopped seeing her the moment you knew.” I don’t need to tell him what, he already understands.

“I tried.”

“Not hard enough.”

He pushes away from the wall, coming closer, getting in my face and I want him to, I want to fight him so much. Even if he’ll probably win, I want to see how many blows I can deal before I can’t lift my fist to punch him again.

His voice is low and smooth and unrelenting. “You discarded her like she was nothing. If she wants to see someone else, I think that’s her call, don’t you?”

“Well, now she’s seeing me again so you can back off.” I put my hand on his chest and shove him back a step. “Whatever you thought was happening, this isn’t it. You’re another one of her servants and now her itch is scratched, she doesn’t need you.”

I have an inch in height, but the muscles rippling under his shirt give me pause. Although I play sports for fun, I’ve never been an athlete. I’ve never stepped foot in a real gym, only using the one at school when the curriculum forces me there.

He closes the gap again and just as I think he’s drawing back to strike me, his arms go around me, pulling me into an embrace, folding my head down against his shoulder. “I’m sorry this is how we’ve reconnected. I wish the circumstances were different.”

“They can be.” I shove against him, but my struggles aren’t in earnest. When I close my eyes, the air smells the same way it used to when I was a boy. Dad smells the way he used to.

I remember the same hug when I came a cropper while skateboarding at age eight, skinning my entire side as I slid down the edge of the concrete curve. When a boy in my class teased me for having a mismatched uniform, after I walked alongside granny’s casket, proud to be a pallbearer but reeling as I came to terms with the finality of death.

Nostalgia grips my throat hard as I relax into the hold. My arms go around him, hugging back, grateful because I’ve been so lonely down here, even before everything went to shit.

Then the same emotion twists into aggression. I’ve been lonely because he lied to my mother, telling her he was down in Dunedin when he just didn’t want to see me. I try to withdraw but he clings to me.

“You can bugger off and leave me and my girlfriend alone. It’s bad enough I had to share her with a glorified cook, I don’t want to share her with you.”

“She’s not sleeping with anyone else.”

My anger comes out in a rush, pushing against him until I stagger free. “She is. You can see it.”

“It’s not Brooke.”

The confidence is unwavering. His gaze steady. No matter the evidence in front of his eyes, his belief appears unshakeable.

“You don’t know that. You just want it to be true,” I choke out. “Well, so did I. The man in the video—” My voice breaks apart as I recall the smirk on Warren’s face as I demanded to know the truth. The expression that eradicated any hope. “He confirmed it.”

“And what did Brooke say?”

“She didn’t deny it.” He holds my gaze steady until I add, “She just wanted to know where it came from.”

He gives me another hug, firmer, shorter. “I think we need to find her and work out what’s true and what’s not. Do you know where she might have gone?”

I spurt out a laugh. “Obviously not. I thought she was here.”

“Where did the video come from?”

“Alicia.” I plaster my hand across my eyes for a few seconds, gathering up the tattered remnants of my composure. “She knew I wanted to ask Brooke to marry me, and she showed me the video because she didn’t want me to be hurt.”

Queries form and dissipate behind his eyes. Finally, he lands on, “That’s her stepmother?”

I nod, then dig out my phone as I remember I can track Brooke. A simple app we set up in better days. The software connects, the map resolving into smaller and smaller fragments until it pinpoints her location with a dot. “She’s at the airport.”

My father steps close enough to slap a hand across my shoulders. “Then we’d better head after her before she gives up on both of us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BROOKE

I'M WAITING IN THE PRIVATE TERMINAL WHEN I HEAR A commotion near the door. Happy for any distraction from my thoughts, I glance over, then jump to my feet as I recognise one of the raised voices.

Halfway to the entrance, I recognise the other, and my walk becomes a run.

“What are you two doing here?”

Harrison stands toe to toe with the doorman, his presence keeping the automated doors open while he glares with fury at the man preventing further entry. Daegan stands back a pace, arms folded like a bouncer as he adds his glower.

At my voice, they both turn, both break into identical smiles. For a second, they could be twins.

“We came to find you, of course,” Harrison grumps, eyes still taking swings at the hapless doorman as he steps back and allows them both through. “What did you think I was going to do? Sit in your room and wait?”

The unlikelihood of that scenario makes me smile, even if nerves soon wipe the expression from my face. “And you brought your father because...?”

Daegan steps forward, cupping my shoulder and kissing my cheek in welcome. “Because you said you wanted both of us so both of us is what you get.”

Harrison doesn't react quickly enough to hide his surprise, but he also doesn't contradict him. I blink, moving my gaze from one to the other, then opt to take them at face value until they give me a reason not to.

“You're going to visit your stepmother?” Daegan asks and I nod. “You don't mind if I tag along, do you?”

“If we both tag along,” Harrison interjects, frowning.

My eyes choose him to rest on, trying to imagine the scene that brought about this unlikely family reunion. He meets my gaze, steady, calm, dependable. There's a hint of a smile on his lips that makes him look identical to the Harrison of a few months ago.

I wonder where he found that boy, how hard he had to work to slip back into his old skin.

“Alicia always loved a party.”

My voice is light, but a river of emotion is dammed behind it. All my memories of Alicia—most of them happy—are in a vault, sealed up tight. Once I've confronted her, have her response, I'll be able to take them out again, reexamine them in a new light.

Until then, I need to stay removed. Don my familiar armour to ensure any attack won't do more damage than I can sustain.

If I start thinking of the ways she manipulated Harrison, hurt me, I'll go screaming into a meltdown.

“Harrison showed me the video,” Daegan says and my core freezes over. Then he adds, “It's fake, yeah?” and I thaw in relief.

I nod, fighting to keep my emotions in check as the gratitude flows through me. That he could trust in me rather than believe the evidence in front of his eyes.

But when his face pinches, ready to ask another question, I cut him off, derailing him along a tangent because I don't think I'll be able to talk through the implications of the video right now. “Are you two, okay?”

“Yes,” Harrison says firmly. “Although I'm not at all sure about this marriage business. That's just weird.”

The mildness of his reaction tells me he's trying. I try to match his energy as I tease, “Says the boy with an engagement ring stashed somewhere.”

“It's not stashed anywhere,” he says sadly. “I threw it away.”

“Brooke Ellis?” a suited attendant calls from the front desk. “Your plane is ready.”

“Oh, shit. No, it’s not.” I hurry over, waiting for her to connect me to the pilot. “Change of plans. We have another two on board for the flight.” I wave the pair over to provide their weight to the pilot, then we move into the private lounge while they arrange for further fuel. “Where did you throw it?”

“Into a lake,” Harrison shamefacedly admits. “But I can get you another.”

“Not if I’m marrying her first, you can’t.”

Harrison whirls, pointing a finger in his father’s face. “You are *not* marrying my girlfriend. You’re far too old for her.”

“No, you’re far too young. Your poor mother will have a heart attack.”

“She won’t. She loves Brooke.”

“Not when she finds out she’s shagging her ex, she won’t.”

I relax into a chair, entranced by the display. Confused and bewildered, but also with a rising tide of joy.

“How about I decide who I’m marrying, and you can support whatever decision I make?”

Harrison snorts. “Sounds dangerous.” He throws himself into the next seat along, the fingers of his right hand curled near his mouth, the left splayed on the armrest, pinkie reaching out to touch mine. “Is it really not you on the video?”

Daegan falls silent, shifting uneasily before taking a seat to my left. For the moment, I ignore Harrison, already knowing where his belief lies. “You said you watched it?”

He picks up my hand, opening the top button of his shirt and resting my palm against the winged tattoo that covers his heart. “I saw a few seconds of it.”

I don’t ask the next obvious question, but he answers it anyway. “You told me about your experience on our first meeting. I’d remember if you had a note about shagging a random staff member on camera.”

“How could it look so much like me?”

“Photos. Other video footage. It takes less and less to make a deepfake these days.” He waggles his eyebrows. “So they tell me.”

“Why would anyone do that?” Harrison demands, his lips white. “I don’t...” He chokes to a stop.

“Why didn’t you know it wasn’t me?”

He frowns at the armrest, picking at the leather. “Warren confirmed it was real and...” His frown grows into a scowl. “Alicia showed it to me. I don’t understand why she’d show me something that wasn’t true. I still don’t.”

It’s an answer, but not to my question, so I wait.

His face burns hotter, and I cover his hand with mine, but I don’t relent. I don’t give him a pass just because that would be easier.

After a few minutes, he shudders, bending double before he straightens. “Because I was scared for months that we weren’t working and that most of it was my fault.” His voice drops even lower. “That’s part of why I wanted to marry you. To make it harder for you to leave.”

He rubs at his eyes with the heel of his hand, the other clutching onto mine. “I’ve fucked everything, haven’t I?” His face twists, and it looks like he’s about to cry. “I was awful to you, I’m so sorry.” He finally meets my gaze again. “I don’t know how to put this right.”

There’s hope in his expression, like I might tell him some secret path to get us back to where we were. Except ‘where we were’ isn’t the place I want to be, and I don’t know how to fix things, either. I’m just working on instinct, hoping it will all shake out okay in the end.

“Well, I hope you work it out, otherwise, I’ve got your initials carved into my butt for absolutely no reason.”

His face creases with laughter. “You’re still mine. Even if you run off with some decrepit old man—”

“Hey,” Daegan rumbles in warning.

“—you’ll always be mine.”

“You talk a good game,” Daegan says, leaning forward to catch his son’s eye. “But I doubt you’ve ever gone to bat against a real man.”

“A real man who sucks cock.”

I twist to face Daegan with renewed interest. “You do?”

He shifts uneasily in his seat, glancing around the room though there’s nobody nearby. “Sometimes, when I’m working.” He raises his finger, looking past me to Harrison. “And I confessed that in confidence.”

“Do you let people watch?”

His face takes on a rosier tinge than normal and I’m delighted to have found something to upset his usual composure. “Not even if they buy me a house.”

I blow a raspberry at him. “Lame. What about special requests?”

“Why do you want to see men pleasuring each other?”

“I don’t know. Why do men want to see woman going down on each other? The world’s a strange place.” I poke him in the thigh. “What about on—”

“No.”

“You didn’t even let me finish!”

“Because I’m a mind reader and I know exactly what you’re going to say.”

“What about you?” I glance back to Harrison. “Got anything you want to confess?”

He wrinkles his nose. “Not to this crowd.”

“What about...?” I get onto my knees, whispering directly into Daegan’s ear. “In a threesome with your son.”

He pulls back, shaking his head with laughter. “Brat. You’re nothing but a brat and I’m going to discipline you so hard tonight that you won’t sit for days.”

“Is that for the first part or the last part of my suggestion? Give me some parameters.”

He grabs me around the shoulders, then rubs his knuckles on my head until I squeal, making Harrison grin. “Somebody’s in desperate need of parental guidance and since I’m the only parent present, that job falls to me.”

“Pfft. Someone’s talking themselves out of a private plane ride.”

Daegan’s face stills. “You’re eighteen and have your own plane?”

“It’s her dad’s,” Harrison helpfully supplies. “Are you going to tell us about whatever scheme of yours we’ve just hijacked?”

I shrug, biting on my nails while I try not to think of what’s happening at the other end of this flight. “I just need to ask Alicia a few questions. You don’t have to come.” I shift on the seat, my discomfort increasing. “In fact, it might be easier if you don’t.”

Harrison studies my face for a few seconds, then nods. “Okay.”

“No, it’s not okay.” Daegan takes my hand. “Whatever your questions are, they’re obviously causing you distress. We’re not about to let you go somewhere on your own, feeling tense and nervous.” He looks past me at his son, and Harrison takes my other hand, squeezing it before linking his fingers through mine, a united front. “Whatever you’ve been used to in the past, we’re your support system now.”

Daegan runs a knuckle along my cheekbone while a knot inside me—a knot that I can’t ever remember not being there—loosens, frays, the ends spooling apart. “Good luck ever confronting anyone on your own, ever again.”

I clutch at both their hands, holding my men tight, then jump as my name’s called out. “Guess this is it.”

HARRISON

When we board, I throw myself into the chair next to Brooke, blocking my father, forcing him to take the seat opposite. The conversational grouping of recliners isn't my favourite, but I clutch her hand, kissing the knuckles while I stare across at my father, taking a modicum of pleasure from the clench of his jaw. Brooke snatches her hand back the moment she realises, making his eyes glimmer with amusement.

He presented us to her like a united front and we're not. A sensation that deepens when Brooke turns to me, whispering for my ears only, "Are you okay?" Then, when I nod. "Did you talk about him leaving?"

My dad's eyes sharpen, and I glance away, shaking my head. "How about we focus on you, today, and everything else can be sorted tomorrow?"

"What's everything else?" he asks, shifting in his seat.

"I don't want to do this here."

"And I didn't want to go to Auckland today to confront the woman I think of as my mum," Brooke says, bumping me with her elbow. "But I'm doing it."

"It's nothing."

"Harrison." She reaches out and grabs my chin, forcing me to look at her. "I just went through six weeks of hell because you refused to talk to me. If that shit's going to continue, you can get off the plane right now."

A threat undermined as the pilot taxis us away from the terminal, heading for the far right strip. There's no dulling of Brooke's expression though. She stares at me with her eagle eyes, seeing everything.

"You really want me to air our dirty laundry here?"

"Where else?" she challenges. "You're stuck together for the next hour. Might as well put it to good use."

I run my fingertip from her elbow to her upper arm. “There are so many other better ways to use the time.”

She levels a stare at me that would tell me I was on thin ice if I hadn’t picked up the signs. Rather than have her burn my retinas, I glance across to Dad, who has an expression of deep longing.

“Fine,” I mutter, easing my shoulders out while I think where to start. “Why did you tell Mum you’d moved to Dunedin when she told you I was coming to school here?”

His frown tells me half the story before his lips move. “I never told her that.”

“Why didn’t you visit me, then?”

“I tried.” My lip forms a snarl, and he holds up his hands, palms facing me. “Honestly. I talked my way through the front gate, then couldn’t get any farther. Nobody would even confirm if you went to the school or not, and I had to leave when they threatened to call the police for trespass.”

He rubs a hand over his beard, stroking it into a sleeker shape. “Turns out you weren’t attending Dilworth anyway, but I didn’t know that at the time.”

I frown at the name. “The school in Auckland?”

He rests his hands on his legs, rubbing against the frayed denim of his jeans. “Gwyn fought me for years to take you up north. I had no reason to believe you were anywhere except where she said you were.”

“But why would she...?” I trail off, shifting uncomfortably, reaching for Brooke’s hand for the comfort rather than the challenge. And she’s there, offering reassurance I don’t deserve from her. “You could have called or texted.”

This time, his voice is softer. More hesitant. “You wouldn’t return my calls. When I planned visits to Auckland, you’d never show. There’d always be a forgotten party or some other last-minute excuse. I just—” He abruptly breaks off, coughing as his face becomes darker, his brow thunderous.

My mind fills with memories of Mum nervously pacing the house, waiting for the assigned time to come and go. She'd whisk me out to friends, to the movies, to golf or tennis or badminton. Anything to wipe the sting away.

Now I sit here, staring at my father, unable to believe he's this good a liar. If he's telling the truth, those outings weren't to make up for his abandonment. They were to get me out of the way so we'd each think the other was avoiding them.

The thought cuts me to the bone with its cruelty.

"I couldn't afford to keep flying up there and Gwyn wouldn't..." He shakes his head. "She refused to let you come down here. Said it would interfere with your schoolwork even when I took time off during the holidays."

I pull out my phone, unsettled, handing across one of the last messages he sent. "Remember that?"

"Even if you don't answer, I'll keep texting. I'm still your father even if you hate me right now."

"Yes, I remember, but—"

I snatch the device back from him. "And do you remember the three-year silence that followed?"

Instead of answering, he digs out his phone, scrolls for a moment, and passes it over. "After you sent this, I didn't think I could do it any longer."

I stare at the message. One that came from my phone number but isn't mine.

"Text me again and I'll change my number."

A low level despair sweeps over me because there isn't anything good at the end of this discussion. I started off with one absent parent, now my whole view has shifted so I can't trust the other.

Dad leans forward, "I'm sorry. I knew Gwyn was filtering stuff, but I didn't understand how deep that went. As far as I knew, you were reluctant to visit with me for years, then I lost my rag at the wedding, and I just thought..." He pinches the

bridge of his nose, body tensing. “I thought you didn’t want to see me.”

“I didn’t. You made a fucking spectacle of yourself. It was embarrassing as shit.”

“Yeah. I—” As he breaks off, I can see the list of excuses lining up for duty, then they scatter as he shrugs. “Yeah. I was a mess and I’m sorry.”

I incline my head a little. “Nowhere near as embarrassing as finding your dad stripping for a group of your peers.”

“Stripping.” He makes a dismissive noise. “I didn’t so much as undo my bow tie.”

“Much to the crowd’s dismay and only because you’d never have got it tied again,” Brooke interjects. “Nice to know I’m not the only one with a shitty family.” She nudges me with her elbow. “Welcome to the rejected children’s club. It’s dank down here.”

Dad shakes his head, eyes sad. “I never rejected you.”

Brooke’s smile spreads wide with delight as she leans into the tease. “You’re openly fooling around with his girlfriend. How’s that not a rejection?” She curls into me, hooking her hands around my upper arm, pulling her legs up on her seat. “Bad daddy.”

“Holy shit,” I murmur, cupping her cheek until her head rests against my shoulder. “Ever thought of leaving well enough alone?”

“I’ve never left anything or anyone. I wouldn’t even know how.” She tilts her head. “Does this mean I can trust you two alone in a car together? I’m grateful you’re here but I think I’ll be better off talking to Alicia alone.”

“If that’s what you need,” Dad says, “we’re happy to wait outside.”

“Maybe we should pay mum a visit while we’re at it,” I suggest. “See if we can get some truth out of her.”

Brooke’s eyes widen in surprise. “Right. *Now* you’re invested in communicating, are you?”

“If I’m continually going to be compared to Mr let’s-be-open-and-honest-with-each-other over here, I figure it’s time I put some effort in.”

She laughs, squeezing my biceps tighter. “And they say competition is bad for relationships.”

“Healthy relationships,” Dad corrects her with a smile. “We’re all disqualified.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

BROOKE

I STAND IN ALICIA'S DRIVEWAY WATCHING AS THE DRIVER reverses into a small cul-de-sac on the left-hand side to wait. Through the passenger window, I see the shapes of Harrison and Daegan in the back seat. Judging by the animation of their hands, their discussion's already grown heated. Another thirty minutes, maybe an hour, and I might return to find them dead at each other's hands.

And the moment I think that, Daegan throws his arm around Harrison in an awkward hug.

I return my gaze to the door in front of me, steeling my spine. Now I can't put off thinking about the confrontation any longer, my breaths start short-changing me. I raise my arm to knock and my hand trembles. It takes me flexing my fingers twice before I can complete the action.

"Brooke?" Alicia smiles broadly as she answers the door, pulling me into a one-armed hug, the other hand holding onto a glass of something green and probably far too healthy for my tastebuds to handle. "What're you doing here, love? Is there a school holiday I've forgotten about?"

"No, nothing like that. Just wanted to pay a visit."

She swings the door wider, inviting me inside. The enormous house is designed to impress rather than offer comfort. A point reinforced by the wide expanse of marble that my heels tippy-tap across as I hurry to keep pace with my stepmother.

"I'm in the kitchen," she announces, flinging open the swinging door to let me enter first. "These days, I can't be bothered to use the dining room. With just me and Warren here, it's ridiculous."

"Warren eats with you?"

She rolls her eyes. "Your privilege is showing. Of course, I eat with him. The maids only work until two and the gardener

barely ever ventures into the house. It's either that or eat alone."

I take a seat and watch her take large slurps from her smoothie in between regaling me with gossip. It never occurred to me she'd be lonely living here.

The house had been awarded to her during the divorce. She'd wanted the penthouse apartment Dad used in central Auckland, but he reverse-psychology-ed his way into gifting her this white elephant instead.

It's remote, the surrounding land too steep and filled with too much loose shale to be built upon. Great when you're an elderly retiree who values their peace. Terrible if you're a woman in your thirties, wanting to celebrate her newly single status with a string of nights out on the town.

She can't even sell the place to buy something more appropriate. Although she has full usage rights, the title is held by Dad's trust.

If she leaves, she gets nothing.

"Is that a hickey?" she asks with another of her bright smiles while I slap my hand to my neck far too slowly. "Don't worry. I remember being eighteen." She drifts into a daydream, smiling at images only she can see, then gives a shake. "Sorry. It's good you're not dwelling over Harrison. At your age, you should play the field. You're a gorgeous girl."

She appears genuinely pleased to see me. Enough that I feel evil for harbouring the thoughts I do. But there's no escaping the plain facts. She gave Harrison the link to the sham video. While I wept and wailed and struggled to think of answers for why he'd left, she hugged me, comforted me, but never volunteered what she'd done.

But there's only two reasons I can think of for her to give Harrison that link, and the simplest answer is usually the right one. And with anything connected to my family, the simplest answer is money. It all comes back to our obscene amounts of money.

“Actually, I’m back with Harrison,” I say, watching her from beneath my lashes as I fake interest in my phone. “Whatever got him flustered at term break has blown over, thank goodness.”

Her lips press together so hard, they thin to straight lines.

“Not just him,” I add, an unexpected flutter of enjoyment hitting me. “I’ve asked his dad to marry me. We’re forming a”—I wave my hand in the air—“a what-do-you-call-it? A throuple.”

She shifts in her seat, leaning forward, then pitching back again. “That’s not really legal, is it?”

“It’s not illegal to be involved with more than one man at a time.”

“I meant the wedding thing. You can’t actually marry two men, can you?”

“Not yet. I’ll start with Daegan and hopefully the legislation catches up soon so I can marry Harrison as well.”

“Right.” Her face flushes and she runs a hand through her hair, blowing away some loose strands. “I don’t mean to be judgemental, but—”

I snigger. “Sure. That’s how all non-judgemental comments start.”

“You’re very young to be getting married. I think your father might have a few things he wants to say.”

“You’re still in touch with Dad?”

She crosses her legs, drumming her fingers on the table. “If I need to be, I am. This relationship sounds a lot more like trying to be cool and modern than a genuine connection. How long have you known this other man? This... Daegan?”

“Six weeks give or take. Though for most of that I was a client, so if we’re just starting from the point I stopped paying him, it’s closer to two weeks.” I frown in concentration. “Or is it only one?” I shake my head. “Honestly? So many things have been happening, it’s hard to keep track.”

Alicia grips the edge of her seat with one hand, still mimicking a drum solo with the other. “What do you mean you stopped paying him?”

“He’s a sex worker. That’s how we met. When Harrison dumped me, I wanted to get so good in bed that I could win him back.” I produce an evil smile. “Then I liked my trainer so much, I kept them both on instead.”

To give her credit, she doesn’t flinch at the information. Her face stays impassive, only the crinkle at the corners of her eyes giving away her increasing stress.

“Do you want to come to the wedding?”

She slams her palm flat on the table, making me jump. “Don’t be ridiculous. You can’t marry a sex worker decades older than you. Especially not when he’s the father of your boyfriend.”

“I can.” I open my purse and pull out a confirmation slip. “This says the marriage licence only takes a few days, so I thought next weekend might be good. The less time I give people to object, the better the reception will be.”

Alicia snatches the paper from my hand, reading over the wordage with eyes that jump from the page to me and back again, quick as a strobe.

I remember her wedding. My dress was tight with fussy ribbons everywhere, in the palest gold so I had to be careful not to brush against anything. She’d been so gracious, letting me into the bridal preparations, bending to let eleven-year-old me fasten a brooch to the centre of her collar, so beautiful and patient and kind.

Those are the memories that lingered. With all the kind gestures and reassuring words, I forgot why she came into my life in the first place. Dad was loaded, and she was drop-your-jaw pretty. A match made in gold-digger heaven.

“You’ll love Daegan when you meet him,” I say with studied casualness, as though he wasn’t waiting halfway along her drive. “He’s incredibly handsome and charming. I think

he'd get a kick out of asking your permission to marry me since Dad is so difficult to pin down these days."

Her face twists and she looks about to unleash a torrent of harsh advice upon me. Before she can, I add, "He can show you the engagement ring, and you can show him my sex tape."

Alicia's mouth pinches together, wariness lurking in her eyes.

While she fights to maintain her composure, I slump lower in my chair. "Or we could cut the crap now and you can explain why you sabotaged my relationship with Harrison."

She tosses her hair and I expect her to stall, pretend ignorance, but the hand grips her seat again, knuckles clenching so hard I wince. "You're too young to get married. In a few years, you'll regret it, then you'll be stuck."

"Hardly stuck. I'm pretty sure Dad has a good divorce lawyer."

Her lip curls at the mention. "It sounds fine when you say it, but I know you. You're far too sensitive to get through an experience like that with no scars."

"So you put my face on a porn actress's body to look out for me, is that it?" I click my tongue in irritation. "Spare me the help in future."

"You had a lucky escape. It might hurt now but at some point, you'll thank me."

"Right. Or, here's an idea, why don't I tell Dad exactly what your help entailed?"

Alicia's face turns a shade of green only slightly less vibrant than her smoothie. "Once he hears your bright idea of marrying a sex worker twice your age, he'll be on my side."

"You know, when Harrison told me what you'd done, I didn't want to believe it. I thought it must be something altruistic that just came across the wrong way. Like you'd found the video on Warren's phone or something and thought it was real. That you thought you were doing the right thing."

Her glacial eyes track every minute movement. Head tilting as she considers where my summary might lead.

“I really wanted that to be the truth because I couldn’t see what you gained from it. It’s not like you posted it online and demanded money to get it taken down. You didn’t even threaten that could be the case.”

“Of course, I’m not threatening you. I’d never do that.” She rubs her forefinger against her bottom lip, frowning clearly enough to show her last round of Botox must have worn off. “It was all done for your benefit.”

“Sure.” I get up from the chair, pacing the room, unable to sit still when my insides are churning, my thoughts are fuzzy, my heart has moved residence to thump in my throat, each beat choking me a little more. Sadness overwhelms me, every word sincere as I say, “You’ve always been so nice to me it makes it hard to think otherwise.”

“And you don’t need to.” She also gets to her feet, taking small, cautious steps nearer to me. “I’m sorry it all came out wrong. The idea was dumb, but it seemed so much better than starting an argument I wouldn’t win.”

I watch her approach. I let her take my hands. I let my heart fill with every remembered kindness, every sweet word, every protective gesture. The one adult I thought cared for me. Not because she was paid to but because she liked me.

“Please don’t act in anger,” she whispers, squeezing her fingers around mine. “You can yell at me all you like but don’t marry someone just to spite me.”

“And that’s the bit that worries you, isn’t it?”

Her lips press into a flat line, the pressure on my hands strengthening into discomfort.

“I couldn’t work out why at first. I didn’t understand at all why me getting married would affect you. Then I realised.”

“It doesn’t affect me. This is all for your welfare, Brooke.” She moves another tiny step closer, so far into my personal space my chest wants to heave. “Please don’t make me have to call your father.”

“Go ahead. I want you to.”

Her eyelids flutter, then settle. “You don’t mean that.”

“Better still, call his accountant.” I jerk my hands free of hers, reaching for my phone. “I’ve got him in my contacts. Or was he the one you fucked to get access to my trust fund in the first place?”

She stares at me for a long time, sadness in her gaze. “You have control of your trust fund, Brooke. No one else.”

“Half of it,” I correct. “But what about the half that’ll be mine when I turn thirty?” Her face shutters. “Or get married. Whichever comes first.”

She retreats a step, hands on her hips, studying me like she’s trying to find an angle.

“I’m guessing there’s not a lot of that portion left.”

“It’s...” Alicia stops and licks her lips, bouncing on the balls of her feet like she’s about to cut and run. “It’ll all be back in there by the time you’re thirty. I promise. It’s just... I needed *something*.”

“You have something.” I wave around me. “The free use of this house and staff for a start.”

“It was just sitting there,” she says, ignoring me. “All that money just sitting there. Doing no one any good.”

An immediate argument springs to my lips but I bite it back. I don’t care about winning an argument. All I wanted to achieve by coming here was to verify my suspicions and that’s done.

Anything else is pointless.

I turn on my heel, walking for the front door and make it halfway before she gives chase, wrenching my arm, making my feet skid. “Don’t go. Just... if you listen, you’ll understand.”

“I don’t need to understand, Alicia. Once I leave here, it’s all in Dad’s hands. Talk to him and let him decide what is and isn’t relevant.”

“No. You can’t tell him.”

I shake her off, starting for the entranceway again, my eyes strangely dry, filled with grit, like reverse tears.

And as I have the door half open, she reaches me again, tugging at my arm. “Don’t leave. We still need to discuss things, then you’ll see. It’s not as bad as you think.”

“Not as bad...” I jerk my arm away and face her. “I thought you cared about me, but you only cared about the money.”

Her expression hardens like quick-pour cement. “You’re the one who’s made it about the money. You could stay here, have a conversation, human to human, but instead you’re rushing away because you’re so desperate to save those zeroes in your bank account.”

“I thought we were family.”

Her face pulls in a thousand different directions all at once. “We are.”

“You put me and Harrison through torture to hide your fraud. Which part of that counts?” I shake my head, stumbling through the door, the late afternoon sunlight blinding me as it reflects off the white stone steps.

“He’s the one who didn’t trust you,” she screams after me, giving up on self-preservation to inflict more pain. “I barely had to do a thing, and he ran.”

“Congratulations. You made a teenage boy feel insecure. Why don’t you nominate yourself for a fucking award?”

My feet reach the gravel and I increase my speed, clutching my arms across my stomach, my heart aching, chest heaving, stomach twisting with misery. My eyes blur, still stuck with the strange gritty sensation.

The car is a smudge of black to my right. It’s not until Harrison calls my name that I turn in the right direction.

Then his arms are around me, escorting me the rest of the way. “Are you all right? Can I get you something? I’m pretty sure the driver’s got water if you need it.”

I stop walking, returning his embrace, hugging him so hard that my muscles complain about the unexpected exercise. “She never cared about me at all,” I say, having to push the words out through my resisting vocal cords, making them strain. “She kept me close to have access to my trust.”

“Fuck.” His arms close even tighter around me, his chest a shield against the world. “And to think she could have had such a great career in manufactured porn.”

The idiocy hits me just right, letting me burst into laughter as hard as I want to burst into tears. “You dope.”

“Mm. I’m so sorry.” He releases his grip in favour of cupping my face, his thumb stroking along my jawline with incredible tenderness. “Sorry I fell for the fucking bullshit on the video and sorry because I know how much her friendship meant to you.”

“I’ll survive.”

“We’ll make sure you do a lot better than survive.”

Another set of arms appears, Daegan slipping them around my waist, pressing against my back until I’m the meat in a father-son sandwich. His large fingers splay across my lower belly, igniting a storm of sensations.

The sun overhead. The warm men front and back.

When I ran after Harrison along this same stretch of driveway, head confused and heart breaking, I couldn’t have imagined landing here. Of finding someone new in such a short space of time. Of reconnecting with the boy I love.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BROOKE

THE FLIGHT HOME IS UNEVENTFUL. AS WE DROVE AWAY FROM Alicia's place, I'd asked if they still wanted to visit Gwyn, but both declined.

"I think a few weeks to compare notes and get a handle on our emotions will work better," Daegan said, one arm slung around my waist, while Harrison sat on my other side, holding my hand. "And we'd both rather be here for you."

It's strange, having them both here to comfort me. Even if they still have bumpy patches ahead in their relationship, the bonds feel strong enough to hold fast.

But what do I know? The only family member I thought I had turned out to be a stranger.

By the time I walk through Daegan's front door, I'm exhausted. I send a message through to Dad's accountant, then decide to wash my hands of the whole thing. I don't care if the trust fund had money stolen or misappropriated. If Alicia had asked, I would happily have given her anything she needed. It just hadn't occurred to me she was wanting.

If the money was all it was, I'd have forgiven her on the spot. It's the cover up that hurt me.

"What time do you need to get back to school, tomorrow?" Daegan asks, popping on the kettle for a hot drink. "I can drop you there or on Monday morning if you want to cut it really close."

"Ugh." I drop onto the couch, burying my head in my hands. "I don't even want to think about it."

Harrison sits next to me on the sofa. "If you want to skip on Monday, I'll cover for you."

I rest my head against him, closing my eyes. "How will you manage that since you're not in any of my classes?"

"I'll just tell your teachers I knocked you up and you're suffering from morning sickness."

I snort so hard that I'm in danger of dislodging something. "Knowing my luck, they'll mark me down for being careless."

Daegan's voice is oddly thin as he asks, "Have you been ill?"

The way his gaze lingers on me, steam builds until my entire face is heated. There's something deeper behind his eyes, a different question. Something that makes my stomach knot, and my nipples tighten, and my arms yearn for a small bundle to hold.

I shake my head, watching his reaction closely. "Did you want me to be?"

He sits next to me, taking my face between his hands and pressing a kiss as soft as cotton wool on my forehead. "Someday. If this marriage is still on the cards, we could throw caution to the wind on our wedding."

"You're not still getting married?" Harrison says in a strangled voice. "I thought..." After a pause, he inhales a deep breath through his nose. "How is this meant to work? Are you alternating? Do I get you during the school week and dad gets the weekends? I just don't understand how..."

By the time he stumbles to a stop, he's hyperventilating.

"We don't need to sort it all out tonight," his father says, still holding onto me, keeping me close. "It's a new situation to all of us."

"I don't like this."

"We'll work it out. It'll be fine."

"Fine for you," Harrison growls. "You're into all this weird shit already but some of us haven't spent half their lives being gay for pay."

The arms holding me are suddenly full of tension. I clear my throat, already reeling from the emotion of the day, uncertain if I can handle any more. "Maybe we should just press pause and we can resume this conversation later in the week."

“Hours ago you complained that I don’t communicate and now I’m trying—”

His father snaps out, “Harrison, that’s enough.”

“Stop talking to me like I’m a child. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m taller than you, I’ve got a better education than you, and I’m the one who’s spent a hell of a lot more time fucking your soon-to-be-wife.”

They both spring to their feet, Daegan looming into his son’s personal space, glowering. “Watch your mouth.”

I sit back, hugging myself, a sense of doom catapulting towards me. What’s that saying about being careful what you want?

I wanted the two of them and here they are. Two men at each other’s throats.

“Should I order some food?” I offer, trying to derail the impending argument. “It’s been a really long day.”

There’s not even a flicker to show they hear me.

“You can’t have a baby with her. She’s still got four years of uni in front of her. Or are you so selfish you’ll just tank her prospects?”

“I’m not going to university,” I interject but again neither pays attention.

“Are you planning to trap her the same way you trapped Mum?”

“I didn’t trap anyone. We split up months before Gwyn found out she was pregnant. Neither of us—”

He breaks off but Harrison’s already read the truth lurking behind those words. “Neither of you wanted me. Is that what you were about to say? Well, maybe I don’t want you, either.”

“Then you can get out of my house. You remember the way to the door.”

“My house,” I mutter, ignored again. With a jolt of irritation, I stand, angling my body between Harrison and the exit. Then louder, “This is *my* house. Unless each of you

behave, you can both leave and sort yourself alternative accommodation for the night.”

Daegan turns his glare my way. “You gave it to me.”

“No. I offered it to you as an engagement present, but you haven’t said yes, so I’m taking it back.”

“You didn’t say yes?” Harrison asks, incredulous.

Daegan murmurs, “Brat.”

He encroaches into my personal space, making my eyes gleam as he glowers at me, expression slowly transitioning to blankness. Then he glances at his son, and it morphs again, into a smile. “We shower you with attention all day long, yet here you are, craving more.”

Harrison stands to the side, then angles his body to face me alongside his dad. “What sort of attention do you think she’s after?”

And a thrill runs through me, so strong, so satisfying that my insides turn molten and my skin heats with a body-wide flush of arousal.

“I have something,” Daegan says, his slow gaze ravishing my body. “It was too much for her the other day, but I think it’ll give her the attention she deserves.”

My spine explodes into tingles, and I can’t remember how to swallow.

“Blindfolded?” he asks, turning to Harrison.

His son tilts his head, staring at me while a smile slithers across his mouth, borderline sinister. A smile reminding me he carries a knife and doesn’t mind using it.

“Definitely blindfolded. You’re not scared of the dark, are you Brooke?”

The tease has me biting my lower lip, trembling with anticipation. I shake my head, not trusting my voice.

Harrison moves behind me, resting his hands on my shoulders. I can’t see him but, in my imagination, he’s cocking

his eyebrow at his father, sorting out their nefarious plans with silent communication.

He slides his hands down until they're circling my wrists, gently encouraging them behind my back. His knee bends, rubbing against the back of my legs as he moves it up and down, finding a rhythm that makes my skin sing, the fabric of my skirt lifting and falling, tickling and stroking.

"Are you going to apologise for your disrespect?" Harrison's cheek rests against the top of my head, voice muffled by my hair. "There's still a chance to avoid your punishment."

My voice is a whisper. "I don't have anything to apologise for."

"Then I guess your choice is made."

Daegan steps closer, bending until he's level with my eyes. "You've got your safe words?"

I nod.

"You'll need another if he's restraining your hands. Do you want to blink for me?"

I blink twice, replacing my usual taps. Not that I've needed them... The only time I needed an out, I just asked him to stop.

Another shiver hits me. Maybe today he isn't in the mood to monitor me so closely. Maybe the things he wants to teach his son today aren't as safe as they have been up to now.

"That won't work if I'm blindfolded."

"Talking back as well." Daegan gives a forlorn shake of his head. "This really won't do. Being right isn't any sort of excuse."

"Guess we'll just have to be unsafe, then." Harrison's hands slide up from my wrists, gathering my forearms and squeezing, the sensation firm but not painful. "Get in the bedroom."

I take my first step forward and he grasps both my wrists together in one hand, moving the other to my shoulder to steer. The slow steady passage cranks up my internal tension until it's screeching along the edge of sanity, breath held until the next instruction arrives.

"Here," Daegan calls, tossing Harrison a pair of cuffs. He's used fluffy bondage cuffs on me before, with padded bracelets that struggle to raise a bruise, but these aren't any kind of fake. They're metal, sized for a woman, the straight bar between them providing a grip to hold on to.

When Harrison clicks them around my wrists, he slides a finger inside the bracelet as a gauge, checking he doesn't cut off my blood supply. The tiny gesture of comfort is the only concession he offers me, immediately shoving me onto the bed, holding me pinned with one strong hand in the centre of my back as he drags down my skirt, underwear travelling along to halfway down my legs, freed with a few firm tugs.

With my blouse, he unbuttons it, twisting the fabric around so my restraints are padded, my bra tangled with them, giving me even less freedom of movement. Exposing me while the two of them remain fully dressed. Fully in control.

Daegan hands his son a blindfold and Harrison fixes it to my face, running a finger underneath the elastic so it doesn't catch on my hair.

There's a shuffle of movement, something heavy being dragged across the carpet, then Daegan's hands are on me, moving me into position, bending me forward until my cheek rests on the bedcover, my knees are at the edge of the mattress, my pussy exposed, my arse high in the air.

The vulnerability takes my breath away. Each cell of my skin is on full alert, waiting for the slightest movement, the faintest touch. The slow caress as Daegan runs his hand from the middle of my spine, along the curve of my lower back, out towards my hip, spreading electric tingles all the way.

"Look at you," he murmurs, stroking my inner thigh, making my mouth dry as badly as when he stuffed it full of my underwear.

Another hand joins his while I'm held in the blindfold's darkness. The palm on this one is smoother, plumper, the fingers moving to rub along the lips of my pussy are far more eager, caught between the softer tease of his father and the threat of the machine.

"Pass me that package," Daegan instructs his son and I hear the snap and crack of plastic being torn apart, the tear of cardboard.

Then a long hard rubber dildo lands on my back, stretching from my tailbone to level with my sternum. Twelve inches or longer, the thickness clear in its weight.

"You want to choke on a cock again?" Daegan asks, humming while I struggle to find an answer.

Then I couldn't respond if I wanted to. Harrison's fingers hold my forehead back, hold it steady while the large rubber tip is inserted into my mouth, sliding over my tongue, hitting against the back of my throat and there's more, still so much more to go.

"Fuck you take that so well, sweetheart," a voice whispers and it croaks with so much raw lust that I can't identify if it's father or son.

The blindfold captures most of my tears as my eyes water, my mouth producing a torrential rain of slobber as the fake cock pierces deeper into my throat.

"That's it. Get it all lubed up for yourself. Feel how deep it goes because that's how deep it's going to ram into your pussy."

An electric shock of arousal makes my mouth water, my cunt water. I snuffle in a breath through my stuffy nose a second before the press of the rubber cock chokes off the luxury of air.

I'm ready to come and all that's happened is a rubber shlong got jammed in my mouth.

"There you go," Daegan says, withdrawing it and moving to the other side of the bed.

I hear the rattle of metal and wood behind while Harrison remains in front of me. He gently wipes the stream of saliva from my face, then sheds his clothes. When he next touches me, it's with his cock, resting it against my cheek, letting me feel the pulse of blood as it fills, as it grows thicker and taller, the veins so prominent I can pick them out as he shifts, and the silky skin moves to rub against my lips.

“Harrison, you're in control.”

A gasp comes from me as Daegan spreads the lips of my pussy wide. His finger slips inside me, curling against my walls, teasing at my entrance before he withdraws, and I hear him suck me from his rough calluses.

Then another tip touches against my most sensitive skin. The rubber stretches me wide, then stretches me again. There's an increase of pressure against me for a moment, then weight is on the bed, tilting me sideways. Daegan's fingers grab my upper thighs on each side, drawing them farther apart, completely exposing my pussy to the savage length of the dildo affixed to the machine.

“Are you ready?” Daegan whispers and I don't know how to answer. A muffled groan is the best I can manage as I press my head into Harrison's hip, sticking my tongue out to keep track of his cock.

The long slide of the dildo into my cunt raises the hairs on my skin, blood pulsating where it's needed until my entire pussy throbs with the overload of sensations. It keeps coming, more and more of it. Just when I think it's at the end, there's another wriggle, as it plunges farther into me, until the stretch edges into the realm of pain.

“That's the limit,” Harrison whispers. “For now. You want more, you can push backwards, show me how much you can take.”

Right now, I can't. I'm so full and the firmness is unrelenting. Just as I move, to wriggle, to lessen the sensation, the fake cock begins its withdrawal, the steady retreat setting off a new flurry of ecstasy, Harrison shoving my head back down flush against the mattress as he reverses the machine,

sending it plunging into me again, stopping at the same point, the grip of Daegan's fingers holding me wide open adding another layer of joy even as it edges into pain.

Harrison must be reading me, paying attention to each squirming motion, learning when to press forward, when to retreat, when to increase the speed until I release a steady cry to offset the overwhelming rush of pleasure and pain.

He learns something new with each changed setting on the remote; urging me towards orgasm then snatching it away.

It's so good, I weep, needing another outlet. The change from the boy I couldn't convince to hurt me even when I explicitly asked is a revelation. He goes from apprentice through to master, controlling me with expert precision.

"The machine's getting all the fun," Harrison grumbles, then he grabs a handful of my hair with his free hand, tilting my neck back. "Open your mouth for me. I've got a present I've been saving just for you."

And my mouth gapes open, tongue lunging forward, trying to reach him, taste him, before the command has time to settle in the air. "Here," he says, and he must have tossed the remote to his father because only one hand holds my thigh now while two strong hands grip my head.

"That's it, angel. Hold your head still and keep that mouth wide open for me." One hand disappears a moment before the head of his cock rubs against my lips.

I try to suck him inside, but he laughs, letting the thrust of the machine move me forward and back, forward and back. "Stop trying to run things or we'll both go, leaving this machine turned up to its maximum. How would you like that, hm? We'll go fetch a coffee, have a snack, then come back when this machine has fucked you absolutely raw. Would that be a good lesson?"

"Yes."

A smack hits against my arse cheek, Daegan's warning growl an accompaniment to the sharp crack.

“No,” I whine, changing tack. “I meant to say no. Please don’t leave me with this machine fucking me far better and far harder than you ever could.”

“Your fucking lip,” Harrison says, rubbing his tip over the feature in question, releasing a salty jus appetiser. “Always talking back. Well, I’ve got a cure for that.”

And he shoves his cock deep into me, holding my face steady as he plunges in and out. Then he thrusts inside and holds there as tears cascade from under my blindfold, as my chest heaves, as my lungs pull against the intrusion, suctioning him farther into my mouth.

“You can take more, can’t you, Brooke?” One of his hands slips to the back of my head, forcing me forward as his hips thrust again.

I can’t breathe, my ears whine with the lack of oxygen. My wrists pull hard against my restraints, unable to budge them a millimetre, as the fake cock mechanically surges in and out of my pussy and Harrison jams himself deeper into my throat.

“Good girl,” he murmurs with appreciation, hauling my head off him, letting me heave in a breath, mouth sagging open, taking in as much air as I can. His voice turns mocking. “Do you want my daddy to take a turn? Do you want to kneel for us while the machine fucks your cunt, and we take turns fucking your face?”

I think he’s joking. It’s a tease. Then the bed shifts and seconds later a new cock is surging over my lips, thrusting into my mouth, into my throat while Harrison crows in delight and Daegan moans with satisfaction.

“That’s my girl,” Harrison says, his lips pressed against my ear, breath rasping and setting my aural canals on fire. “Take him as deep as you took me. Give the old man a nice treat.”

His hands reach for my tits, squeezing and pinching. His weight on the bed tugs me his way, the machine steadfast as my body shifts, hitting at a new angle inside me, a tangled mix of pleasure and a stretch so intense it borders on pain.

He mashes my tits together as Daegan moves to the side, taking my head with him as he fucks me, fucks my mouth, fucks my throat, withdrawing only long enough to rub his sensitive tip over my lips and my cheeks, the passage fluid with my saliva, then back into my mouth, the chance to suck in a stray breath a privilege.

Then Harrison's cock fights for entrance, the men pushing and shoving for the honour of choking me, my blindness meaning I never know where the next cock is coming from. There are more hands, more cocks, more intensity and desire and raw lust than I know what to do with.

I bear down, clenching my cunt muscles around the machine as it fires yet again into a higher gear.

Then Harrison grunts, shoving himself deep inside and holding there, holding, then one last thrust as his cum spills into my throat. As he withdraws, I suck at him, wanting to memorise the feel, the taste, chart the differences between him and his father.

"One down, one to go," Daegan whispers, pushing his son out of the way to take possession of my mouth.

Harrison's weight leaves the bed, then he strokes my back, following the curve of my arse, thumbs spreading my pussy wide as he watches the machine shove deep into me.

"Damn but you look good. I'm going to memorise every second, so I always have access to some top-shelf memory porn."

His thumbs move higher, their rhythmic stroke adding to my existing stimulation in all the right ways.

"Your pretty pussy is just begging for more attention." Harrison kisses my cheek right where his father gave me the one slap. His tongue moves over his healing initials, then circles the reddened imprint, sucking in a mouthful and gently biting, while his fingers continue to explore.

"Your poor swollen clit," he says as his fingers dance near. "Trying hard to get attention. It reminds me of someone I know."

Daegan chuckles, the sound vibrating along his cock, echoing into my soft palette. “You want to come on Harrison’s fingers while I come jammed halfway down your throat?”

He pulls back just long enough for me to moan, his length resting too heavy on my tongue to form a word, then he’s back inside, thrusting with more and more force while Harrison cranks the machine to a higher setting, the friction enough to build heat while he moves under me, blowing a soft breath across my aching clit, making me groan around his father’s cock.

Then his tongue caresses me and I nearly explode. Tears stream down my face, not my eyes watering but genuine tears of joy, full of anticipation, straining towards another shelf of pleasure that till now has been too high to reach.

The urgency of Daegan’s thrusts increases, the steady thump of the machine is relentless. Harrison tongues my clit, caressing it, lapping at it like a kitten licking milk, his tongue alternating between rough and smooth, aggressive and gentle, then he turns greedy, fingers slipping and sliding just past the point where the machine takes over, moving through my folds, igniting new stretches of arousal, his tongue pressing, pressing, then licking and swirling, the brush of his teeth a spark of fear that ignites a jolt to my core, tugging me the last way up the precipice before it boots me over, plunging at neck-breaking speed down the other side.

My mouth slackens as the orgasm shudders through me. The machine slows, slows, slows to a halt.

Daegan gathers the back of my head in both hands, pulling me where he needs me and holding me there, breath a forgotten treat, his roar of completion as he convulses inside me enough to bring me a second, fluttering rush.

The machine is kicked away, Harrison getting one last long lick across my pussy before he rolls into place beside me, hauling me back against him while Daegan sandwiches against my front, resting one hand around my neck as a support, the other resting on my hip.

Exhaustion claims me, swooping down and stealing me away before I can open my mouth to protest. With my aching jaw and aching pussy satisfied, I give in to the dominant claim of sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HARRISON

WHEN I WAKE ON SUNDAY, I SLIP OUT OF THE HOUSE IN THE early morning, hating to leave the comfort of Brooke's arms but needing to get my head clear. Everything went from a perfectly compact arrangement into a sprawling mess, and I need space to relax and untangle the rope of emotions tugging me apart.

This late in August, there's still a crispness to the morning air, but the sun's rising earlier. Soon we'll be careening into summer, a thought that brings a heavy dose of stress for the first time.

Every other year, it's been a time for celebration. Six weeks or longer to enjoy myself free of the tight confines of the school yard. This time around, there won't be a new school year come February. The future is closing in on me and I'm not anywhere near prepared.

Dad's car is parked in the lean-to on the side of the house, but I'm happy to walk. After fifteen minutes, with my thoughts lining up in more familiar patterns, I jump on an early morning bus that takes me the rest of the way to Kingswood.

The school looks the same. I could go inside and enter my room, try to get myself geared for the week ahead.

Instead, I skirt the buildings, heading for the back lane, for the cycle track.

My phone rings halfway to the subdivision and I'm shocked to see Mum is the caller. Since I've been boarding, a leisurely nine a.m. wakeup call is more her speed. "Hey."

"What the fuck is going on, Harrison?"

Her voice is so shrill I wince, the noise acting like a needle in my eardrums. A rush of guilt consumes me. My mother doesn't swear unless she's really upset. All I want is calm, for

the people around me to be happy, but lately, every decision I make hurts someone.

“There’s gossip everywhere about how you and your father are sharing some *girl?*” The tone she uses on the last word makes it sound like the world’s worst possible insult. “Honestly, Harrison. We spent so much money getting you into a good school and you’re just throwing it all away with this nonsense. It won’t matter what connections you make if you’ve got a reputation for this weird depravity. Businessmen are conservative. They don’t want to hire someone who’s—” She breaks off with an angry cough. “I can’t even *say* it. And your *father?* Hasn’t he dragged you through enough pain over the years?”

I take a beat, head spinning. “Lovely to hear from you.”

She clicks her tongue against her teeth in irritation. “Yes, yes. Next, you’ll tell me to mind my own business when from the moment you were born, my only business has been you and your welfare.”

“I’m fine, thanks for asking. Brooke sends her regards.”

“According to Alicia—”

“The woman who’s been defrauding Brooke for years.”

There’s a cautious pause. “Was she lying to me, then?”

It would be so easy to agree and let this go. Bump it down the road for another day. But that’s hardly the way to show Brooke I’m working on my communication skills. That I understand where I went wrong and what I need to put right.

I grit my teeth and answer, “No, she wasn’t lying. I’m back together with Brooke and so is Dad.”

“Harrison! I don’t even—” She breaks off, panting with outrage. “How could you do this to me? That man disappointed you your whole life and now you’re what? Choosing him over me? The woman who loved you and cared for you and made sure you never wanted for anything. You know that man has never attempted to—”

“What did you hope to achieve?” I interrupt, not needing another world-according-to-Gwyn lecture. “When you lied to me, and you lied to him? Did you think he’d just stop being my father and I’d forget I was his son? What’s he done that’s so horrible you fooled us both for years?”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never—”

“You have. If you need a graphic reminder, I’m happy to collate our separate memories into a document and forward it to you. Is that what you’re after?”

There’s a longer pause than before, then she blurts, “I know that man better than you do. You need to trust me.”

“Did you steal my phone?” I stop on the path, leaning back against a lamppost for support, wishing Brooke and Dad were here.

But they are here in a way. I carry them within me. They give me the impetus to continue, even knowing how rough this conversation will become.

“We compared messages, and he has one from me telling him to stop texting. But you know what, Mum? It’s not from me. I never sent that message.”

She’s silent. Only the faint barking from Martin’s dogs let me know she’s still on the line.

“You took my phone, and you sent him that text, then deleted it so I wouldn’t know. How could you? All those days where I thought he didn’t show—”

I have to stop, biting my lip as a wave of grief crashes into me. The combined weight of every hour spent waiting, hoping this time would be different, when it wasn’t. All the years thinking I wasn’t good enough to earn the love of my father and now that I know it wasn’t true, it’s somehow worse, because carelessness is one thing and actively seeking to hurt me is quite another.

My voice is low, the only way I can keep it steady as I say, “You let me believe he didn’t love me, didn’t want to talk to me any longer, and for what? What has he done that’s so awful

you destroyed me, over and over again, just to tear him out of my life?”

Her breathing is ragged. I can picture her, how her cheeks will be blotchy red, her eyes flashing. It's not the noise she makes when she's sorry; it's the noise she makes when she's been caught. “We can discuss this in person when you come home. I'm sending tickets.”

“No. I'm staying here.”

And her voice comes back with a vicious streak I haven't heard for years. “No, you won't. Martin won't pay your expensive tuition while you're continuing this... this... *immoral* relationship.”

“Then Brooke and I will move in with Dad, fulltime.” I break into a laugh. “Considering I begged you to let me leave school just over a month ago, taking it away hardly counts as a threat.”

“Don't you *dare* embarrass me this way.”

I hear it then. The reason. I hear it so clearly in her voice I can't imagine why I missed it before.

She didn't push Dad out of my life because she thought he was a terrible man or a bad influence. She did it because of the stigma, the shame.

His line of work *embarrassed* her and that was all the excuse she needed to cut the man from her life and, by extension, mine.

“If you're ashamed of me, that's your problem. I'm happy. Dad's happy. Brooke's happy. Until you can be happy for us, please don't call again.”

I cut her off mid-word, staring at the screen for a long moment before I put the phone on silent and tuck it away.

There's far more important work to be done. I haven't dressed for the occasion, but that's not about to stop me.

The lake is calm enough to catch the perfect reflection of the sunrise, the reds and pinks of inclement weather painting a beautiful picture on the fragile canvas. I walk to the end of the

public jetty, taking off my shoes and socks, then fold each item of clothing on top of it until I'm stripped to my briefs.

It's not the best temperature for a swim, but I don't want to wait a second longer. My eyes pick out the spot where I last saw the ring box sinking beneath the waves, and I dive.

By the time my head surfaces, I regret all my life choices.

The water is fucking *freezing*.

It takes a good five minutes for me to acclimate enough to draw in a full breath. Instead of freestyle, I swim to the right spot using a strange type of doggy paddle that mainly comprises me keeping my limbs tucked as close to my body as possible, trying to retain some heat.

When I plunge underwater, all I see is murk. The weak winter morning sunlight isn't enough to illuminate the depths. I break the surface, hauling in as large a breath as I can manage, then dive again, fighting to get low enough to search among the mud and plant strewn seabed.

The next time I surface, I stay up long enough to stop panting. Instead of inhaling, I carefully expel a breath, the absence of air in my lungs helping to sink me to the lake floor.

This time, I use my feet to poke and prod along the slimy base, stopping to examine anything likely. A crumpled can. An old stress ball. A knitted hat so tiny it must have belonged to a child.

I rise to the surface again, shivering, knowing that I need to get out and warm myself before hypothermia sets in.

A couple more tries, then I'll swim back to the dock and hope a jog back to school will be enough to warm me until I throw myself in a hot shower.

DAEGAN

I leave Brooke snoozing in bed, walking through to the kitchen to set a pot of coffee going, surprised to find the room empty. When I heard Harrison get up, I assumed he'd moved in here to think. Apparently, he needed more space than that.

With the filter coffee set, I lean against the bench, checking on the tracking app we installed to see if he's gone far.

At first, I think he's at Kingswood, then see the dot is slightly northeast of there. I take a minute to see it's moving; that the difference isn't just because of limitations in the app.

A walk. That's all it'll be. Yesterday, before we refocused all our attention on Brooke, we'd been at loggerheads. After such a long period of estrangement, that's to be expected, especially added to the other unique arrangements. At least there's one thing we're united on, the one safely dozing in the bedroom.

We should take a few days off. Start the first of a long series of conversations to see if we can fight our way through all the bullshit Gwyn's dumped in our laps. Get to a new point, a new way to relate to each other.

I nearly have a heart attack when the phone rings in my hand. Like I conjured her by thinking her name, Gwyn's number appears on the screen.

"What the hell are you playing at?" she yells the moment the call connects. "As though you hadn't brought enough shame to the family, now you've gone and got your hooks into our son as well?"

I push away from the wall, slipping outside so my voice doesn't disturb Brooke. On the front step, I take a seat, my arse complaining loudly about the cold concrete. "Good morning to you, too."

“Your son just hung up on me,” she ploughs ahead, ignoring my tone. “If you think you can afford to keep him in that fancy school without our support—”

“Stop.” I rub a hand over my eyes, trying to focus on the message behind her onslaught of words. “Could you start from the beginning? What’s going on with school?”

“How could you get him mixed up with your lifestyle? He’s a good boy. If he just paid a bit more attention in class, he could really get someplace. Instead, you’re distracting him with all your nonsense and now Martin won’t foot the bill.”

There are about three different conversations going on within that one stream. I tangle out the most obvious one. “Harrison wanted to leave school, anyway. I’m sure he’ll be relieved.”

“Sure. Why don’t you throw that back in my face?”

“I’m not—”

“Do you ever think about the future? Harrison’s future? What kind of girl is going to marry him when he’s got this weird sex thing hung around his neck like a stone?”

“I thought you liked Brooke.”

“This isn’t about Brooke.”

A sharper concern pierces through the fog of my morning-addled brain. “Wait, you talked to Harrison already? When?”

“Just now.”

I stand up, glancing over to the carport where my old Mazda is parked, condensation glazing into ice with the deepening morning cold. “Did you tell him about school?”

“Of course, I did. The boy needs some discipline and if he’s not getting it at Kingswood, I don’t know why we’re paying those exorbitant prices.”

“I’ve got to go.” A sense of unease falls on my shoulders and I try to shake it off, but it doesn’t leave. The lingering remnants of yesterday’s emotional upheavals are still raw.

If it's like this for me, it must be a hundred times worse for Harrison. His youth will automatically amplify each emotion to an unbearable degree.

When I walk inside the house, the smell of freshly brewed coffee has a bitter edge. In bed, Brooke is just rousing, and I kiss her on the forehead, smoothing hair away from her cheek. "I've got to go out for a while. I want to track down Harrison and have a chat."

"That sounds good. Is that coffee?"

"Yeah, there's a pot on the warmer. Keep your phone turned on and I'll give you an update."

She sits up, eyes focusing. "Is something wrong?"

"Gwyn called him, and I don't think she was very kind. He's somewhere near the school and I just want to find him. Make sure he's all right."

"Okay." She curls her knees to her chest. "Can I do anything?"

"Just let me know if he calls."

I kiss her again, properly this time, her lips beautifully pliable, eyes still clouded a little from her extended sleep.

Then I'm outside, breath condensing into clouds like cigarette smoke as I get into the car, setting my phone on the stand so the GPS lady can guide the way.

It doesn't take long to get where she tells me. A subdivision. Maybe a friend? I don't know. All I want is to find him, make sure he's safe, then the tightness in my chest will relax and I can go home.

A jetty pokes over a manufactured lake where the brilliant blue breasts of Pūkeko flash as they stalk the mossy underbrush leading down to the water's edge, their bright orange beaks stabbing at any stirring insect.

I walk there, eyes darting from the scenic view to my phone and back again, scanning for any sign of Harrison. He could be in any of the occupied houses here. Maybe even in an

unoccupied dwelling. I could search for hours and never be sure.

A mound is at the end of the jetty, and I walk towards it, thinking it's a coil of rope or someone's fishing tackle trustingly left behind. It takes until I'm almost on top of it to recognise it as a pile of clothing.

I squat, pawing past the t-shirt and the jeans, checking the shoes, not sure enough of Harrison's clothing choices to know if they're his, believing it anyway.

The nip of concern I felt throughout the journey here, turns into a bite.

Harrison feels things deeply, but he's never been good at sharing. Long before his misstep with Brooke, I remember how tense he used to get when Gwyn and I argued. How he held it all in, cracking jokes to get us to smile.

There's a phone tucked inside the jeans' pocket. I send a text and the screen flashes. They belong to Harrison.

He came here, a twenty-minute walk from the school, a half-hour drive from my house. He came here on a freezing morning, stripped off his clothes, left his phone behind, and... went swimming?

The improbability makes my skin turn icy cold.

When I try to inhale a deep breath, my lungs won't inflate.

I stand, eyes scanning in all directions, looking for a sign, a symbol, something to let me know where he's gone. A dull pain grips my left arm and I flip through the neat stack of clothes again, this time searching for a note. There's nothing but I can't be relieved. Not when he could just as easily have sent a message from his phone, telling us goodbye. When he could have opted to leave without explaining.

In the water. He must be in the water.

My eyes restlessly scan the surface for any splashes, ears cocked for the slightest out-of-place noise.

Seconds pass like hours until I can't stand it a moment longer. I strip my jumper and t-shirt off, becoming frantic as I

nudge off my sneakers, shuck my jeans, then plunge into the bitter cold of the small lake.

When I break the surface, I hear a splash and head in that direction. My breaths are short and fast, not giving me enough air. Something heavy settles onto my chest and I struggle to push through, push on regardless. I don't have time for anything to go wrong. Not until I find Harrison. Not until I can hold on to my son.

His head bobs above the surface and the initial rush of relief is swamped by new concerns. Is he trying to swim? Has he changed his mind? Has whatever madness drove him to this icy lake in the early morning hours retreated or is he still held fast in its grip?

I strike out for him, closing quickly now I know exactly where to head. He sinks farther in the water, but I grab hold, manoeuvring behind him, fear cutting like a blade as I wrap my arms around him, and he tries to push me away. To get free of me long enough to sink into the water and drown.

"Let me go," he blurts, gasping for air as he renews his struggles. "I'm right on top of it. Just one more dive."

"On top of what?"

I'm so grateful to hear him speak, I let go, swimming back a stroke to have a better view of his face. "We need to get you back to shore. Please, I promise you, things aren't as bad as they might seem."

"What?" His face creases with a frown, then he exhales, bobbing lower, then he's gone.

"No!"

I duck into the water, following him, my eyes not adjusting to the opacity, the gloom, the murk.

Then I see the shape of him near the bottom. I reach for his shoulder, grab his upper arm, and start hauling him to the surface.

At first, he fights me, I see a long limb stretch out to grab a handful of mud or weeds or *something*, then he capitulates,

and we float up together, me gasping for air the moment my head breaks from the water.

“Harrison, please come back with me. Whatever’s troubling you we can sort it out, but please, please don’t end it this way.”

“End what?”

His lips are dull white, skin turning grey with cold. Instead of talking, I slip my arms around his chest, pulling him back against me, then strike out for the jetty. He fights me again, struggling free, but this time heads in the same direction, relief giving me another impetus to make the swim back to safety.

“What were you thinking?” I scold him, directing him up the ladder first, teeth chattering so my words take different shapes than I mean. “I could have lost you.”

“Lost me how?” He clutches a small box close to his chest. “Do you have a rug or something in your car? I’m freezing.”

“No, shit. Next time you throw yourself into a lake to die, please choose one in summer.”

Harrison goes still. “You thought I was...” he shakes his head, opening the box and tilting it towards me. “It’s the engagement ring I had made for Brooke. I thought... I can’t buy her anything she can’t already buy herself, but I hoped she’d see the effort and...”

And another jolt of relief hits my bloodstream. “You went diving in a cold lake at the crack of dawn to find a ring?”

He shifts from foot to foot, hugging himself for warmth. “Well, yeah.”

“Without telling anyone where you were going or what you were doing?”

He rubs a hand through his hair, flicking out water. “No one needed to know. I was diving into a poxy little lake to find something I threw away, not wading into the ocean with rocks in my pockets.”

The simultaneous urge to smack him and hug him leaves me doing neither. I head to the car, pulling the rug from the

back seat and shaking five years' worth of crumbs to the ground before handing it to him.

“One day, you'll have a kid, and I hope they put you through the most torturous shit ever devised by an offspring in the world ever.”

“Wow. Thanks, Dad. Really selling me on parenthood.” He narrows his eyes at me. “Does that mean I get to go first?”

I yank the rug away from him, drying myself while he whimpers, then getting dressed, even that layer of protection not enough to drive out the cold. “I'm not the one to ask,” I say once I've let the query settle and tossed the rug back his way. “And if you taking off on daft excursions, telling no one, is anything to judge by, you've missed the point about communication.”

“I did communicate. I talked to Mum this morning.”

“Yeah.” I fold my arms while staring at him, the self-embrace my only point of warmth. “How'd that go?”

“It went kind of how you'd expect. I don't think I'll do it again in a hurry.”

“Fair enough. You get a free pass on that one,” I hold up a warning finger. “But that's the only pass, got it?”

His smile is wide and genuine and tugs at so many heartstrings I'm in danger of having an attack.

“Now, get in the car before I ground you.”

“Sure. Now you start parenting.”

He slips around the side of the vehicle before I can give him a crack over the ear for talking back, and I watch fondly as he replaces the rug in the car before getting in the front passenger seat. Inside, he fiddles with the air conditioning, cranking the heat as high as it'll go, then settling back, rubbing his arms to generate some warmth.

“Sorry if I concerned you,” he says as I take the driver's side. “I didn't even realise how dumb an idea it was until I dove into the water. After that, I wanted the discomfort to be worth it, so didn't get straight back out.”

I put my hand on the back of his neck, ruffling his collar-length hair, throat swelling with affection.

“What’s that look for?”

“I love you a whole lot, you know.” I start the car but don’t put it in drive, just idling with my hands on the wheel. “If this situation’s too much for you, it’s okay to let me know. I’d rather step back than lose you altogether.”

Harrison huffs out a breath through his nose, turning to stare out his passenger window. “Good one. Can you imagine Brooke letting you get away from her now? She’d pay to hunt you down on the street, then keep you captive in a modified basement.”

“Ah, now I get it. I was wondering what you saw in her, but obviously the mad stalker vibes cinched the deal.”

“Sure, laugh,” he scoffs. “But remember she bought your house when she thought you might try to back away. Pretty sure that’s coercive control in action.”

He has a point. Right from the start, Brooke’s controlled access to me with money. I forget she’s wealthy day to day, although yesterday’s travel in a private jet reinforced the idea better than anything else I’ve seen.

Then I remember her storming to my door after the dance, ignoring the embarrassment and awkwardness in her single-minded pursuit of what she wanted. The blatant manipulation that would be a turn off in anyone else, but because of her, of how she is, how I feel about her, it’s undeniably sexy.

“Yeah,” I agree. It’s definitely a form of control. Even her submission in the bedroom comes at the end of a spirited fight. And because Harrison’s admiration shone through in his voice, I add, “I kind of like it, too.”

He bursts into laughter, shaking his head as he pulls across his seat belt, and I reverse the car away from the lines of ghost houses, heading for the comforts and safety of home.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BROOKE

HARRISON AND DAEGAN LOOK STRANGELY SATISFIED WHEN they return from their outing. The flutter of worry that Daegan had given me as a parting gift, relaxes into gratitude the moment they get home.

I don't understand why they chose one of the coldest days this year to go swimming, but they appear so pleased with themselves and each other, I don't much care.

"It's official," Harrison says after taking a shower to turn him back to his usual rosy hue. "I'm a high school drop out."

The news takes me by surprise. "You are?"

"Mm-hm. Apparently Martin's pulled the plug on my enrolment, so I'm no longer able to attend."

"You can't attend Kingswood," Daegan corrects him. "You're perfectly capable of going to the local high school."

"The one with the metal detector on its main doors?"

"Wouldn't you rather that than students carrying anything they like into the school?"

I raise my eyebrow at Harrison, his old jocularly sinking into my bones like a warm brew. "Since he carries a knife, I think he's upset they'll confiscate it if they find out."

"Why d'you have a knife?"

When Harrison struggles to find a reason, I joyfully add, "To terrify little girls with."

"Terrify them into an orgasm as it turns out."

"Mm. Some of us do err on the side of danger."

Daegan strides over until he looms above both of us. "Give it here." And when Harrison hesitates, he barks, "Now."

"It's just a flick-knife. Calm down." After handing it over, he lays his large palm on my thigh, the fingers still struggling

their way back to warmth. “Lots of kids in Kingswood carry protection.”

“From who?” Daegan appears shocked. “You’re the elite of the elite. Who’s going to attack you?”

“The other elite,” I suggest, wondering if I should invite Floss over for a gossip session. She’s always had a talent for rooting out the best stories. I’m sure she’d have a treasure trove of examples at the ready.

“In which case, you’re better off not going to that school.” He tosses the knife into a drawer in the kitchen, then comes back through. “Do you want to go shopping? I’ve only got enough groceries in to last tonight.”

Harrison swivels towards me, a huge grin on his face. “Have you ever been to a supermarket?”

“You make me sound like a queen. Of course, I’ve been to the supermarket.” I shoot Daegan a more cautious glance. “But I don’t know how to cook or what you like to eat.”

“Would you like to learn to cook?”

“I’d love to.” I smile up at him, nudging him with my toe. “As long as I get a sexy-arse instructor, that is.”

“We could order some meal boxes. They’re pretty good for starting out. Nice easy recipes without much prep involved.”

It sounds exactly what I need. As we sort through the different offers online, I pull out my phone and put a query into my banking officer to get Harrison and Daegan added to my cards and enquiring about the logistics of setting up a shared account.

Just the thought of money reminds me of Alicia and a few nerves break free, leaving me nibbling my thumbnail as I click and scroll.

The moment Harrison sees, his arm goes around me, stroking my arm with his thumb, using his other hand to pluck the offending digit from my mouth. “We’ll have to get you that awful polish again.”

“Bleurgh. No thanks. I’ll leave it a few days, then try to go cold turkey.” I spread my fingers wide. “Nails are pretty pointless, anyway.”

Daegan gives me an intent stare. “Are you condemning us both to a lifetime of not having long marks scored into our backs? Because that feels like a decision we should all have input into.”

I’m halfway through an eyeroll when there’s a heavy thump on the door. A burst of adrenaline jolts me to my feet while Daegan shuffles to answer, trying to squint through the net curtains to see who it is.

When he opens the door, the accelerator pedal for my anxiety gets pressed flat to the floor.

Standing on the front step is my father.

“Brooke?”

I stumble forward, hairs standing on the back of my neck. “Dad? What are you doing here?”

He steps inside, waving away his bodyguard before closing the door, not giving me an answer.

“How did you know where to find me?”

His gaze finishes cataloguing everything within view and lands on my face. “You had my investigator trace this address. Since you weren’t at school, it seemed the obvious place to start.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr Ellis,” Harrison says, jumping to his feet and approaching with his hand extended. “I’ve been going to Kingswood with your daughter for the past three years.”

My dad dismisses the hand with a glance and Harrison pulls it back to his side. “Gwyn’s son, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Martin and I tried to do a deal together thirty years ago. The man’s a selfish prick.”

Harrison's smile falters, then tunes back to a higher voltage. "That certainly sounds like him." He holds his palms up in playful surrender. "But I'm not related to him except through Mum's marriage, I promise."

Dad steps forward, sliding an arm around my waist and tugging me close enough to kiss me on the cheek. The touch is perfunctory, robotic. A little girl inside me still bounces on her toes, trying to make herself taller, babbling to grab his attention, but most of me already knows better. His eyes run a rudimentary scan of my face, then he turns back to my companions.

"Alicia told me you were making a dreadful mistake, so I thought I might be overdue a visit."

My hands curl into fists and I feel about a foot shorter. "Did she tell you anything else?"

"No, but I'm guessing the call you put through to Dafyn is related."

Dafyn is his accountant. A man who still hasn't called me back but perhaps he didn't sense the need since my father has apparently taken it upon himself to investigate. A shock that still hasn't fully registered.

My father turns the full glare of his attention on Daegan. "You're the sex worker then, I take it. And you're how old?"

"About ten years less of an age gap than between you and your current wife," I interject, moving to stand in front of my dad before he can stride any farther into the house. "Did you just turn up to be rude or is there something else?"

He frowns. His large, fluffy eyebrows instantly turn menacing. "Don't speak to me that way. I'm allowed to show concern for your welfare."

"Is that what this is? No wonder it's so unfamiliar."

Dad's lips twist while I bite hard on the inside of my cheek, trying not to unleash any further aggression. I don't understand what's happening, just that so many emotions are bubbling up that they're taking a variety of weird and wonderful forms.

“Sorry,” I say, probably far too late. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Why don’t you take me on a tour? Alicia talked so fast, I barely heard half of what she had to say.”

“Sure.” I clutch my arms tightly around my midriff, jerking my head at the couch as I pass by Harrison, who takes the message, pulling on his dad’s arm when Daegan seems set to follow my whirlwind walk-through.

In each room, my father takes a few mental snapshots, then motions for me to lead him into the next space. “This isn’t a bad place,” he comments in the rear bedroom, which Daegan uses for storage. He knocks on the wide wooden mantel above a deactivated fireplace, then peers out the window into the sprawling but tidy back yard. “Great for kids if it wasn’t for the gang pad right next door.”

It doesn’t take long for our roles to switch. He leads me into each adjoining room while I hang back, trying to understand his motives. The last time I saw him was at his latest wedding. A small affair with three hundred guests. I’d have had better luck speaking with him if I’d attended his last divorce, instead.

When we emerge back in the dining room, Daegan is in the kitchen making a pot of tea while Harrison loiters by the front door, looking uneasy. He straightens as we walk closer and I smile, thinking for a moment he’s about to salute.

“You should have negotiated for a bigger discount,” my dad says, pulling out his phone and frowning at the screen, before tucking it away. “With the longevity of its last listing, you should have been able to knock the estate agent down by at least ten percent of the asking price.”

“I wanted to secure it.”

“Right.” He reaches out, laying his hand on my shoulder for a split second, just long enough for me to miss it when he pulls it away. “If this is how you’re wasting your trust fund, then I can’t get too excited over Alicia putting the other half to her own use.”

The sting of that barb sets deep. The thing he cares about most is money, but since my fund was already earmarked for me, it falls outside his remit. My chest pinches with that old, familiar ache.

“That’s not what I cared about. It was more the faking porn using my image and distributing it without my consent.”

His eyes widen, staring at me for such a long time that the weight of his gaze becomes exponentially heavier.

“She and Dafyn left out that bit. Send the details through and I’ll have my investigator tidy it away.” His phone buzzes again but he doesn’t reach for it this time. “You should never have bought this property. Next time, check with Antoine and he’ll be able to give you an assessment. There’s no money to be made from this place.”

I could argue that a home doesn’t have to be churning out profit, that it’s not the primary concern, but whistling into a gale would have more effect.

“As you so eloquently pointed out, there’s a gang pad next door. A subsidiary of the head-hunters.”

“Right.” My dad’s interest dissolves as quickly as it appeared. His blank stare passes over me as though I don’t exist more than a painting on a wall or an image on a television screen. “You might think that’s a feature but in real estate terms—”

“The gang has experienced fifteen percent growth year on year for the past four years. Their property is already straining at the seams.”

He shakes his head with amusement. “Great. Not only a gang house but a crowded gang house full of tension. Sounds desirable.”

“They can’t go to a bank. When they made an offer on this place, they were laughed away. They can’t compete on an equal field to the usual housing market. If they want to expand, they have to make us a cash offer. They have to accept our terms.”

“Or just go elsewhere.”

And I hold my gaze long enough that he connects the dots. “Okay. You either sell at a marked increase or the gang moves and your house price soars.” He presses his lips together. “Not what I’d do.”

“It’s not your money any longer so I don’t care what you’d do. This is a sound investment and I’ll get a higher return in a shorter period than anything else in this price range.”

“Unless you piss off next door and get targeted.”

“That’s what the insurance is for. If you’re here to cast judgement on my relationship, have at it, but don’t disparage my investment ability. It’s not like I blew half a million on coke and fast cars.”

A tremor takes hold and I fight against it, keeping my chin raised and my gaze steady. This man has never given me love but the least I want is his respect.

And he inclines his head, his eyes sliding away first. “Fair enough. Walk me to the car.”

He takes my elbow, making it awkward to decline his request. The moment we’re outside, he stops on the porch, letting me go to shove his hands in his pockets, swaying onto the balls of his feet before slamming back onto his heels.

“Your mother and I haven’t given you the best demonstration of marriage over the years. I hope you understand what you’re getting into.”

“They’re both pretty and they’re both far poorer than me. Isn’t that the lesson in domestic bliss you were trying to teach me?” He snorts out a laugh and I think I’m about to faint. The sound is so alien, it takes me a second to convince myself that’s what it is. “I’m probably going to drop out of school.”

“Because you’re doing badly?”

“Because I don’t like it and I’d rather spend my time working out what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

“That’s fair. I dropped out of school at sixteen. Never really saw the point to it.” He falls silent and I wait beside him, the awkwardness draining away, happy to just stand

there. After a few minutes, he shakes himself. “Better get back to it. Make sure I get an invitation if you’re serious about marrying one or both of them.” He sends me a shy grin. “The first wedding is special.”

He’s back in his car, the driver pulling away from the kerb before I decide he was cracking a joke. As the vehicle turns the corner, out of sight, I allow myself to relax into a smile.

Then I turn, the door already opening. Daegan and Harrison spill from the entrance, ready to bundle me back inside, ready to support me, to become the family I’ve searched for so long.

“Are you okay?” Harrison asks, enveloping me in a hug as the door closes us inside. “Or do I need to chase after him and kick his arse?”

The idea makes me snigger. “Good luck when his bodyguard turns on you.” Adding, because the worry lines aren’t going away, “I’m fine. It’s odd but I think he gave me his blessing.”

“Oh, yeah?” He shoots me a loopy grin, then slides his hands onto my shoulders, positioning me so I face him. “Found a little something while I was out on my swim this morning.”

“Something good?”

“Maybe.” He glances over to Daegan, who nods. “I’m not sure how this will go but I’m sure we’ll make it work.”

While I’m still staring on, baffled, he huffs in a deep breath and gets down on one knee. “Brooke, I love you. You’ve been the best part of my life for the last few years, and you’ll continue to hold a special place long into the future. I know you’re marrying my dad—”

Daegan breaks out in a cough that sounds suspiciously like a laugh, something that abruptly ceases when Harrison sends him a cautionary glare.

“—but I would like you to wear my ring as a gesture of our commitment.”

He takes my hand, reaching into his pocket for a box, and flicking the top open with his thumb. Even though his gaze is steady, his hands shake as he takes out the ring, holding it between his finger and thumb.

“There’s a lot of my family history tied up in this bauble, but the thing I’ll always be proudest of is forming a new family with you.” His eyes skate to the side, to include Daegan. “And you, I guess.”

A bubble of laughter floats from his dad. “Way to stick the landing.”

It feels wrong to bring Harrison to his feet, so I drop to my knees in front of him, cradling his head between my hands and leaning forward to kiss him. I whisper in his ear, “Thank you. I’m proud to be part of your family, too.”

“I know it’s not enough, but—”

And I kiss him again to stop him. “It doesn’t need to be enough. Not right now. We’re all a work in progress, aren’t we?”

He sweeps his arms under my knees and swings me up as he stands, spinning me in a circle while I shriek in surprise. When he sets me on my feet, I stumble to the side, letting Daegan catch me and hold me steady.

“Thank you for the ring. I suppose now is a good time to admit I’m not sure about getting married.” The idea lent me security, but I don’t need it any longer. I have security all around me. In just a few days, I’ve grown to trust my partners, revelling in our shared connection. The strength of our bonds is well above anything a marriage licence could give me.

Harrison tilts his head, scrunching up his face. “No?”

“Nah. I think we should all just be involved in flagrant debauchery instead.” I twiddle my fingers. “With beautiful accessories.”

Daegan links his hands over my abdomen while Harrison closes in for another kiss and I can’t imagine anything being as perfect. I close my eyes, reducing my senses so the ones still in action can be indulged to the fullest.

As Daegan lifts my hair to press a row of kisses along my neck, Harrison's fingers blaze a trail of fire along my collarbone, his lips still soft but pressing against me with increasing dominance.

It feels like the beginning of something special and I rest one hand on Harrison's chest, one atop Daegan's hand, holding both close, my heart now complete.

EPILOGUE

HARRISON

THE HOUSE IS EMPTY WHEN I ARRIVE HOME, UNDOING MY TIE the moment I'm through the door, my shirt off by the time I hit the bedroom, the stiff suit-trousers following a moment later.

Rather than go back to school, I've spent the last four months of the year interning in the sales office of a corporate real estate agency that Ollie's dad runs.

The days are long, the money's almost non-existent, but I still find a lot of satisfaction in the work, in building a rapport with clients and striving to meet their needs before they organise their own thoughts long enough to voice them.

Next year, I'll work on my own commissions. The last internal review is Friday week, and I fully expect to pass with flying colours. My team leader already pulled me into his office to give me a glowing assessment.

It mightn't be my ideal career—and god knows what that will turn out to be—but it's satisfying and it feels incredible to build a skill-set that is of actual use rather than totting up scores that only matter within the confines of the schoolyard.

“Anyone home?” I call out, opening the back door dressed only in my boxers and staring across the lawn.

Summer has browned the grass, but the native plants dotted along the border of the fence are thriving. Close to the house, a patch of rosemary attracts dozens of early season bees, prepping them for the berry plants that will soon blossom.

Brooke lies on her stomach on a beach towel, the bright red and orange stripes a vibrant counterpoint to the dull grass and cracked clay. She's slathered in sunscreen, wears an enormous hat to protect her face, and her genetics guarantee she might burn but never tan. Still, she loves to read on the back lawn, splayed beneath the unforgiving rays of the antipodean sun.

She rolls onto her back in greeting, raising a hand to shield her eyes where the hat doesn't cover.

Without asking, she gets up and folds away the towel, clutching her kindle in one hand as she walks over to plant a kiss on my cheek. In the long months since we moved in together, I've grown closer to her than I thought possible.

Now, as she throws her arms around my neck, extending the kiss until my senses are drowning in her, it's almost like we're melding into one, becoming a better person together than we ever were apart.

"I should come home early, more often." I rest my forehead against her, brushing strands of hair from her face only for the gentle breeze to blow them straight back to unkemptness. "What have you been up to today?"

"Reading. Pondering. I've been tracking some stock prices back a decade because I think I've spotted a pattern, but I need more data points before I can verify that for certain."

"Mm. Crunching numbers. My one true hatred."

"Liar," she teases, poking me in the ribs. "Your hatred was English, followed by maths, general science, geography—"

"Enough of that," I say, tickling her until she doubles over laughing. "If I want to hear a list of my faults, I can return one of Mum's calls."

"You should." Brooke face straightens as she takes my hand and hauls me inside. "Because you know who she calls when she can't get hold of you or Daegan? Give you three guesses."

"You don't have to answer, either."

She rolls her eyes as though I'm spouting nonsense, then opens the fridge and glares accusingly at the contents. "These food box companies need to include a packet of motivation in their list of ingredients. How am I meant to put everything together without that?"

"Hire a staff member to do it for you."

Brooke scrunches her nose, and my breath catches in my throat for a second. I remember how we were at the beginning of the year, tiptoeing around each other, scared to grab for what we wanted in case it sent the other sprinting headlong in another direction.

I still struggle to share sometimes. Thoughts will lodge in my head, and I won't know how to get them out, how to put them into a word packet that others can consume. But Brooke is responsive as long as I try, and my dad found a well of patience somewhere during our years-long estrangement.

Even with my hangups, the more I try, the easier it gets, though easy in this context is still far harder than anything on earth ought to be. And the reward is paid with Brooke's openness, with her trying to be a better, more communicative, partner, too.

Secure enough in our relationship to grow into the person she wants to be.

“Where's Dad?”

“Entertaining a hen party,” she confides, waggling her eyebrows suggestively. “I hope he fends off all those hands trying to stuff money down his skimpy briefs. He should get paid danger money.”

“He does. You thought all that cash was because of his dance moves?”

“Yup.”

“So much for his retirement.”

Dad has withdrawn from the bulk of his activities, but he has one contract that won't expire until the middle of next year and his conscience won't allow him to break it just because Brooke could afford to pay the penalties without blinking.

After it's done, he might be the only one of us going to university. Without the need to earn constantly, he's turned his thoughts towards what he might want to do instead. Brooke told him he could be her elderly toyboy but the role of provider is too deeply entrenched for him to consider doing nothing.

“Do you want to go out for a meal?”

I grab her by the waist and nuzzle into the side of her neck. “Or we could head into the bedroom, and I’ll eat you for dinner, instead.”

“Tempting, but I need far more calories than that.” She swings the door closed with a sigh. “The only thing I miss about Kingswood is the meal service every day.”

“I miss lying on your bed, waiting for you to come back, and planning out everything I’m going to do to you as punishment.”

“You talk a good game, mister, but you’re still not attracting me as much as pizza.”

I swing her over my shoulder, enjoying the squeal as she fights to regain her footing and utterly fails, falling into laughter instead. “Put me down. There’s no single play until Thursday.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t let you orgasm, so it doesn’t count.”

I let her fight her way free in the bedroom, escaping back into the lounge, leaving me to change into sweats before rejoining her on the sofa. She waggles her phone at me, displaying an ordered menu that could conservatively feed a family of eight. I grab the remote before tugging her into my arms, holding her close despite the afternoon heat baking through the windows.

“Netflix and chill it is,” I murmur, flicking onto the tv menu, then handing it to her when the array presents too much of a challenge.

She picks a horror, tugging the curtains across so we can see the dark scenes. As she settles against me, fitting into my arms like she was born to be there, contentment washes across me like a warm wave.

There are tough spots in our relationship. Sometimes, I want to grab Brooke and head for the hills, keeping just the two of us in play. Other times, there’s such a rush of affection for my father, I can’t imagine anything different. I can’t

imagine not wanting to share, not wanting to watch Brooke being shared.

When I wake in the morning, her lying between us, a smile of beatific beauty on her face, I sometimes catch his eye and see the same expression of wonder.

I know our relationship doesn't make sense to other people, openly aggravating some, but it only needs to be comprehensible to the three of us. The added support eases the pressure, giving me the breathing room to make mistakes without feeling like certain doom awaits. It gives me the courage to try new things, knowing I have a supportive base at home.

But there are bad days, too. Days when I glower at my father, spoiling for a fight.

When jealousy nibbles, I reframe our situation and it helps. Instead of me being the tongue-tied jerk who rightfully lost his girlfriend and had to have a third party take the steering wheel, I'm the boy whose dad landed himself a gorgeous, rich, smart, young girlfriend... and who graciously lets me fuck her most nights.

Not much of a distinction perhaps but to me it sounds just right.

DAEGAN

The tattooist is finishing up when Harrison and Brooke return to the shop, the latter immediately running over to examine the latest addition to my canvas.

“It’s so pretty,” she exclaims, twisting me onto my side to get a better view of the design. “I’m surprised you had any room left.”

The image is a small stream parting around stones shaped for her initials. A nod to her name but also a presentation of how she flowed into my life.

As she gently places her fingers near the swollen skin, the artist interrupts to spray with an anti-bacterial foam and cover the area with gauze.

“On the next visit, I’ll fill in the details,” the man says, moving towards the counter to tally the work so far.

“What about me?” Harrison asks and I frown.

“You want a tattoo?”

“No, but I’m your flesh and blood child. Shouldn’t you get one for me as well?”

It still gives me a shock sometimes to see the young boy peeking out from the eyes of a man taller than me. Who’d be broader, too, if he could be bothered to work at it.

A few sessions at the gym taught me a lot about Harrison’s motivation. He spent most of the time chatting with other men, pretending to wait for the chance to use machines or weights, but really gossiping to pass the time without putting in the slightest lick of work.

With his easy manner and genuine interest in other people, he’d make a great impression in my old line of work. It was no surprise to me when he announced he’d gone into sales. Commercial property isn’t the best fit but anything that allows him to chat with people, discover their concerns, and find a solution makes him happy.

It's bittersweet to discover what I've missed out on by being absent from so many years of his life. Sometimes, I daydream what it would have been like if Gwyn and I had been able to make a go of it. If I could have spent every day with this incredible boy, had more input as he grew into a man.

It makes up for the days when we butt heads and I want to kill him.

"What about you?" the artist asks Brooke as I settle the bill and type the new appointment into my phone. "With your skin tones, we've got some fabulous designs that would suit." He reaches for another card. "Scan the QR code and it'll take you to our online gallery, but we're happy to make an appointment and work out a custom design."

I think she takes the card to be polite, then see her snatching glances around the shop and wonder if she's interested. "How much does it hurt?"

"Barely," I say, then immediately regret it as Harrison pokes my new addition. "If you're lucky," I add with a grimace. "Quite a lot, otherwise."

"We can fit you in right now if you have something in mind," the man offers, and I stare at him with a disgruntled expression.

I had to wait six weeks and only got today because of a cancelled appointment but put a pretty lady in front of him and suddenly his schedule's free.

"I want initials, too," she says as Harrison also notes the interest and slings a possessive arm around her waist, pulling her against him.

"You could get your scar tattooed," he murmurs. "Put some flowers and shit around it."

She arches her eyebrow at him in amusement. "If you wanted flowers around your initials, you had your chance to put them there. You didn't seem interested in floral arrangements at the time."

"It was five seconds after you asked me if you could fu—" Harrison breaks off as he notices how interested the tattooist is

in our conversation. “If you could visit my dad.”

“And now he gets a nice tattoo, and you get a scar.” She purses her lips. “Such a pity.”

Harrison makes a dismissive noise. “A scar’s far better. You can always get a tattoo removed.”

“Here are a few designs you might like,” the artist says, flicking through a binder. “We can certainly incorporate other elements if you have a preference.”

I take a chair and pull Harrison away when he glowers at the man, deliberately standing too close. He wears his protective instincts far too prominently on his shoulder.

“You didn’t answer me,” he says in a gruff voice, slumping far too low, daggers still unsheathed in his eyes. His hair falls in his eyes, and he flicks it back, holding it for a moment before it cascades down to his shoulders.

His mother would say he needs a cut, but I wonder if he overheard a compliment Brooke paid me a few weeks ago.

We’re committed to this relationship, but we’re also still working our way around each other. The single dates have worked to release most of the pressure, but we’re both competitive in our own ways. No matter where we put out fires, others will spring into life. We just need to learn our ways of managing them when they do.

I wore a t-shirt to the appointment and now hitch up the shoulder, tapping my finger against a small design. A heart made of thin wavy lines, ragged around the edges. “This is you.”

He frowns at the design, nostrils pinching together.

“It’s your palm print,” I explain. We had your footprints and palm prints taken at the hospital and I took copies of the hands. The artist traced over the lines.

There’s a small heartbeat line over the top, added a year later.

“I got this one after you came through your last surgery with flying colours. It’s on my shoulder because when I was at

work, I liked to look at it, to remember why I was doing everything I did. They took the EKG at your last surgeon's appointment."

Harrison touches a finger to the image, tracing the shape of the heart. His cheeks grow blotchy, and he snatches his hand away, digging his thumb into his palm like it's cramping.

"Guess I should think about something."

I nudge him with my elbow. "I don't think it's a prerequisite."

"Yeah." He pats his torso, rubbing his hands up and down like he's warming himself. "My body is a temple and all that. I might just find some nice jewellery."

"Sounds good."

Brooke finishes up with a small portfolio of designs to consider and a vague invitation to come along whenever she wants. Harrison immediately springs back to her side, leaving the artist in no doubt that the appointment won't be a solo one, even if she's the only one getting marked.

I stay seated for the moment. Just watching.

It's hard to look at them without emotion pulling my throat tight, making my chest ache. They're my second chances. The beautiful girl who makes me feel eighteen again with the world at my feet, all my mistakes in front of me, and my son. The boy I let slip away once but will never release long enough to drift away again.

Brooke turns, gesturing for me to join them. Never one to need a second invitation, I cross to her side, resting a hand on the curve of her shoulder while Harrison keeps one arm slung around her waist.

I know it'll raise eyebrows, it almost always does, but it's been a long time since I gave a fuck what anyone else thought—a trait that Brooke and Harrison have been quick to adopt.

The tattoo artist's eyes widen, then he disengages from the conversation, feigning interest in the back room where another customer is swapping jokes with their artist.

“You’ll have to help me choose,” she tells me as we head out of the store. “Otherwise, I’ll end up with all of them.”

From where I’m standing, that doesn’t sound like a bad decision at all.

BROOKE

A face peers through the window, eyes sharp, alert for any details. The breath of the man outside fogs the glass, adding a shield of blurriness that softens his harsh features, like Vaseline over an old film camera, smudging the leading lady into greater beauty.

The rough sound of Daegan's breathing fills my ear a second before he snatches my earlobe between his teeth, the wet suctioning enough to make my insides curl into a panting ball of need.

I can't believe that I used to find the fluids, sights, smells, sounds of sex repugnant. Each one of those details now means only one thing, pleasure. Each dribble or lick or pinch or groan or wet slap just another step on the path to ecstasy.

He slides the head of his cock into me, the expansive back seat of my sedan grows smaller by the second as Daegan's muscled, tattooed glory of a torso uses up the wide stretch of leather, leaving me balanced on the very edge, each thrust threatening to spill me into the footwell.

Not that there's any space there. Not with Harrison crouching, his mouth-watering, eye-watering cock at the perfect level to plunge into my gasping throat.

A palm slaps against the window, lines visible in the small glow of the interior car light. The front windows are each rolled down a centimetre, giving us an aural entryway into the world outside the car.

Another man stares through the back window and I make accidental eye contact as I peer behind me, checking on Daegan as an exquisite groan of pleasure escapes his lips. Delightful, but far too early.

The girl beside him has her chest against the cool glass, her erect nipple squeezing against the window on the side where her boyfriend's fumbling fingers aren't pinched tight, drawing a small cry from her throat.

The sound shoves me forward, escalating the speed of my journey. When Harrison teases me with the head of his cock, dotted with a tantalising drop of pre-cum, Daegan bears down on my shoulders while thrusting inside me, the throbbing length of his erection a constant taunt, a constant game of dare to see how much I can take.

Sometimes I'm a loser. Sometimes my hand taps out such an insistent rhythm that even the clock stops. Most times, my pair of duelling suitors keep me at the perfect distance from that line, hauling me along the exquisitely sharp edge without ever letting me drop into the decline.

A hand slaps against the bonnet and Daegan pulls the buttons of my blouse apart, flipping down the cups of my bra to release my tits much to the excitement of the growing cluster of voyeurs outside the car.

Harrison presses his thumb against my chin, opening my mouth like it's an automatic button release, growing tired of the tease and easing into me, not enough to gag, encouraging me to flex my tongue and work at his pleasure. The groan as Daegan increases the speed of his thrust acts like a vibrator before I can resume the teasing flicks and curls of my tongue, the suction gently increasing as he allows me to find a rhythm, displaying my prowess to the growing crowd.

"On your knees," Daegan commands, withdrawing to give a slap on my rump, then clamping his large hands over my hips and moving me to a new position, flashing my glistening pussy at the windows, steaming enough now that I can barely see the faces, the hands.

Not that I need the visual. My other senses are enough. My imagination paints in anything I miss.

This time, he doesn't slam into me. He waits, stroking his length, pumping his fist in long motions I catch from the corner of my eyes.

Then I can't see anything except Harrison, his fist clutching a handful of my hair to tilt me back before he fastens a collar around my neck. "Good girl," he says, the tone a

mocking reference to a dog rather than the usual praise. “Do you have any new tricks for me?”

I reach out for his cock but he slaps my hand away, twisting the back of the collar so the thick leather bites into my skin.

“Beg for it.”

“Please,” I say without hesitation. “Please can you let me taste your beautiful cock?”

He raises my head further, undoing the rest of my blouse with impatient fingers, dragging the fabric halfway along my torso until Daegan grabs it from behind, my arms snagged in the sleeves, losing half their range of movement.

Harrison’s rough fingers paw at my chest while the men and women outside raise their voices in approval. He bends his head, sucking one erect nipple into his mouth, teasing me as he nips it, flaring his lips to show those watching the tender nub balanced between his straight white teeth.

Then he moves to its neighbour, giving it the same treatment but different, always different, always something unexpected, something new. Something more than I ever could have dreamed.

The roughness of his tongue matches to the slow inward outward pulse of Daegan’s cock. A man starts a drum solo on the roof of the car, thumping his palm against it in a light rhythm.

Others pick up the beat, adding their voices and palms to the increasing tempo, the sound acting as a metronome to the music being played on my body, in my cunt, across my skin, echoing across my tongue as I open my mouth, imploring Harrison to come back where he belongs.

He rubs the head of his cock along my lips again, my tongue lolling out, frustrated, wanting more. “Please,” I murmur again, bending to suck him as he jerks his hips away, laughing at my frustration.

“Why don’t you try a different word,” he murmurs in my ear, a private moment in the middle of our public debacle.

“Why don’t you cry out, Harrison, stop, and we’ll see how much traction your command gets.”

“Stop,” I beg, writhing against the fabric as Daegan twists my blouse in his hand, securing my arms even tighter behind me. “Don’t touch me. I don’t want your fat cock choking me. I don’t want you hammering at the back of my throat, making me gag, making me gasp for air.”

“What about my daddy?” he whispers next, eyes moving to meet Daegan’s gaze above my shoulders. “What horrible, degrading, disturbing things do you not want him to do?”

“I don’t want him to fuck me. He’s too big. I can’t take his massive length in my tiny little cunt. Don’t let him fill me all the way up, Harrison,” I beg. “I can’t take it if he’s plunging his hard cock into me while you’re jamming yours into my throat.”

A hand slaps across my arse, the pain stinging and singing. “You don’t want this?” Harrison asks, twisting my collar, shoving himself between my lips as I pretend to hold them closed. “You don’t want this?” he asks, grabbing a handful of tit and squeezing, moulding, pinching my nipple hard, then rubbing the sting away with heavy strokes of his palm.

He pushes my head against the backrest, holding it in place with one hand, using the other to guide his cock into my mouth, then bracing himself as he begins to thrust.

Even opening my throat, I struggle. The motion is too quick to adjust to, saliva flows and stretches out in long lines from my mouth to his cock, gleaming strands of silver hanging in the air like liquid cobwebs.

The rhythm of those outside watching increases, their slapping palms joined with stomping feet, the rush of their exhalations mixing with the groans of satisfaction as they use our visual display to get themselves off, some with partners, others finding their indulgence in self-pleasure.

Each noise sends another lightning bolt of arousal singing through my body. The base beat of their demands throws Harrison and Daegan into the spotlight, their huge pulsating

cocks as much a turn-on as the sheen of wetness between my thighs. Their rippling muscles a firm counterpoint to the soft curves of my hips and breasts.

Then Daegan grabs a handful of my arse in his hand, grunting while his huge cock twitches, withdraws, and sprays his load across my backside, spreading it with his hand into a glistening coat of cum.

And Harrison hauls me upright, holding me steady while he plunges inside the pussy his father so recently vacated, no time to relax, no withdrawal of sensation as he relentlessly chases his orgasm, my thigh muscles clenching, my cunt spinning into a delirium of strong convulsions just a second before he moans into my open mouth, then withdraws, painting me with his cum, scooping up fingerfuls to jam against my suckling tongue.

He curls me against him, shielding my face from those outside, knowing how vulnerable I am straight after I climax. Daegan reaches overhead to switch off the light, plunging us into darkness, pulling the curtains on our show.

Outside, the crowd disperses, moving to the other vehicles parked around the same rest area, an everchanging lineup of entertainers to keep their pleasure going throughout the night.

“You’re such a messy girl,” Harrison whispers as he and his father clean me with wet wipes, pull my clothing back into position before struggling into their jeans and t-shirts, sitting in exhausted satisfaction while we watch other shows unwinding from the comfort of our back seat.

“And how did that work for you?” Daegan asks, always taking notes, always adding to his repertoire of how to satisfy me. “Want to give it another try?”

“Tonight?” I say, my voice pitching upwards with mild panic.

“Not tonight,” Harrison says, kissing me on the side of the neck as he unfastens my collar. “I’m too tired to go again.”

“Did you hear that, Daegan?” I reach over to poke him. “Your son’s about to ask for snacks.”

“In the glove box,” he assures him while clambering between the seats to take the driver’s side. “Now fasten your seatbelts while I get you home.”

Harrison clambers forward too, taking the passenger side and immediately opening a foil packet and coating himself in cheese dust.

As I relax against the back seat, inhaling deeply to entrench the musky scent in my memory, my gaze shifts from father to son and back again, always cataloguing the similarities, the differences. I’m subsumed by a burst of sleepy warmth and my eyelids struggle to stay upright as Daegan steers us along the winding roads of the Port Hills, taking us to the safe comfort of our home.

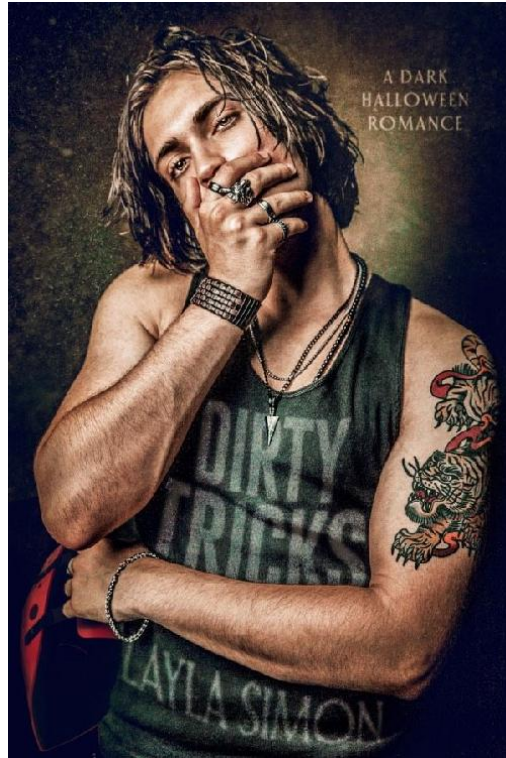
Each man is wonderful in his own way. Each with so many endearing qualities, I’m grateful that neither made me choose.

I curl my legs onto the seat, hugging my knees to my chest, happy to doze and wake and doze again, knowing my family is around me, more love than I ever dreamed to hope for contained in the confines of our car.

Thanks for reading!!!

If you enjoyed this story, please look out for my next release, a Halloween special featuring a stalker and his one true love.

[DIRTY TRICKS: A DARK HALLOWEEN ROMANCE](#)



One night. One copied disguise. One chance to capture the girl and make her mine.

For the past year, I've stalked the hallways of Kingswood College. Unseen, unremarked upon, a ghost. Even the girl I love looks straight through me like I'm invisible. I have to stab myself with a blade at night to remind myself I'm real.

But when I overhear a discussion on the costumes being worn to the annual Halloween party, an opportunity shimmers in my mind. A chance to duplicate another boy's outfit and steal a moment with the girl of my dreams.

A night where I won't have to spend my time skulking in the shadows, eavesdropping from underneath her bed, relegated to the sideline.

For everyone else, the annual Halloween party is a chance to hide themselves behind elaborate masks.

For me, it's a chance to be seen.

ALSO BY LAYLA SIMON

Lesson Learned

Spoilsport

Your Loss

Time Out

Pretty Cruel Boys

Pretty Wicked Boys

Pretty Savage Boys

Savage Favour

Savage Revenge

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Layla Simon is a fictional entity writing dark romance stories because she keeps running out of books to read.

(and please don't tell her TBR I said that)

She enjoys writing about large dangerous men and tiny feisty woman, possibly because she is neither of those things.

You can check out her available and upcoming titles on my website: <https://laylasimon.com>

Stay up-to-date with every new release by joining my newsletter: <https://subscribepage.io/LaylaSimon>

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