



PROVE YOU

Wrong

CHERRY KEELEY

Prove You Wrong

Cherry Keeley

Independently Published by Cherry Keeley

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To anyone who's reading to escape.

*If you're on the brink ...if you're about to boil over ... I hope this helps let off
a little steam.*

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Content Warning

Prove You Wrong is written for an adult audience. If, like me, there are some subjects you'd rather not read about, please see content warning below before you proceed – may contain spoilers. Or, if you like surprises, skip over to the next page.

In Prove You Wrong, you will find:

- * Open door romance scenes and explicit sexual content
- * Strong language
- * Alcohol use
- * Off page death of a sibling (in the past)
- * Off page road traffic accident
- * On page hospital treatment

Readers Note: Written in British English so some spellings / terms may vary.

Smutnotes

An index of the spicy scenes so you can head straight to the steam (or avoid it) if you want.

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

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Epilogue

Playlist

The unofficial soundtrack to Prove You Wrong.

Spectrum (Say My Name) (Calvin Harris Remix)

— Florence + The Machine

Are You Gonna Be My Girl

— Jet

Do You Want To

— Franz Ferdinand

The Middle

— Jimmy Eat World

Don't Blame Me

— Taylor Swift

Ride It

— Jay Sean

Wrecking Ball

— Miley Cyrus

A selection of songs which inspired the writer or the characters.

Chapter 1

Ella

‘Oh crap, wank, bollocks. Please don’t do this.’

The swear jar would be brimming if anyone could hear me right now.

As the rain and wind shakes my car, the scene in front of me flickers from illuminated to dim and a warning light pings on my dashboard. Fault with the lights. No kidding, being half shrouded in darkness gave that away.

This is all I need.

After ferrying my little sister around all evening so she could celebrate Halloween with her friends, and then a midnight call out to go and help my mum, I’m now breaking down in a storm. I take a deep breath. I’m only about a ten minute drive from home but it’s not safe to continue in this weather.

Not like this.

Not after the accident.

Despite my cautious pace, the water thunders like Niagara Falls on my windshield. Judging by the pattern of the light fanned out on the ground — or lack thereof — at least one front bulb has gone, if not a fuse.

At three in the morning the road is deserted, but straining my eyes through the downpour, I can see a glow ahead. Hazards blinking, and my one good headlight guiding me through the darkness, I drive slowly until a square of light comes into view.

A single blue-tinged security light illuminates a hanging sign swaying in the rain. The Bull Inn. Seeking safety, I pull into the pub’s car park. Red-bricked, the building looks like an old public house where, centuries ago, weary travellers would have sought shelter and food on their lengthy journeys. It doesn’t offer quite the same respite today. With the car park

empty and no lights on inside, the place seems abandoned. But at least I'm off the road.

Deep breath. If I want to get home tonight, I need to fix this, and to do that, I need to acknowledge this is horrifically stressful and completely inconvenient, while also having faith I can rise to this challenge. 'It's going to be okay,' I whisper.

The pounding of my heart quiets and I double-check the battered manual in the glove box. I can sort this out. A damsel in distress, I am not.

The torrential rain continues to hammer on the roof of the car, almost obliterating the view through the windscreen. I can't fix the lights in a downpour like this. Squinting around the car park, I come up with a plan.

There's an emergency bag for this very eventuality stored in the boot, but I don't want to get out unless I have to. Climbing into the back, I fold down the back seat and retrieve my stash from the dark cubby hole, taking out a poncho, head torch, and my supply of spare bulbs and fuses.

I throw on the poncho and head torch and thrust the spares into the pocket of my hoody. With both hoods up and torch blaring, I take another deep breath before opening the door.

To the side of the pub are a few picnic benches, a couple under a wooden framed gazebo. The security light's glow doesn't particularly reach here, but I'll be okay with my head torch. I sprint over, rain pummeling me, grateful to reach the meagre protection of the plastic, corrugated roof. I lift a bench up onto two legs, aiming to drag it across the gravel. My fingers slip on the cold, soaked wood and I swear again under my breath. If my sister were here, she'd be euphoric about our swear jar filling up.

The pebbles underfoot scrunch and squeal as I haul the table a couple of inches before resting it down again. Moving around to the other side, I pull it a couple of inches further. Getting into a rhythm, I alternately lift and heave each side until I've worked it out of the way. Next is a patio heater, which squeaks as I brace it against myself.

‘What the fuck?’ The male voice is deep, ragged. I jump out of my skin.

With my pulse smashing in my ears, I turn, but I’m instantly dazzled by a flashlight in my face.

‘Waa,’ I choke out, staggering back. ‘You’re blinding me.’ My wet, stinging fingers rush to shield my eyes.

‘As opposed to you robbing me?’ The voice is accusatory, not threatening.

‘I’m not robbing you.’ My dissipating shock quickly turns to outrage. I feel affronted, as well as blinded. The cold and wet are starting to seep through my layers. ‘I’m just trying to sort out Helena.’

‘Who’s Helena?’ The torch beam flicks off me and over the rest of the car park to my sad jalopy before returning to sear me in the eyes once more. My vision doesn’t have the chance to adjust before it’s assaulted again.

‘Where’s Hel —’ The voice raises up a notch.

‘Helena’s my car.’ I interrupt, wincing. ‘Can you stop it with the interrogation tactics, please? Sorry if I’m in the way, this won’t take long.’

The direction of the light shifts. ‘You’re trying to fix your car? In this weather?’ His voice is softer now, bemused.

‘That’s why I’m feng shu’ing this smoker’s area, I didn’t want to flood the engine with rain.’ I point to the roof.

‘And you couldn’t call roadside assistance because?’ He’s moved closer, but with my eyes struggling to adjust, I can only make out a silhouette. He could be dangerous, but if he were predatory, wouldn’t he have pounced by now?

‘I don’t need to, I can fix her myself.’ I’m not in a position to pay the roadside assistance excess call out charge, but he doesn’t need to know that.

‘Fix this?’ The beam settles on Helena’s tarnished chassis. ‘Wouldn’t it be kinder to put Old Rusty here out of her misery?’ He whispers the last bit as if euthanising my car was a possibility.

‘She’s a classic.’ Matching his volume I add, ‘And don’t let her hear you talk like that.’ My gaze flicks to Helena and then back to the man. ‘If you don’t mind me fixing her quickly, I’ll be out of your hair soon.’

Now my retinas aren’t being scorched by his torch, I take in the six-foot tower of a man whose tee-shirt is plastered to his torso in the tsunami-like rain, the fabric clinging to his hard planes. If I wasn’t trying to fix my car in a hurricane in the middle of the night, I’d pay a little more attention.

‘And you didn’t think to, I don’t know, knock and ask, huh?’ His voice is playful as he manoeuvres himself past me and easily lifts the heater, moving it clear across the ground, placing it carefully over to one side.

‘Thanks. I didn’t realise anyone would be here. There’s no cars, barely a security light.’ I indicate towards the dim glow at the front of the pub.

‘Bulb must have gone.’ He runs a hand over his buzz cut, spraying water droplets into the night, and flashes a smile. ‘And, you’re welcome.’

He grabs the other table that needs to be moved and I rush to help with the opposite side. His eyebrows quirk as if surprised and I use my frustration at being underestimated to power my strength.

Now we’ve cleared a car-sized space under the gazebo, I dash to Helena and drive her over. Popping the bonnet in the relatively dry shelter, I take a moment to prop it open securely and reacquaint myself with the layout. The engine needs to cool before I get stuck in anyway.

‘You want me to — ’

I cut his question short. ‘It’s just fixing the headlight.’

He holds up his palms in defence. ‘Okay, but I’m good with my hands. Maybe I could help.’

I glance at his huge hands splaying out, unable to stop myself scanning along his ripped arms.

Ideas of some other things he can do with his hands spring to mind. He must be able to read my indecent thoughts, or he's noticed me ogling him, as there's a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

What am I doing? I need to fix my car and get the hell home. But my interest has been piqued. I never usually allow myself the pleasure of flirting, but heaven knows tonight needs a silver lining.

'Maybe those hands of yours could hold the torch?'

Surprised by my own bolshiness, I add a cheeky grin. I don't even know this guy's name and I'm bossing him about after trespassing on his property. But he doesn't seem to mind too much as he cocks his head to the side with a smirk, as if to ask me for the magic word.

I pause, lifting an eyebrow. Fooling around with him could be a lot of fun if I wasn't dead on my feet, soaked through and desperate to get home safely. 'Please.'

'It'd be my pleasure. These hands can be quite ... obliging, sometimes.'

A lock of my hair clings to my face, almost blackened with rainwater, and I swipe it out of the way. Was he flirting back? My tired brain can't function with the lack of sleep, late driving, broken car and now, the random attractive guy.

Deep breath.

I try to zone everything else out and focus on the most important task at hand. 'Actually, I need to check the fuse box first. It'd make things a lot easier if it were just a fuse.'

He nods and I find talking through my plan with this stranger surprisingly reassuring. Somehow, I focus my thoughts and recall the car maintenance research I'd done in preparation for this kind of disaster. The fuse for headlamps is in the engine compartment. Of course it wouldn't be the one inside the car.

Listening as I talk through my options, he shifts the torch beam for me, anticipating my next moves seamlessly as I work.

‘It’s not the fuse,’ I sigh as the replacement doesn’t fix the problem.

‘Do you want to come inside to warm up, or...’ He stops himself from saying something and finishes with, ‘or call for help?’

Rubbing my forehead, I decline. I’m shattered. ‘No thanks, it’s definitely the bulb. It won’t take long now. I’m set on doing this myself.’

‘I’d noticed.’ His voice is playful, sexy even.

The low light shows chilled goosebumps setting the hairs of his arms on end, but he holds the torch steady with no complaint. If I wasn’t quite so preoccupied with fixing Helena, then I’d enjoy gawking at his forearms, which glisten in the rain. On one side, tattoos reach out from under his sleeve, black ink wrapping around the muscles like a cobra ensnaring its prey.

In truth, I’d love to drop everything and crawl into the warm, dry pub. Into a pair of strong arms like his. Have someone else fix the light. Have someone else worry about getting home to my sister. But this is all on me. It has always been on me. So I need to focus. I need to sort it out.

Selecting the right screwdriver, I undo the screws, loosen the headlight bundle and unclip it from the electrical connector. My heart pumps faster as it comes away in my hand.

Carefully, I carry it around to the back and lay it in the boot to swap out the old bulb. He follows me closely and now the light beam illuminates the spent bulb, showing the filament has burnt out.

‘That looks like the one. Nice job.’

‘Don’t speak too soon.’ I turn and look at him, noticing how his eyes have crinkled with his smile. ‘Helena’s not out of the woods yet.’

The guy scans my vintage Ford Escort from boot to bonnet in mock consternation. ‘Please do not drive this car through

woods, or anywhere off road. Actually, are you sure it'll make it home?'

'She'll be just fine thank you very much.' I tap Helena fondly on the bumper.

Slotting the pieces back together and re-fixing the wires and bolts takes a minute and then the moment of reckoning arrives.

I bite my lip as I slide into the driver's seat. This is it.

'Light her up!' Calls out the man.

Slotting the key in the ignition, I twist it over and Helena rumbles and flares into life, lights dazzling on full beam.

'Wahoo, yeah,' the guy shouts and tosses the torch into the air, catching it easily.

I give Helena a double toot on her horn to celebrate and can't stop a giggle of relief escaping. After reversing so I can help reposition the furniture we'd moved, I leave the lights running to illuminate our work. Pausing for a moment behind the wheel, I take in the view of my unexpected assistant.

He's drenched through to the skin, and, if my eyes aren't deceiving me — which is a distinct possibility as I'm so low on sleep I could start hallucinating at any time — he is freaking ripped. His wet top clings to a sculpted chest, defined abs, and his tracksuit bottoms hug in all the right places. From the top of his buzz cut, down to his toes, this guy is off-the-charts hot.

As I scan back up to his face, his eyes meet mine through the glass, his mouth tugging into a smirk and I realise the interior light is still on in the car. He has totally caught me checking him out, again. Awareness of my rain poncho's resemblance to a bin bag slices through me.

I feel shy as I climb out of the car to help with the furniture. My hands tug at the cold, wet, plastic hanging off me, pointlessly trying to zhuzh up the ensemble.

He moves over to me, sticking up his hand for a high five. 'Nice work. Shit, your hands feel cold.' His smile falls, brows knitting together. 'You sure you won't change your mind about coming in?'

‘You’ve done so much already, and I should really get going.’ Manoeuvring around him, I grasp the table we need to shift.

He follows me, picking up the other side and says, ‘Not even a hot drink? To celebrate?’

I shake my head. ‘It’s way past my bedtime, but, thank you. For everything.’

We move the table back to its regular spot. ‘You’re welcome, Sparky.’

‘Sparky?’ I raise an eyebrow.

‘A reference to your natural affinity for electrics,’ he chuckles. I’d probably find his banter cute if I wasn’t so tired. ‘Anyway,’ he continues, ‘it’s not like you told me your name. Helena, on the other hand, we go way back.’

‘Ella.’ I stick out my hand and he moves to shake it. ‘And you are?’

‘Well, that’d be telling.’ A smirk twists on his face. ‘Why don’t you think of me as the hot, mysterious stranger who helped you fix your car?’

‘You held the torch!’ I reach out to swat at him. I knew he’d busted me peeking at him.

He dodges and grins. A dimple appears on his cheek and I swear a fairy must die somewhere, just to restore the balance of light and dark, good, evil, and hotness in the universe.

‘I notice you didn’t dispute I’m hot though.’ His eyes sparkle as he thrusts his hands in his pockets.

‘You notice a lot.’

He scans me, up and down, serious suddenly. ‘I do.’

There’s a pause. I think he’s about to say something. Maybe ask me in again. Maybe I’d say yes this time.

‘It’s late.’ He takes a deep breath, the inhalation filling his chest, making him seem even bigger. As he breathes out, the playful smile returns to his face. ‘So, Ella, it’s been a pleasure.’

‘It’s been interesting,’ I say, tipping my head to the side.

I walk back to Helena, and open the door.

‘I’m going to head in. Might get a bit wet otherwise.’ He taps Helena on the bonnet. ‘Drive safe.’

Hot Guy turns and jogs back to the front entrance of the pub. I swear I catch a glimpse of that dimple in the rear-view mirror as I drive off.

But, again, I could be hallucinating.

Chapter 2

Ella

Tonight, I need to let my hair down. If I don't, I might implode. Or explode. I remember something from physics lessons years ago, dying stars can do both at the same time. Is 'ploding' a thing? Something's going to happen if I don't let off some steam soon.

Between work and family commitments, I'm wrung out. My bestie, Josie, has promised me a night of cocktails and giggling and it's going to be exactly what I need. Although, an early night should probably come high up this list too, especially after the number of late ones I've had recently.

Collapsed on my bed, I slide my phone from my pocket.

Ella: What's the name of the bar we're heading for? Need to know what bus to get.

Helena's getting the night off, too, as I'm planning on seeing away quite a few cocktails.

Josie doesn't reply straight away so I busy myself getting showered and dressed. My lucky little black dress winks at me from my stash of office attire and I slip the slinky fabric on, marvelling at how it's so stretchy and comfy, yet seems to magically pull me in, flattering my curves.

I smooth my hands over my hips; the material is soft and silky under my fingers. It's not that I need a *lucky* dress as such, not when all I want to do is catch up with my bestie, but I'm on the edge. I'm pulling out all of the self-care moves so I don't lose my mind. If I freak out about how shockingly shit everything is, then who's going to be there to look after my sister? Who's going to help mum with the bills?

So, I snort lavender essential oil and practise deep breaths so much I'm pretty sure I'd be a champion free diver given half the chance, doing everything I can possibly think of to keep myself sane. And that includes a weekly date with my bestie, where we dress up for each other, drink cocktails and

catch up on all the craziness we're both negotiating. You've got to put your oxygen mask on before helping others, so they say. Not that I've ever been on an aeroplane to actually appreciate that saying.

Josie: I've ordered you a taxi, my treat. It'll be with you in twenty mins.

Mysterious.

Sipping on a glass of Pinot, I perfect my makeup while waiting for the cab to arrive and fire off a message to my sister.

Ella: Your dinner's in the microwave, ready for when you get in. Don't forget you have a test tomorrow xx

I mean to text Josie to get more details when Chloe replies.

Chloe: Stop nagging, you're worse than mum. I already ate a burger.

Exasperated, I hurl my phone across the room. It's childish but trying to take care of a teenager can push you to the brink. I'm already there, clinging on, knowing any little thing might tip me over.

It takes five minutes trying to fish out my phone from where it's slid under my chest of drawers. Suddenly the cab's here, tooting, and I'm running late. Keeping myself calm with a 'you've got this' mantra, I head outside.

As the taxi pulls away, and I settle back in the seat, I try to distance myself from my usual worries. I'm free to be me for the night.

Streetlights and headlamps whizz by, bright sparks in the dark night, and I'm transported back to Halloween night. I can't quite believe what happened. I was so tired, and it was so late, maybe it was a dream. The Hot Guy, as I have to think of him, was too impossibly beautiful to be real. He's taken over as the leading male in my daydreams and fantasies; his sexy voice, that dimple ... that body. My vibrator has been given quite the workout.

In another life I'd have stayed. I'd have gone into the pub to warm up, and by warm up I mean have amazing carefree sex with a hot stranger. And then I'd have left and never looked back, or maybe he'd have become a semi-regular hook up. Either way, here in this life, I would never let that happen. Too many risks.

My adrenaline spikes.

The driver has made a left turn instead of going right towards town, and I wonder if Josie's accidentally ordered a dodgy cab that's going to take me straight to a human trafficking ring.

I dash off an emergency message.

Ella: Sharing my location with you. Has the taxi gone AWOL? Tell my mum I love her and my sister that she can have my beanie bear collection.

I'm mostly joking. Mostly.

Josie: Can I have your little black dress?

Ella: No, I'm wearing it. If I'm ever found, you won't want it. It'll be soiled with a thousand tears from my anguish of missing cocktail night.

It's hard to make out anything through the window. Where has Josie sent me?

Josie: I see you on the map. It's all good, only a couple of miles to go.

Ella: I thought we were going for drinks in town?

Josie: Change of plan. Tell you more when you get here. I'll wait at the bar.

The driver makes another turn, and suddenly I know exactly where we are. The road I drove only a few nights ago, dazed and confused and soaked through. This is Hot Guy's road.

Shit. Am I going to his pub?

The taxi slows and indicates to turn into the pub car park. My heart starts to pound. This must be a coincidence as I haven't told Josie about that whole ordeal yet.

What if he's there?

A torrent of panicky questions tumble through my brain until I'm momentarily distracted by the taxi pulling up next to a line of motorbikes. My brow creases — I hope she knows what she's doing — she did choose this place after all.

Despite the bikes, this place seems welcoming, cute even, compared to Halloween night. Now, the building is lit with fairy lights wound through the climbing ivy. Festoon lighting is drizzled over the patio area, and a very familiar heater is glowing a warm orange.

Shaking, I climb out of the cab like a foal being born, instantly regretting the skimpy dress and hot pink patent stilettos.

Deep breaths. Long and steady. *You've got this.*

It's probably best I didn't know where we were going tonight as I may never have left my house through indecision over what to wear. You can't help first impressions, but second impressions, they can be carefully managed and manicured into whatever you need them to be. Kind of over-dressed wouldn't have been my first choice of appearance but at least my lucky LBD accentuates *all* my positives. And, is a damn sight better than the poncho.

Trying to find a silver lining, I realise I haven't spent any time over-thinking absolutely every possible iteration for how tonight might go, so, yay me. As it is, *if* Hot Guy is here, which is really unlikely, then he absolutely won't recognise me because I don't look like a wet bin bag. As I head inside, I try to convince myself this sort of fluke doesn't happen in real life.

Palpitations. Sweating. Why is my body betraying me? Gah! Even if he was here, I wouldn't let anything happen.

I never do.

I've got no time for boyfriends or the inevitable breakups, and I've worked too long and hard on helping to bring my little sister up, I can't risk bringing a bad influence into her life.

But the vision of him standing in the downpour is burnt into my memory. Tattoos glistening, droplets of rain on his buzz cut. Hot Guy is the poster boy for being a bad influence. And I'm not buying.

Chapter 3

Nate

‘You sure it’s okay I leave early tonight?’ Enzo asks, as he fidgets with a bar towel.

I survey the bar. My flatmate and best friend, Chunk, is in the corner with some old buddies, there’s a group doing a pub crawl, a couple of regulars scattered around and a redheaded newbie who keeps checking her phone.

‘We’re hardly rushed off our feet. I’ll be fine.’

‘I’ll make the time up.’

‘Seriously, it’s what?’ I stretch my neck from side to side as I think. ‘Half an hour early? And you don’t want your wife walking home in the dark.’

‘Thanks, man. I owe you one.’

He claps me on the back and I roll my eyes. ‘It’s no biggie. Head off when you need to later.’

Rubbing my hand over my head, my recently buzzed hair tickles, feeling almost velvety. The sensation is meditative, combined with the lack of trade tonight, my mind has space to wander and I’m back to a few nights ago when I’d gone from thinking we were being robbed, to being hypnotised by the intriguing Ella. Thanks to her sassy smile, and honestly, sheer grit, I’d found myself willingly standing in the pouring rain holding a torch. Actually, I was grateful for the downpour, it made whatever plastic thing she was wearing cling to her figure.

And then she’d driven off as abruptly as she’d arrived.

The door clinks, snapping me back to reality. This is really not like me. It’s embarrassing in fact. But every time I hear the sound, I’m hoping it’s Ella, coming back to say she’s lost a spanner or something.

No luck.

In walks an older man, wearing a vintage black leather jacket I've admired for the six years I've known him. He's an old-school rocker, with a big family and a heart of gold.

'No Pauline tonight?' I greet Geoff, who's in most nights with his wife.

He climbs up onto a bar stool with a laboured huff. 'She's babysitting for the three little lunatics.'

'You're not helping her? No Grandpa duty?'

'I was. But she sent me here to recover.'

'Pint?'

'Whiskey, please. It'll need to be a double.' Geoff nods up to the spirits shelf and I get his usual single malt down and pour him a good measure. 'That's better,' he says after a long sip.

'Pleased I can help.'

I pivot to return the bottle to the top shelf where I keep The Good Stuff and spot him in the reflective glass which lines the back of the bar, taking another swig. It must have been a long day.

It's funny how most of the customers don't realise the mirror behind the optics at the back of the bar is just that. A mirror. Reflecting everything they're doing when they think my back is turned. Geoff thinks he's getting one over on me every time he reaches around to top off his pint. Retired, a regular, he doesn't realise with the amount he buys in here I'd give him a free drink every week if he wanted.

The door goes and my eyes flick to the glass to see who's coming.

Is it her?

With a click of heels on the hard floor, a woman walks in, swiping at her chestnut hair, revealing flushed cheeks as if she's been rushing.

She's biting down on her lip in a way that makes my trousers tighten. Her eyes scan and then she breaks into a

smile as she clocks the newbie sat at the other end of the bar.

That mouth, that smile, it rings a bell and my dick twitches as if it's trying to nudge me.

'Another one, Nate?' Geoff's voice breaks through my reverie and, keeping my crotch to the bar back, I busy myself fulfilling his order. Later, I'll remind him to leave his bike and walk home — it'll be safe around the back with mine — but right now I'm straining to catch more clues.

Her familiar voice hits my ears and I almost spill Geoff's whiskey as I place it in front of him.

'Hey, this place isn't what I expected.'

It *is* her.

Ella.

My night time intruder who's been invading my consciousness around the clock ever since. I try to suppress my grin or Geoff will think I've gone mad.

'Me either.' Her friend, the newb, replies. She's a petite redhead who scooted up on a stool a little while ago, gave me shit for not having a cocktail menu, and then sunk a tequila slammer. I left her with a tap water and a silent prayer she paces herself.

'You okay with the ... bikers?'

I'm sure it's Ella's voice. She has that sassy, confident tone that captured my interest when she was bending, face first, into her scrap heap of a car a couple of nights ago. Cloth in hand, I wipe over a spot on the bar to polish it. Eyes down, but ears most definitely to attention.

'I'll have to be. Morons.' Her friend barbs back.

I'd hate to know what she *really* thought. What's wrong with us bikers?

'So, why the sudden change of location?' Ella asks.

I'm intrigued to hear why these ladies have chosen to come to a pub frequented by said morons.

‘I heard some good things,’ her feisty friend replies. ‘You don’t mind, do you?’

It’s wrong but I keep listening to their exchange while tidying around the bar back.

‘Not at all, actually. I came across this place myself recently. I’ve been meaning to check it out.’

Her perfume has percolated through the alcohol fumes, fresh, classic, maybe notes of lavender. It was what she was wearing the other night and I move closer, chasing the scent memory.

As if magnetised, I can’t keep away and find myself approaching them. Finally allowing myself to study her properly, I take in the sight of her tight body barely covered in a skimpy black dress. The way she’s propped up at the bar pushes her tits out, straining the fabric. I knew there was something spectacular hidden under that fucking binbag she’d been wearing.

Scanning up, I catch sight of her sexy mouth, coated in bright pink. A vision of her lipstick smeared around my cock flickers through my mind. I find her doe-like eyes and they’re staring right back at me. Her cheeks are flushed as if she’s read every dirty thought that’s just run through my head.

Chapter 4

Ella

The moment I entered the bar, I realised it was *him*. I'd only needed to catch half a glimpse to know for sure and now adrenaline is coursing through me, along with the taste of lipstick as I chew my bottom lip.

It was such a relief to find Josie and I hug her like it's been years instead of days since I last saw her. She squeezes me back, her long red hair soft on my face.

Casting my gaze over her shoulder, I spot some guys in the back corner, their black jackets slung over chairs, and helmets scattered on tables. Despite my distraction with the gorgeous man behind the bar, I'm worried about my friend.

'You okay with the bikers?' I dip my head in their direction. Anything to do with motorbikes or bikers stirs up difficult memories for Josie, so I usually try to avoid situations like this. And after my mum's string of hell's angel-like exes, I'm not their biggest fan either. If I've learnt anything from my mum, it's what a red flag looks like.

She forces a smile. 'I'll have to be. *Morons.*' She does an impression of her dad.

As I start asking her about the change of location tonight, I can sense Hot Guy approaching. All coherence leaves me as my one-track mind recalls how the rain plastered his tee-shirt slick to his torso. The image has been replaying through my head ever since and I feel naughty for how he's become the star of my fantasies. Warmth spreads to my face and I'm thankful people can't read my thoughts.

All the saliva drains from my mouth and my tongue is suddenly drier than a martini in the desert. I need a drink. But I'm going to need to ask *him* for one. Perhaps it would have been better if I *had* stayed at home overthinking this whole thing. Then at least I'd have a plan.

He's here and he's talking to me and that bloody dimple is out in full force like a sinkhole, sucking me in.

He's saying words and now looking at me like I need to say words. I don't know words. Shit.

Josie nudges me with her foot as she says, 'Shall we get a couple G and T's while we decide?'

'A thinking drink? Nice.' He winks at me as he says, 'Coming right up.'

Does he recognise me?

'You okay?' Josie asks.

'I think I may have lipstick on my teeth ... I should — ' My eyes dart around trying to locate the toilets, or even better, an escape, but Josie grabs my face.

'Show me ... nah, you're fine,' she reports as I tentatively show her my teeth. There goes my plan to hide in the loos.

Two bulbous glasses are settled in front of us, ice clinking. 'Let me know if I can get you anything else.'

'What's going on with you?' Josie asks once our barman has gone to the far side of the bar.

I fidget and tug at my dress. 'Is it that obvious?'

She takes a slurp of her drink, eyebrows raised as if that question doesn't deserve an answer.

'I'm getting into a silly tizz.' I eyeball the bartender and Josie follows my gaze. 'I bumped into him the other day and I've been preoccupied with the memory, to say the least.' I murmur out of the corner of my mouth. It's thrown me, him serving us. I didn't expect to ever see him again.

'You should go for it.' Her eyes are bright, excited.

'No.' I shut her down like I always do. I can't risk getting hung up on a guy, bringing him into Chloe's life, only to find he's as bad as all the others when he leaves. 'You *know* I don't date.'

Don't get me wrong. I would date. If there was a safe, trustworthy option who wasn't going to upend my life, or Chloe's life. But these people don't exist. So, for all intents and purposes, I don't date.

'Who said anything about a date?' She feigns confusion with a smirk.

Changing tack before she starts extolling the virtues of one-night stands, I raise my glass towards the guys in the corner. 'You're sure you're okay with *the morons*?'

'Yeah.' She looks bleak for a moment, but then she forces a weak smile to her lips. 'There's triggers everywhere. It's been eight years.' She shakes her head, her auburn hair swishing softly. 'You'd think I'd be used to it by now.'

'I don't think you ever need to get used to it.' I squeeze her arm but drop the subject.

Usually a bright ray of sunshine, I know Josie prefers the distract and deny coping mechanisms for grief when we're out and about. In private, my girl lets it all out — but she wouldn't want to here.

'How's it going at Craftisan?'

'The art shop is fine I guess — pays the bills. And the staff discount helps supply my habit.' She waggles her eyebrows. 'But my side hustle, my Etsy shop, is really taking off.' Josie takes out her phone and swipes the screen. 'Plus, I've been posting pieces on Instagram and have been getting people to vote on options like subjects or colours, which has started to translate into a few sales.' Josie's eyes light up as she talks more about her artwork and shows me photos of her latest designs. Her passion and excitement shines through. 'It's much more what I want to be doing, and it's super fun.'

'These look amazing. I'm going to commission an order one day ... when I can afford you.' I nudge her proudly.

'You'd get mates' rates,' she chuckles.

Sliding her phone back into her pocket, she asks, 'How's stuff in the world of accounting?'

‘Don’t ask,’ I tut. ‘You’ll never guess what my boss did mere minutes before he went off on annual leave this afternoon.’ I roll my eyes as if this is just a fun anecdote, but truthfully, it really got me down.

‘What’s Boris the Bell End done now?’

I sit up a little straighter as I say, ‘Took a dump in my inbox.’

Josie splutters out her sip of drink. ‘Gross visual.’

‘Moments before he left, he forwarded me five of his clients’ accounts, that are a *complete mess*,’ I gesticulate because I’m not sure Josie fully comprehends the amount of work Boris has loaded onto me. ‘He tells me he trusts I’ll get the issues resolved in the next couple of weeks and I shouldn’t need his input.’ I puff at a strand of hair that’s fallen out of place. ‘He’s going off grid so I can’t contact him if I wanted anyway.’ Agitated, I swipe the loose lock behind my ear. ‘This is on top of what he’s already got me doing since Shaun left. I had a little look before I finished for the day, the clients don’t even record expenses properly.’ I massage the knot of tension above the bridge of my nose as I groan, ‘There’s not even a shoebox of receipts.’

‘Sounds like he shit and split.’ She has such a way with words.

‘Pretty much.’ I take a long swig of my gin.

‘No wonder Shaun left.’

‘I thought Boris might promote me to fulfil the position, but *no*.’ I place my drink down firmly as if to punctuate the sentence.

‘You should get a new job.’ Josie swills her drink around the glass. ‘Seems like they want you to do the work of a senior accountant, but pay you as an assistant. That’s not fair.’

‘Sounds about right, though. Trouble is, I’ve got job security there. I can’t up and leave without a viable job to move onto. I’d lose all my redundancy rights and sick pay and things. It’s too risky.’ Again, I rub the spot between my

eyebrows that feels like my skull is shrinking. ‘We need the money.’

‘You speak to your mum?’

‘I can’t, you know she needs my help. I’ll have to grit my teeth until Chloe’s through her A-Levels and then see where the land lies.’

‘Girl, no wonder you needed a night tonight.’

‘Yeah, I was hoping to get blitzed on cocktails so I could forget ... but gin is a great second choice. Does the tonic kind of make it a cocktail?’ I grasp my glass again, gaze wandering. The hot barman is pulling a pint for an older man; the flex of his biceps sends a warm buzz through me. I take another sip of my drink, savouring it on my palate as I observe him.

‘Still.’ Josie dips her head, following the direction of my focus. ‘The day can only get better, right?’

Chapter 5

Nate

My new guests are brightening up that usually quiet corner of the bar no end. I can't help but listen in as they chat. If I'm not serving, I hear almost everything back here. Must be something with the acoustics, but Ella's sexy voice seems to carry further. Or maybe I've tuned in to it.

It sounds like she's had a hell of a day, if not month, and I feel kind of bad they aren't having the night of cocktails she'd hoped for. Though, for the life of me, I couldn't say why they'd come to The Bull if they were looking for cocktails.

We're known as a beer drinkers pub, real ale, spirits, nothing fancy. My brother, Scott, took this place on a few years ago and he hasn't really made many changes. I keep telling him he should do more with the place but he just keeps it ticking along and telling me not to get carried away with grand ideas. I managed to get him to agree to some charity fundraisers but most ideas he rejects, it's like he's only half invested in it.

The glint of some stainless steel equipment catches my eye and I get a brainwave on how to bring a smile to those pink lips, *and* bring the pub up a level. Scott has left me in charge for a few days, after all.

'Sorry to interrupt, ladies,' I say, sidling up to them behind the bar. 'I can't help but notice you're almost at the end of your thinking drink. Have you had the chance to consider what you might want next?' I'm asking both of them, but I can't stop my gaze returning to Ella. The way she's sat up straighter pushes her tits out. Her bright eyes alert, there's a spark about her which I find entirely captivating. 'Or, could I make a suggestion?'

Ella wraps her mouth around the straw, taking a long draw of the drink. Watching her swallow, my dick gives me another nudge. I know, dude, she's unbelievable.

‘What did you have in mind?’

A hundred filthy thoughts scattergun through my head and I take a deep breath to gather myself.

Her friend suddenly growls. ‘Sorry, I’ve got to take this.’ Phone in hand she stalks off, scowling at the screen.

Ella follows her friend’s movements and then focuses back on me.

‘Well, *Ella*, or should I call you Sparky?’

A slight blush tinges her cheeks and her eyes widen, as if surprised I recognised her.

As if I could forget her.

‘I might have a favour to ask.’

‘You’re not going to make me stand out in the rain, are you?’ She nibbles that bottom lip of hers and I almost combust.

‘Nothing crazy.’ I hold up a hand. ‘And don’t worry, no one makes anyone stand out in the rain around here.’

‘You did.’ She cocks her head to one side.

‘I wanted to.’ I shrug. ‘You didn’t make me.’

‘I was so wet when I got home. I think I’ve only just recovered.’

It isn’t a nudge this time. My dick is full-on trying to hulk out of my trousers and I can’t stop some sort of strange cough-laugh coming out.

The faint tinge to Ella’s cheeks flares to full blown magenta, the colour rushing down her neck, disappearing under her dress to I can only imagine where. Her hand whips to her mouth when she realises what she said. How can someone so sexy be this adorable?

The fuck?

How long has *adorable* been in my vocabulary?

‘I meant from the rain,’ she says, eyes wide.

‘It was quite a night,’ I say, hoping to ease her embarrassment. But I’m also wondering, how far down does that blush go?

She takes a long suck on her straw. ‘Thanks again for your help, I owe you one.’ She flicks her hair off her shoulder. ‘You never did tell me your name.’

Keeping it from her had been a reflex, a habit. I toy with the idea of telling her, but the urge to try and make her blush again is too strong. ‘I did!’ I force my brow to furrow. ‘I can’t believe you’ve forgotten.’ I try to sound outraged.

‘No. You didn’t.’ Delicate brackets crease her forehead and she leans in.

‘I saw the way you were gawping at me over your engine, like I was some piece of meat.’ I tut and then soften my voice, feigning hurt, ‘And you didn’t even bother to learn my name.’

‘Hey,’ the pitch of her voice rises. ‘You told me to remember you as the hot, mysterious stranger.’

‘You *did* remember.’ A grin stretches across my face.

‘Urgh, don’t tell me then.’ She sits back in her seat and huffs, ‘I preferred it when you were more mysterious.’ She quirks an eyebrow as I chuckle and asks, ‘What’s the favour?’

I lean on the bar, moving closer to her as if this were some sort of clandestine plot. ‘We’re thinking of introducing a cocktail menu and I wondered if you’d help sample some? Perhaps ... feedback on what you think would be best?’

‘Josie said you didn’t do cocktails.’ There’s a questioning tone to her statement.

‘We didn’t. But maybe we should.’ I shrug. ‘What do you reckon?’

‘It’s a great idea.’ She nods. ‘I’m a big fan of cocktails.’

‘A connoisseur?’ I wiggle my eyebrows. ‘So, what should we offer?’

‘All good menus need a Margarita, it’s a staple. A classic. Then you might want a Mojito, or a Martini.’

‘All the Ms, huh? What’s your favourite?’

Her friend returns, hoicking herself up onto her stool. ‘What did I miss? Favourite what?’

‘Cocktails,’ we reply together.

‘Sex on the Beach. Ella *loves* Sex on the Beach.’ Her friend announces, causing some of the locals to turn and look.

Ella’s flush has returned and then some.

‘I always found it a bit too sandy myself.’ I’m starting to love watching this crazy-sexy woman blush. ‘Sex on the Beach? I’d have thought you were more a Screwdriver kinda girl. I’ll go and see what I can do.’

Chapter 6

Ella

As I steady myself on my stool, I grip the edge of the bar, trying not to look affected by the hot, yet obnoxious, bartender who's sauntering away. I don't stand a chance between him and Josie announcing my fondness for Sex on the Beach as if it's my location of choice rather than preferred cocktail.

But my protest dies on my tongue as she throws up her hands and says, 'Urgh. Little brothers.'

'Everything okay?'

'Jamie messaged to say he wants to go to a house party tonight and so can't give us a lift home.'

'Oh no, we could share a cab?' I inwardly wince, I hadn't anticipated the need to budget for taxi fare.

'Don't you worry.' She flicks her hair back. 'I called him right back and told him I'd rat him out to mum about the mystery stain on the lounge rug and he promised he'd still pick us up.'

'Phew, thanks.' Grimacing, I say, 'Do I want to know what the mystery stain is?'

'It's best if it's never spoken of again,' Josie giggles. 'So cocktails, huh? How'd you swing that?'

'He just offered,' I shrug.

She fixes me a curious gaze but doesn't pry. 'Do you think he knows he's dealing with a couple of semi-professional cocktailieriers?'

Josie and I have been going for our cocktail nights for as long as we've had ID.

Laughing, I say, 'I think he may realise we're not exactly professional if he hears us call ourselves an entirely made-up name.'

‘If that’s not a word, it should be.’ She taps at the beer mat as if to make a note. ‘Anyway, what we lack in class, we make up for in experience.’

‘And enthusiasm.’ I clink my glass to Josie’s.

I used to be fascinated with the extravagant sounding ingredients and would pore over menus imagining the exotic places that had inspired them, trying anything new I came across. The tropical drinks made our corner of England a little bit more bearable. Now, I’m less star-struck by them, having honed my favourites to a few tried and tested options, ones that are sure to get me blitzed, half based on taste and half based on whether I can bring myself to say the name of it to the bartender. Actually a Dirty Porn Star is still on my Need To Try list.

Coy, I rotate my nearly empty glass in my hand. ‘He wants us to help him design a cocktail menu.’

Josie nods sagely. ‘I can understand why you didn’t refuse.’

I shoot her an I-know-he’s-hot-but-don’t-go-there expression and she smirks in response.

We chat some more about our day and then he approaches with two highballs, the drinks inside a gorgeous, orange-pink ombre.

‘What do you reckon?’ He leans his elbows on the bar, showing off his tanned skin, both sets of biceps flexing, one covered in a vivid scrawl, the other bare, like before and after pictures.

Sipping the fruity concoction, it’s clear he’s created a masterpiece.

‘Mmm, it’s good.’ I kind of groan a little which is a bit embarrassing but, he’s absolutely nailed it. ‘Very good.’

There’s a small smile to his lips, eyes dark and intense. ‘You think it should go on the menu?’

I nod and take another swig. ‘So, how many are you looking to do?’

‘Three or four.’ He dips his head to the side. ‘A little something for everyone.’

‘What would you go for?’ I sit forwards, intrigued. ‘What’s your favourite?’

‘I’m not sure. Something quite potent.’ He glances back along the bar to where a group have waved him over. ‘Excuse me.’

I watch as his backside struts its way towards the other end of the bar.

‘You joining us for shots?’ An attractive female shouts out.

He replies something and the group grumbles, a couple of the ladies pouting.

‘A round of sambucas for the road,’ one guy calls out, raising both arms in the air.

As I study the distracting bartender pouring their order, Josie leans in. ‘If he were a cocktail, you know what he’d be?’

It’s a game we play when we try to match personality types with cocktail names. My sister used to be a right Shirley Temple, but now she’s more of a Naughty Girl Scout, which is a worrying trajectory.

I raise a brow. ‘I know exactly what he’d be.’

We eyeball each other and then both chuckle, ‘A Leg Spreader!’

I glance at him. ‘Lethally strong. Probably too much for me.’

‘I think if ever there’s a good time to try something new, it’s now.’ Josie says softly.

I jerk my head. ‘You know I normally stick with something safe, like a Woo Woo.’

Josie tuts, ‘No one wants a Woo Woo. Not when they can have ... ’ she gestures towards the barman. ‘I’m out of cocktail euphemisms. But this guy, he’s hot. I can *tell* you think he’s hot.’ She leans in closer. Imploring. ‘He’s clearly into you.’

‘He’s sexy as sin but you know my number one rule. No one that’s going to be a bad influence on Chloe. After my mum’s string of deadbeat exes, she’s had enough negative male energy in her life.’ Especially not men like him, all buzz cut and tattoos, oozing trouble like it’s a pheromone.

Nate

A leg spreader, huh?

Mouth-watering visions of getting better acquainted with Ella’s thighs thrust into my mind. Slipping the hem of her skimpy dress slowly up, skimming my fingers over creamy skin, easing my way between her knees. Higher. These thoughts won’t let me think straight, nor are they helping the current situation in my boxers. Luckily serving shots to drunks can be done on autopilot.

As I move further away from the distracting woman, the lust-induced static fogging my brain clears.

A leg spreader ... I’m not sure if I should take the comment as a compliment or a criticism. Sure, my younger self would be high-fiving that reputation, but that guy was an immature, heart-broken, dick. Don’t get me wrong, the string of one-night stands I enjoyed in my early twenties were always mutually satisfying, I made sure of that.

A quiet snort of laughter huffs through my nose. Mindless, anonymous sex lost its appeal, and these days, I’ve not seen nearly so much action. Focused on working —on getting my shit together — it’s not that I’ve given up women, I just haven’t found any that float my boat.

But, there’s something about Ella.

The thought of getting to know her, and her thighs, a little better, is something I could really get on board with.

The group in for a pub crawl call out a rowdy goodbye. I stack their empties in the glass washer and continue tinkering away in the background. As I restock a fridge, my brain keeps picturing Ella, legs akimbo, and I wonder if my semi is ever

going to settle down or if this gorgeous woman is going to keep me stirred up all evening.

Probably. She's been on my mind all week.

I'm more than intrigued. Waltzing in to fix her car one night, dissing bikers the next, it's safe to say she has firmly got my attention. She's ballsy but in the most conservative way. The way she blushed when her friend mentioned Sex on the Beach, I'd love to see how far into her cleavage that blush travelled. I feel compelled to see if I can elicit any more reactions.

Enzo comes over to check a fifty pound note with me and I remember I still have a job to do. And a boner to quash. I picture my old physics teacher, who used to smell of mustard, while I help my colleague. I need to focus on work, try to be professional.

It's no use.

As I tidy around the bar, more of the ladies' conversation filters over to me. I can't stop myself from overhearing. At least I'm invisible back here behind the pumps, amongst the optics and packets of crisps. No one ever notices the barman, so they'll never know I've lost my fucking mind and been entirely hypnotised by Ella.

'Urgh, that text's from my mum,' her sweet voice sounds defeated.

'Everything okay?'

'Yes. No,' Ella sighs.

Her friend is soothing her arm and a pang of worry has my ears straining harder.

'She's managed to get a double shift tomorrow, which is great. But we were going to spend the day together. Do the big shop, cook a batch of meals, clean the house. It sounds dull but when we do it together, it's kind of fun. Now it looks like it's all on me.' Her head has dropped onto the bar and I hear a muffled, 'Again.'

'Sorry, I wish I could help,' her friend sighs.

‘It’s okay, they’re just chores.’ I glance over to see her sit back up with a flick of her hair. ‘I was hoping to spend some time with my mum, that’s all.’ She tries to give a small smile. ‘We’ll make up for it on Sunday.’

Geoff calls me over and I go and see how I can help my best customer. He’s a great guy, always has an interesting take on life, so will be a welcome diversion from my one-track mind tonight.

‘Different crowd in this evening. It’s nice to change things up.’ He indicates over to the girls with a knowing eyebrow.

‘What would Pauline say?’ I pretend to scold him and he chuckles.

‘She knows I don’t have the energy.’

‘She’s a wise woman.’

He eyeballs me pointedly. ‘She’d tell you to go for it.’

I return his look. Maybe I haven’t been as incognito behind the bar as I’d thought.

‘You *should* go for it,’ he continues, ‘but grab me another pint first.’

Chapter 7

Ella

‘Ells, all this shit at home, shit at work, what I’m hearing is that you need to. Get. Laid.’ For emphasis, Josie pokes at the bar with her fingers to punctuate the last couple of words.

‘You know my rules. I’m not in the market for a boyfriend.’

‘Who said anything about a boyfriend? I’m talking a night of steamy, no strings attached passion. It’s good for your mental health.’

‘The last thing Chloe needs is to catch me doing an early morning walk of shame.’

‘Don’t get caught.’ Josie sucks the last of her drink from between the ice cubes with a loud slurp. ‘What about exploring this thing here.’ She gestures with her glass between me and the bartender. ‘See what happens.’

Glancing along the bar, Hot Guy is reaching for something off the highest shelf. I’m gifted a mouth-watering peek at his abs as his tee-shirt rides up. Why is forbidden fruit the sweetest?

‘There’s not a thing,’ I tut.

‘There *could* be a thing. He’s into you, I can almost feel the heat from the way he looks at you.’ She sits up straighter, placing her drink down. ‘You’re clearly into him.’

I pluck at my napkin. ‘Am not.’ My feeble reply isn’t convincing anyone.

‘You shouldn’t deny yourself pleasure. Life is short.’ She fans her fingers wide, then curls them into a fist, squeezing the air with anguish. ‘You deserve to be happy too.’

‘I’ll be happy when Chloe leaves home a balanced, strong, independent female that hasn’t spent her whole life exposed to players and flakes.’ I stab my straw at the ice in my glass.

‘They’re not all bad.’ Josie shakes her head.

‘Maybe not. But this guy screams danger and bad decisions.’ My eyes linger on his sexy as hell tattoos.

‘He seems like he might be the kind of guy that leaves you screaming though.’ She cocks an eyebrow. ‘Just saying.’

‘But can you imagine me taking him home for Sunday lunch?’ My eyes bulge.

‘You’re not listening,’ she gives an exasperated laugh. ‘Who said anything about lunch? Or taking him home? You should go get some.’ Josie bats me away with her hand. ‘Blow off some cobwebs. Scratch an itch.’

I fix her a look. ‘I’m not itchy.’

‘You must be. It’s been what? Two years?’

‘You’ve been counting?!’ It comes out as a hiss.

‘Best friends keep track.’ She shrugs.

‘You can talk, you know. Both of us are probably a little cobwebby.’

‘Oh no.’ She smirks. ‘I had a little spring clean the other night.’

I round on her. ‘And this is the first I hear of it?’

‘I was going to tell you.’ She raises her tone to match mine.

‘Well, tell me now.’ I bang my hand onto the table like a gavel. ‘Everything!’

‘It was at that Halloween party. There was an extremely sexy zombie.’

‘And you let him eat your brains, didn’t you?’ I quirk my eyebrows mischievously.

‘Oh honey, I let him eat everything.’

‘Josie!’

‘What? It was an adult masquerade fancy dress kind of party, that’s what you’re supposed to do, isn’t it?’

‘I wouldn’t know, but you go girl. I’m happy for you.’ I lean on to the bar, resting my chin on my hand. ‘So, are you seeing

him again?’

‘We didn’t exactly swap details,’ she groans. ‘In my wisdom, I thought it would be hot to have some awesome anonymous sex, but I’m kind of ... regretting that now.’

I open my eyes wide in sympathy.

She wrinkles her nose. ‘I massively fucked up. He was incredible. I was kind of hoping he’d be here tonight.’

‘But he’s not?’ Straightening my spine, I peer around the room, half expecting to spot a zombie.

‘No.’ She sighs. ‘I wanted to orchestrate bumping into him and, you know, see if he wanted to jump my bones.’

‘Smooth. So why here? Do you think he works here?’

‘Well, you know it was masquerade?’ She lowers her voice conspiratorially. ‘I’m not a hundred percent sure, but part of his costume was a polo shirt with The Bull Inn logo on. It had been all bloodied and ripped but it was definitely this place.’ She coughs. ‘I may or may not have done some serious internet investigating — ’

‘Stalking,’ I correct.

‘Potato, pot-ah-to. I found this place and wondered if he might have a link here, possibly a regular ... or staff.’

‘So, *this* is why you arranged a relocation.’

‘Yeah.’ She gives me a semi-apologetic grin. ‘But perhaps it’s worked out for the best. I got mine, now you can get some.’

‘I’m not gonna get any ... ’ my voice peters out as Hot Guy starts approaching with his swagger and sexy grin and I become increasingly concerned I’m about to slip off my seat.

Loudly, Josie proclaims, ‘I’ve gotta ... ’ before getting down from her stool. She walks off mumbling, ‘No one’s listening, I’m just gonna make myself scarce.’

He leans on the bar. ‘How’s Rusty?’

‘Helena’s doing fine,’ I roll my eyes. ‘Thank you for asking.’

He dips his head. ‘Seems like you’ve been having a tough week, car troubles, mean boss — ’

‘Have you been listening in?’ My eyebrows hit the roof.

‘Can’t help but hear the odd word back here.’ He shrugs. ‘Is there anything I can do to make your evening a little bit better? Another cocktail perhaps?’ His lips press into a smirk. ‘And by the way,’ he moves even closer, lowering his voice, ‘although I love a Leg Spreader,’ he cocks his head to the side as if really considering this, ‘I also like a French Kiss from time to time. No need to be so filthy minded.’

I feel a warmth rush through my cheeks when I realise exactly how much he’s heard.

Nate

There’s that blush. *Bingo!*

Getting a reaction out of Ella has quickly become my new favourite hobby. There’s something about her that keeps tempting me back for more, toying with her to see what she does. I’m entirely captivated.

I’m also concerned.

I never hit on customers, or anyone these days, but, whatever this is with Ella, it feels different. And tonight might be my only opportunity to get her attention. This concern is making me do things that aren’t like me.

Flipping the cocktail maker in my hand like some sort of Tom Cruise wannabe, I throw her a flirty smile. ‘Do you fancy going out with me for some cocktails? Show me how it’s done?’

‘I’m sure you already overheard I don’t date...’ she tails off as if she’s not finished her sentence.

‘What, like full stop or ... ?’

‘I *haven't* been dating, full stop.’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘But now?’

Lips turning up at the corners, she gives me a look as if she’ll agree but then seems to mentally talk herself out of it with a reticent shake of her head. ‘I don’t date ...’ Again she stops herself. I feel heat from her eyes trailing all over me.

‘Is it my terrible cocktail making skills?’ I give the shaker a toss for effect. ‘Or my mechanic skills?’

‘You only held the torch,’ she counters with a wry smile.

Encouraging her to finish the sentence, I say, ‘So, you don’t date ... guys like me?’ I clutch my heart pretending to be offended, while her cheeks pink up.

I put on what I hope is a cute pout, popping my dimple like when I was a kid trying to get away with murder. ‘You know, you could totally take me home to meet your mum. Mums love me.’

It’s her turn to raise her eyebrow. ‘That’s not a great brag, you’ve met *a load of women’s mums*.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that.’ Realising my mistake, I raise my hand in surrender. ‘I mean ... my mum loves me.’ It comes out as more of a question and I try the cute smile tactic again.

‘It’s not mums I’m worried about.’

‘Tell me more?’

She smiles but shakes her head, as if still talking herself out of something. ‘I’ve got to set a good example for my sister.’

‘Are you suggesting I’m a bad example?’

Her brown, doe-eyes sparkle. ‘That’s exactly what I’m suggesting.’

‘Like I’m a *bad boy*?’ I whisper the last bit and watch the crimson spread across her delicate skin. I’m not like that anymore but I can’t stop pushing her for more, riling her up, seeing how I affect her.

‘I don’t think a *good* guy would be going to quite such trouble to make me feel uncomfortable.’

I kind of love how she’s already calling me on my bullshit. Can she feel this frisson between us, too? I can’t be imagining it.

Propping my elbows on the bar and leaning closer to her, I speak right into her ear. ‘But you respond so strongly to me just messing around here, imagine how it might be in my bed?’

Visions of her writhing about in my sheets fills my mind and I wish I’d told her my name when she’d asked so I could imagine her gasping it.

Her face is now scarlet, from her ears, which I am so close to I could nibble, down to below the neckline on that unbelievable black dress. If I ever get the chance to explore that particular route, so help me, I hope I get lost.

She swallows. ‘You’ve gone from a friendly cocktail to your bedroom pretty fast. It’s not doing much to dissuade my concern you’re not a,’ she curls her hand to shield her mouth from view and then mouths, ‘*bad boy.*’

I give her a wry smile. ‘This sounds like a challenge. I need to prove I’m not like that, huh?’

Her friend reappears and Ella sits up straight, focusing all her attention back on her, avoiding my question.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Being this close to Ella overloads my senses and I can’t stop myself from saying and doing things that are sure to give her the entirely wrong impression.

But getting this kind of heated response from her? It’s addictive.

Her friend chucks her phone down as she arrives. ‘Gemma wants to know if we can come to the display on bonfire night.’

‘I can’t, but you go.’ Ella’s voice remains light but I notice her smile doesn’t quite meet her eyes.

‘Boo. It won’t be as fun without you.’ Her friend takes a dramatic breath. ‘But it’s a chore I shall have to bear on my own.’

‘Eat a hot dog for me and say hi to the gang.’ Ella raises her glass, a few dregs of cocktail and old ice sloshing in the bottom. ‘Fancy another?’

Her friend nods enthusiastically and Ella turns to me and asks, ‘What’s next on the menu?’ before wrapping her lips around the straw, sucking on the slush.

Fuck, she’s killing me.

Looking her right in the eye, I say, ‘How about a Wet Pussy?’

The drink is ejected rather forcibly back down the straw as she coughs and splutters. She tries to take another sip, making a loud slurp.

I feel a little bad.

Scooping a lock of hair behind her ear, she almost looks like she wants to fall into the slushy ice chips and hide. But, as predicted, that delicate blush erupts and I’m left wishing she was slurping on something else.

Doing my best to keep a straight face, with a serious tone I say, ‘No, you’re right. Bad idea. Too similar to Sex on the Beach.’ I serve the Margarita I’ve already mixed and say, ‘Try this. Any requests for your next one?’

Rallying, she sets her shoulders back and flashes a confident smirk. ‘Surprise us.’

It’s hard, but I force myself to leave the ladies alone. Working my way around the pub, I chat with locals and clear some empties. Don’t want to neglect my regulars.

Stopping by my friend Chunk’s table, he’s having a catch up with some other ex-forces guys.

‘You joining us, Nate?’ A moustached, Scottish guy they call Jock, asks.

‘Thanks, but I’m working so I shouldn’t.’ I don’t like to intrude. ‘Another round, fellas?’

I take some orders and then busy myself pouring and carrying it back over to them.

More of the ladies’ chat filters through the air and I hear Ella laugh, which is its own kind of magic.

Although, watching her blush is still my favourite.

Across the pub, I see her from a new angle. As she swaps the cross of her toned legs, my eyes scan from her crazy-bright, pink, fuck-me heels, all the way up to where her clingy black dress hugs her curves. Whoever designed that dress must be a sadist, as it’s driving me nuts.

My eyes meet hers and she holds my gaze as she wraps those pink lips around her straw again. I’m going to need to make sure we get more straws in the next order, it would be a crime if she were to come back and we’d run out. I swallow to make sure I’m not drooling.

‘That brunette catch your eye?’ Chunk’s question is mumbled low as he passes me an empty glass.

For such a big guy, he’s surprisingly softly spoken. An IED left him partially deaf on one side where it blew his eardrum out. Since, he’s always talked quietly for fear of bellowing at someone by accident.

I jerk my chin towards the other lads. ‘You’re supposed to be chatting with your buddies, not eavesdropping on me.’

‘I’m trained to be observant,’ Chunk replies.

‘You notice me striking out too?’ I mock-wince.

‘That’s not like you,’ he gives me a rueful look. ‘Your reputation precede you?’

‘Fuck off.’ I’m not going to announce in front of all of his Forces mates that I’ve been deemed *a bad influence* or whatever.

Even though Ella’s probably right; I can’t get the thought of fucking her out of my mind. Except it’s more than that. It’s not

just the way she responds to me, it's how I respond to her. We could have a lot of fun.

'Her friend seems ... nice,' Chunk adds, letting his gaze linger.

'Calm yourself. Her friend sounds like she's interested in some other dude.'

'Now who's eavesdropping?'

'I can't help that their voices carry.' I look back over to Ella, mesmerised as she throws her head back to laugh and her dress stretches across her tits.

'She's really piqued your interest tonight, hasn't she?' Chunk's levelling a knowing look at me.

My flatmate and best friend, he probably knows me better than anyone, but now is not the time for a full on Chunk-style heart-to-heart about what I'm doing with my love life, or lack of it.

Shutting the conversation down, I ask, 'Another brewski? Alcohol free?'

Chunk gestures he's all done. 'You up for the gym tomorrow morning?' He goes along with the change in subject.

'Nah, got to be here for a delivery. Day after?' It's not like it'll matter if the handsome prick misses a workout.

'I'll do both,' he shrugs.

Heading off, I clear some more empties. Once I'm sure everything is under control and all the punters are happy, I remind Enzo it's okay for him to head off early. It's a quiet night, nothing's going to happen now.

Chapter 8

Ella

‘Ladies, another cocktail?’ The infuriating bartender flashes a seemingly innocent smile, enticing me in more ways than one.

Stubborn to the end, I’m desperate to know his name but I’m not going to ask again. I tried earlier and now it’s borderline too late. I’ll simply have to think of him as the irritating but hot barman forever.

‘Not for me, thanks,’ says Josie. ‘That last Mojito was so strong, it almost blew my socks off.’ She swivels around in her seat. ‘Yikes, I need the little girls’ room.’

My friend staggers as she dismounts from the stool, heading to the toilets. It’s probably best we stop drinking while we’re still vaguely in control.

Okay, *I’m* still in control, even if Josie’s battered.

Knowing he’s going to come out with something completely obscene, some underwear melting retort, I can’t stop myself asking, ‘What did you have in mind?’

Without blinking or smirking, not even a lip curl to give him away — completely deadpan — he says, ‘Can I interest you in a Screaming Orgasm?’

Heat rages across my skin. Why hadn’t I anticipated *that* as a response. All I want to do is say *hell yes!* And I would if my life were a little different.

But I’m the responsible one.

I’m the sober one.

Most sober, in any case.

Buying some time, I give a little cough. ‘Tempting. But I should probably go and make sure my friend is okay.’

Across the room Josie knocks into an empty chair, and then loudly apologises to it while she straightens it up.

‘I’d better — ’ I don’t bother finishing my sentence as I chase after her.

‘That was an interesting evening,’ Josie giggles as the pub door closes behind us.

‘I’m sorry your mystery fella wasn’t there.’ I bump my shoulder into hers.

She shrugs. ‘It was still great to set the world to rights. I love our nights out.’

I rub my arms briskly, waiting for my alcohol-induced beer jacket to kick in and regretting not bringing a coat.

‘Where’s Jamie?’ More than a little tipsy, Josie stamps her foot. ‘He promised he’d pick us up at half past.’

There’s a rev of an engine and a battered silver car swings into the car park, drawing to a stop in front of us. I look on, perturbed, as Chloe climbs out of the passenger side, pulling the seat she’d been sitting in forwards. It’s a two door car so the only way in and out of the back is an ungainly climb.

‘Alright?’ Jamie calls out from the driver’s side. ‘It’ll be a bit of a squeeze.’

Josie and I crowd forwards and see Chloe’s two best friends, Hayley and Claire, squashed in the back. The car’s inside light illuminates Claire’s hair, hanging lankly over her face and Hayley, trying to wedge her head upright.

‘What the fuck, Jamie?’ Josie shrieks.

‘They were at the house party too. I said I’d give them a lift. I couldn’t leave Claire like that, could I?’

‘Where are Ella and I supposed to go?’

‘Can’t you squish in?’ Jamie looks over his shoulder into the back.

‘No.’ My voice is calm compared to Josie’s squeal. ‘It’s not safe.’

‘The boot?’ Jamie sounds hopeful.

‘No, it’s fine. I’ll wait here,’ I say, ‘Jamie, you get the girls home and then come back for me.’

‘No, I should wait here. My brother’s stitched us up. I should be the one put out.’

‘Hey, fuck you,’ Jamie growls. ‘I told you I couldn’t get you —’

‘It’s okay,’ I interrupt, hands raised in a way to try and diffuse the situation. ‘Jamie’s being a gentleman. Imagine if he’d left the girls stranded? No, it’s fine. I’ll be fine here.’ Although Josie stopped drinking a little while ago, she’s too vulnerable to leave here on her own.

Claire makes a retching sound in the back and Jamie rummages around in the passenger footwell. Fishing out an old fast-food bag, he throws it in the back. ‘It would be great if you could repay the favour by having Claire *not* throw up all over my car.’

‘It’s not like we’re doing this on purpose,’ my sister replies as she climbs back in.

‘Just go!’ I usher them and force a smile.

It’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.

‘We’ll come straight back, unless you want me to wait with you?’ Josie’s already started buckling her seatbelt.

‘No, you go, silly us both being put out. Plus, I need you to make sure Jamie actually comes back for me.’

‘As if I wouldn’t,’ Jamie tuts.

I slap the car a couple of times on the roof. ‘Go!’

‘See you in twenty,’ Josie calls through the open window.

Checking my watch, it’s gone closing time.

‘More like forty,’ I mutter to myself, thinking there’s no way Jamie can make the drop offs and be back anytime soon.

Fuck.

I’m totally fucking screwed.

Sometimes I try to check my thoughts, to swear less and lead by example for my sister. But there's something about finding the exact right word for the situation. And right now, it's, 'Fuck!'. I whisper-shout it into the darkness, a tiny act of rebellion, and a burst of relief whistles through me, like slightly releasing the cap on a shaken fizzy drink. Maybe I should add swearing to my self-help routine. Letting it all out should help, right?

I walk over to the covered area where I'd fixed Helena a few nights ago. The old picnic benches feel rough on my bare legs as I perch on one.

Cold and stuck outside a pub; this is really topping off what seems to be one of the shittiest days.

I'm trying to keep perspective but at the moment it seems like one stress or disappointment after another. Practising deep breaths, I try to check my thoughts. No one died. No one's seriously ill. I saw my friend and had a good time tonight, it's not that bad.

Breathe.

The pub door opens and there's some raucous laughter.

'Thanks fellas,' the voice of the exasperating yet hot barman calls out.

Perhaps I should have followed Josie's advice. Distracting myself with him tonight had gone some way towards easing the pressure. But the feeling that *everything is about to boil over* is still present. I'm simmering at best.

Feeling rather exposed sitting outside in the dark, I shift in my seat hoping I'm not noticed. This is a ridiculous situation to find myself in. I shiver, wishing I'd done some self-defence training or something.

'I'll be right behind you,' another voice calls.

Hot Guy says something I can't hear and then there's the roar of motorcycle engines. What fucking imbeciles. Drinking and riding. I hope they don't encounter Jamie, or anyone else for that matter.

The light from the door diminishes and I know my barman has gone back inside with voice number two.

My phone buzzes and I check the screen, hoping it's Josie saying she's commandeered a helicopter and is minutes away.

Josie: Claire's chundered in the car, gonna be at least another 30.

There's another message I hadn't noticed too.

Mum: Got a shift Sunday too. Double pay :)

It's like a switch has flicked.

What has my life come to?

Shat on and under-appreciated at work. Spending nearly all my free time doing housework, cooking, taxiing my sister around. Worrying about bills with my mum, who's working literally every hour she can. My car surviving on axle grease and hope alone. My social life in a tailspin. And on my one night off, I'm left literally out in the cold while my sister steals my ride. Is it too much to want a little something just for me?

The door opens and shuts again. Boots crunch on gravel over to the last vehicle in the car park and it roars away.

I find my feet working before I realise what I'm doing.

Suddenly I'm pushing the bar door open with a swoosh and I'm back in the warm, welcoming pub.

The barman's voice calls out, 'Seriously, Chunk, I can close up on my own.' I can't see where he is, the bar is deserted. The door feels cold and hard behind me as I lean back on it and I find my hand scrabbling to bolt the lock. 'It's not Chunk,' I call out. My own voice sounds strange. Husky, and somehow in control.

I don't feel anything like in control.

He appears in a doorway behind the bar.

'You're back?' He's coming towards me with an intense expression on his face and I'm not sure how physics has let him cover the ground so quickly. Like a magnet, I'm pulled right over to him.

‘You okay?’ His hands are on my arms, his skin scorching mine.

‘I was wondering about that ...’ Deep eyes scrutinise me as I pick my words. Brow creased in concern, his full lips part as if to ask a question, but before I can consider what I’m about to admit, I hear myself saying, ‘ ... Screaming Orgasm.’

It’s my voice, but not my brain. Is this what an out-of-body experience feels like? Why the hell am I out-of-body? I want to be in my body if this is going where I think it’s going.

Gaze locked, we share a heavy breath.

‘You want ... another cocktail?’ His voice is ragged. Strained.

Taking my time, I unhook my bag and lower it down on the freshly polished surface of the nearest table. Pausing, I inhale. Then I look at him. ‘I’m not thirsty.’

What am I doing?

I don’t do things like this.

I don’t even know his freaking name.

He’s so close I can see his eyes have darkened with want.

Slowly, he trails his knuckles down my arm, cascading a wave of goosebumps, awakening every nerve ending until he reaches my fingertips. Then he gives a tug towards him.

We collide, frantic.

As I press into him, his mouth captures mine. Prickly stubble is soothed by soft lips. A woodsy fragrance engulfs me, mingling with the scent of real ale and something else ... something undeniably him.

His hands comb into my hair, tugging a little, angling my head. The pull sends a jolt straight to my core. His lips move with mine, urging me to open and I can’t stop a moan from escaping when I feel his tongue, hot and wet.

I run my fingers over his hair, the softness contrasting with the scratch of his five o’clock shadow as my mouth thrusts onto his.

Through his kiss, he growls, 'Is this what you want?'

Everything feels alive. Tingling. Needy. I need him.

I track the contours of his body, snagging at his tee-shirt and sliding my hands underneath. 'Yes.'

Chapter 9

Nate

Ella's touch fires me up like a fucking Ducati.

She groans into my mouth as she slides her thigh up mine. Pressing into me, I know she can feel my raging hard-on which is desperately wanting to break free.

Shit. I could blow my load just kissing her.

That enticingly plump bottom lip is finally on mine. Distracting curves thrust against me.

Her skin feels chilled and I encourage her closer. Reaching down to cup her ass, I smooth my hands over her body. Why do I want to protect her as much as I want to fuck her?

I need to slow down.

When she'd left, I'd told myself if I ever saw her again, I'd do things differently for once. I wouldn't let her get away without at least telling her my name, asking for her number, maybe trying to change her mind about that date.

But, right now, her perfume is intoxicating and it's a struggle to think straight.

As her arms wrap around my neck, my grip tightens, boosting her as she hops up, binding her legs around my waist and pressing her heat into me.

Holding her securely, my mouth plunders hers. Kissing her. Nibbling her. I can't get enough. I back her towards the nearest surface so I can suck and lick and bite her from her lips all the way down that beautiful neck.

She gasps in surprise and I realise I've rested her on the glass washer. It rumbles below us as it blasts a load of glassware clean. She squeezes me to her, her legs locked behind my back, those crazy fuck-me heels digging in to my butt. The machine's vibrations passing through her, to me.

Now she's at the perfect height, I ease my hands up and trace her body through her ridiculous dress. Clingy, sexy and only a little revealing, this dress has been taunting me all night. Her nipples harden under my thumb and I suddenly wish said dress would disappear.

Hungrily, I kiss her sweet, soft skin, following the curve of her breasts with my mouth. My fingers carefully trace along the seam of her dress and ease the material aside, freeing one of her perfect tits. My kiss zeros in on her tight, pink bud and I gently drag my teeth over it before swirling my tongue across, then round to the soft skin underneath.

Ella's hands have gripped onto my head, drawing me down as I lick and nibble my way over to the other breast.

Don't want it feeling left out.

But I need to see her face. As I pull away, she sets deep soulful eyes on me and bites down on her bottom lip. Fucking sexy.

'Please don't stop.' I can hear the feral need in her voice.

'Wasn't planning on it.' Not unless she asks me to.

To reassure her I'm not going anywhere, I take a long slow suck on her earlobe and then start to work my way down her neck. Her head tips back as she releases a quiet moan.

Suddenly, I remember something important.

'My name is Nate, by the way,' I say through my kisses. 'For when you need to scream it.'

'Nate,' is whispered on her lips and it sounds like fucking heaven.

With Ella supported on the glass washer, my hands are free to explore further. One hand snakes into her hair, the other finger-tip walks down her dress to where the hem meets her silk-like skin. Scooching under the material, I work my way back up her thigh. I can feel warmth radiating from her, through the thin scrap of material she considers underwear.

Zeroing my pointer finger in on her hot centre, I gently caress across the fabric and she whimpers as I tease her. I can

feel through the satin how turned on she's getting and I can't resist very slowly slipping my finger under that silly strip of material.

'Shit,' she murmurs, parting her legs more, welcoming me in as I find a hot, wet path.

We both gasp. Carefully, I ease a second finger in and slowly start to stroke inside her. She grinds her hips, riding my hand, encouraging me deeper. Curling my digits, her little noises and breathy moans tell me which way to go. Thrusting inside her slick, tight pussy, my dick throbs to be where my fingers are. But this isn't about me. The lady placed a certain order and I must oblige.

With my other hand, I grip her thigh, holding her wide open for me. She looks incredible.

My mouth is magnetised back to kissing the path her blush took and I stretch out my thumb to caress the little bundle of nerves at her apex. She cries out as I circle her clit, my fingers continuing to pump.

Suddenly, she catches her breath, tensing, then a gasped, 'Fuck,' escapes as she exhales.

She bucks against me. I feel her muscles clamping inside, squeezing in rhythm and I focus on following her movements to draw out her orgasm for as long as possible.

Ella folds into me. I gently withdraw my hands and move them to her back, holding her tightly, supporting her. She's almost turned to jelly. I've done this to her; my chest tightens with something like pride.

I wasn't just toying with her earlier, suggesting how she'd feel messing around in my bed. I knew there was some sort of chemistry here. Damned if I know whether it's plain old combustion, nuclear fusion or some kind of fucking alchemy. I'm too far gone to know. But whatever this is, it's fucking hot.

Burying her head in the crook of my neck, she lets out a breathy chuckle. 'Fuck,' she repeats.

'Yep.' I'm also lost for words.

I take a moment, revelling in the earthy scent of her release.

I need more.

‘I ... you ... fuck.’ She lifts her face up, giving me a coy grin and a shake of her head.

‘I’m gonna need you to do that again.’ I lift her up and her legs tighten around my waist.

I start to move towards the back of the pub, towards the private quarters.

She braces her hands on my shoulders. ‘Woah, soldier, where are you taking me?’

‘Upstairs.’ Pausing, I suck on the skin where her neck meets her shoulder.

‘There isn’t time,’ she sighs.

What? I’ve only just got started.

‘I need to taste you,’ I grind out, my lips pressed to her throat. ‘And you still need to scream my name.’

‘Bar,’ she manages to say before crumpling back onto me, her mouth kissing along my collarbone, fingernails trailing down my back.

Flames ripping through me, I hold her strong and carry her over to the end of the bar.

As I perch Ella on the glossy wood, she frees her hands from behind me and curls a finger into my waistband. Sliding it round, she grazes my stomach, leaving a streak of fire in its place. Her other hand starts to fiddle with my flies.

I catch hold of her. Pulling my mouth away from her sweet skin, I rest my forehead against hers, noses touching.

‘Ladies first,’ I manage to choke out, my breath ragged. ‘I’ve not given you what you asked for, yet.’

Purposefully, I bring her hands up, gripping them together at the wrist like my fingers are a cuff.

She gives me an innocent kind of pout, her bottom lip running through her teeth, like she doesn’t know what she’s

doing to me.

This woman is a fucking siren.

I would willingly get smashed into a thousand jagged rocks to hear my name on her lips again.

I kiss her once more, but she pulls free of my grip, her hands tussling to grab onto me, fingers sliding over my hair. The scrape of her nails leaves tingles on my scalp.

Determined to keep this about her, I gently pull her hands away. 'Lie back.'

Those big brown eyes widen but she gives a nod and slowly eases her weight backwards, her knees dangling over the end of the bar.

I join her wrists together again; her pulse jumping under my thumb. 'Hands above your head.'

She stretches them up, over her head. Her body laid out for me, as if on an altar, or the spread at a feast.

'Good girl.' It comes out as a growl.

Her eyes flare open with indignation like I knew they would; so fucking responsive to everything I throw at her.

Lips curling into a smirk, I raise an eyebrow to ask if she's going to behave. Biting her lip, she meets my gaze, her wandering hands staying put. Satisfied she won't distract herself with me, or distract me from my quest, I grasp her hips and shimmy her dress up, fully revealing the black silky thong that's as insubstantial as I'd imagined. Hooking my thumbs around the band, I start to ease it down. She shifts and wiggles to let me slip it off. As I unhook it from her heels, she brings her hands down, reaching out for me again.

I ease her hands back. 'Above. Your. Head.' I punctuate my command with kisses along her exposed body.

Sliding my hands over her thighs and down to her ankles, I lift one leg at a time onto my shoulders. She wraps her heels around my neck, knees falling out, opening her pussy to me.

Her pink centre glistens in the dim lights. Soaking wet. And completely beautiful. My dick thickens again, almost painful in my jeans. *This isn't for you*, I tell it. Think of old sports pundits, dodgy politicians.

Shit, do not blow your load in your pants like a fucking teenager.

Ella

I can't quite believe it. I'm totally freaking exposed. Lying on a bar, for goodness sake. I've never felt so vulnerable and defenceless and ... *turned on* in my life. Nate just conjured a mind-blowing orgasm out of thin air and now he wants me to go again. Again! But he won't even let me touch him. I want to be able to grip onto him, how else am I going to keep any semblance of control? A literal grip on reality.

'You look un-fucking-believable.' His voice is gruff. I can't see his face; it's buried between my legs.

He's licking his way up my thigh, but it is so slow.

So slow and languorous.

My pussy is almost quivering in anticipation. A sharp stubble scratches where his mouth is soft, his teeth nip after his lips smooth.

He's stopped.

No, not stopped, but hovering.

I feel his hot breath on my most intimate place and then his tongue flicks out. Just once. Unhurried. Politely asking for entry. I hear my own breath catch as I try to stifle a moan. My pussy is trying to stretch out to him, to let him in, and he takes another lingering lick.

'Please.' Thick with desire, my voice still doesn't sound like my own.

He doesn't make me beg. His tongue strokes upwards, landing on my clit, where it circles, circles and circles and then suddenly his lips are clamped around me, sucking, and I cry out.

He moans with his mouth around me and the vibrations almost send me into a spin. I get a flashback to moments ago when he'd lifted me onto that juddering machine thing, his fingers inside me, the vibrations sending me over the edge while his lips were on my neck.

A pinch of my nipple brings me back to reality. The sharp sting recedes as his thumb smoothes over my skin as he caresses across my breast.

Circling.

The laps of his tongue in time with his thumb, hypnotising me.

I can feel my orgasm building again, a knot inside, pulling together, tightening.

One large hand is on my breast, the other is stroking up my thigh towards his mouth. He palms my butt, fingers digging in, holding me tight to him. Even up on this precarious bar I feel anchored. Safe.

Gradually he eases a finger inside me, or is it two? I don't know anymore. As his tongue swirls, I feel everything clench together. Tighter. Higher. And then I am undone. As if a string has snapped and I'm unravelling. His name leaves my throat and then I'm lost.

As my climax pulses through me, he matches the tempo of my rhythm, drawing out my ride until I'm left shaky and breathless.

Soft lips kiss their way across my thighs and he wraps his hands around my waist. Trembling, I push myself up to sitting as he straightens. His hand cups my head and pulls me to him, forehead pressed against mine.

'I've got you.' A surprisingly tender kiss leaves me with a hint of my own taste. I can feel his breathing is as heavy as mine.

'That was ... huh.' My throat hoarse, I can't string a sentence together. Mind-blown. Greedy. I want to go again. I want to feel him inside me. I want him to tie me in knots and then unravel me all over again. I want to give him even half

the pleasure that's just ripped through me. I do not want this to be over.

'Do you — ' he starts to ask something but there's a toot of a car horn.

'Shit.' Adrenaline spikes through me.

I yank my dress, pulling it up to cover my chest.

He turns to look across the empty pub to the door and then his focus is back on me.

'Is that your lift?' He asks as he takes my thong and loops it over each of my stilettos before sliding it up to my knees.

'Yeah, I'm sorry.'

I shimmy to the edge of the bar. His hands are back on my hips and he steadies me as I land.

'No need to apologise,' his voice is ragged as I fiddle with my underwear, pulling it up in the most ungainly way.

The horn blares again, making me jump as I straighten my outfit. Casting my gaze around the bar, I locate my bag and snatch it off the table. 'I'd better — ' I nod to the door. *Really eloquent tonight, Ella.* 'Thanks for — ' Again words fail me.

'It was my pleasure.' He's leaning against the bar, arms crossed, making his biceps appear even bigger.

The door unbolts easily and suddenly I'm outside again, the cold air slapping my senses awake.

Josie is out of the car and walking over. Thank God I made it out when I did. 'Hey, I was starting to worry.'

'I'm fine.' I sound higher pitched than normal and she peers at me through narrowed eyes as we bundle back towards Jamie's car.

'So, you went back inside?'

'Yeah, it was getting cold out.' I clamber into the back seat.

Josie gets herself in the car and turns to face me. 'And?'

I click my seatbelt on. 'And what?'

‘Did you finally speak properly to that guy? Did you get his number?’

With a grin, Jamie glances at me in the rear-view mirror.

‘Nothing like that.’

‘Ella!’ Josie scolds.

‘It didn’t come up. I didn’t get the chance.’ I cross my fingers hoping she doesn’t pry into what *had* come up. Jamie may be seventeen but there are some things best friend’s little brothers don’t need to know.

‘Did the girls get home okay?’ I change the subject.

‘Kind of,’ says Josie.

‘You’ll find out soon. I dropped them at your house.’ I can hear the mirth in Jamie’s voice.

‘What?’ I shriek.

‘It was the closest. I didn’t want Claire to spew all over my car.’

‘Fuck,’ I mutter and stare out into the dark night. My moment of self-care is definitely over.

Chapter 10

Nate

I watch Ella's hips swivel as she walks away. Forcing myself to lean on the bar, arms firmly crossed, I stop myself from following her. From pulling her back. I keep my voice as cool as I can, like I'm not literally bursting at the seams to rail her into next week. My balls are aching for release; I've been rock solid since the moment she walked back in.

Once she disappears through the door, I finally let myself follow and bolt the lock.

Did that just happen? The sweet taste in my mouth and the throbbing of my cock tells me it was real.

Without a thought to the rest of my closing-up duties, I lumber up to the flat above the bar, flicking the last light off as I go. I'll sort whatever is left in the morning.

In the shower, the water pelts me, and I scrub at my face, trying to shake my daze off. I can't stop replaying the look on her face when she finally relinquished control to me, when she came undone at my touch. The feel of her sweet, tight pussy clenching on my fingers. The sound of my name on her lips. Jesus, shit.

My dick gives me another nudge. Fisting my hand along my length, it only takes a few pumps and I blow my load, the rush of the shower raining down with me.

She'd had me rapt all evening. All. Fucking. Week. Despite my brazen attempts to rile her—teasing her, peacocking—she was unruffled. Yes, she'd flirted with me, but only a little. I was disappointed, thinking she'd left with her friend, maybe never to be seen again; I had no idea she'd stroll back into the bar and take what she wanted. What she needed.

I remember that craving for release.

Been there, done that. I've buried myself in a hundred nameless women trying to lose myself, find myself, distract

myself.

The look in her eyes told me what she was seeking. And I was fucking delighted to be the one to help her in her quest. My stomach roils at the thought of her going to someone else to give her what she needs and I shake off the notion as quickly as it arrived.

Messing with her this evening was the most fun I've had in a while. I loved winding her up, making her blush. Almost as much as I loved making her come undone. She's got me more awakened than I've felt in a long time.

I'm annoyed with myself for not getting her number. I'm so out of practice for this kind of situation. Somehow, I remembered to tell her my name. But a way to get in contact with her? Fail.

A foreign feeling passes through me. Is it hope? Would she make a return visit? Reconsider her no-dating rule? After all, rules are made to be broken.

'So, I'm away for barely a week and you've instigated a cocktail menu?' My brother, Scott, is standing in the kitchenette off the back of the bar, holding the sheet of paper I'd scribbled notes on.

The cocktail menu idea wasn't just a line to chat up Ella, although that was a happy coincidence.

'Thought it was worth a trial.' I shrug.

I've got an inkling it's a good idea but, if I'm too keen, it'll put him off. There's a chance he won't like it because he didn't think of it himself, grumpy bastard. And sometimes I wonder if he still doesn't fully trust my judgement. Either way, I'm playing it cool.

He studies the sheet again. The list of spirits and mixers, the pricing, my notes on the time they took to make, the profit margins. I did a thorough job, mainly to try and get Ella out of my head.

‘Absolutely. Any other brain waves I should be aware of?’ Scott empties the dregs of the ice tray into the sink with a clatter and bangs it down on the stainless steel. ‘You’re not gonna try and get me to do a theme night again?’

This guy is no fun. ‘No, but the charity quiz has had a lot of interest. Hopefully, we can raise a lot of money.’ I scan his face, which looks less pinched than usual. ‘Did you have a good time off?’ My brother looks rested from his week away, or at least, reinvigorated.

‘Busy but great. Raging Halloween party at Dave’s. Absolutely mental.’ He shakes his head as if lost in a memory. ‘Made me feel old, to be honest.’

I raise my eyebrows in a knowing way.

‘And then it was awesome meeting up with the lads from uni for a couple of nights,’ he continues. ‘Thanks for holding the fort.’

‘Any time, as long as I’m not on call.’

‘When are you next scheduled?’

‘This afternoon I’ve agreed to be part of a relay ride, taking something up north.’

Scott checks some papers. ‘Can you cover here on Bonfire night? I’ve been given an opportunity I can’t refuse.’

‘Sure. But tell me more another time, I’d better go and get geared up.’

My motorbike is my first love; I never feel more centred than when I’m letting rip on an open road. But today, I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me. I’d thought the ride would give me a good chance to get my head straight, but what with concentrating on rush hour traffic and then Ella’s naked body flashing through my mind as frequently as the cat’s eyes on the hard shoulder, it’s taking all my ability to make the drop-off and get back in one piece.

My bed is calling out to me as I arrive home, especially after crashing at The Bull while Scott was away. I always do to

help keep an eye on the place, but the living quarters leave a lot to be desired. After working extra shifts to help Scott out and sleeping badly, followed by a three-hour round trip on the motorway, I'm wiped.

As I enter the flat, I'm already stripping off my leather jacket and dreaming of a shower.

'Hi, you back yet?' I call out loudly to Chunk, as I kick off my shoes.

'Hey man, in here.'

Chunk is sitting on the floor, surrounded by notebooks, a laptop screen shining blankly from the side. His dirty-blond hair mussed up from where he drags his fingers through it. His large hand dwarfs the pen he's tapping up and down, drumming on a pad.

'I'm not disturbing a board meeting or something, am I?'

Since leaving the military, Chunk started his own business, The Wreck, which has grown into a fully-fledged outdoor activity centre. Although he's gifted at creating experiences for people, and his construction work on-site is exquisite, his relationship with the business-related spreadsheets and paperwork is strained.

'Nah, I'm done with this.' He sighs. He scrubs his hand through his hair. 'I might head to The Wreck in a bit if you want to come? I've had an idea to put in a load of lights. Turn the high ropes into a night-time Christmas illuminations experience.'

Impressed, I nod at the novel idea, my brain firing as I picture it. 'You should have done something like that for Halloween, that would've been scary as fuck.'

He cocks his head to the side, offering a fist out and I bump mine into it. 'Genius. Where were you *before* Halloween when I could have used it?'

'Next year?'

'You sure you don't want to partner with me?'

This guy offers me a job with him about every two weeks. We were friends in school but lost touch when he joined the Royal Marines. Luckily for me, he'd moved back to the area and offered me some work when I needed it the most. Now my best friend, he shares his awesome flat for dirt cheap rent and regularly tries to overpay me for any odd jobs I do for him at the centre.

'Thanks, but no. Not right now.' I value his friendship too much to risk his livelihood. '*Right now*, I need a shower.'

'You know there'll always be a job for you at The Wreck, right?'

I cross my arms over my chest. 'You know I've got the pub.'

He copies my move and even though he's sat on the floor, he's so stacked he'd be quite imposing if I didn't know he was a giant softie.

'That's not a career though, dude.' Chunk never minces his words. Life is short so he says what he means.

'Bar work can be a career.' I start to head towards the bathroom.

'Yes, but it's not *your* career. Not *your* dream. It's your brother's.'

What Chunk hasn't appreciated is that if I don't commit to a career, I can't fail at it.

Not failing. That's my dream.

'I'll work something out,' I call over my shoulder as I shut the door behind me.

Water trickling over me, I rest my head on the cold tiles. Finally, I let thoughts of Ella devour me. I stroke my dick, recalling every moment after she waltzed, fearless and demanding, back into the pub. Like I've done every night since. She was un-fucking-believable.

I don't know how or what or why, but for the first time in a very long time, I want more.

It's no secret that after my ex ripped my heart out, I focussed on having fun and feeling good, taking nothing and no-one too seriously, especially not myself.

I used to be a wham, bam, thank you ma'am, fuck 'em and leave 'em kind of guy. It didn't matter how you described it, I never wanted a follow up. Hell, I wasn't even bothered about a name.

But with Ella, banter with her was more than just fun, it was intoxicating, and what I felt with her was more than just good, it was fucking epic.

I've been entirely consumed by her, but what's really freaking me out is I don't know if I'll see her again.

Chapter 11

Ella

It's been ten days since my girl's night out with Josie. She was right, letting off some steam was exactly what I needed. But now I've had a taste of freedom, I'm hankering for more. I can't indulge myself like that, though. In a bid not to think about it, I've buried myself in the huge pile of work Boris left me.

My phone buzzes, breaking my concentration. Checking who has messaged me, I notice the time. It's half past three. I've worked through lunch.

Josie: Quiz night tonight. I need you!

Ella: You know I can't go out.

Josie: You don't need to babysit your sister, she's fifteen. And didn't you say your boss was away?

Ella: Yes...

Josie: Then you don't need to stay on late at work. He won't know.

My phone vibrates again immediately.

Josie: Please.

She has a point. And I haven't had a lunch break.

Ella: What time?

I hesitantly shoot back.

Josie: Yay! Pick me up at seven? Unless you want me to drive?

No, I did not want my lovely, caring, creative, quirky, soulful, awful driver of a friend to drive. I regard the clock again. If I leave at six, I'll still put in my hours *and* make it to the quiz.

Ella: I'll drive.

Josie sends a series of emojis back and I chuckle before altering the settings to Do Not Disturb so I can finish the account I've been working on for two days straight.

I don't have time to shower at home, but I change into comfy jeans and a nice-ish top, it's only a quiz after all. Josie wants me for my brain not my beauty. Mum's working a double again so I sort my sister a plate of dinner in exchange for her promise to get all her homework done.

Josie is peeking out of the window when I draw up, she must be eager to get going as I'm barely a couple of minutes late.

'To the wire, Ells,' she says when she cranks open Helena's passenger door.

'It's just a quiz, what's the rush?'

'It's a bit of a drive.' Josie, clad in a cleavage flaunting green dress, regards my outfit, giving me an awkward wincing grin.

'Where are we going?' My voice is even, despite the inkling I need to freak out.

'The Bull Inn,' she replies brightly.

I slot Helena into gear and pull away.

'The Bull?' I repeat slowly.

My brain can't compute these words and is stalling for time, hoping when she replies it will be a different pub. A pub where I didn't walk out like a brazen hussy after letting the obnoxiously hot bartender go down on me.

'You remember the way?' She fluffs her hair in the mirror, oblivious to my discomfort.

Because I didn't tell her what happened.

I haven't told anyone.

I've tried not to even think about it.

I've buried myself in work and family stuff and done everything I possibly can to distract myself. Because the moment I let myself think about it, my stomach drops, my pulse races and I wonder if I'm having some sort of medical emergency. And because every time I let Nate drift through my thoughts, I lose time thinking, or *overthinking*, about everything that happened. 'Ella!' She waves her hands in front of my face. 'It's left here.'

Shit. There I go again.

I've stopped Helena at a junction and we're just sitting here, the engine idling. Luckily, it's a quiet road.

'You don't mind, do you?' I think she's starting to tell I'm a little fazed. 'I wondered ... that guy I met might be there and ... well there seemed to be a connection between you and that barman.' She fidgets and then quickly adds, 'It's for charity. I thought you wouldn't mind.'

'It's cool.' I reach over to squeeze her thigh before grasping the wheel again. 'It'll be fun.' I force myself to sound positive for Josie's sake. She doesn't know I've unexpectedly turned into a vamp.

Josie nods and I sense she's trying to reassure herself as much as me.

She flicks on the radio and we pass the rest of the journey listening to some old dance classics while I mentally take inventory of my appearance — what I'm wearing.

What's the drill for when you proposition someone, walk out, and then bump into them days later? Are there rules? I'm pretty sure being as attractive as possible is goal number one. And this is probably a goal I have failed.

It shouldn't matter though. Right? I'm not in the market for anything further. I can't be. I'll have to take the bull by the horns and just tell him, "Sorry, it shouldn't have happened."

Shit, now I'm thinking about grabbing his horn ...

Nope. I shake my head. I'll tell him thanks, it was fun, but that's the end of it.

And who am I thinking he'd be up for more anyway? A guy like him probably has a different woman every night. I doubt I've crossed his mind since then.

We pull into the familiar car park and I kill the engine. I start to grab my bag to get out, but Josie doesn't move.

'Everything okay?' I ask.

'I lied.' Her eyes dart to mine and then flick away quickly. The Bull's outdoor lighting illuminates her features, which are pinched into a worried expression.

'What?'

'Well, I didn't lie. But I didn't tell you the whole truth.'

'Go on,' I urge, intrigued.

'I'm like, ninety-nine point nine percent sure that guy I met will be there.'

'Really?' My tone lets her know I'm not mad in the slightest, but I *am* fascinated. I settle back into the seat to listen.

'So, at the fireworks the other night ... '

'Yeah ... '

'I kind of lost track of the group.'

'And ... ' I draw out the word.

'Well, there was a drinks stand and I thought they might have gone to get a beer or mulled wine for the display or whatever ... ' She keeps losing confidence in the story. I think I know where it's going, but I need to hear my friend say it.

'And?!'

'As I got closer to the drinks stall, I noticed they had this logo hanging up. The same logo as on the sign.' She points into the darkness at the sign for the Inn. 'The same logo that was on the hot zombie's polo shirt. And then the hot zombie was behind the stall, but ... '

'But he didn't look like a zombie?'

'No. He just looked hot.'

‘So, did you speak to him?’

‘Kinda. Yes. No ...’

‘Josie! This is killing me.’

‘I flirted a bit.’ Josie shrugs. ‘Ordered a mulled wine. Went off to find the gang.’ She fidgets in her seat before continuing. ‘He came and found me during the display.’ A huge grin starts to split her face. ‘Kissed the shit out of me in the dark and left me with a fucking massive love bite and a demand to come and find him here. Thank God it’s scarf season.’

‘So, now you’re going to find him, huh?’ I nod knowingly.

Josie squeals, burying her face in her hands. ‘Ells, I’ve never been so turned on in my life. Spilt all my drink, too.’

‘Then why are we sitting out here? Let’s get in there!’

‘I’m nervous.’ She straightens up. ‘Now he’ll see me in the cold light of day. No costumes, no cover ups. What if he changes his mind?’

‘Josie, you are beautiful. Let’s face our fears and get in there. We’ll have a fun night raising money for charity if nothing else.’

As we climb out of Helena, Josie says, ‘Wait. You said face *our* fears.’

‘I may have got more than I bargained for when I came back into the pub the other night.’ I lean on the car roof. ‘Not sure how seeing Nate, again, is going to play out.’

‘Nate?’

‘The bartender.’ I give a shy smile.

‘Why do I feel like there’s more to this story?’

I think about telling her. Confessing everything that happened, everything that I’m feeling. But I know she’d encourage me to follow my bliss, or some other crap, that would inevitably lead to putting Chloe at risk.

So I don’t.

I tramp it all down with everything else that may threaten my hard-fought-for status quo.

‘There can’t be any more to this story.’ I slam the car door with a finality and we head inside.

I cast my gaze around the busy pub. There’s a couple leaning on the bar, right where Nate had me, and I feel myself blush. The second barman from the other night is serving drinks, but no sign of Nate. A funny combination of relief and disappointment washes through me.

‘We’re late. There’s no tables left.’ Josie sighs but then suddenly grabs my arm. ‘Ohh, there’s a spot at the bar over there, let’s go.’

She herds me to the far end of the bar to a couple of stools. Far, far away from the scene of the crime. We get ourselves settled on the seats and try to catch the attention of the bartender.

Before too long there’s a crackle over some speakers. A cheesy voice starts, testing the sound, and welcoming everyone to the quiz. ‘Thanks for joining us tonight to raise money for Oldton Park Hospital’s ITU and the UKBB, causes very special to our hearts here at The Bull Inn.’

‘What’s the charity?’ I whisper to Josie’s ear.

She shrugs. ‘The local hospital, I think.’

‘My assistant will be around shortly to collect your entry fees and hand out your quiz papers, so make sure you have full glasses and empty bladders. We’ll be starting in five minutes.’

Focused on snagging the bartender, I don’t notice Nate approach until he’s right behind us.

‘Hello ladies, it’s great to see you’ve come again.’ Nate’s dimple flashes and part of me feels like I might die of embarrassment. But another part of me, the outrageous part I’ve only recently discovered and definitely shouldn’t let out in public, is wondering if he would be so kind as to oblige me *coming* again. And again. And again.

Luckily, Josie's introducing herself and asking him about the quiz while I'm at a loss for words, let alone a witty retort.

'It's a tenner a head to enter. Just the two of you?'

'Seems to be,' Josie replies vaguely, peering along the bar. 'I'm gonna do as I'm told and nip to the bathroom. Excuse me.'

I watch Josie walk away. Nate is still looking at me, eyes twinkling with mischief.

This might be my only chance to talk with him without Josie witnessing my mortification. My pulse spikes.

'Hi.' It takes a moment to get my thoughts in order. 'About the other night ... '

'Remind me. The night where you trespassed and started, what did you call it? *Feng shu'ing* the beer garden? Or the one where you ... ' He trails a finger down my arm and for a moment a shiver of ecstasy runs over my skin.

'You know what I'm talking about.' I cut him off. Voice serious, but volume low. 'I'm sorry. It shouldn't have happened.'

'Was there a problem with your order, madam?' He wiggles his eyebrows playfully.

'Not so loud,' I implore with a murmur. It feels like my heart's going to jump out of my mouth.

'Okay,' he stage-whispers. 'We don't do refunds, but would you like to order an alternative?' Eyes dancing, he puts on a mock salesman's voice. 'And did you know, for returning customers there's a three for two offer on — '

'I'm being serious.' I grasp his arm to try and stop him fooling around. The granite of his biceps distracts me momentarily.

He flexes, bringing me back to the present. There's a wry grin on his face and I can't decide whether to slap it or kiss it. I content myself in rolling my eyes. 'It didn't happen, okay?'

'I think you'll find it most certainly *did* happen.'

‘It’s not going to happen again.’

‘Why not?’ He crosses his arms across his broad chest, his tattoos peering nonchalantly out from under his sleeve.

‘Because ...’ I gesture uncertainly in his general direction.

I felt clear when I rehearsed this in my head. Now I’m standing by him, smelling his aftershave, seeing his smile, trying not to laugh at his cheeky nature, I can’t quite remember why not. ‘All the reasons I said last time.’

He cocks his head to the side, waiting for me to elaborate.

My mind is bamboozled. ‘You’re ... bad,’ I finish lamely.

‘Bad?’ His eyebrows are almost through the roof. ‘You seemed to think I was alright at the time.’

‘Not you. *You* weren’t ... bad.’ I rush to try and correct myself, cheeks flaming. ‘It’s just, nothing’s changed to make me think you’re not a ... *bad boy*.’ Cringing, I know what I mean but it’s not coming out right.

‘So, *I’m* a bad boy?’ He repeats. ‘And you’re *good*?’

‘Are you going to repeat everything back to me?’

‘Just trying to make sure I understand.’ He dips his head to one side.

‘I ... just ... I need to be good. A good influence.’ I’m tripping over my words. ‘For my sister. And you’re ... I won’t be able to do that ... with you.’

Nate’s holding my gaze. There’s a curl to his mouth, a crinkle to his eyes, like I’m amusing him. But there’s an unnerving intensity too.

Before he can reply, Josie returns. Thank goodness that horrific exchange is over. I can tell she’s touched up her makeup and I wonder if her new beau is around anywhere.

‘Shall we get drinks?’ She looks at me expectantly.

‘Definitely,’ I reply.

‘I’ll send Enzo over.’ Nate keeps his eyes on me as he backs away, then turns and greets some other quizzers at a nearby

table.

Josie glances hopefully along the bar but it's chaos with last minute orders. After a short wait, the other bartender comes over to get our order.

Soon the quiz master is starting the first round. 'Nice and easy now, we'll start with general knowledge. Eyes down. Phones off. Here we go. What are the main ingredients in a banoffee pie?'

Josie whispers without hesitation and I write down her answer. The next two questions are obscure and we stare blankly at each other.

Next the quiz master asks, 'What are Queen Anne, May Duke, and Morello types of?'

And with relief I scribble the correct answer.

Nate comes over. 'Okay, over here? Do you need any help? With only two of you on the team, you're a bit low on numbers.'

'We'll be fine,' I reply as Josie says, 'Yes please.'

Another punter calls Nate over, and while I'm grateful he's distracted, I can't stop following his movements across the room.

The following question is another hard one.

'We suck at quizzes. We should really ask for help,' Josie moans.

'We'll be fine,' I insist as I take a random stab at question six. After two more tricky questions, Josie reaches for her phone. 'Maybe if we ask Goog-'

'No!' I cut her off a little too loudly.

Nate reappears rather suddenly and I shoot daggers at Josie. We probably drew his attention.

'I'm just doing a phone check,' he whispers. 'Got to make sure you haven't been cheating.'

‘We haven’t!’ I show him the home screen of my phone. I’m no cheater.

‘Let me check your browsing history.’ He somehow juggles the phone from my hand, taps the screen several times, and after a few seconds and some more taps he hands it back to me with a nod. ‘All seems in order.’

Josie hands hers over for him to check. ‘Is that offer for help still on the table?’

‘Sure. I’d be happy to join your team.’ His eyes sparkle as he smirks at me.

‘Nowhere to sit, I’m afraid.’ I glare at Josie, trying to convey I’m not sure what the hell she thinks she’s doing but I wish she’d stop.

‘No problem.’ He magics a stool from somewhere behind the bar and pulls it up close to my side, sandwiching me between him and Josie.

‘Isn’t it unfair? Or cheating? You work here after all.’ I make a last-ditch effort to get rid of him. I can’t be held responsible for my actions with him this close.

‘I’m not *technically* working tonight. Just helping out, collecting donations and things. And, I haven’t seen the quiz before.’ He shrugs.

‘We need all the help we can get,’ Josie pipes up.

‘Speak for yourself.’ My voice raises as I snap back.

The quiz master comes back over the microphone again. ‘What is the name of the portable case where archers store their arrows?’

Josie and I exchange blank looks and then I remember something from Robin Hood and start to write “sheaf”.

Nate nudges me to get my attention and shakes his head. He mouths something I can’t understand and then beckons me closer to him.

He leans in and I can feel his breath on my ear as he whispers, ‘Quiver.’

Every single tiny hair on my neck stands to attention. Heat and want and need flushes through me. The pencil nib snaps.

Brushing over the paper, I take a chance to compose myself before dutifully writing down “quiver”.

It’s only a word, not a command, but he spoke it like it was an order. And I certainly want to oblige.

Nate continues to lean in close for the rest of the round, supplying us with answers by whispering into my ear so the other teams can’t hear, and occasionally brushing against my skin, each time leaving a trail of fizzing tingles.

He and Josie swap casual banter, which is a relief, as the quiz and the harder game of *Don’t Jump Nate*, are all I can handle.

At break time, Josie volunteers to take our answer sheet to the quiz master to be adjudicated. I’m convinced it’s an excuse for her to wander around and hunt out her mystery man.

‘Now, where were we?’ Nate distracts my train of thought. He’s still leaning in close.

I sit straighter, shifting away a little. ‘Do you mean earlier this evening or ...’

He gives me a smirk. ‘Don’t tempt me.’

‘You have one thing on your mind, don’t you?’

‘I’ve got a few things on my mind.’ I can feel his gaze trailing over me. ‘So, I’m bad and you’re ... good?’ He drags the word out seductively.

‘I’m trying to be.’ I cross my arms. ‘And I won’t be able to be good with you around.’

‘I think you’ve got me all wrong.’ He raises his eyebrows, a smile twisting on his lips.

‘And why’s that?’

‘I have many redeeming attributes.’ His eyes sparkle. ‘You’re just too *judgey* to realise.’

‘Judgey?’ My eyebrows shoot up. ‘You say that like it’s a bad thing. I have to be. To keep my sister safe. I *have* to make snap judgements.’

He shrugs. ‘I get it. But, you’re only as good as the information you have at hand.’ He braces his arms against the bar, scrutinising me. ‘And I’m sorry to say, you’ve got it wrong.’ He lightens his voice, taunting.

‘Do I, now? Sounds like fighting talk.’ I take a sip from my drink, levelling my gaze on him over the rim. Raising my chest to match his defiance.

‘Perhaps it is. Let me prove it to you.’

‘Prove what exactly?’

‘That I’m a good guy. Prove you can trust me. Let me take you out on a proper date.’

‘Not going to happen,’ I mutter as Josie returns.

‘Time for round two,’ the voice of the quiz master sounds out.

Nate meets my gaze and his eyes crinkle. ‘Ding, ding,’ he whispers in my ear.

He seems to have taken the suggestion of round two as an invitation to switch up his tactics. Instead of whispering just the answers in my ear, he’s taken to reminding me about the other night. As I’m trying to write down that Sofia is the capital of Bulgaria, he’s murmuring about how the sound of his name on my lips keeps running through his head. How loud I was when he was pleasuring me on the bar.

‘I hear what you’re saying, but you’re wrong,’ I say aloud.

Josie’s eyes widen at my tone. Only Nate knows I’m disagreeing with more than quiz answers.

‘Don’t you keep thinking about it?’ His breath tickles my ear.

Yes.

‘Nope,’ I shoot back, and then try to focus on what Josie is telling me about South America.

My mind is completely blank. No, not blank. Filled with Nate. There's no room for anything else. I have no idea what the quiz master is saying. Josie is staring at me expectantly, as if I should know the answer to this one.

'Vanuatu,' Nate mutters before adding, 'We should explore this, don't you think? Can't you feel that connection?'

Yes.

'Definitely not,' I lie loudly.

'Nate,' a voice calls from behind the bar.

Josie takes a sharp intake of breath as I look around.

A guy with brown hair and a blue shirt is holding up an empty glass collector with an unimpressed expression on his face.

With Josie's vice-like grip clamping down on my thigh, I say to Nate, 'You know, we've probably got this now. If you need to go and help somewhere else ... '

Hands up in mock-surrender, Nate slips off his seat and backs away.

'Sweet mother of fuck, it's him,' Josie squeaks as soon as we're alone. I glance again at the guy. Quite tall. He'd be attractive in a brooding kind of way if he wasn't scowling quite so much.

Looking back to Josie, I keep my voice low, the quiz still going on around us. 'Are you going to go and speak to him?'

'What am I supposed to say?' Her eyes are wide. I've never seen her appear quite so affected.

'I don't know.' I pretend to wince sympathetically. 'You're the seize the day kind of person, not me.'

'Where's Nate gone?' She peers around behind us. 'Maybe he can give me some background information or something?'

'Or alert his colleague he has a stalker,' I deadpan. 'We don't need Nate. Just go and say hi. He wanted you to come and find him, didn't he?'

‘You’ve been kind of mean to Nate, you know,’ Josie says, changing tack.

‘Well, he’s really annoying,’ I bluster.

Before I can elaborate, Josie sits bolt upright and gives a little wave. ‘Shit, he’s noticed me,’ she says through her plastered-on smile.

‘Go.’

‘No, we’re still doing this.’ Josie slides the answer sheet in towards her, now very interested in the quiz. ‘I’m totally going to play this cool.’ Frowning, she listens to the next question and her eyes flick between me and the answer sheet. ‘When did we move on to sport?’

I shrug, laughing. ‘I don’t think quizzes are our forte.’

‘Nate,’ she calls out and beckons to him.

‘Josie!’ I grind through my teeth.

We’d only just got rid of him.

He comes back over, a cocky grin on his face. ‘Miss me already?’

‘Sorry, your boss isn’t going to miss you, is he?’ Josie looks between Nate and the man in the blue shirt.

‘Boss? I guess you could call him that.’ Nate chuckles. ‘No, I’m just helping out tonight.’ His gaze tracks from Josie to me, and then he smiles. ‘I’m all yours.’

I roll my eyes and then try to nudge the stool out from under him as he goes to sit down. He catches the movement and smirks, repositioning the stool closer to me still.

Reclaiming the paper and pencil from Josie, I grip it like it’s a shield that can protect me from Nate’s charms.

It’s hard, but I focus on recording answers and ignoring the prickle of electricity emanating from the gorgeous man sitting by me. His proximity is turning my brain to mush. Everything’s going to mush, including my resolve.

The paper is full of my writing at the end of the round, not that I can recall any of the questions.

‘I’ll hand that in,’ chirps Nate.

As he moves away, a feeling of lightness surrounds me. Like I can breathe again, now my senses aren’t being overloaded.

Filling my lungs, I notice Josie eyeballing Blue Shirt. ‘What’s your plan with lover boy?’

She winces. ‘Am I still playing it cool or have I gone over into being plain cold?’

Nate’s heading back to us and I feel the oxygen getting sucked out of me again. ‘I think you can play it cool a little longer. Or at least, don’t leave me on my own with Nate before you act on anything.’

I’m not sure I can cope with him without Josie as a buffer.

‘What’s wrong with the poor guy?’ she murmurs through her smile so he can’t hear. ‘I quite like him. And he totally bailed us out with his sports knowledge.’

Holding up the next answer sheet, Nate drops onto his stool. ‘It’s a music round next. How are you on song titles?’

‘We’ll probably be fine now.’ I try my luck.

‘No,’ Josie objects. ‘I’m shocking at music. And, unless it’s from the last decade, you’re screwed too.’

‘I can do the noughties as well,’ I retort, straightening my shoulders.

Josie grimaces.

‘Looks like I should stick around.’ Nate waggles his eyebrows. ‘Perhaps my wisdom and experience will come in handy?’

My traitorous core is thrilled by his suggestion and aching at his proximity.

‘Are you even that old?’ I roll my eyes.

‘Twenty-five.’

‘Well, we’re twenty-two, so it’s hardly like you’ve got years on us.’

‘Ella, I think we need all the help we can get,’ Josie pipes up.

‘Fine.’ Seizing the paper, I huddle over it, letting my hair fall down as a flimsy barricade.

Snatches of music and lyrics go by in a blur but my spinning head can’t focus and the sheet remains blank.

Leaning in, his breath tickles the shell of my ear. He rasps, ‘Are you gonna be my girl?’ sending a shiver through my body.

My breath catches in my throat.

‘By Jet,’ he adds, casually.

He’s somehow turning the answers into seductive chat up lines, leaving me exasperated and ... craving more. Gripping the pencil tighter, I focus on writing the answer and not *quivering*.

Another snippet of music is played and Josie shakes her head, baffled.

Before I can scour the recesses of my brain, Nate moves in close once again. ‘Do you want to?’ His words are hot against my cheek. Loaded. I squeeze my legs together and breathe out slowly.

He raises a satisfied eyebrow. Dipping my head, I implore with my eyes for him to stop. He’s driving me crazy.

He returns a most innocent look and whispers, ‘By Franz Ferdinand.’

Merciless. The rest of the round is interminable.

‘Now, ladies and gentleman,’ the quizmaster’s voice finally rings out. ‘There’s one more round to go but it’s neck and neck for first place, so it’s all to play for.’ The quizmaster lists the rankings for the teams and we’re fifth out of fifteen.

‘Not-too-shoddy,’ says Josie, then stands and straightens her dress. ‘I’m heading to the ladies before the next round.’

As Josie glides off, Nate suddenly grabs at his pocket, pulling out his phone.

‘I thought there was a no phone rule.’ I pretend to tut.

He frowns. ‘I’ve got to go.’

‘Oh no, really? There’s only one round left.’ It’s left my mouth before I can stop myself.

‘Your concern is heart-warming.’ He presses a hand between his well-defined pecs. ‘It’s almost as if you’re going to miss me.’

I scoff. ‘As *if*.’ I’m not quite quick enough to sound convincing.

He flashes his dimple at me, again, like he knows it’s his secret weapon. ‘Admit it, you’re pleased I was here.’

Feeling the heat of frustration rise up, I argue, ‘You barged on to our team, blindsided my friend with all your random trivia, and then, did your best to sabotage me all game.’

‘I think you mean *with my superior knowledge* and, really, you sabotaged yourself.’

‘How so?’ Affronted, I sit back.

He leans in again. ‘This perfume. Reminds me of the other night. I can’t stop myself getting closer, wanting more.’ His hot lips suck on my earlobe and then he runs his teeth over my sensitive skin, ending with a little nip. A wave of adrenaline courses through me. ‘Just one more taste.’

My hand grips down to try and keep some sort of hold on reality. I find my fingers clawing into his thick, denim clad thigh.

‘I thought you said you didn’t feel anything?’ His low chuckle reverberates through me. ‘But I’ve got to go, like right now.’ He pushes up onto his feet. Indicating to his phone he says, ‘Duty calls.’

What duties does he have at ten o’clock on a Monday night? I devour his broad shoulders and tight tee-shirt as he walks across the bar and through the door that leads to behind the

scenes. Disappointment and relief compete in equal measure. Suddenly, my phone pings and a message pops up from an unknown number.

?: So, how about that date?

My stomach gives a flip and I groan internally; I need to get my feelings in check. Nate is clearly just up to mischief but I wish I could deny I'm drawn to him.

Ella: How did you get my number?

Nate: Called myself from your phone when I was checking you hadn't been cheating.

Ella: Seems like you're the one cheating... and cheating is definitely something a bad influence would do.

As I'm chuckling to myself that I've finally managed a witty retort, rather than gaping gormlessly, Josie returns. A huge grin is stretched across her face.

'Did you speak to him?' I ask as she sits down.

'Yes.' She winces. 'But you're gonna be mad.'

'Why?'

'Or think I'm crazy.' She bites her lip.

'What have you done?' I ask playfully.

'I said I'd stay and have a *drink* with him after closing ... '

I can't stop a small laugh peeling out. 'I'm not mad and I don't think you're crazy.' The fact both of us will have desecrated this bar is a little perturbing, but I don't tell her that. 'But will you be okay? What if you want to leave suddenly?'

'I'll call a taxi.'

'Or me if you need.' Day or night, I'll always have Josie's back.

'Okay, thank you.' She dips her head as she asks, 'Who's blowing up your phone?'

I look down and Nate has buzzed a few more texts through.

Nate: Give me one date.

Nate: One chance to show you I'm not a *bad boy*.

Nate: That I can be trusted.

‘Better pop this away,’ I say, slotting my phone into my bag and leaving the request unanswered. ‘Sounds like the final round is going to start.’

‘Where’s Nate?’ She glances about the bar. ‘Don’t we need him?’

‘He had to go. And *no*, we only need ourselves.’ I smile, clapping Josie on the arm.

Saying it out loud helps reaffirm my beliefs. I don’t need anyone else. Despite the protestations from between my thighs telling me Nate would be welcome back any time, I am resolute. I don’t need Nate.

Chapter 12

Nate

At first, I'd thought my move to get Ella's number was genius, but now I'm wondering if I was too underhand. She didn't seem outright cross with me, but, equally, she hadn't found my mischievous ways charming.

Spending the ride out to the city hospital and back guessing what Ella had replied to my messages, I was more than a little disappointed to find she hadn't replied at all.

I'd been called in for a category one mission: to collect and deliver something within two hours. We never get told what it is we're carrying, we just know it's urgent — someone's life depends on it.

It occurs to me, now, that getting her number in such a devious way did kind of prove her point and I'm annoyed with myself for not playing it cooler. Nearly everything I've done around Ella has been the opposite of cool and I'm frustrated she's not seeing the best of me. When I'm under pressure, it's like my brain short circuits; making me do crazy things, or worse, freezing up entirely.

When I get home, Chunk's hanging off the pull up bar in the kitchen. If this guy isn't working, he's working out.

'Can you do me a favour?' he asks.

I rest my helmet on the counter and nod.

'Take a look at something at The Wreck for me? The illuminations. Let me know if there are any gaps or issues with the aesthetics.' He punctuates each sentence with a lift. 'Also, practicalities of access. I could climb that course with my eyes shut so it's tough to know how tricky it might be in the dark for a novice.'

More than happy to help, I say, 'When?'

'If you've got a free evening this week, it would be great.'

‘Sure.’ I lean back against the counter, folding my arms across my chest.

He grunts and drops to the floor. ‘I’ll be sure to put a bit extra in your pay, as it’s night work.’

I shake my head with a smile. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. I’m doing this as a friend. Get the next take away or something.’

‘Something. You name it.’ Chunk reaches for some boxing gloves, holding one out to me. ‘You want to work out? Spar?’

The kitchen in our apartment often doubles as a gym.

‘Okay.’ I take off my jacket and hang it on the back of a chair.

Chunk hands me the gloves and sets up the pads. I get lost in pummelling on the red and black to his cues.

‘What’s eating you?’ He says after a few minutes. ‘You’ve been quieter than normal ever since you got in.’

‘It’s nothing.’ I smack the pad a little harder.

‘Work or a woman?’

Eyes down, I keep my focus on the targets in front of me. ‘Everything’s fine.’

‘And work seems okay,’ he continues, ignoring my attempt to shut down his enquiry. ‘Seeing as you work for me and for your brother, so, option number two?’

I pummel and jab until Chunk fakes me to the left. I miss and he catches me on the head with the pad. He cocks an eyebrow. He’s never tolerated me brushing things off, likes to keep things real.

Looking at him finally, I sigh, ‘What the fuck is wrong with me?’

‘What? Nothing?’ His brow furrows.

‘Then why the hell am I so ... preoccupied ... with some girl?’

‘What girl?’ He tips his chin with interest.

‘I mean woman.’

Chunk doesn't speak. The awkward silence forces me to continue.

'I met her at the pub.' I glance out of the window, unsure how to verbalise it. 'A couple of times actually.' I hesitate. 'And she's unbelievable.'

'Hot?' A smile tweaks his lips as if he's trying to suppress it.

'Yes, but not just that.' A smile crosses my face as I think of her and I'm sure I look a little dopey. 'Clever. Feisty.'

'This is your brunette from the other week, isn't it?'

'Astute as ever, my friend. Her name's Ella.' I can hear the pitch of my voice melt when I say her name. Thankfully, Chunk doesn't call me on it.

'So what's the problem?'

'I don't do women. I mean I *do* women, but ... '

He chuckles, 'I know what you mean, man.'

'I don't moon after them for days like a fucking puppy.'

'Maybe try something new and ask her out.' He shoots me a smug raised eyebrow, like he's some sort of revolutionary thinker.

'I did,' I shoot back. Now who's smug?

I watch him light up, grin splitting his features. 'Woohoo!' He waves the pads like cheerleader's pom-poms.

It's not the response I was anticipating and I frown at his uncharacteristically overt display.

'Glad you're finally getting back into the dating pool, dude. Welcome to the other side.' There's genuine fucking joy on his face.

Maybe the six years since my ex dumped me took a toll on my buddy.

'Don't get excited,' I grind out. 'She turned me down.'

'Oh ... ' He waits for me to continue but I say nothing. 'Why?'

‘Don’t know why I’m bothered ... ’

Chunk’s levelling his unwavering, non-judgmental, inescapable gaze on me. Can’t hide anything from him.

‘She’s made a snap judgement and got me pegged all wrong.’ I muss my head with the beefy glove still in situ.

‘Oh?’

‘She thinks she has me all figured out. That I’m a *bad guy* ... or bad influence.’

Chunk steps back, as if appraising me for the first time. Head dipping from side to side, he sizes me up. ‘Dude, *I* know you’re solid. But if she’s looking at you ... your buzz cut and tattoos do kind of scream bad boy.’

‘You think my hair is the problem? I shaved it for charity for fuck’s sake!’

‘But does she know that?’ Chunk screws up his face in a friendly wince.

‘No,’ I mumble.

‘Well, show her who you really are.’

I scoff, half-heartedly punching a pad. ‘She’s probably right, anyway.’

Chunk laughs. ‘*You* of all people are not a bad guy.’ He gestures clumsy speech marks in the air with the pads to punctuate the point.

‘Hardly a catch though, am I? I flunked out of uni — ’

A flashback snaps into my mind of me standing outside the students’ union bar, my results printed on a crumpled bit of paper, smudged from where my sweaty hand scrunched it up when the Dean told me I couldn’t continue with the course. Stacey’s lips moving in slow motion as she proclaimed she deserved better than me ...

Chunk jolts me back to reality. ‘And your girlfriend dumped you, waa waa waa.’ He smacks me with the pad again. ‘You’re past that now so suck it up. That happened years ago. It doesn’t define you. You’re a fucking catch. She’d be lucky

to know you. Now, punch properly. And stop moping like a little shit.'

'This is the worst kind of pep talk,' I retort with a groan.

Chunk laughs and claps the pads together. 'It's what you deserve.' He looks at me pointedly.

I run my hand across my head and sigh, 'Fuck, man. She's skittish and I don't want to get it wrong.'

'Did she say no in a "leave me alone and never contact me again, creep," kind of way or in a, "I'm playing hard to get and you need to try harder," kind of way?'

'Maybe the latter? She didn't actually say an out-and-out no. She was flirty but said she didn't date *people like me*.' I throw out my arms, resigned. 'I don't know what it is, but there's something about her.' I puff out a long exhale. 'And I hate that she's ruled me out.'

Chunk gives a sympathetic nod.

'If she won't go on a date with me, how am I supposed to prove myself?'

'Give it a day or so, ask her again. In the meantime, pull up your big boy pants, keep doing your own shit, know that you're awesome, and throw a proper fucking punch.'

I jab quickly, trying to catch Chunk unaware but the bastard's too quick for me. He deflects easily with a snigger.

'And let's hope she doesn't find out about the way you spiralled into debauchery and corruption when you had your heart broken,' he deadpans.

Chapter 13

Ella

The vibrating sounds seem to be magnified in my funeral parlour-like office. I should have my phone on silent or turned off, but then I worry about missing a call if someone needs me. So, I settle for vibrate and curse Josie every time she sends me a ridiculous meme that causes my phone to buzz across the desk. Although I love the way she's always trying to make me laugh.

Subtly, I check the screen, hoping for a Josie message rather than some sort of bad news about my little sister.

Nate: How about that date?

I roll my eyes. He's persistent, I'll give him that. And he's probably still trying his luck as I haven't given a clear no. The truth is, I *do* want to go out with him. I haven't enjoyed flirting so much in, well, ever. And then there were his superior bar skills, and I'm not referring to his cocktails. Although, they were good too.

No.

I can't allow this train of thought. There's my sister to think about. She doesn't need a flaky guy in her life, not again. I should tell Nate 'no' properly so he can go have fun with someone else, find someone carefree to mess around with. But then, my pipe dream really would be over and I've been enjoying the fantasy as much as I've been denying it.

My phone buzzes again and I'm already mentally composing the message that he has to stop; it's a definite no.

Chloe: I'll be back late tonight, don't wait up.

Scowling, I aggressively tap out a reply.

Ella: It's a school night.

Chloe: It's for a school project.

Ella: You still have a curfew.

I swear this girl is going to finish me off.

Chloe: You are NOT my parent. Mum said it was OK. I'm only telling you coz she asked me to.

A second text arrives immediately.

Chloe: Why are you so boring?

A mix of feelings surges through me. Irritation, outrage and a pang of realisation she's right. I'm not her mum, and maybe I am boring.

Before I can change my mind, my thumbs fly as I tap out a response. This one isn't for Chloe though.

Ella: What did you have in mind?

There's a minute before Nate replies.

Nate: Nothing much, just proving you wrong.

'I think I'm losing my mind,' I announce when Josie answers the phone.

Since my boss got back from his holiday and I saved his bacon by sorting out his accounts, I feel like I can take more liberties at work. And by liberties, I mean the luxury of a lunch break. The moment I can escape, I call Josie.

'I fucking hate Boris the Bellend. What's he done this time?' I love how she's always in my corner.

'It's not him.' I swallow. 'I've agreed to go on a date ... with Nate.'

She chuckles, 'That rhymes. Awesome. What's the problem?'

'I don't know why I did it? Well, I do, but ... ' I pace on the pavement outside my office, aware I don't have long.

'Was it to have amazing, carefree sex with a hot stud?'

'Jose, no one says stud.' I roll my eyes even though she can't see them.

'You're avoiding the question.'

Why did I agree to it? Panic courses through me. ‘I don’t know.’

‘What do you want from this, Ells?’

To rebel.

‘To prove I’m fun?’ It comes out as a question as I toe a stone on the ground.

‘To who?’

I take a deep breath and puff out everything I’m thinking, all at once. ‘My sister. Myself. Who am I kidding? This is such a bad idea. I’ve never been fun. I’m sensible. I make good, safe decisions. I look after my sister, I work, help at home. I don’t have time for fun.’

Maybe that’s why I agreed to it. Nate was fun and he was absolutely not a good or safe decision.

‘Well ... go have fun. And by fun I mean sex. Lots and lots of sex.’

‘Josie!’ I scan around for potential eavesdroppers even though I know people on the street can’t hear her.

‘It’ll do you a world of good.’

Visions of the other night flash into my head, sending a pulse to my core. ‘It’s just a bit of fun,’ I repeat, not sure who I am trying to convince.

After we hang up, I take a second and try to focus on my breathing. That sensation of almost boiling over reduces back to a simmer.

I can do this. I can be fun. I deserve fun. I can make time for me.

My phone buzzes in my hand, the screen lighting up with a stream of messages.

Boris: Where are you?

Boris: You’re needed in the office.

Boris: Now.

Nate

Holy fuck balls. She agreed.

‘You were right, man,’ I call out to Chunk. My voice hoarse from just having woken up.

‘Usually,’ he deadpans. ‘What specifically?’ Chunk comes and leans on my doorway, arms crossed over his chest.

Reclined on my bed, I hold up my phone. ‘Ella said yes to a date.’

The clock says ten. By the time I usually wake up in the morning, most people have been up for hours, so Ella won’t have realised texting her was the first thing I did. That she was the first thing on my mind. Has been for days.

‘Perseverance, my friend. The secret of all triumphs.’

‘Is that one of your military quotes?’ I sit up and rub the sleep out of my eyes with my palms.

‘It’s Victor Hugo. You should read more,’ he tuts. ‘I’m heading out to The Wreck in a bit.’ He turns to leave but swivels back. ‘You still okay to check the illuminations for me this week?’

‘Yeah, doing it tomorrow.’

‘Thanks.’ He drums on the doorframe. ‘Let me know how I can repay you. You know, like taking you on full time ... ’

‘Dude. Thanks, but you know — ’ I yawn. ‘Not sure that’s the best idea you’ve ever had.’

‘Just because you failed at one thing, doesn’t mean you’ll fail at everything.’

Simultaneously failing all my Sports Science and Business modules at uni isn’t quite failing at ‘one thing’, but I appreciate his sentiment. However, it’s too early to start dissecting the time everything went spectacularly wrong for me. It’s too early to admit that, ever since, I’ve avoided putting myself out there. Why risk another chance of failure or rejection?

Although I've not been awake long, my mind starts whirring. 'Actually. There is a thing.' I take a swig of water from the glass on my bedside table. 'Could I borrow one of the summer treehouses?'

'For overnight?' He scowls. 'They're no way near ready yet. Far too cold. And if you try and light a fire in a treehouse, so help me, I will burn *you* down.'

'Just for an hour, after I do the illumination check.'

'Sure.' He's eyeballing me in that piercing way that lets me know he sees through all shit. 'Weird, but sure.'

'Can I bring someone? To the illuminations?'

'And now it all becomes clear.' He sighs like he's a disappointed parent. 'Yes. You can seduce that girl of yours in my tree top cabin. Although, watch out for splinters.'

Standing up, I grab an old tee-shirt from the back of a chair. 'It's not like that.' I pull it over my head. 'And anyway, you're the one who told me not to give up. To show her who I really am.'

Chunk flashes me a grin. 'I've got three words for you.'

'If it's "Son, use protection," I'm gonna burn *you* down.'

'No.' He chuckles. 'Sign. The. Waiver.' Walking off he throws over his shoulder, 'And you won't get splinters, I had the floors polished.'

I shake my head as I search for some shorts. May as well have a run before my shower, helps me think. I need to get my head sorted for my date with Ella. Work out a plan.

My phone screen lights up and I wonder if Ella's ears are burning.

Ella: So where are we going?

Nate: You'll find out soon enough.

When I return from my 10K, there's another message waiting for me.

Ella: Dress code?

I smirk as I reply.

Nate: You'll want to wrap up warm.

Getting myself cleaned up, I dress in jeans and a black tee, then I head over to the pub on my bike.

I don't feel my phone buzz when I'm riding, so it's only when I arrive I see Ella's response.

Ella: Are you always this insufferably mysterious?

'What's got you grinning like you're high?' Scott asks as he hauls a ladder up against the side of the building.

'Messaging a friend.'

'A friend, huh? My friends don't make me smile like that.'

'That's 'cos your friends suck.'

Scott's eyes darken a little and I feel like a shit, but then he says, 'So, no more nailing and bailing, huh? Knew you'd get bored of random hookups eventually.'

It goes without saying that I love my brother, but he's too fucking serious for his own good.

Keeping my voice light, I say, 'Move on, bro. You know I've not pulled any of that shit for a long time now.'

He holds his hands up in mock surrender. 'Didn't mean to hit a nerve.'

Even his goading, overbearing big brother shit isn't going to put a damper on my mood, so I simply smile and tap out a reply to Ella.

Nate: You'll have to wait and see ;)

Scott's watching me. When I pocket my phone he says, 'I'm pleased for you. Dad would say it shows you're maturing.'

I eye the ladder. 'You want help with that or not?'

Chapter 14

Nate

Surprised Ella conceded to let me pick her up before our date, it also makes me happy. Maybe it's old fashioned but I like the idea of driving her, plus I get to spend a little more time with her and, surely, it can only serve to demonstrate how upstanding and responsible I am.

Having used it all day to run supplies to The Wreck, I'm still driving Chunk's Ranger. I park outside her house and take a deep breath.

Here goes.

Opening the door, she looks like she did that first night, minus the bin bag, rain poncho thing. Long hair shining in the lamplight, she wears jeans, a jumper, a big coat over her arm and a blaze of fire in her eyes. My dick gives a twitch knowing what's hiding beneath all those layers. Down boy. We have to behave tonight.

'Thanks for coming to get me.' She pulls the door shut behind her.

'My pleasure.' I smile because, honestly, it is. 'Besides, I wanted to make sure you get there in one piece ... can't have Ol' Rusty conking out on you in the wilderness.' I dip my head towards her ancient Escort.

She presses her finger to her lips, looking genuinely concerned the car will hear me. Then she asks, 'Wilderness? So where are we going?'

Keeping the mystery up a moment longer, I waggle my eyebrows and she bites her lip. Ella on tenterhooks does things to me.

I open the passenger side door, but resist the urge to help her up the big step in. Hands might stray.

As I buckle myself in, I reply, 'Do you know The Wreck?'

‘I’ve heard it’s fun, but I’ve never had the chance to go.’ She twists in her seat. ‘Wait, is it even open this late?’

‘You’ll see,’ I tease and Ella flashes me an exasperated smile.

We drive onto the main road and she pats the dashboard. ‘Does this beast have a name?’

I check my mirrors before briefly flicking my gaze to her. ‘It’s a Ford Ranger.’

‘Not the make and model,’ she tuts. ‘A beauty like this, she’s got to have a name.’

‘She, huh?’ I quirk my lips.

‘Yes,’ she says emphatically. ‘This car is a hard worker. She’s definitely a girl.’

‘Well, *Rusty’s* taken ...’ I ponder for a second. ‘How about Belle?’

‘Belle?’ She sounds super unimpressed.

‘What’s wrong with Belle?’

‘Bit princess-y.’

I risk a glance across to her, and her nose is twitched up in mock revulsion.

‘Well, you referred to her as both a beast and a beauty?’ I shrug. ‘It’s on theme.’

‘It doesn’t capture her personality. Hmm ...’ she pretends to think. ‘It’ll come to me.’

We drive on until the streetlights run out and then take a tight lane heading deeper into the countryside. Slowing as we draw nearer, I turn onto a track. Wheels crunch the rough earth floor as I pull into the car park. To preserve the surprise, the dimly lit sign is the only indicator of life. She leans forward, peering through the windscreen. ‘Are you sure this place is open?’

‘It is for us.’

I go to get out of the Ranger but Ella stays belted in her seat.

I turn back towards her and she's nibbling on that bottom lip, anxious. 'You okay? Are you worried about the dark?'

Slowly shaking her head, she asks, 'Isn't The Wreck a paintballing site?'

'You scared of paintballing?' My tone is playful, relieved she's not scared of being in the middle of nowhere ... with me.

'No.' She sits up straighter. 'I'm scared of pain, though. And those suckers look like they hurt. And how will we see to aim?'

I leap out and head around to her side. 'Don't worry, no paintballing tonight.'

When Chunk first set this place up, he enlisted my help to clear the scrub for a paintballing centre, but since, he has cultivated a number of side hustles including a high ropes course, which he's had me fully trained for. But I don't tell her this yet. I can't resist keeping her guessing just a little bit longer.

Opening the door, I hold out my hand to help her down. 'This is something that definitely doesn't have any pain, or paintballs, and it won't even be dark.'

She takes my hand and as our skin touches, anticipation for the night ahead builds inside me.

I squeeze her fingers. 'Come on, I'll show you.'

Ella

It might be the nerves from not really dating. Perhaps it's the fear of the unknown. But, when Nate takes my hand, the sensation in my stomach changes from a delicate flutter of butterflies to a twisting murmur of starlings. I take a deep breath and try to relax. This is just a bit of fun. I'm here to enjoy myself.

Nate leads me to a cabin and flicks a light on inside. The wired bulb glows a dull orange, but I still blink into the sudden brightness. There's a large desk and, behind it, several racks of military type kit. The wall has a stuffed stag's head hung on it,

front and centre. The fragrance of ancient, earthy leaves fills the air.

‘This is Base Camp.’ Nate holds out his arms gesturing to the room. ‘First, we need to fit your harness.’

‘Harness? Why do we need a ... ’ my words peter out as I glance through the window to outside, and up into the gloomy forest canopy. ‘Are we — ’

Nate seems almost glowing with excitement. ‘Doing the high ropes course here, yes. With a twist.’

‘In the dark?’ My heart rate picks up.

‘Almost.’ He waggles his eyebrows. ‘Chunk, my buddy who owns this place, has set up a winter illuminations experience. You get to see the trees lit up from up high. But, it’s brand-new.’

‘Are we the first? As in guinea pigs?’ I can’t keep a note of terror out of my voice.

‘No, the ropes are well established.’ His low voice is reassuring. ‘But no one else will have seen the lights. That’s our treat.’ He grins. ‘Have you ever done high ropes before?’

I shake my head and feel a flush of anticipation. ‘So, we’re giving it a dress rehearsal?’

‘Exactly.’ He bobs his head with assent. ‘Chunk wants our honest feedback. He’s keen to have an outsider’s point of view. It’s hard to see the full picture when you work so closely with something.’

He pulls a bundle of heavy straps from a rack. Untangling them, he opens them to make two loops.

‘Step into these.’ He holds them out to me.

I push a foot through each side in turn and Nate wiggles the gear all the way up to the top of my thighs. I hope he doesn’t notice my breath catching as his fingers graze against me. Gently, he guides my arms through loops on either side, one at a time. Our eyes meet briefly and I feel a zing strike straight to my chest, below the buckles he’s starting to do up. Each slow, careful snap of the clips pierces me to my core.

Without warning, there's a whizz of nylon as he tightens the contraption.

Suddenly, my thighs are ensnared and my boobs squished together and I can't help but gasp a 'Woah.'

A smile tugs at his lips at my uncensored response. 'Can you still breathe?'

I try a deep breath, to compose myself as much as check the fit. 'Yes.'

'Good. They should be tight, but not suffocating.'

'Wait.' My eyes widen. 'Don't we need an expert to check all this is safe?'

With a waggle of his eyebrows, he pops his dimple at me. 'That would be me, so, you're in safe hands.'

'You're a high ropes instructor?' Surprised, I shift backwards a little. 'I thought you worked in the pub?'

'I'm a lot of things.' He winks. 'Best not to make snap judgements until you have all the facts.'

'Nice dig.' I chuckle. 'And anyway, bad boys need to earn a living too.'

'Ella,' he sighs. 'Ella, Ella. Would a bad boy be interested in following policy, or wearing a hard hat?'

The next thing I know, he reaches behind the desk and tosses a bright orange helmet at me. He's already pulling his own harness on.

Adding all these extra layers seems counterproductive for a quick hookup, but I'm going with it. Maybe he has a proclivity for health and safety. Subtly, I check him out in all the kit, cinching taut across his body. With him looking like that, maybe I could get on board with this health and safety stuff, too.

'Better sign this form, or Chunk will skin me alive.'

'Am I signing my life away?' I study the small print.

'Pretty much, but I promise you're safe with me.'

Reassured this is an established course and I'm not about to scale Everest, excitement is starting to build. I sign the form and then put on the hard hat.

Moving in close, he places both of his hands on my helmet as he secures my head torch. His eyes drop to mine, holding my gaze for just a beat before he pulls away and attaches his own torch.

‘Just one more thing.’ He reaches behind the desk again, fiddling with something. The sound of a switch clicks, and then he shoots me a grin. ‘Let’s go.’

Nate turns out the cabin light as he pushes the door open. It swings wide, revealing a different world. It’s like I’ve emerged into a fairy-tale. The trees near the entrance have been woven with golden fairy lights and a shimmering path leads into the darkened forest — an avenue of glowing trees illuminating the way.

The ground is soft underfoot with the litter of dropped pine needles as we follow the glowing route. Dotted further in the distance are some figures — a group of deer — shining white and gold. Up ahead, clouds of colour seem to be floating in the canopy.

A gate, strung with more fairy lights, leads to wooden steps with yet more lights woven all around. We pause here and Nate says, ‘You ready for this?’

My heart gives a thump and I say, ‘Ready as I’ll ever be.’

With a grin, he reaches out and unhooks the latch.

Inside the enclosure, Nate stops, turning to face me. He grabs something from my harness, holding up a heavy, clunky piece of kit the size of my hand.

‘Okay, this is your trolley.’ Nate slips seamlessly into instructor mode and I can’t help but smile at his professional voice and confidence.

This is absolutely not how I envisioned tonight going. I thought he’d be trying to sweet talk, or should I say dirty talk, his way into my pants, but instead I’m getting a safety lecture.

‘It’s a continuous self-belay system.’ He carries on explaining the ins and outs, dropping terms like dual pulleys and asymmetric lanyards until he finishes with, ‘Just always make sure you clip on.’

‘Okay, I think I’ve got it.’ I give a confident nod.

‘Awesome. So, ladies first.’ He ushers me in front of him. ‘Let me hook you up.’

He slots my trolley into the cable system and I follow his instructions for looping and clipping the equipment, relieved he’s so authoritative about it all.

‘Perfect.’ He offers me a reassuring smile. ‘I’ll be right behind you.’

He jams his trolley through the junction too and follows me closely as we start climbing a staircase that disappears above us.

A gasp escapes me as we leave the covered steps, emerging onto a narrow, raised platform. We’re high in the treetops, and although it’s still dark, a magical glow is suspended in the ether. Sparkling around us is a nebula of pretty fairy lights woven through the canopies of the trees — higher and lower than my vantage point — some near and some far.

I can feel Nate’s warmth behind me and enveloped in this stunning vision, a tingle runs through my body.

‘It’s ... ’ I’m at a loss for words.

‘I had no idea it was going to be this ... ’

‘Beautiful,’ I finish for both of us.

‘Mmm.’ Nate’s groan reverberates through me and, suddenly, I wish I was the cause of his humming.

Turning around, I realise Nate’s extremely close. The platform is so narrow, I can’t help but be pushed up against him. Carefully, he draws his arm around me and reaches up. For a moment, I’m convinced he’s going to kiss me and my eyes fall to his lips. My pulse quickens at the anticipation of feeling his mouth on mine again. The mouth that’s currently quirking into a smile, suddenly shining brilliantly at me. Then

I register the click from where he's just flicked my head torch on.

'There you go. That'll help you see where to step but won't ruin the illuminations. I'm going to turn mine on next, so you might want to face the other way to save your eyes.'

As I turn back to face the front, a flush of embarrassment runs through me. I'd given Nate shit about him being a bad influence with only one thing on his mind, and here I am, minutes into our first date, thinking about sucking his face off.

Determined to regain my dignity, I mentally brush myself off and say, 'Let's do this.'

I unclip my carabiner and clip on again past the junction. Nate follows, his presence reassuring. The cable the trolley is linked on to leads us around to a rope bridge, and a series of planks suspended through the air disappears in front of me. The beam from my helmet falls over the first plank and disappears into darkness below.

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself this is a business built on people having fun, safe experiences, so really, there's nothing to worry about.

But my blood pressure is off the charts, along with my anxiety.

The rope feels rough in my hands and I brace myself as I step out onto the first plank. It sways, but it's nothing I can't handle. With my head torch shining on my trainers, I inch forwards.

'That's it.' Nate encourages from behind.

Once I've cleared the first plank and I'm onto the second, he calls out, 'You've got it.'

I turn back to shoot him a grin and watch him nimbly bound onto the first plank.

Buoyed by realising I haven't fallen, I quicken my pace and work my way across the bridge, clipping and unclipping my carabiner as I get onto the platform.

‘Nice work.’ Nate’s voice is close to my ear as he joins me and I wonder if he can see me glow.

There’s no balustrade, so taking a firm grip of the tree trunk our platform is fixed to, I peer over the edge to the forest floor. Below us, a scene of two large deer and a fawn grazing is laid out with white and gold lights.

‘That’s adorable,’ I murmur.

‘*Adorable.*’ Nate pretends to take note of my feedback. ‘Now, are you referring to the scenery or your instructor?’

‘Very cute,’ I reply dryly.

‘Again, the animals or ... ’

I go to swat at his arm but misjudge my aim and wobble with a squawk.

Steady hands grab onto me. ‘You’re okay. I won’t let anything happen to you.’

He’s pulled me in close, words hot on my cheek.

He keeps a tight hold for a beat longer than necessary before letting me go. ‘You alright?’

‘I’m okay.’ It’s not a lie but the swirl of feelings I’m having couldn’t really be described as okay.

Finally doing something for *me* is exciting. The high ropes are electrifying. Terrifying. And spending time with this sinfully hot guy is provoking in the best way.

Deep breath, Ella.

‘Right, what’s next?’ My voice doesn’t betray my lack of composure.

We whizz our trolleys around to the next junction. Ahead of us are suspended tree trunk slices, like stepping stones, weaving out into the night.

‘Just like you did on the last one,’ he encourages. ‘Go steady. I’m right behind you.’

With the scent of pine needles in the air, Nate and I work our way round more of the course. It’s thrilling, being so high

in the trees, seeing things from a totally different perspective.

My torch beam flashes around, illuminating clusters of fir cones, hollows in tree trunks, and Nate's easy smile when I turn back to check he's still with me. It's fun in a challenging, exhilarating sort of way. All the while, he's patient as I fumble with the clips and wobble my way precariously from obstacle to obstacle.

'I think this one of Santa loading his sleigh is my favourite so far,' I say, taking in another diorama from our viewpoint.

'I hadn't realised Chunk had done so many different scenes,' Nate replies with an impressed tone.

'Did he do all this by himself? He's done a brilliant job.'

'He's a bit of a genius when it comes to this place.'

We move further round the course and my confidence creeps up as my balance improves.

'Now, *that's* my favourite.' Nate points out a huge Christmas tree, complete with presents underneath and a shining star on top. His arm brushes against me as he reaches past, his proximity making my skin dance.

'Gorgeous,' I gasp, taking in the scene and the trees surrounding us, bejewelled branches in rich reds and golds.

'Sure is.' Nate trails his hand against my shoulder as he pulls back. This guy.

'Yes, definitely the best,' I say, trying to focus on something other than the feel of him touching me.

We make our way over to another platform, the belay cable leading us round the wide trunk. In the distance, a mass of lights is suspended in the air and, as we get closer, I can see there are hundreds of stars on strings.

'It keeps getting better and better.'

'That's the finale.' Nate gestures over to it. 'One last challenge before we get there, though. The *Terror Tunnel*, as I like to call it.'

'The what?' I peek over my shoulder at Nate.

‘Easy with your interrogation light,’ he chuckles, lifting a hand to shield his eyes.

‘Oops. Why is it a ... ? Oh.’ Moving my head torch away from Nate, I focus it on a rickety-looking crawl tunnel, slats of wood wired together in an unstable tube. The rough wood and wire cobbled together in a perilous fashion that makes my stomach twist.

Moving to the entrance, I squat down to peer inside. Like a wormhole through the canopy, it extends into the night where my torchlight dissipates, not quite reaching the end. Placing my hands on the rim, I push my head inside. ‘How the fuck ...’ My words fail as the tube banks away and I retreat with a gulp.

‘You’ve got this.’ Nate’s gravelly voice encourages me. ‘Keep low. Once you’re in, it’ll feel tight but you’ve got more room than you think.’

‘What if I get stuck?’

‘You won’t. Just work your opposite arm and leg, contralateral. Imagine you’re a lizard.’ I swear I can hear a smirk in his tone.

‘Lizard,’ I mutter, bracing myself at the entrance. ‘Couldn’t be something cute, like a squirrel?’

On my forearms and knees, I work my way along the tunnel as Nate’s chuckle echoes behind me and he calls out, ‘Geckos are cute.’

Trying not to think about how I’m only held up by ropes and skinny strips of wood, I keep moving. Glints of lights flicker through the gaps as the tunnel sways.

‘You’re going great, gecko.’

‘That’s not becoming a thing,’ I call over my shoulder.

With my arms burning, I finally emerge from the tunnel and give a whoop as I clip my carabiner on to the next section.

Safely on the last platform, I take in the gorgeous surroundings. Lights are festooned above me, fanning out and

around like a circus tent. Trails of stars dangle from the branches above.

‘Knew you could do it, Gecks.’ Nate emerges into the golden light and I can’t even be frustrated with him and his nicknames. I’m just so happy we made it.

Bouncing on my tiptoes, I envelop him in a hug the moment he steps onto the platform, almost overbalancing us, but he’s ready and leans me back against the tree. My breath catches as unexpected tingles shoot straight to my core. Josie’s command to have lots and lots of sex echoes through my mind.

Chin resting on my helmet, he returns the squeeze, but then stills and shifts away.

I swallow hard, missing his warmth, his proximity. Despite my prior reluctance to go out with Nate, my attraction to him has been building all evening. I need to remember why I’m here: for a bit of fun. Nate is not a good, safe choice. He’s probably just doing all this to seduce me.

But then, isn’t that the point?

With a cough, I inch further away from him and then cast my gaze around. ‘So, how do we get down?’

He grins at me, eyes glinting with mischief. ‘That’d be the hundred metre zipline.’ His lips curl with relish.

‘Are you kidding me?’ I gasp, my chest tightening as the hoot of an owl fills the air.

‘Take a look over there.’ He points out into the darkness, an oasis of light glimmers in the distance.

The line stretches out in front of us then gradually disappears into blackness. There’s nothing, nothing and more nothing and then the line is back, dimly lit, ending at a bank of bark chippings.

‘Is this Chunk’s idea of a romantic winter lights experience? Plunging through the pitch black?’

‘He never mentioned *romantic* to me.’ Nate shrugs with a smirk. ‘So, we could climb down but the ladder is super

narrow and honestly it's about fifty rungs, and there's no soft landing.'

'Soft landing?' I squint out into the abyss. 'Is that what you're calling that pile of splinters?' I ask, already clipping my carabiner on again. I've got no intention of descending the lame way, even if the alternative is truly terrifying.

A low chuckle rumbles from Nate's chest as he checks my lines and clips over, and then tugs on the zip line.

'What kind of name is Chunk anyway?' I try to distract myself.

'It's a long story. I'll tell you some time.'

'If I survive,' I retort, throwing him a cocked eyebrow.

Inching forwards so my toes are on the edge of the platform, the beam of my head torch highlights my trainers and then shines bluey-grey on the forest floor below. I try to swallow, but it feels like there's a pine cone stuck in my throat.

'I don't think I can do this,' I whisper. I don't have a fear of heights, but apparently I have a fear of plummeting to my death.

'I know you can, Ella. Take a breath.'

'I *really* don't think I can.' Facing out, I shake my head to emphasise my point. Nope. This is not going to happen.

'Just walk off the edge.' Nate touches his fingers lightly to my back. 'The zipline will do all the work.'

'Um, what if it snaps, or worse, doesn't snap but propels me at 120 miles per hour into a tree trunk?'

'This zipline is good, but you won't quite reach terminal velocity. And it's safe.' He rubs his hands on my shoulders, his thumbs massaging down my arms.

It'd feel divine if I weren't almost catatonic with fear.

'If you're facing forward when you land, pick your feet up as if you're walking, and if you're sideways or backwards then drag them, the wood chippings will cushion you.' He gives me an extra squeeze as he says, 'Promise.'

‘I think I might want to try my chances with the ladder.’

‘You don’t want to go down that old thing. You’ll be so disappointed if you do.’

I look over to the side, the Ladder of Disappointment mocking me.

‘Even if I wanted to go over the edge, my feet are fused here. Self-preservation or something.’

‘Step back here,’ his low voice is soothing, enticing, like whiskey and honey.

His hands remain firm on my shoulders, reassuring me I can take a step backwards, away from the brink.

I oblige and already feel the stranglehold on my chest loosen. I feel the pressure of his hands manoeuvre me and somehow, I’ve turned around, facing him. I angle the torch so I don’t dazzle him.

‘I know what you’re trying to do here.’ I flash him a wry smile. ‘But if I plummet to my death, it’ll really undermine your efforts.’

He steps forward, raising an eyebrow. ‘And what am I trying to do?’

‘Pretend you’re not a bad guy. Save me from something scary so you can get laid.’

His hands slide from my shoulders, down my arms, to my hips, then around and over my backside until he grasps each thigh.

‘Nope,’ he growls, actions clashing with words.

Without warning he lifts me up, so I’m sitting in mid-air, all my weight supported by the line and his arms. I let out a traitorous squeal of surprise.

‘The harness has got you.’ He glides me closer, dipping his head to mine. ‘You’re safe.’

I can only whimper.

‘Breathe,’ he whispers.

I suck in the cold night air. He exaggerates his inhales and exhales and I follow until I'm back in control of my breath.

Now calm, I notice how close we are. I can see each individual curl of his eyelashes. The way his stubble glitters in the light. I want to close the gap, wrap my suspended legs around his waist and kiss him.

He seems to sense this and pulls me nearer, gaze locked on mine.

'You want to do this?'

I nod, not sure if I'm agreeing to the zip line or a kiss.

'Do you trust me?' His silvery-blue eyes are wide.

I dip my head slightly, unable to look away.

'I'll be right behind you.' As the words leave his lips, he spins me around and steers me toward the edge of the platform.

'No, wait.' I reach back, clinging on to him, desperate to not be launched over the edge.

He pulls me in towards him. 'It's okay. We can do the ladder.' His voice is kind, patient.

I take my weight down onto my feet. 'It's not that. Let me do it myself.'

His eyes sparkle in the fairy lights. I shoot him an anxious grin, suck in the deepest breath I can muster, swivel, and launch myself over the edge.

I'm free.

The wind whips at my face. Distant trees flash by as I hurtle along. A whoop of exhilaration leaps from my chest. The glow from the landing area veers closer and I realise once you're on the zipline, head torch shining, there isn't a dark, scary patch, you take your own light with you all the way. It's a hell of a ride. It just seems scary from the outside.

Suddenly, the landing area is rushing towards me and before I know it, I'm scuffing and dragging my legs through bark chippings.

Sitting myself up, I scoop some bark in my hand and toss it into the air like confetti. ‘Woohoo!’

The shout of, ‘Yes, Ella,’ echoes through the forest and I realise Nate is hurtling along the line. Before I can move, he’s already touched down, and is running towards me.

‘You did it!’ He pulls me into a hug and I grip onto him, pulling him back down onto the ground, on top of me.

His broad shoulders feel ripped through his jacket and I can’t help but like the feeling of his arms pinned on either side of me. He laughs, and his breath falls on my cheek. His face is mere millimetres from mine and I long to feel those lips again, but after accusing him of having only one thing on his mind, I feel stupid, and shy.

He catches his breath and then pushes himself up again. Lowering a hand to pull me firmly to my feet.

‘You faced your fears up there. This calls for a celebration.’

‘Does it still count if I had to be literally pushed into it?’ I stumble as I get to my feet, finding myself pulled closer to him still.

‘Don’t be so hard on yourself.’ With a hand to my back, he steadies me. ‘You took the final step yourself.’ His eyes lock on mine and I can’t look away. I don’t want to. ‘You had the opportunity to stop and take the ladder. More than once.’ He tips my chin up gently and it feels like he’s examining my soul. ‘*You* made the brave choice.’ I swallow and he pauses before saying, ‘And don’t worry, everyone needs a bit of a push to take a giant leap every now and then. Even Neil Armstrong.’

‘Really?’

‘Nah.’ He flashes me a grin. ‘I bet he was chomping at the bit to get out on the moon.’

I wallop his arm and he chuckles. Deep and low.

‘Let’s get unhooked. I’ve got another surprise for you.’

Chapter 15

Nate

Once I've pulled Ella up from the landing zone, I can't quite let her go. Her hand in mine, her body against me, it feels so fucking right. This is harder than I thought it would be. It had seemed like a great idea. Take Ella on a date, show her how mature and restrained I am. Show her she can trust me. Trust me to keep her safe. Trust me not to rail her into next week and then leave her high and dry.

Chunk's request for me to trial run his latest endeavour was a gift.

Or, I thought it was.

A unique experience with privacy and a chance for me to show her I can be better than the man she's judged me to be. The man I had been. But in the darkness, this trust that I've been so eager to prove, it's too intimate, almost impossible not to break.

Her determination is fucking hot. There's a shine to her eyes. I could tell she was terrified but she did it anyway. I feel honoured to witness her resilience.

Honestly, I miscalculated her fear factor. It hadn't crossed my mind she'd never done high ropes before. I know Chunk's set up is safe so I'd not considered how anxiety-inducing the course could be. I thought I'd be guiding her through the adventure in the darkness, heightening the senses, offering a little bit of adrenaline to give her a rush.

But this has turned out to be so much more.

She's more. I feel foolish for underestimating her.

I don't have the right to be proud of her. I barely know her. But I want to know more. And I want to see her overcome all of her obstacles. Be the one to see that look on her face when she succeeds.

This bloody harness is cramping my junk big time, but perhaps I should be grateful for that. Don't want to scare her off.

Shit, I want to kiss her so badly. But that would prove her right. Show I'm just some animal who can't control himself. This can't be about what I want, what my dick wants. This needs to be about showing her I'm worthy of her.

I'm trying to be, anyway.

Before launching off the platform, I'd checked my watch, we've got about half an hour before my next surprise for Ella. I'm not sure how long the walk will take by torchlight, so I need to get us moving.

Ella's hand, still locked in mine, feels hot from where she's gripped the rope. I guide her to the exit, and drag our trolleys off the end of the course.

I pick out a trail into the darkened forest, retracing my steps from earlier today when I set everything up. Ella keeps her fingers threaded into mine as we venture up the dim footpath, which is gradually climbing uphill.

As we walk, we chat easily about Chunk's illuminations.

Reaching a fork, I lead us to the right and then, before long, there's a glimmer ahead.

Ella's words tail off, mid-sentence, as the scene comes into view.

Using the leftover decorations from the illuminations, I'd wrapped a tree with golden lights. There'd been enough left for the trunk and the ladder that runs up it, which are now radiating a soft, gentle glow.

'Wow, what is this place?' She picks up speed, dragging me forwards to get a better look.

'You can go up and take a look.'

'Do I need to clip on?' She holds up her trolley, ridiculously cute in the clunky, practical kit.

‘We don’t need that now. Let me help you.’ I reach towards her.

The bindings loosen as I work the clips. My fingers sliding under each strap, I ease it off her shoulders. I swear she smothers a gasp as I skim my hand along her warm thigh, grazing her backside, loosening off her leg fastenings. This is torture.

She leans on me to step out of her harness and once she’s steady, I lay a hand on the side of her helmet and unclip it, lifting it clear from her head. Her hair fans down on her shoulders, and she shakes it out, sending her fresh flowery scent over me.

Unhooking her head torch, I pass it to her, before leaving her discarded kit on a section of felled trunk at the foot of the tree.

Ella shines the light up the ladder, looking curiously at the structure hidden in the canopy of the tree, as I wriggle out of my gear and drop it next to hers. ‘I’m so intrigued. Shall we?’

‘After you.’ I bite down on my lip. I’m being a gentleman but I know I’m going to get a face full of her ass as she shimmy her way up the ladder.

The straining in my jeans does not make for an easy climb.

Ella’s gasp as she reaches the top is exactly what I’d been hoping for.

However, it doesn’t help my current plight of trying not to fuck her senseless. Her happy, surprised sounds are far too similar to the sounds she made as she was coming in my mouth the other night.

I go back to thinking of aged sports pundits as I climb the last few steps of the ladder and rise up behind her.

‘Stunning view.’ She’s gazing out of the window, across a map of towns and villages sprawled beyond the treetops. ‘Where are we?’

‘This is the Birdsong Boutique,’ I say as I walk over to her. ‘The Lookout Lodge and Sunrise Sanctuary were far too tricky

to reach in the pitch black.’

She giggles. ‘What?’

‘They’re going to be our luxury treehouse stays.’

Ella’s eyes widen. ‘The term “treehouse” makes this place sound a little more rustic than it is.’ She surveys the all-glass wall, which gives a vista across the county. You can forget we’re up in the hills when you’re surrounded by the tall trees of the woods. It’s only when you break canopy you get a sense how truly high up we are.

I tilt my head. ‘I say *ours* ...’ I continue, ‘they’re Chunk’s, really. I just help him out. He plans to set them up as summertime lodgings.’ I gesture my hand across the room, past the empty curtain rail and bare walls. ‘They’re nowhere near ready yet, but I thought we could picnic in this one after doing the ropes.’

‘I love it already.’

‘The plan is to install a bed, some small furniture, maybe some bunting and drapes.’ Ella nods along, as if imagining the finished interior.

Right now it’s the wrong season, so the space has been left empty, not wanting the stuff to deteriorate in the cold, damp winter. But, just for tonight, I’d had a rummage through Chunk’s storage, ransacked our flat and popped to a local shop for supplies to try and cosy the place up.

‘So, did you bring all this up here?’ Her eyes sweep across the sheepskin rug, blankets, basket, flask and about a gazillion electric tea lights.

‘Yeah.’ I shrug, dipping my head down, embarrassed suddenly that it’s too much. I take a stride over to the basket, crouch down and flick the lid open. ‘Fancy a hot chocolate?’

‘Yes please.’ She drops to her knees on the rug, running her fingers through the shaggy pile. ‘I can’t believe you did all this.’

I pull a couple of enamel cups out of the basket while Ella swivels the lid of the thermos open. She pours us each a mug

and then takes one, wrapping her hands around it and giving a shiver.

‘You cold?’ I grab one of the throws and loop it over Ella’s shoulders. ‘There’s plenty of blankets.’

‘Thanks.’ She takes another blanket from the stack and then scooches back to lean against the wall, patting to the side of her, inviting me over. I perch next to her and she fans the blanket over both of us.

We lean against the timber slats, legs propped out in front of us, watching the lights of the town moving and flickering in the distance.

‘Mmm, that’s hitting the spot.’ She takes a deep swig of her drink. ‘I hadn’t realised how hungry I was.’

‘Oh wait.’ I haul the basket over and rummage through it, tossing a can of whipped cream out of the way. Next come two bottles of water and then some serviettes, until I get to the foil-wrapped tray at the bottom. ‘There’re brownies too.’

‘You made brownies?’ She sits up straighter, intrigued.

‘Trail mix ones.’ I waggle my eyebrows. ‘Tried to keep it on theme.’

She reaches in to prise out a piece from the tin. ‘But, you actually baked these?’

‘Yeah,’ I shrug again and then shove a piece in my mouth so I don’t need to answer any more tough questions like, why the hell I’m doing something like baking for some silly want-to-prove-you-wrong date.

The truth is, the moment she agreed to go on a date, the moment I got a chance to show her she’d misjudged me, my imagination ran wild. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking up ways to make this date better and better.

‘Mmm,’ she groans. ‘These are delicious.’ She licks her fingers with relish and I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop thinking about that mouth doing anything else.

I cough and then try to bring the subject back around to her. ‘You did really well tonight. Facing your fears.’

‘If I’d known a stunning, luxury treehouse with hot chocolate and brownies was awaiting me, I wouldn’t have thought twice about launching myself down the zipwire.’ Suddenly, she gasps. ‘Oh, look!’

In the distance there’s an explosion of white and gold stars.

‘Looks like someone has some fireworks left over from Guy Fawkes night.’ She sits forward and points when there’s another flare of greens and pinks, her face shining with a kind of sweet innocence.

Fuck, she’s beautiful. Doesn’t matter what she’s doing. Fixing a car, writhing on a bar, captivated by fireworks. I’m hooked.

‘Looks like we’re in for a treat.’ My voice comes out tight and raspy, and I take another sip, trying to play it cool and not to give away the surprise.

Knowing Ella had missed bonfire night last week, I’d asked Chunk to give us our own little display. His parting words to me earlier were to make sure we were in the treehouse by eight, and now, we were officially even on favours. I don’t know where he managed to find so many fireworks after Bonfire night, so I think, actually, I’m back to owing him again.

As she leans back to watch, I move my arm out and she snuggles into the gap, tucked right against my side.

I relish the feel of her steady breaths, the warmth of her imprint on me. I don’t know how long this will last, so all my attention has gone to cataloguing these feelings.

You could light a firework in this cabin and I’d be too absorbed in her to notice.

‘They’re my favourite,’ she says and I rip my eyes from her face to see the dying light of some zigzagging white trails.

There’re a few more explosions and then the sky falls dark once more.

‘Wow, that was amazing.’

I file her compliments away, ready to relay them back to Chunk, along with reports on his high ropes illuminations and the treehouse.

‘I’m glad I came out with you tonight.’ Ella’s eyes flick to mine. ‘It’s been fun. *Scary*, but fun.’ A shy smile creeps across her face. ‘And definitely not what I was expecting.’ She takes a deep swig of her hot chocolate, then rolls her lips together as if to savour every last iota of flavour.

My gaze falls on a smudge of brown on her lip. I watch as her pink tongue flicks out over the chocolate, not quite capturing it.

Fuck.

Fixated on her mouth, it’s taking all my strength to restrain myself from leaning in to her. I don’t know how much longer I can control myself.

Ella

Well, this was a pretty bloody perfect date. I’m so wired from it all, the accomplishment, the thought he’s put into it, the unexpected fireworks, the chocolate. He baked, for goodness sake! I’m genuinely concerned my pants might melt off from need alone.

Shit.

The crap I gave him about *him* being the bad influence, yet here I am, fantasising about sex in a treehouse. Such a freaking hypocrite.

I’ve got to remember my priorities, remember my sister, remember that Nate is ... what is he? The only thing I know for sure is that he’s fucking *delectable*.

I finish my hot chocolate. Damn, that was almost as satisfying as his work in the bar when he ... nope, do not think about that. My eyes flick to his lips. Too late, I’m already thinking about it.

I drag my gaze up to find his baby-blues seemingly locked on my mouth. I can’t stop my tongue from darting out, wetting

my lips like it's flirting with him without my consent.

'You've got some — ' the pad of his thumb swipes over my bottom lip, sending a tingle right down to my centre. My thighs clench remembering the other night and I'm undone.

I move into his touch and he slows, his hand now cupping my face. His gaze finds mine, his pupils dark, intense. My heart is thudding so powerfully I'm worried it might break free and start knocking on the wooden planks I'm leaning against.

Slowly, oh so slowly, I lean towards him, mentally imploring him to close the gap. To kiss me. His eyes flick to my mouth and then back to mine again, as he dips his head almost imperceptibly. I can't stop myself moving closer still, all the arguments against him I had nicely lined up in my head, quickly evaporating.

All I can think of is the feel of his lips on mine again.

His fingers glide from my face into my hair, scratching my scalp as he weaves into it. The pressure from his hand takes a firmer grip now, encouraging me forwards. Guiding me to him.

I stop millimetres from him, feeling his heat radiate, breath tickling my skin. I press against his mouth, and he opens to me, kissing me tenderly, almost reverent.

Hand in my hair, he tugs on me, firmly adjusting my head to meet his need as his tongue explores and his kiss deepens.

I lace my hands around his neck, needing to feel him closer. Gathering his jacket into my two clenched fists I kneel up. I'm a heartbeat away from twisting and straddling him but his large hands have moved, each enclosing over one of mine. Gently he slows the kiss and breaks his mouth away from mine, my hands still pinned under his. He eases my grip, sliding my hands to his chest.

He takes in a deep shuddering breath, his ribs expanding under my touch.

'We need to stop now.'

The air has stilled. The forest quiet.

‘What?’ I barely whisper, my voice sounding as desperate as I feel.

Breathing laboured, it’s as if he’s fighting to get his words out. ‘This could very easily turn into me stripping you naked,’ he rakes in another breath, ‘laying you down on this sheepskin rug, covering you in that whipped cream,’ he nods over to the picnic basket, ‘and then eating ... well ... everything.’

I swallow as his eyes dance. I’m guessing he knows the cream is cliché but he’d still do it.

‘And, then when you were good and satisfied, I would take my raging hard-on and plunge it inside you until you were ... even more satisfied.’ He places my right hand over his hard length, the strong ridge palpable through his jeans. My palm heats with the feel of him, flames coil up my arm and through my body, spreading to the place that wants it the most.

His jaw tightens at my touch, eyes rolling back as his head falls against the wooden slats. It takes a moment but I see him gather himself, taking a deep inhale and forcing his eyes back open.

Voice low, he bites out, ‘I’m being deliberately crass. I need you to know how serious I am.’

I swallow. ‘I can’t see the problem with anything you’ve just said.’ My words come out breathy.

‘I can. One, I can’t promise to go slow.’ The rumble of his voice drills right to my core. ‘In fact, I think I’d lose control and I don’t want to hurt you.’ His pupils are so wide, I believe him. ‘Two, it’s too fucking cold to get you naked up here. Wouldn’t want you to lose any appendages to frostbite.’

I chuckle as he lifts my fingers to his lips and kisses them.

‘You’d be keeping me warm.’ I try to keep on the hopeful side of desperation.

Nate offers a small smile. ‘And three, this date was about me showing you that you could trust me and that I wasn’t a bad influence with just one thing on my mind. And if we carry on like this, I promise you,’ he loops a lock of wild hair behind my ear, ‘I’ll be every bit the bad guy you think I am.’ His eyes

blaze into me with his raw truth. ‘Thoughts of fucking you will be the *only* thing on my mind. Full stop.’

I can feel my slick desire pooling between my legs. His intensity is overwhelming. The need in his eyes, the gravel in his voice, the thickness in his cock. Fuck, I *want* him to lose control. *I’m* about to lose control.

‘I don’t think you should listen to what I said before.’ I try to backtrack. ‘I was obviously out of my mind or on drugs or something.’ I twine my fingers behind his neck, trying to draw him back to me. ‘You should discount all that.’ It comes out as a whisper.

‘And risk you waking up tomorrow with a head full of regrets?’ His hands clamp over mine again, stopping me in my tracks. ‘No way. I want another date.’ Holding me still, I feel his breath on my cheek as his forehead rests on mine. ‘One where you show me you trust me.’ He runs his nose along my jaw, and then murmurs in my ear, ‘That this is what you want. That *I’m* what you want.’ In one move, he’s untangled my hands from his collar and pushed himself away somehow.

What? Now is not the time to start being chivalrous. *Fuck no.*

‘This *is* what I want.’ I sit up straighter.

‘One more date.’ He rolls to his knees and pushes up to stand. I miss his closeness, his warmth, immediately.

Pride makes me try to cover my disappointment. I give what I hope is a cute kind of pout and then catch a hold of his hand as he reaches to pull me up.

Now I’m away from his heat, his scent, and no longer wrapped up in the cosy rugs with him, the cold starts to creep in, along with the humiliation. My cheeks flush with the hot rush of shame and I busy myself folding the blankets.

‘I’ll sort that, leave it.’ His voice is soft.

I want my hands to be doing something. It’s dawning on me that I offered myself on a plate and he rejected me. How did I manage to mess up a hookup?

Tears prick my eyes but I refuse to let them fall. Tidying the blankets is a welcome distraction.

‘Hey.’ He catches hold of the throw I’ve been folding, stilling it in my hands. ‘Before you freak out I’ve just turned you down, please know I’m going to be kicking myself about this for weeks. Months.’

‘I’m fine. You don’t need to — ’

‘It’s not *fine*.’ He steps in closer, brows folded together. ‘But it’s what needs to happen. So I know you really want this.’ Nate squeezes my hand, as it bunches up the fabric. ‘But please know, this is one of the hardest things I’ve ever done.’

‘Really? *Not* fucking me is one of the hardest things you’ve done?’

‘I showed you how hard.’ He smirks and I can’t stop a laugh escaping despite my disappointment.

We fold the blanket together in a strange moment of domesticity. As he bundles it up with the rest of the throws, I cross my arms self-consciously.

He comes over to me, opening his arms in the offer of a hug. He smiles, making his dimple appear in a way which suggests he knows he looks adorably irresistible.

Reluctantly, I open my arms to him, and he pulls me tightly to his strong chest.

He nuzzles into my hair. ‘You are beautiful.’ He drops a kiss onto my head. ‘Irresistible — ’

‘You managed to resist,’ I counter.

‘Unbelievably stubborn,’ he continues, punctuating with more kisses. ‘And now, I’ve got to do a thirty foot ladder with a massive boner.’ He thrusts against my thigh, grinding on me until I giggle. ‘So, the only one here that should be feeling awkward is me.’

I look up at him. ‘How did you know I was feeling awkward?’

‘That bottom lip of yours ... I should be the only one biting on that.’

‘You had the chance ... ’

‘One more date.’ It’s not a question. It’s a demand.

Chapter 16

Nate

No exaggeration, saying no to Ella is one of the hardest things I've ever done. Well, along with *not* throwing her over my shoulder and dragging her back to the treehouse as we walked through the forest. Not to mention *only* giving her a quick kiss goodbye when I dropped her off, rather than taking her right there in the Ranger.

Ella hadn't said anything else about what happened in the treehouse. She certainly hadn't *tried* anything else. But remembering the look in her eyes nearly kills me. Yes, there was heat. The hunger I'd seen after the fireworks stayed but it was joined with a touch of hurt. Rejection.

My mind reeling, going over every second to check I did the right thing — doubting I did the right thing — I get back to the flat in a daze.

'How was it?' Chunk asks, pausing a game and looking up at me from where he's sprawled on the sofa.

'Er ... great, man.' I stall for time, sliding my jacket off. 'The site's looking quality. No problems with the ropes ...' I trail off as he's fixing me with a bemused half smile.

'And your date?' His green eyes get kind of piercing when he's grilling me.

'Oh.' I turn away. 'Yeah, good.'

'Only "good"? Come to think of it, you're back early.' He checks his watch. 'Blow your load too soon?'

I snort. 'Thanks for your faith in me.'

'What?' He rubs the back of his neck. 'It's been a while.'

'You counting?'

'Yup. So did she turn you down?' He shifts to make some space. 'You saw her in the cold light of the illuminations and changed your mind?'

‘No, nothing like that.’ I tut as I flump on the sofa next to him and reach for the spare games controller.

He sets one of his No Bullshit expressions on me and I sigh, placing the controller back down.

‘I tried to show her I respect her by *not* fucking her and now, I’m not sure if she feels rejected, or if I’ve missed my chance.’ Sitting forward, elbows on my knees, I rub my head in my hands. My hair’s starting to feel fuzzy as it grows back in.

‘Shit, you really like her.’ His voice goes up a notch.

‘I don’t know what’s happened. At first it was fun rattling her cage, and then ... ’ I lift my head, trying to find the words to explain. ‘Then she made some massive assumptions about me.’

‘So then it was fun to prove her wrong?’ Chunk raises an eyebrow.

‘Yes. And now ... ’ I tail off.

‘Now, it’s not about proving her wrong. It’s turned into you trying to prove *you’re right*. Right for *her*.’

I fucking hate Chunk sometimes. He’s a perceptive prick and has a way of calling out uncomfortable truths.

‘This was only supposed to be a bit of banter. Proving a point that she’d misjudged me.’ It was never supposed to be a proper *date* date.

‘Right.’ Chunk sits up a little straighter, drawing out the word. ‘Ever since she agreed to go on a date with you, you weren’t acting like a guy out to prove a point. You were acting like a guy thinking about the f-word.’

‘No. I told you, tonight I went to exceptional effort *not* to fuck her.’ Why the fuck did I turn her down?

‘Not that f-word,’ he tuts, exasperated.

‘Well, what fucking f-word?’ I match his tone.

‘The *future*.’

‘Shit.’

I can’t deny it.

I have been acting like that.

When did my stupid brain jump from indulging in banter with a hot chick to trying to win her affection?

‘I was only supposed to show I was a decent guy and that she’d gotten the wrong idea. Looks like I’m the one who had the wrong idea.’ I force my voice to be light. ‘Joke’s on me.’

‘I don’t mean to diminish your problems, bro, but I can’t see the issue. Sounds like she likes you and you like her.’

‘She *liked* me. Probably changed her mind after tonight.’ I scrub at the back of my neck. ‘And I wasn’t supposed to like her back.’

‘What’s the problem?’

‘After Stacey?’ I glare at him. He’s not going to make me relive that fucking heartbreak. ‘I’m not looking for a serious relationship.’

I’d made rules. No girlfriends, no relationships, no pain.

No names had been a rule, too, and that went out of the fucking window.

Clenching my hand into a fist, I feel like I’m on the brink of something. On the brink of losing reason and control, yes. But also on the brink of opening myself up to being hurt again, of being rejected, of not being good enough. Failing. Forcing my fingers to straighten, I splay them wide, working to keep them steady. The fear is real.

Normally level-headed and calm, Chunk narrows his eyes. ‘Stacey was a piece of work. Just go with the flow, see where you two end up.’

‘We’re going on another date.’

He claps me on the arm. ‘That’s great. If she agreed to go out with you again then — ’

‘I didn’t ask her. I told her.’ I get up, feeling twitchy about Chunk’s overly probing questions. ‘I need to know she trusts me.’ I wander towards the kitchen, wishing this conversation was over.

‘And you need to know you can trust her. I get it,’ Chunk calls after me. ‘But you can’t force it. You can’t make her shut her eyes and fall backwards to prove you’ll catch each other.’

I pivot to face him and he throws a cushion at me.

‘Hey, don’t look at me like you’re actually considering incorporating a trust fall into some sort of date.’

I hold my hands in a position of surrender.

‘Fucksake, Nate.’ It’s a resigned sigh. One where he knows me too well. ‘Are you this out of practice? Ask her if she wants a date and if she’s mad enough to say yes, then take her on a normal date. Don’t put so much pressure on yourself. Or her, for that matter. Jeez.’

Ella

The claustrophobia that builds up in the office is almost suffocating. As soon as it’s after twelve, I swap heels for trainers and head out to walk around the neighbourhood on my lunch break, trying to get some steps in.

My office is on the shittier side of town, but round a few corners you find the edge of the more upmarket area. Over the last week, it’s been fun window shopping past the designer stores, but my favourite is getting a sneak peek inside the trendy restaurants and bars, planning fantasy nights out with Josie.

Chez René, an exclusive bistro — all shiny windows and pretty lights — glows like a diamond. The doorman makes it tricky to get a good view inside but I know it’s a sea of linen tablecloths, sumptuous chairs, and multitudes of elegant glasses.

There’s not even a menu out the front I can salivate over.

My phone rings and I step to the side of the pavement to answer it, the cream wall of the Edwardian-Baroque architecture to my back.

‘Hey, Josie,’ I say down the line.

‘Am I disturbing you?’

‘Nope. Out on my lunch break.’

‘Who are you and what have you done with my bestie?’

‘Ha, it’s the new me.’ I straighten my shoulders, pulling my bag strap up. ‘I’m allowing myself basic human rights like lunch breaks these days. So, you ok?’

‘I’m good, just fancied a chat. Did you arrange that second date with Nate?’

I’d already filled Josie in on the horrifically embarrassing treetops experience where I all but threw myself at him. I don’t know what I was thinking, other than I wasn’t thinking. I came away trying to convince myself I should be grateful he spurned me. But my traitorous stomach flipped when he breathily demanded a second date. And my duplicitous heart leapt when he then texted to ask nicely.

‘I’ve still not replied.’ I wince to myself.

‘Why not?’

‘I’m not sure what I want. When I’m with him, I get swept up in the moment, almost lose control, like some horny teenager.’ I give an embarrassed laugh. ‘But, in the cold light of day, it’s a terrible idea.’

‘Last time you told me you wanted a bit of fun ... a hookup.’

‘I said *fun*. You said hookup. And oops, we didn’t hook up.’ I try to make light of my disappointment.

‘But you had fun?’

‘Yes ... ’

I trail off and Josie says, ‘I feel a ‘but’ coming on.’

‘But what’s the point? I mean, what does he want?’ I twiddle my hair with my free hand. ‘He had the chance of a hookup and rejected it. So what does he want?’

‘I don’t know, Ells. Maybe he had fun too? Maybe he wants to get to know you better? Maybe he likes you? Maybe he wants more?’

Josie’s diagnosis hangs heavily in the air. Did I even have the head space for more than a hookup? I’d gone down this hedonistic road on Josie’s recommendation to let off some steam. Scratch an itch, as she so prettily put it. But the whole ‘more’ side of things is uncharted territory.

‘I’m not in the market for more,’ I hiss. ‘I can’t — ’

‘Don’t give me that bull about leading by example to your sister,’ Josie interrupts.

‘Someone has to.’ My voice kicks up a few notches. ‘The number of dick exes my mum’s had ... I can’t introduce another guy to her life. I can’t risk her getting let down, thinking it’s okay to be let down.’

‘Don’t you think showing her everyone deserves love, and that life is short so seize the day, are better lessons?’

‘You make a compelling argument. But this isn’t love,’ I bite out. ‘It’s raw lust.’

‘But life *is* short, sweetie. It can’t be lust or love or anything if you shut *everything* down.’ She takes a deep breath. ‘Take it slowly. I’m not saying you have to introduce him to your sister and your mum right away. It’s not like you have to invite him round for dinner.’

I blanch at the thought. Mum’s boyfriends never stuck around much once it came to *meeting the family*. They were usually more interested in their motorbikes than family meals.

Josie must take my silence as reluctance as she adds, ‘Sorry, forget about all that. Don’t overanalyse. Just go for you. For the fun. Letting your hair down should be up there with taking a lunch break. It’s a basic human right, like you said.’

‘Hmmm.’ I remain noncommittal and do my best to change the subject. ‘How about you? Any updates for me about your sexy zombie. You’re being awfully secretive.’

‘We didn’t get much talking done the other night, but we did organise a date. Maybe I’ll have some news for you after that. *You* just focus on you and Nate. Text him. Go for it!’

After our chat, I stare through the huge window of the bistro at the people inside having fun on their lunch breaks, popping out for a bite without overthinking everything.

Josie’s always bloody right.

With her encouragement still ringing in my ears, I send Nate a text.

Ella: OK. This Wednesday?

I can see the dots rippling as he composes a reply.

But then ... nothing.

Perplexed and disappointed, I set off back to my desk.

What’s wrong with me? I only wanted a hookup and now I’m getting twitchy over him returning my texts.

As I step back through the front door of my office, my phone vibrates. The first part of Nate’s message displays on the locked home screen.

Nate: Sorry, I can’t do Wednesday...

‘Where have you been, Ella?’ My boss is suddenly right by me, eyes bulging.

‘I ... er ... lunch?’ Flustered, I mix up my words. My thumb poised over the screen, pin-code half entered.

‘Come on now, stop playing on your phone on company time.’ He brandishes some files. ‘You’ve got work to do.’

Tapping back to locked mode, I put away my phone and follow him reluctantly.

There’s got to be more to life than this.

Now I’ve had a small taste of freedom, albeit pathetic lunch breaks, I crave more.

More freedom.

More respect.

Chapter 17

Nate

Of all the fucking days. Of every single fucking date Ella could have gone for, she somehow chose the one I absolutely couldn't do.

I was so excited when I saw her reply, like a kid at Christmas, and then I realised I'd swapped my on call with Tony for that day. And Tony had begged me to do it for him, he'd struggled so hard to find cover, he'd offered to do two of my dates. Not that I'd hold him to that. Hoping for a miracle, I knew, even as I called up Control, there wouldn't be anyone else to cover. No one else to ask. They needed me.

Now, the ball was back in Ella's court. Would she go for a different day or was that it? No more chances?

Chunk drives us over to The Wreck in his Ranger, indulging my silence by turning up the banal morning radio show. I check if I've received a reply from Ella so often it might develop into a nervous tic.

Nothing since midday yesterday, when I rejected her. Again.

Fuck, I hope I haven't blown it.

When I get out of the vehicle, fresh air hits me in the face. Being outside, unrestricted, helps me feel freer than I have all morning. I silently appreciate the winter sun filtering through the trees.

Slamming the door shut sends a flock of pigeons bolting from the canopy.

'Whatcha got for me?' I hope Chunk will find me something strenuous to absorb all of my attention. Save my phone battery. And my dignity.

'Sorting out the old barn. I've got new plans for it.'

My eyes glide over the thicket of brambles and weeds that lead to the partially obscured entrance of Chunk's storage

shack. ‘Big job. I’d better get stuck in.’

I wonder if Chunk realised how much I need this. Thoughtful prick.

I check my phone is in my jeans pocket, then pull off my jacket, leaving it in the back of the SUV. Chunk tosses some heavy-duty gloves at me and I help myself to a machete.

We hack away in silence, my arms eventually burning with the effort. My tee-shirt clings to me. The weak sun high in the sky, I’ve managed to go without checking if Ella’s replied for a respectable amount of time. Scrubbing my arm over my eyes to wipe the sweat away, I pull my phone out. Still nothing.

I throw the machete down, embedding it in the dirt.

‘How’s things with your girl?’ Chunk calls over to me.

‘She’s not a girl. And she’s not mine,’ I shout back.

‘That good, huh?’ He braces his hands on his hips, and looks around at our progress. ‘You want to talk about it?’

I grunt as I pull the machete back up again.

‘Nate?’

I swipe at some thick, woody brambles, decimating them with the blade.

‘Fuck,’ Chunk barks out a laugh, walking closer. ‘You’re killing me here. At the risk of sounding like a fucking teenage girl, what’s happened now?’

‘Nothing. I was at The Bull last night; Scott told me to play it cool.’ I take my frustration out on a dense patch of bracken. ‘I’m not very good at being patient.’

‘What are you waiting on?’

Ella to trust me. Ella to take me seriously. ‘Just a message.’ I continue to hack away. ‘Trying to arrange that second date but it’s gone silent her end.’

‘Maybe she’s checking her diary.’

‘Since yesterday lunchtime?’

‘Getting shit organised? Fuck, I don’t know. I thought you were trying not to stress about this.’

I pause my tirade on the overgrowth. Panting and staring at the shredded greenery. ‘Scott said she might be ghosting me.’

‘Scott’s a grumpy bastard,’ Chunk retorts.

‘He got grumpier, if you can believe that.’ I look at Chunk. ‘Like a bear with a sore head on our shift yesterday.’

‘Dude needs to lighten up.’ Chunk nods over to the barn. ‘You think he’d come to the opening party?’

‘What party?’

‘I’m relocating my annual Christmas Eve party here. More specifically,’ he opens his arms in a gesture towards the ramshackle building in front of us, ‘the barn. Flat’s not big enough anymore.’

I scrub at my head. ‘We’ve gotta get that pile of shit ready in four weeks?’

‘I like how you say “we”.’ I get the sense Chunk’s stopping himself from saying something smart about us becoming partners again. He opens his mouth and then presses his lips shut before finally saying, ‘Better stop whining and get on with it.’

My fuck you retort falls from my lips as I feel my phone buzz in my pocket.

Ella: Can you do Thursday?

‘Is that her?’ Chunk’s eyes are wide. Invested.

‘I thought you didn’t like gossiping like teenage girls?’ I pivot away so he can’t see the ridiculous smile suddenly commandeering my face.

Tackling the weeds and scrub with renewed vigour, I can’t feel the fatigue in my muscles anymore. Thursday. That’s only a few days to wait. I’ll book us a nice restaurant, like a normal fucking person on a normal fucking date.

Chapter 18

Ella

Today, I'm dressed to impress. Or at least, dressed to impersonate a professional looking person. Forgoing comfort and safety, I'm wearing my highest black stilettos, paired with skinny cropped trousers, and a blouse and blazer. Attempting to strike the balance of smart and sophisticated but still sensible. It's a big day in the office.

Some execs from HQ are here for Boris' Big Meeting and I've been drafted in to pour drinks and bolster numbers. To make Boris seem like he has a posse.

I carry a tray into the meeting room and eye where the best space to leave it is.

With a flap of his hand, Boris tuts, 'Leave it there.' Then rolls his eyes to Mr Suit Number One.

I place the tray down and start to unload it.

'Stop fussing, girl.' He shakes his head to Mr Suit Number Two. 'Just our assistant, don't mind her.'

My stomach clenches with the stab of humiliation.

I might be *just* an assistant — an assistant financial accountant — not his PA as he'd implied. And I'm good at my job. I've worked hard and been faithful to this company. Under the leadership of the late, great, Mr. Lawrence, I started with an apprenticeship in accountancy, and he'd promoted me to assistant with the promise of more as I worked my way up.

But Mr. Lawrence had a catastrophic heart attack, and Boris oozed his way into the manager's role. Stealing ideas, shifting blame, and scaring away any good workers with his *leadership skills*. So, here I am, still treading water.

Don't get me wrong. He's given me experience. He has me working on some of the biggest accounts, given me the responsibility of a much more senior accountant, but he doesn't give me any kudos for this.

Not in title or pay. And definitely not with any sort of praise.

Boris treats me like a badly performing secretary all day and it's awful. I'd hoped I'd get the chance to show myself in a new light, perhaps get that promotion since Shaun left. But apparently not. Assistant accountant and coffee maker I shall be, forever.

Yes, I could leave, but where would I work? I doubt I'd get a good reference, so I'd probably have to start in another organisation, at the bottom, spending even more years working up to the level of job security and benefits I have at AWP UK.

My shoulders are in knots and I feel crumpled and hollow by the time I step outside; completely wrung out. The fresh winter wind whips past me, dragging fallen leaves in its wake.

Out with the old and in with the new.

The sensation that this is a pivotal moment whispers through me as I shut the office door, leaving the crap behind and heading to something better.

My heels click-clack along the road to the classy quarter. There's no time to head home and change so I head straight to meet Nate at Chez René.

I have to confess, I let out an uncharacteristic squeal of excitement when his message with the location arrived yesterday.

It's one of the classiest places in town so I hope my work attire and a new swipe of lipstick will pass muster. I zhuzh my hair a little as I walk to help freshen up.

Already dark, a check of the time shows I should have been there two minutes ago and I still have half a kilometre to go. Picking up my pace, I curse my heels as they wobble precariously.

The windows of the bistro glow warm and welcoming and there's a happy chatter and clink of tableware as I enter.

The maître d' greets me, and on hearing the reservation name, ushers me in, taking my blazer and announcing Nate is

already here.

I cast my eyes around the room, decorated lavishly in creams, with hints of black and gold, and then back to him. ‘Which way?’

‘Of course.’ He smiles, his mock French accent unconvincing. ‘Follow me.’

He weaves through the room, past cosy nooks and intimate tables. I catch sight of Nate in a smart shirt as we approach and *holy shit*. I can barely thank the maître d’ as he pulls a chair out for me, too distracted ogling broad shoulders that are to-die-for.

Nate stands as I arrive, eyes sparkling. He’s almost unrecognisable. Clean shaven, collar and tie. He leans in to give me a peck on the cheek and exudes a fragrance so divine, a kaleidoscope of butterflies erupts into my stomach.

His lips are soft and warm on my cheek.

‘Ella,’ he greets me, his deep voice making my thighs clench.

‘Sorry, I’m late,’ I manage to say, almost struck speechless by his appearance. It’s just a shirt, but he’s levelled up from rugged bad boy to a sleek mafia boss in one outfit. I mean, while I do prefer his more casual look, who doesn’t love the morally-grey billionaire fantasy?

‘No,’ he gives me his dimple-popping smile, ‘You’re right on time.’

‘I had to come straight from work,’ I gabble. ‘Sorry, if I’m —’ I gesture to my outfit. ‘This place is so lovely.’ I sit down, scooching my chair under the table.

He sits in sync with me, and with a small shake of his head he laughs, ‘Stop apologising. You’re perfect.’ He holds my gaze for a beat and my breath catches. ‘It seems like you’ve had a bit of a day. Can I get you a drink?’

‘Yes, please,’ I agree, a little too enthusiastically.

Nate gestures to a server across the room and they come and take our drinks order.

Watching the waiter head to get our wine, I take in more of the sumptuous decor, real candles flickering on each table. ‘This place looks amazing. Thanks for suggesting it. I’ve been admiring it for a while.’

‘Well, after the floor of a treehouse, I thought you deserved something more refined.’ Nate pours out some water from a carafe for us. ‘So, you’ve not been before?’

‘Are you kidding me? This place is crazy posh.’ I smooth my hand across the pristine tablecloth. ‘And besides, you know me and Josie, it’s always a cocktail bar we head to.’

‘Has it always been cocktail bars?’ Tumbler in hand, he swills his water around the glass.

‘When we were younger we’d head out to whatever club or pub accepted our fake IDs but now we’re *much more mature*.’

‘And by *mature* you mean characterising people by scandalous cocktail names?’ He cocks his eyebrow.

‘Exactly.’ I clink my glass to his and get lost in his eyes for a moment. They’re so warm, crinkling at the corners and sparkling with a hint of mischief.

‘So what kind of club?’ Nate asks, sitting forwards. ‘I bet you loved cheesy pop.’

‘Now who’s being judgey?’ I raise my brow and break into a laugh. ‘I was into alt rock back in sixth form, but I have to confess, nowadays you’re more likely to find me listening to Taylor Swift.’

‘Who doesn’t love Tay Tay?’

My giggle draws a glare from a nearby table, making us both snigger quietly at the snobbish clientele. Nate catches my eye and quirks his eyebrow. Holding my gaze he loosens his tie, somehow making the way the silk unknits, sliding against itself, ridiculously sexy. He coils it around two of his fingers before sliding it onto the table. Then he methodically undoes his top button, repeating the same at each cuff. Folding back the cotton he exposes his ripped forearms and I struggle to swallow. The way the light shines off him as the sinews of his muscles move over each other, the way his ink stands out

against the bleached linens. Jesus. A screech of china and scandalised murmurings from the nearby diners pull me back to my senses, just as he's stretching his neck out.

'That's better,' he murmurs. 'Awfully stuffy in here.' He assumes a fake-posh accent, his lip twitching at just a hint of a smile.

Our neighbours might disapprove, but this look is doing it for me.

We pass an easy evening bantering and chatting, enjoying the delicious food and exquisite service despite the pretentious atmosphere.

I'm pleased I followed Josie's advice to come out with Nate again, to not overthink everything and just see what happens.

It's weird, when he's not tormenting me with his outrageous flirting, I actually feel really relaxed with him.

I also feel like a prize melon. I *had* totally misjudged him.

A couple at a table near us leaves and I check my watch, the swell of disappointment blooming inside. 'Shit, I have to hustle if I'm going to make the last bus.'

Nate moves his hand to mine, gently stopping me from trying to down my drink. 'Let me give you a lift home. Then there's no need to rush.' His voice is low, seductive.

'Isn't it out of your way? Your pub's about a fifteen minute drive from my place. I don't want to put you out. You drove last time.' Nerves are making me ramble.

'You wouldn't be,' he says, simply. 'Anyway, it's not *my* pub. I don't live there.'

'You don't? I thought you ... how come you're always there so late?'

He leans in closer, his woodsy cedar scent teasing my nose. 'The first couple of times I met you, I was staying there to help out. But I've got my own place, with Chunk, actually. In Oldton.'

‘That’s not far from me.’

Eyebrows raised, he gives me an encouraging nod and I find myself nibbling my lip. ‘But you *do* work at the pub?’

‘Sometimes.’ He tips his head as if to think. ‘A lot of the time, really.’

‘And you also work with Chunk?’

‘Yeah, if he needs it. We’ve got a big project underway at the moment. He keeps asking me to join him and be partners.’ He chuckles as if the thought is preposterous.

I shake my head. ‘Don’t you want to?’

‘Long story.’ He feigns a wince. ‘I’m not sure it’s for me. So, can I give you a lift home now you know I’m not going far?’

‘Sure, thank you.’

‘And, will you stop biting your lip? Giving you a lift is in *no way* putting me out, so you don’t need to worry and,’ he lowers his voice to a whisper, ‘we’re in public and I’m finding it very distracting.’

I roll my eyes and break into a laugh. I hate being beholden — being a bother — to anyone. I pride myself on self-sufficiency. But it’s as if Nate sees all this, anticipating and reducing my worries before I’ve even fully formulated them.

We settle up, sharing the bill at my insistence. Emotions coil in my stomach, disappointment the night is coming to an end mixed with apprehension for what might come next. Maybe a goodnight kiss? Maybe more.

Maybe flat out rejection, again.

As the waiter heads away, Nate turns to me. ‘You know what? I don’t think this date should be over yet.’

Not ready to say goodbye, relief makes my chest feel lighter. ‘What do you have in mind?’

He blazes his eyes onto mine as he says, ‘Dancing.’

The thought of being sweaty and close, pushed up against Nate, shoots across my mind and straight to my core. This day is only getting better.

‘That sounds good.’ My lips twist into a smile. ‘I haven’t been for ages.’

Nate reaches out to me, pulling me to my feet. ‘Too busy hunting cocktails, huh?’ He smirks. ‘I know just the place a few streets away.’

Chapter 19

Ella

An icy blast buffets us as we exit into the night air and I wrap my blazer around me tightly. Nate takes my hand, his thumb stroking my knuckles as we walk along. A zip of electricity dances between our fingertips.

As we wait at a crossing, Nate pulls me round to face him, his arms linking around my back. 'I've really enjoyed tonight.' He dips forward, his soft lips find mine and the tingle of electricity morphs into a thunderbolt crashing straight through me.

My hands snake into his hair, his stubble gives a soft scratch as we deepen the kiss. When his tongue swipes across mine, I can't stop a little moan from escaping into his mouth.

His warmth engulfs me and I press closer, drawn towards him. A sensation of heat and anticipation awakens between my thighs.

His kiss is thorough, unhurried. Time stopping.

He pulls back slightly, not quite breaking the kiss. 'Sorry, I've been wanting to do that all evening,' he murmurs against my lips. 'All week, in fact.'

'Don't apologise.' Thank God it's dark, I can't keep the stupid lust-struck grin off my face.

'It was so hard to walk away from you after the treehouse.' Forehead locked on mine, he punctuates his words with kisses. 'I felt like we were doing things backwards. I needed you to know the real me. I want you to trust me.' He works his mouth along my jaw. 'Do you trust me?'

'Mmm, hmm,' is all I can manage. Because right now, I do. There's no sense to it. No logic. Just feelings.

He sucks on the sensitive spot behind my ear and I gasp, hot breath misting into the air.

‘Shit, it’s too cold for this,’ he growls. ‘Let’s head to the club and get warmed up.’

The beeps indicating it’s safe to cross sound and he pulls me into his side as we carry on our journey.

His lips find the top of my head, and I sigh into him, our breath puffing out like miniature ghosts as we walk along. We round a corner and I see lights and a queue of people ahead.

Nate asks, ‘Have you been to Bash before?’

‘No. You?’

‘I haven’t been for a little while.’

We arrive at a curious looking building and join the back of the line. He wraps his arms around me while we wait and I take in the architecture.

‘This place is a converted ballroom,’ Nate says, jerking his head towards some ripped posters on the wall advertising battle of the bands and a Foo Fighters cover band. ‘Now it’s a rock club.’

A kooky rock venue isn’t what I was expecting, but I’m relieved this isn’t some swanky nightclub with esoteric electro beats.

‘Thought you might want to relive your youth,’ he says, nuzzling his lips into my hair.

‘You saying I’m old?’ I swat him on the chest and chuckle. ‘Actually – ’ I eye one poster suspiciously. ‘It’s not a foam party tonight, is it?’

‘Not tonight.’ Nate skims his hands up and down my back. ‘Foam parties not your thing?’

I scrunch my nose. ‘Maybe they were one time.’

‘They’re usually a good night.’ He dips his voice and rumbles, so only I can hear, ‘You’d be soaked by the end,’ sending a tremble right through me. ‘I would love to see you all wet like that.’

As we queue to get in, I note the people around us have adopted a dress code of leather, denim and black to

compliment eye-watering facial piercings and some beautiful tattoos. Nate's leather jacket fits in perfectly with the others waiting in line, unlike my smart apparel. I'm embarrassingly overdressed.

'Shit. Hold this.' I take off my blazer and pass it to Nate.

Chilled goosebumps flare on my exposed skin.

As quickly as my fingers allow, I work the buttons on my top. Nate's gaze darkens, his eyes locked on my chest, and I suddenly feel even more self-conscious. I shake off the blouse, leaving just a black camisole top, edged with a little bit of lace, to go with my tight cropped trousers and heels. I flick out my hair and immediately feel more appropriate.

My blouse folds away into my bag.

Taking my jacket back, I say, 'Thanks, I felt a bit too office-y before.'

'My pleasure,' he growls. 'Now, come here.' Pulling me closer, he nips my ear lobe. 'I can't have you catching a cold.'

Oblivious to the temperature, heat and lust drench me, leaving me feeling twirly.

Unzipping his coat, I burrow my hands inside, feeling the muscles of his back, taut and hard. Moving down, I skim the band of his boxers.

'Not fair,' he murmurs.

The bouncer calls us forward. Huge and dressed in the requisite leather, too, his jacket is patched with logos I don't recognise.

He and Nate fist bump. 'You should have told me you were here, rather than waiting.'

'It's okay, man. Wouldn't like to presume.'

The big guy checks my ID while continuing to chat with Nate. 'Not been around for a while. You've been missed.'

'Probably not by the management,' Nate retorts.

The bouncer levels a gaze on me and then back to Nate. 'Don't listen to your boy here. He was their best customer.' He jerks his head towards the club. 'Missed by staff and customers alike.'

'So you come here often?' I raise an eyebrow at the deliberate line.

'Oh, he *came* here often.' The bouncer gives Nate a wink. 'You have a good night now.'

'That was weird,' I lean in and whisper as we walk through.

'He's cool. But perhaps one too many whacks to the head splitting up bar fights.'

'We could have skipped the queue, though?'

'But then I wouldn't have got to keep you warm.' His hand brands the small of my back as he guides me into the gloomy smoke.

We ditch our jackets and head onto the dance floor. The bass reverberates through me as we watch the live band, the whole crowd writhing to the music.

Nate circles his arms around me from behind, his hand roaming across my stomach, his lips back on my neck, and we sway to the rhythm.

The band breaks into an old classic. 'I love this one,' we shout at the same time and then laugh, bouncing around like we're teenagers again.

The band plays a few more old covers and we dance along, enjoying the vibe of the night and each other's company.

When they take a break, a DJ starts playing some thrash metal.

Nate pulls me to the side. 'Shall we grab a drink?' He has to shout over the music.

'Sounds good.'

We head to the bar and immediately a tall guy with a beard reaches over the bar, engulfing Nate.

‘Damn, where have you been?’ He slaps Nate on the back in a guy hug.

Both faces split into huge grins.

‘What’s it gonna be? Shots?’ Tall and bearded looks hopeful.

‘Hell yeah,’ someone nearby calls out.

‘Not tonight, Liam.’ Nate pulls me forward. ‘This is Ella. Ella, Liam.’

‘You’re new.’ Liam casts an eye over me before scanning back to Nate.

Before anything else is said, there’s a squeal. Nate and I turn to see a woman with bottle-red hair careering in. ‘Nate’s back! That means body shots.’

She launches herself at Nate, long legs wrapping around his waist as she clings to him. Hands on her butt, he lifts her easily onto the bar, like he’s done it a hundred times before.

‘Maybe another time.’ He smiles at her.

In a flash she jumps up to balance on the bar, giving us all an eyeful of what she hasn’t got on under her tiny skirt.

‘We still need Tequila to celebrate,’ she calls out before jumping off the bar into some other guy’s arms.

He swirls her round, tipping her backwards as she locks on to him. A constellation of purple dots curls around the inside of his elbow and I try to avert my eyes, but it’s hard not to look as Red and Track Marks grind against the bar.

Wonder if she’s dry humped Nate on the edge of the bar, too? With that skirt situation, she may be doing more than *dry* humping.

Who are these people Nate’s friends with?

Liam leans forward, watching me eyeballing the display. ‘Don’t mind Angel. She’s friendly with everyone ... if you know what I mean. I’m sure Nate will tell you.’

Nate turns back from fist bumping and high fiving with some guys next to us.

‘Tell you what?’

‘How friendly Angel is.’ I raise my eyebrow as he blanches.

Strobe lighting illuminates the scene and I try not to stare at the nature documentary taking place a metre away.

Before I can overthink, or panic, we’re interrupted with yet more people coming to say hi, clapping him on the back and smothering him in bro hugs. Nate introduces me to several more people, names lost in the noise and confusion. Quite a few beautiful women give me a cold smile and I can’t help but wonder how friendly they’ve been with Nate, too. Meeting his friends has been eye-opening to say the least.

Perhaps this date wasn’t a good idea.

The rumble of a chant swells. ‘Shots. Shots. Shots.’

Several people at the bar are banging on the wooden surface in rhythm.

‘Easy,’ Nate laughs, gesturing for people to calm down, ‘Maybe later.’

He flags down Liam and I order a beer while Nate gets a low alcohol version. Thank goodness he isn’t planning on drinking and driving later.

Drinks served, Nate indicates to a darkened corner. ‘Let’s head to a booth.’

‘We can stay with your friends if you want.’ I glance over to the raucous crew.

He leans in, murmuring right into my ear, ‘I’d rather talk to you.’

My nerves jangle as I take his hand and weave through the melee. Feeling out of my depth, I wonder how much experience he must have compared to little ol’ me. Twisting round, I peek back at the throng of long-lost friends at the bar. He seems to be very popular here. And he works in a pub. He has women on tap, really.

What did I discuss with Josie? Have some fun. See what happens. Don't overthink it. Was I aiming for a hookup? I clearly wouldn't be his first. Scanning the bar, I probably wouldn't even be his twelfth.

Jeez, I'm lying to myself about *only* wanting a hookup. From the grip of his calloused hand in mine, down to my ridiculous stilettos, a warmth is curling through me. I feel it whenever we're together.

Hope.

The date we had at The Wreck was too elaborate to lead to a one-night stand.

And tonight ... he's made me curious about a path I had always thought was off the cards for me, something more. But here, seeing him in his element like this, it's like I'm flying too close to the sun. I'm nervous.

I slide into the empty booth with Nate following closely behind me. His eyes burn with an intensity; like his gaze alone might devour me.

His hand traces up my arm, leaving a trail of fiery tingles. He loops his fingers into my hair, a move I've come to recognise, to crave. He pulls me in for a kiss, possessive yet somehow restrained.

Slowly, he pulls away. 'Damn, your lips do things to me.'

They'd like to. I don't say it aloud, settling for grasping his collar and drawing his mouth to mine again.

Nate lifts me onto his lap and resumes his work, kissing and sucking, nibbling my bottom lip while his hands roam over my silky top. My concerns from moments before entirely forgotten.

His fingers play with the lace on my camisole before slipping up inside it.

'I'm a big fan of your ... wardrobe change,' he growls, his lips against the skin of my neck.

'Didn't want to look out of place,' I reply, breathless.

‘You look perfect.’ His thumb grazes over my nipple and I gasp, clenching my thighs together, as his hands slide down to encircle my waist.

It’s my turn to pull away a little. ‘As much as I love *talking* like this with you ... ’ I touch my forehead to his, not really wanting to break us apart. ‘We might end up like Angel and that guy if we’re not careful.’

Nate’s face darkens and he gently releases me. I slide off, onto the bench next to him, and take a sip of my drink. We take in the pulsating mob on the dance floor, writhing, moving almost like one living organism.

‘This place is epic.’ My eyes widen as I take it all in. ‘Can’t believe I’ve never been.’

‘They don’t do cocktails.’ He quirks a smile.

‘Look.’ I nod in the direction of the stage. Some machines are blasting out fake, eerie smoke and four figures are returning to their instruments.

‘Band’s coming back on. You want to do some more dancing?’ His fingers stroke over the silk of my top again, hypnotising.

‘I’m not going to say no to that.’ I bite my lip, hesitant to say the next sentence. Reluctant to leave. ‘But I need to head to the ladies. Please watch my drink.’

Nate

Ella walks off, getting swallowed into the very club where I used to come to lose myself. Her butt swivels sexily and already I miss her. I want her back here where I can touch her. Smell her. See her pupils dilate.

Perhaps coming here was a stupid idea.

The bistro wasn’t really me, and, although she enjoyed it, I don’t think it was Ella either. Swept along with the night, I didn’t think this through. I thought she’d like the retro rock music and I figured dancing might be a good way to get her

more relaxed, before I roll out the rest of my plan to show her she can trust me.

Admittedly, the bonus of being close to her swayed me, too.

I peel at the corner of the label on my bottle and consider maybe we should have gone somewhere else.

Since I started sorting my life out, I haven't had the compulsion to come back here. This is somewhere the old me would come to get drunk and fuck around. Careful fucking around, but fucking around nonetheless.

My eyes flick to the crew at the bar. Fake friends. I'm so fucking lucky to have my brother and Chunk. These old drinking buddies are pretty much strangers, and an unwanted reminder of my past. Not that I'm trying to keep my past a secret, but I'm not especially proud of the things I used to get up to. I know now that I'm not the bad guy Ella has me pegged for, but the old me was. That guy was a dick.

A heartbroken dick with his confidence in his boots. The shit I used to pull ... feeling I didn't deserve either love or respect, so I didn't give them either. I didn't give a shit, full stop. I'd numbed myself.

I puff out my cheeks, forcing an exhale as I think of the hell I put Chunk and Scott through worrying where I was, what the fuck I was doing. They got me out of my pit of despair, them and my bike buddies helped me start seeing my worth; to have a modicum of self-respect ...

A tap on the arm pulls me out of my reverie and I glance up to see a familiar but unexpected face.

'Dee?'

Dee giggles, her giant blonde hair-do askew. 'It *is* you.' She hiccups and half staggers.

I stand to steady her.

'You okay? You want to sit down?'

'No, no,' she slurs, 'I'm on a night out with my friends.' She vaguely gestures over to a group. I can smell the tequila

fumes rolling off her. ‘Thought it was you sitting over here on your own.’ She runs her hand on my arm.

I don’t want to be mean and shake her off, but I wish she’d stop. My gaze flicks to her friends, wondering if I should let them know she needs a bit of looking after.

‘I miss you stopping by every week.’ She leans in and I take half a step away, causing her to stumble and, reflexively, I grab her to stop her falling.

Shit, I accidentally touched her boob. Kinda hard to avoid as it spills obnoxiously out of her low-cut dress.

‘Thanks.’ It sounds half like a purr.

I don’t want her to get any ideas here, so I try to keep conversation light — polite — until I can make an escape. ‘How’s everything going with ... Kayla?’ I scramble to remember her baby’s name, despite seeing her weekly for about a year, it’s been a while.

As we talk, I tug her elbow, trying to guide her back to her group.

‘Good, she’s two now. And Morgan is five but the size of an eight-year-old.’

‘What have you been feeding her?’ The moment I say it, I regret it. Isn’t it an automatic response when a kid’s getting big? But now she’s plumping her boobs at me.

‘I blame the good stuff. Although, I kinda miss how they used to look. Do you think they’re different?’

Errr, is she asking me to look at her tits? I fix my gaze determinedly above her neck.

A dreamy expression crosses her face. Or is that the alcohol? ‘Hmm, maybe I will be seeing you again,’ she murmurs.

Frantically, I scramble for a plan to get away from her and get her somewhere safe. She’s vulnerable like this. ‘How about you introduce me to your friends?’

There’s a blur of movement.

‘Don’t let me interrupt you.’ Ella launches past, grabs at something and swivels away, stalking off.

Aw, shit. Twenty quid she’s put two and two together here and made forty.

‘Ella,’ I call after her, but she doesn’t break her stride.

Chapter 20

Ella

As I mindlessly storm back to the toilets, the flame of embarrassment flares through me. If he could hit on someone when I'd only left for a few minutes to go to the ladies room, then I'd been right from the start.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

I know I was only supposed to be having fun, seeing what might happen. But that planted the seed in my stupid overthinking brain that something *could* happen. I thought I'd been wrong about my first impression of Nate. And maybe that meant I'd been wrong about relationships, too.

Walls I'd carefully constructed to protect myself — from relationships and their inevitable failure — had been undermined by these sneaky thoughts. Maybe I *could* find a trustworthy, reliable guy. Maybe I already had.

But nope.

I swipe under my lashes. The smoke machine is making my eyes prickle. Nothing else.

Cross with myself, I wonder why I hadn't listened to my instincts. I barge through the door and into the relative peace of the ladies room. It's blissfully empty and I pace up and down outside the cubicles, unsure of what to do next.

I'm holding my beer but I don't remember grabbing it. A mist had descended when I saw Nate flirting with that gorgeous blonde. I can't think why I've holed back up in the grotty toilet, either.

Wrapping my arms around me, I brood over all the ways Nate is wrong for me. Guys that look like him are nothing but trouble. I'd honed this theory many years ago thanks to my mum's revolving door of a love life.

It's not only his underwear-melting good looks that should have warned me off, although that should be a game-ender by

itself. There's his buzz cut. The tattoos. The inability to commit to a job.

He's like the love-child of all my mum's exes, all rolled into one perfectly built package.

What was I thinking?

I stop pacing and clutch the edge of the sink, staring into the mirror.

He's probably been with Angel, that blonde, and every other woman at the bar.

And then he brought me here, too.

Playboy player with no scruples.

Except ...

I had been listening to my instincts. When I'm with him, my heart trusts him. Not my brain, there's nothing logical about it. But, my heart does.

My bag buzzes, my phone vibrating inside, cutting into my thoughts.

'Can you talk?' Josie's voice comes down the line when I answer. She sounds funny, strained. A glance at the screen shows patchy signal.

'Yeah.' Why not? I'm not planning on coming out of this toilet anytime soon. And I'd appreciate my friend's perspective.

'It's all echoey. Where are you? Oh no, are you still on your dinner date?'

'Kind of.' I pinch the bridge of my nose. 'We ended up in Bash.'

'I'm not far from there. Wait, why are you talking to me? Go enjoy yourself.'

'He's just like all the others, Josie,' I sigh, blinking away the misting in my eyes.

'Who, Nate? Which others?'

‘My dad. Chloe’s dad. Shane. Peter.’ The reflection in the mirror shows my jaw set grimly as a resigned disappointment swarms through my head. The notches on my mum’s bedpost have decimated my confidence in relationships.

‘What happened?’

‘I’d been gone max five minutes and I came back to find him feeling up some woman with boobs the size of the Eden Project.’

‘Shit, Ella. I’m sorry.’ The line goes crackly for a moment. ‘All men suck.’

‘I’m disappointed.’ I shake my head. ‘In him. But in myself as well. I got carried away. Now I don’t know what to do.’ I give a half-hearted snort. ‘I should probably start with going home.’

‘Ella?’ Nate’s voice pipes out through a crack in the door.

I don’t hear Josie’s reply as the door swings open with a bang and the blonde stumbles into my tiled sanctuary.

‘Dee! Shit.’ Nate’s head appears around the frame, eyes furtively glancing around the room. ‘Ella — ’

‘I’ve gotta go.’ I go to hang up on Josie but the call has already disconnected.

‘Nate,’ the blonde giggles, drawing out the syllable, and swatting at his head to push him away, out of the room.

Is this for real?

Stunned, I squint in the direction of my new toilet buddy, trying to work out what the hell is happening.

‘Leave this to me.’ Miss Blonde shuts the door and turns to lean back on it.

She’s grinning to herself and then, as if remembering something, turns to me.

Still smiling, her eyes take a moment to focus.

‘I’m Dee.’ She wobbles as she lunges towards me, hand outstretched. ‘It’s Ella, right? You’re here with Nate?’

‘I, er ... ’

She steadies herself against a sink and seems to use all her energy to concentrate on me. ‘I always used to say to Nate he needed to find himself a nice girl.’

‘So you know each other?’ I’m sceptical, but this woman doesn’t seem in any kind of condition to lie effectively, so I’m curious what she’s about to say.

‘Well, your guy out there used to drop by every week to take my stash to the hospital.’

‘Stash?’ My brow furrows.

‘My boob milk.’ She fake-whispers, hand up to her mouth. ‘For the neonatal unit. I donated my liquid gold to help the babies.’

Almost completely bamboozled, I find myself going along with the ludicrous conversation. ‘I didn’t know you could donate milk?’

‘Not many do, and not many mummies have the time or energy to be able to express some.’ She puts her arm on mine as if confiding in an old friend. I stare at her fingers clasping my skin, but can’t seem to pull myself away. ‘But I was lucky the second time, I guess. I had so much milk it used to leak everywhere.’

Jeez, is this actually happening?

‘I started expressing a bit off, to try and prevent it, but it would pour out, and then before I knew it, I’d set myself in this cycle where I was producing more and more.’ Dee shakes her head, her blonde hair tossing in the movement. ‘The thought of wasting it was devastating, especially when I remembered how they tried to use some donated milk to feed Morgan when she was born. She’s my first. She was a bit prem’ and my milk took a while to come in.’ She presses her hand to her chest. ‘So, when I had far too much, I phoned the ward to find out if they could take it and they set me up with the equipment to express it at home. Nate would come round every week to collect it from my freezer.’

My eyes flick to the door to search for Nate, but it's just me, Dee, some scummy toilets and a crazy story.

'I felt trapped at home with a baby and a pre-schooler. Nate was the only adult I might see most days. I used to look forward to his visits.' Dee hiccups.

'I hoped I could live vicariously through him but he never had any sordid gossip for me. I really did used to tell him he needed a girl, if only for my own entertainment. You've got yourself a lovely fella there.' She's rubbing my arm again.

I shake my head as if to clear it. To separate what I saw from what I'm hearing.

'So, you and Nate ... ' I point between her and the door, my voice petering out as I don't quite ask the question.

'No sweetie. That's why I'm here.' Another giggle peels from her. 'Nate was worried. Thinks you got the wrong end of the stick and I hate to think it was because of me.'

Am I really believing this?

'I don't know what I saw.' I start to shake my head. 'I thought you were — '

She waggles the fingers of her left hand. 'Happily married. Nine years. Two kids. Hopefully a third one on the way someday soon.' That bejewelled hand moves back to her ample chest.

I take a long swig from my beer and try to digest her words.

Nate didn't seem like the sort of guy to mess me around. That's why I was so shocked when I saw him pawing over her.

But had I?

This touchy-feely, over-sharer is drunk and falling all over the place. Hell, *I'd* almost touched her up by accident. And her story is so obscure, could it really be made up? Would a potential competitor for his affections really go to these lengths to fool me?

'Have I just made a giant tit out of myself?' I wince.

‘No sweetie, I skidded in a puddle of something on the way to the toilets. Totally stacked it in the middle of the club. I’ve made a tit out of *myself*. You’re just in here helping me get cleaned up, right?’

‘You didn’t?’ My eyes widen as I scan her for injuries.

‘It’s just beer,’ she laughs. ‘I’m fine. Well, I’m covered in bruises and I’m gonna be in bits at six tomorrow when my little darlings wake up. I *so* can’t handle my drink after two kids and years of no social life.’ She flaps her hands and starts to usher me towards the club. ‘But really, I’m *totally okay* now, so you can get back to Nate.’

Before I know it, Dee has linked arms with me and I’m being marched out of the loos.

Nate’s leaning against the wall, staring at his bottle.

Dee gives me a tap on the bum as she growls, ‘Go get ‘em, tiger.’ She waggles her finger again and teeters across the club towards the bar.

I cross into his line of sight and do a strange salute. ‘Hey.’ Totally awkward. My greeting is so lame.

Nate’s eyes whip to mine and I feel his gaze heavy on me. His scrutiny is complex, as if he was worried, but with a tinge of something else. Is it annoyance? Could I have blown this by overreacting? We’d been having a particularly wonderful time up until I jumped to conclusions.

He straightens immediately, hand reaching out for my shoulder. ‘Hey. Everything okay?’

‘Yeah ... I ... Sorry I took so long. I was chatting with your friend, Dee.’ The music is super loud out of the ladies room and I have to shout to be heard.

‘She’s more of an acquaintance,’ Nate hollers back.

‘Shall we — ’

‘You want to — ’ We start to speak at the same time and nerves make me giggle like a schoolgirl. Or Dee.

Hand on my back, leaving a scorch mark under the pressure of his skin, he guides me to a quieter spot.

‘What just happened?’ His tone is confused rather than angry. ‘You ran off.’

‘I ... I ... just needed a minute.’ I stare at his broad chest, his stubbled chin, anywhere but at those baby-blues that get me all worked up.

His hand tips my chin up so I can’t not look him in the eye. ‘There was never anything between me and Dee.’

‘I know.’ I bite my lip feeling totally foolish.

His eyes flick between mine, scrutinising. The same expression crosses his face as did at the bar: discomfited. Conflicted. ‘I’ve got a lot of work to do, still. To prove you wrong.’

‘Prove me wrong?’ My voice goes up a notch.

‘You still seem dead set on me being this bad guy,’ he rumbles softly.

I stutter and try to argue but he kind of has me bang to rights.

‘I have trust issues.’ I force a small smile. ‘My problem, not yours.’

His large hand slips from my chin to the back of my head, curling into my hair. His fingers press in as he tugs me towards him, nuzzling me in close. Pleasure mixing with a slight sting at my scalp.

I gasp as I feel his lips hot on my ear as he says, ‘Good job I kind of love proving you wrong.’

Every nerve ending zings.

‘But’ he exhales heavily then shifts away a little, casting his gaze across the crowded venue before settling back on me. ‘I think you should know I ... ’

This is it. This is where he tells me I’m notch ninety-two on his bedpost.

‘Hooked up with Angel before?’ I offer, trying to help rip the plaster off.

‘What?’ he exclaims, rearing back.

I bite my lip. ‘Liam implied ... ’

Nate barks out an irritated laugh and shakes his head.

‘It’s okay.’ I put my hand on his chest. ‘Everyone has a past.’

He looks pained. His hands cup my face again, kissing me softly this time. He sighs, ‘Nothing ever happened with Angel. Or Dee. Or anyone here.’

‘But ... ’ I swallow. I’m not the jealous type but seeing Nate in his natural habitat, revered, surrounded by beauty and temptation, I can’t quite believe it.

‘I won’t lie. I’ve got a past, but not one we’re going to come across here.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ I scan the heaving room.

‘I made sure I never got with someone I might bump into again.’ He shrugs. ‘Made sure they were from out of town, passing through.’

I ponder that. ‘How come?’

‘I was never in the market for a relationship before.’ His touch starts to meander over my shoulders and down my arms as he talks. ‘I wasn’t interested in dating and I certainly didn’t want the awkward encounters days later with the why-didn’t-you-calls and hurt feelings.’

‘But now?’ It comes out as a whisper.

‘Now? I don’t know.’ His eyes are wide. Earnest. ‘I just keep praying I will see you again.’ His large hands circle my waist, drawing me right in.

The warmth rekindles inside me, but I’m still a little confused. ‘So, what was Liam saying?’

‘Ha!’ He shakes his head with a laugh of disbelief. ‘I walked in on Angel and Liam boning in the back once. She

was riding him, using a couple pairs of ice tongs to clamp his nipples, with a lemon shoved in his mouth. Scarred me for life.’ He grimaces. ‘It was the final push I needed to stop me from coming here and screwing around.’

‘Jeez, you wouldn’t want to do tequila slammers after that.’ I wince. ‘God knows where the ingredients might have been.’

‘Exactly.’ He nods, eyes wide.

‘No wonder you looked so appalled when Liam brought it up. I thought you had something to hide.’

‘I’ve not got anything to hide from you.’ His tone turns softly serious. ‘I can’t change my past. But I’m choosing a different future.’ He tightens his grip on my hips.

As I melt into his arms, his lips, Josie’s voice breaks into the moment. ‘Ella?’

Instinctively, I pull away. ‘Josie?’

Almost unrecognisable, her usually happy face is tear stained. Frowning. Confused. Maybe cross.

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I told you I’d come and get you. Seems like you reconciled. You don’t need me.’ Her glare swaps over to Nate before burning back onto me again.

‘I’m sorry. When did we — ’ I shake my head. I swear I haven’t had that much to drink.

‘I told you on the phone, before you got cut off.’

My eyes widen. Shit. ‘I didn’t hear you say — ’

Josie’s scowl deepens before her face contorts and tears leak down her cheeks. ‘Sorry. It’s been a rough night. I fucked up and now I’ve come here and fucked up with you, too.’

I rush to smother her in a hug. ‘No you haven’t.’ I try to soothe her with gentle sounds as I rub her back. ‘What’s happened?’

She raises her head, my neck now sticky and wet from her tears. ‘I don’t know where to begin. I don’t want to ruin your

night. I'll go.'

Josie turns and walks away.

I call after her, take a step forward and then turn back to Nate, my feet still inching towards Josie.

'Go!' he calls.

Chapter 21

Nate

What kind of cluster fuck is happening here? Just when one minor catastrophe is averted, another turns up. I don't really know Josie, but she's clearly upset by something.

Pushing through the crowd after her friend, Ella heads to the exit, and I know I won't see her again tonight. Her friend needs her, so of course she'll help her. That's the kind of person she is, she puts everyone else first.

The trouble is, the kind of person Ella thinks *I* am is not particularly complimentary. But I'm working on it. Trying to gain her trust, I'm being open and honest with her. Risking her disapproval by sharing my past is scary as hell, but I'm hoping it's the right thing to do. And I guess, as long as she keeps showing up, I can keep trying.

I'm not sure why I'm so adamant to prove her wrong about me, but here I am — stone cold sober in a club, spilling my past, trying to show her my present self — mind racing to think of all the different ways I can convince her.

Shit. Now my plan for later tonight — the *ultimate trust fall* — is fucked.

The reasonable voice in my head knows her leaving to help her friend was the right thing to do. Wanting her to stay would've been selfish. But I can't say I'm not disappointed.

I just fucking hope I get another chance.

Lingering over the dregs of my beer, I pull my phone from my pocket, and send her a text.

Nate: I know you're busy with Josie but let me know you get home OK.

My phone flashes with her response.

Ella: Sorry I didn't say a proper goodbye. I'm heading home with Josie. Thanks for a good night.

It hadn't been a *good* night. It had been *fucking perfect*, until it wasn't.

I want a do-over. To give Ella a night that's not marred with misunderstandings and upset friends. I type out another message.

Nate: We've got unfinished business. Can I see you tomorrow?

Ella: I can't tomorrow. Have to work on a report, plus Chloe needs me to take her badminton training.

Consciously, I try to relax my grasp on my bottle as I reread the message.

Is she giving me the brush off? Heart in my mouth, I ping off another text. Scott would be appalled with how uncool I'm playing this. Apparently I'm channelling Chunk.

Nate: Brunch on Saturday?

Ella: Is that the most trustworthy thing you can think of?

Nate: You'll trust me by the end. Promise ;)

Ella

'Josie, wait.' I catch up to my friend and she looks at me with panda eyes.

'Let's get out of here, but I need to grab my blazer first.' I guide Josie over to the cloakroom.

She keeps mumbling sorry as we wait in the queue of people grabbing their coats.

'It's honestly fine,' I promise her. 'This is why you called earlier, isn't it? And I just babbled on about my problems. I'm so sorry. Are you going to tell me what's up?'

She sniffs and looks around. 'Not here.'

Retrieving my jacket, we link arms and head to the exit.

Pushing the door open into the bitter night air, she glances down as I teeter on the steps. 'Ugh, you wore fuck-me heels.'

Smirking, I say, ‘I did wear my smart office apparel that gives me height advantage and a confidence boost, yes.’

Huddling together as we walk, we pick our way along the pavement.

‘I’ve totally fucked up your date.’ She sighs. ‘And it’s gonna take ages to walk to my car.’

‘Time for you to tell me about what’s up.’ I nudge her.

‘You go first. What happened?’ She dips her head back towards the club. ‘I thought it had all gone wrong for you. I’d never have come otherwise.’

The misunderstanding flashes through my head again and I feel warmth spread to my cheeks. Wishing I could fall into a hole, I settle for burying my head on her shoulder.

‘I overreacted.’

‘Go on.’

I raise my head back up so I don’t break my neck on our stagger to the car. ‘I saw him with this other woman. Completely flipped out.’ I shake my head at my embarrassing overreaction. ‘Ran off. Spoke to you. Then they found me, she — Dee — explained. I’d got it wrong. Now, I feel like a total fool.’

Josie is quiet for a moment. ‘He’s not like your Dad.’ She gives me a squeeze. ‘I see how he looks at you.’

‘I guess I worry history will ... repeat itself.’

‘After what you and your mum went through? It’s only natural you’d flip out if you thought it was happening again. But ... everything’s okay now?’

My phone buzzes and a message from Nate fills the screen.

I find a smile creeping across my lips. ‘Yes. Despite the misunderstanding, it was such a great night. He just texted me.’

I tap out a reply to Nate and chuckle at his immediate reply.

‘You like this guy, huh?’

‘Gah! I didn’t mean to. You know this was just supposed to be a bit of fun. But — ’

‘But when you react like a prize prick, you realise there’s more to it than that.’

I bury my face back on her shoulder for a moment. ‘Pretty much.’

‘I’m happy for you.’

‘My neurosis about cheating and infidelity is definitely something I need to work on.’ I swipe my hair off my face as I talk. ‘But somehow, I feel with Nate ... ’ biting my lip, I pause to choose my words, ‘maybe if anyone can help me work through it, it’s him.’ The last part comes out as a whisper. I can’t quite believe I’m saying it out loud.

Josie’s eyes widen. ‘Looks like my advice paid off for once.’ A rueful smile flashes on her face briefly as she says, ‘Although ... I told you to blow off some steam. I didn’t expect you to fall in love.’

We reach her bright yellow Beetle as I say, ‘Who said anything about *love*?’ I make air quotes. ‘I’m in serious *like*, alright?’

‘If you say so,’ she snickers.

We get in and slam our doors. Josie starts the engine, fans on full to try and get the heat through.

I cover the hand-break with my hand. ‘Spill the beans, my friend. No excuses now we’re here.’

‘You remember that guy I told you about?’

‘The zombie?’

‘Scott.’ She hesitates. ‘So ... he got to know me a little better and is no longer interested.’

‘What?’ I shriek.

Josie shrugs and puts the car into gear to pull away.

‘But you’re amazing. What did he say exactly?’

Josie remains quiet, concentrating on driving as we exit the car park, joining the main road. I don't badger her; she'll tell me when she's ready.

'Amongst other things, I'm too young,' she says eventually, her voice quiet.

'What were these other things?' I ask, indignant.

She tuts, 'It doesn't matter.'

Josie takes a bend erratically, the car swerving before she yanks it straight and I don't push her on it, not when she's trying to drive.

'You know you can talk to me about this whenever you want?'

There's a long silence before she says, 'It's just ... I thought there was a real spark, you know?'

Chapter 22

Ella

It's habit to fend for myself, so when Nate offered to pick me up for our brunch date, I insisted on meeting him there. Big mistake.

Helena has been temperamental for a few days and now she's started overheating. Scared to start her, I hurry to the bus stop, catching the seventy-two just in time. Luckily, there's a seat free and I perch on the edge, unable to relax.

My vanity flared into overdrive as I considered how to present myself today. Attractive, obviously, but not too slutty like in the pub, and not too practical like our high ropes date. *Appropriately* dressed, unlike in the bin-bag-rain-poncho or at the rock club.

Hoping I've struck the right note with a tight jumper, snug jeans and boots with a bit of a heel, I tug at my chunky scarf, my hands at a loss for anything else to fiddle with. I've let my hair hang loose, falling in soft waves over my shoulders, as it's actually behaving today. Although, after rushing, it probably looks like it's been blow dried in a hurricane. I'm not about to make it worse by raking my fingers through it.

I arrive at our meeting spot at the park right on time. Thank you traffic gods.

Winter sun is glinting off the coursing river. Nate's standing, leaning on the railing of the bridge, staring into the depths.

He takes my breath away when I see him. His leather jacket slick to his shoulders and defined arms, reflected sunlight brightening his blue eyes which crinkle at the corners when they scan me up and down.

He leans in and pecks my cheek, his stubble now grown into a soft, bristly beard. 'You look amazing,' he rumbles into my ear, the vibrations shooting straight to my centre.

‘Not so bad yourself,’ I reply, the anxiety of making it to our date now replaced with gentle butterflies of anticipation.

‘So what’s the plan?’ I curl my fingers into his, his touch cascading tingles through my stomach, stirring the butterflies into a frenzy.

He tosses a bulky rucksack onto his shoulder and we amble away from the bridge. ‘I’ve booked us a table at Little Treat. It’s that new brunch and dessert place.’

‘Ohhh, I’ve been wanting to try there.’ I give a little clap of excitement.

‘I hoped you’d like it. They have a cocktail menu.’ He nudges me suggestively.

‘Sounds perfect. Thanks for thinking of me.’ I give him a shy smile. ‘But, you know, perhaps next time we should do something you love to do?’

He gives me a very mischievous look. ‘Actually, I plan to show you that very soon.’

I straighten, turning to him as we walk. ‘Oh, what is it?’

‘You’ll find out soon enough.’ He raises his brows up and down just once. ‘I don’t want you to have any prejudices or preconceptions before you give it a go.’

‘Always with the mysterious.’ I pretend to sigh, bumping my hip into his as we walk along.

He smirks. ‘If I tell you in advance, you’ll start thinking about it. Or worse, thinking how to get out of it.’

‘What is it?’ I quirk my eyebrow as I joke, ‘It sounds *awful*.’

‘It’s one of my most favourite things in the world.’ Our eyes lock and I can’t stop my grin growing wider.

He squeezes my hand and I love the way his rough, calloused fingertips feel on mine.

Our feet crunch in the old fallen leaves as we wander along the river bank towards the city.

‘Everything okay with your friend?’ he asks softly.

‘I’m sorry I had to leave like that,’ I reply, bringing my hand to his bicep.

‘It’s alright,’ he says softly. ‘Of course you had to go after her.’

I swallow, the weight of a hundred thoughts crashing through my brain at once. ‘I feel like I owe you an explanation.’

‘About Josie?’

‘No, about me. About Dee.’ I risk a glance at him, but his intense eyes make me look away. I should give my side of the story before I lose my nerve. I need to address what happened with him.

Doesn’t mean I’m going to enjoy it.

We walk along in silence while I try to pick my words, don’t want to go into daddy-drama now.

‘I overreacted,’ I say eventually. ‘I thought I’d come out of the ladies to find you hitting on some other woman. Except —

‘I told you I never — ’ he tries to interrupt.

‘Oh, I know,’ I rush to agree. ‘Dee explained. I jumped to conclusions, I’m sorry.’

‘Please don’t apologise.’ He stops his stride, turning to me. ‘I’m guessing something’s happened to you ... that’s made it hard to trust people.’

I nod, reassured he’s understood but isn’t pushing me.

‘You don’t have to talk about it unless you want to.’ He squeezes my hand again. With a lighter voice he says, ‘You might have noticed, I’d really like to earn your trust so ... you can ask me anything. I want to be open with you.’ He shines that dimple at me as if it’s a challenge and then turns and we carry on walking.

One question *has* kept niggling at me every time I’ve gone over the events of the other night, but I’m not sure how to ask

it.

‘Dee seemed lovely.’ I choose my words carefully. ‘Quite drunk though. Tactile. Bit of an over-sharer.’

‘That’s an understatement,’ he laughs.

‘So, I have a question.’ I look up at him as we walk along. ‘How did you get into collecting her ... what did she call it? Liquid gold?’ I roll the words around my tongue, the phrase is new to me and I kind of like how it sounds. Empowered. ‘She told me quite the story and I’ll be honest,’ I chuckle, ‘she probably shared a little too much.’

Nate laughs. ‘I forgot she calls it that. That’s an easy question.’ He catches my eye. ‘I volunteer at the hospital. Pick stuff up, deliver it. Saves them money on taxis or delivery firms.’

My feet stumble as I pause. ‘Wow, that’s — ’

He shrugs with a small smile. ‘Least I can do.’ Pointing down the street, he says, ‘We’re almost there, hope you’re hungry.’

Little Treat is heaving inside. We’re shown to a table by a living wall, luscious with succulents and ferns.

‘There’s too much to choose from,’ I say as I pore over the menu. ‘It all looks so good.’

‘Let’s get the Big Treat sharing platter.’ Nate studies the card. ‘Looks like it has two of everything.’

‘Perfect.’ I set the menu down with a tap. ‘Seeing as Helena’s sulking and I had to get the bus, I’m going to get a cocktail, too.’

‘Sex on the Beach?’ Nate cocks an eyebrow.

‘You gonna join me?’ I flick my brow right back.

‘Think I’ll stick to sparkling water. Then I can give you a lift home.’ Nate’s giving me that intense smouldering gaze of his and I’m wishing our order was to go. ‘If that’s okay with you?’

My nod comes out a little jerky and the waitress arrives, sparing me the need to reply coherently.

‘Volunteering’s a pretty awesome thing to do,’ I say once they’ve taken our order. ‘How do you manage it all though? You’ve pretty much got three jobs.’

‘I feel it’s important to help out. So that’s not a job.’ He sits back, arm trailing across the top of a chair, open and ... deliciously tempting. ‘And the others? Honestly, they don’t feel like work, either. Do you like what you do?’

I tip my head to the side, thinking. ‘It’s a safe career. People will always need accountants.’

‘That doesn’t sound like a ringing endorsement for a job you love.’ He cocks his head, looking like he’s analysing me.

I shrug. ‘It’s a good job.’ I’m trying to convince him as much as myself. ‘But I’ve been considering picking up a side hustle or something. I’ve been investigating evening classes.’ I give a small smile. ‘But there’s nothing available that I want to do.’ Nate holds my gaze, lips parted slightly as he listens. ‘And even if there was, I probably wouldn’t have time.’

The server delivers our order, and we start on a shared stack of loaded pancakes.

After a mouthful, Nate looks ponderous as he says, ‘You help out a lot at home, don’t you?’

‘I wouldn’t say a lot.’ I take a sip of my cocktail as I consider this. ‘But it probably is. The trouble is my mum is out working so hard for us, I want to contribute, too. And if that’s cooking dinner or making sure my sister is okay, then I’m happy to do it.’

He leans towards me, settling on his elbows. ‘You must be a close family.’

‘We’re all each other has. My dad left, then my mum had my sister, Chloe, with this other guy and he left too.’ I find myself shrugging again. ‘It’s just us now and I want to do my bit.’ I pop a blueberry in my mouth and it bursts on my tongue as I chew. ‘Tell me about your family.’

‘There’s not much to say. It’s just me and Scott in this part of the world.’

‘Scott?’ I repeat, sitting forwards. ‘From the pub?’ My brain scrambles to comprehend. ‘He’s your brother?’

‘Yep.’ He looks quizzically at me.

Jesus.

Josie’s been hooking up with Nate’s brother.

His brother!

‘Well, now I feel like a traitor.’ I wince. ‘He’s the reason Josie was so upset.’

‘Scott upset Josie?’ Nate’s eyebrows fold together.

‘Something weird went down. They were seeing each other but then he blew her off, said some stuff that upset her.’ I press my lips together, concerned for my friend all over again.

‘That doesn’t sound like him.’ His voice is tight, surprised. ‘Aside from the fact he never has girlfriends, he’s not the sort of guy that would mess someone around. But ...’ Nate rubs at the scruff on his chin. ‘Scott’s not been himself recently.’

‘Josie’s not said much.’ A pang of guilt passes through me. ‘I don’t actually know what happened. Don’t worry, I’ll get more information before jumping to conclusions again.’ Heat spreads to my cheeks as I remember where jumping to conclusions got me last time.

For the briefest moment I let the fear snake back in and wonder if maybe Scott *is* the kind of guy that would mess someone around, maybe they’re two bad-boy-brother-peas-in-a-pod. But I mentally shake that thought off. Not. Jumping. To. Conclusions.

Nate reaches out for my hand. ‘Please don’t worry about that.’

I flash him a grin that says I probably will continue to recall my embarrassing moment of paranoid anxiety for a while longer.

Taking a fortifying breath, I reframe my mindset. ‘They’re both adults.’ I shrug with a smile.

Nate catches my eye, holding my gaze as if he can read every thought and innermost turmoil. After a beat, he squeezes my hand and lets go, sitting up straighter to change the subject. ‘Now, tell me what’s up with Rusty.’

We’re so busy chatting, our food disappears in the blink of an eye. We settle up and head out into the chilly autumn air.

Entwining his fingers with mine, Nate rubs his thumb over the back of my hand. ‘Shall we walk along the river before heading off?’

I lean in close to him as we walk. ‘That sounds lovely.’

Walking back towards the bridge in the park, I feel light. Content.

Part of me doesn’t want this cosy feeling to end. I love sharing things with him and telling him things about me I didn’t expect I’d feel comfortable enough to say. But part of me wants to take us to the next level, to spend time with Nate in private, and see how we connect there. If that encounter in the pub was anything to go by, it would be mind-blowing. A shiver runs through me in anticipation.

‘Are you cold?’ his deep voice rumbles. ‘Shall I take you home?’

‘I’m not cold.’ I bite my lip and look away, unable to meet his gaze in case I’ve got this wrong. ‘I wouldn’t mind if you took me home though.’ I toe a loose stone on the ground before locking eyes with him. ‘You might need to stay to help me warm the place up though. No one else will be back for hours.’

He cups my cheek and pulls me towards him for a long kiss, one hand snaking up into my hair, the other down, wrapping around the back of my neck, tugging me in close to him. His scent wraps around me and I’m lost.

‘You sure?’ he murmurs into my mouth.

I nod, not breaking the contact of my lips on his and I feel him smile as he kisses me.

Cosiness be damned, it's *all* of me that wants to take this to the next level. My fingers work their way under his jumper, telling him so. He's pressed tight against me and by the unmistakable hardening in his trousers, I can tell he's on the same page.

Suddenly, it feels incongruous being out here in a park, in the middle of the day, with so many people around.

'Let's go.' I break our kiss, feeling that now we can't get away fast enough.

'I'm parked over there.' He points to the road outside the main gates. Hitching his rucksack higher, he leads me away from the river.

I check up the street but no sign of the muddy SUV, although there's a small car park at the end which we seem to be aiming for.

Nate pauses by some motorbikes and starts rummaging in his bag, probably searching for his keys. I survey the lots to try and see the 4WD and when I look back he's produced a helmet.

A motorbike helmet.

A strained giggle escapes. 'Are you joking?'

'Nope. *This* is Betty.' He nods to an acid green bike.

I gape in response, unable to formulate words.

'You've got Helena. You kind of inspired me with the whole name thing.' He widens his arms in a lopsided shrug. 'She's going to take us home.'

'She absolutely is *not*.' I keep my voice light but my heart is pounding inside my chest.

'Why not?' His smile suddenly falters.

'These are death traps. I'm not getting on one.' I take a step backwards. 'I'll ... have to walk.'

He lowers the outstretched helmet to his side. ‘Don’t be silly. You can’t walk.’

‘Fine. I’ll get a taxi then,’ I sigh, knowing full well I can’t spring for a taxi. ‘I’m not getting on it.’

‘I don’t know why you’re so against it. I’ll take care of you.’ He shakes his head with laughter in his voice.

I suck in a breath. ‘You’ve obviously never lost someone close to you in a motorbike accident.’ My voice comes out as a whisper.

Nate’s smile falters, mouth opening to say something but he stops himself.

I take another step but he matches me, catching my hand.

‘I’m *so* sorry that happened.’ His voice is gentle as he asks, ‘Can I ask, who did you lose? I mean, you don’t have to tell me if it’s too hard.’

I take a moment to gather my thoughts. ‘Josie’s brother. He wasn’t really close with me. I was only fourteen when it happened. But I’m close to Josie.’ My heart clenches at the memory. ‘I saw how it devastated her.’ I shake my head. ‘Her whole family.’

‘Ella ...’ it comes out gruff and Nate pauses, swallowing. ‘I’m so sorry to hear that.’ Eyes locked on mine, infinitely deep, he takes a heavy breath. ‘You’re right, I haven’t lost someone close to me. Not quite.’ He gives the barest of head shakes. ‘But my brother did. His best friend.’

‘So, surely you get it?’ I squeeze his fingers and force a small smile.

His crystal blue eyes are filled with an intensity. ‘Let me just ... introduce you. You’ll feel safer if you know her.’

‘It’s nice to meet you Betty,’ I call over to the bike. ‘There you go. I’m still not getting on.’ I flash him a grin to show I’m not budging on this, but it doesn’t mean *all* our plans are off. ‘You know my address, you can meet me there.’

I take a step backwards, slowly disentangling our fingers and dropping my hand to my thigh.

‘I’m not going without you.’ He raises his eyebrow, laughter in his voice. ‘I’ll walk back, too.’

‘What about Betty?’

‘She’s got wheels.’ He gives a half shrug.

As he bends to stow the helmet back in his bag a look of disappointment flashes across his face, but when he straightens, all I can see is his sexy, mischievous grin.

‘Lead the way then.’ He kicks the stand up and pushes her out of the space.

‘This isn’t going to hurt Betty is it? Pushing her? Or you? She looks heavy.’ I eyeball Nate rolling the metal beast.

‘Don’t go dissing my ride and then making out like you care.’ He winks at me. ‘Don’t worry. Wheeling your bike is part of the test. You have to show you can do it in case you ever break down.’

‘It’s about a twenty-five minute walk,’ I warn as I stride on, mentally cursing my cute boots with every pace. I hadn’t expected this much walking. My feet are already throbbing.

He nods like it’s no sweat, but I’m feeling slightly guilty for putting him out. Not guilty enough to change my mind, though.

We walk quietly for a minute, the clicking of my boots and the ticking of his metal steed as it rolls over the tarmac filling the space between us.

He dips his head as he continues to push Betty. ‘Have you heard of Blood Bikes?’

I shake my head. ‘No?’

He gives me a proud smile. ‘That’s what Dee was talking about. There’s a whole network of us delivering medications or samples or whatever across the country.’

I let the rumble of a passing car die down before asking, ‘So, that’s how you do your volunteering for the hospital? You deliver stuff on a motorbike?’

He nods. ‘If it can fit on a bike, we can take it.’

Looking to the horizon as we walk, he says, ‘I’ve done enhanced rider training, I’ll have you know.’ His voice is playful before he adds, ‘It’s a requirement to volunteer with them. I take it very seriously.’ Quietly, he adds, ‘And, you’d be completely safe with me.’

My God. That’s soul scorchingly, outrageously noble, but I’m still not in the position to change my mind. I toss him a rueful smile. ‘It’s not that I don’t trust *you*, Nate.’

‘You’re really not into this, huh?’ He asks after a while. ‘Do you think you’ll ever change your mind?’ His eyes hold that swirl of emotion again and I feel a pang of guilt, but I can’t go back on my promise.

‘I’m sorry to disappoint you. If it’s any consolation,’ I meet his eyes, ‘I’m into you.’ I waggle my eyebrows trying to break the solemn feel.

‘You’re absolutely not a disappointment.’ He bites his lip mischievously as he watches me. I notice a bead of sweat on his forehead; this bike wheeling malarkey may not be as easy as he’s making it look.

My heel goes down a rut and, gasping, I teeter precariously before righting myself with a giggle. Don’t want to stack it now.

There’s a bench ahead and it looks so beautiful I can almost hear it calling my name. ‘You want to stop and have a rest?’ Nate points out the bench I’d been eyeing.

It’s not a mirage!

‘No thanks,’ I bite out. Now I’ve started this ridiculous walk home, I feel I have to finish it, despite my aching heels and pinched toes. Nate can’t see me caving in. I don’t let people see me being weak. ‘I’m *great*.’ Determined not to limp, I quicken my pace.

His long legs easily keep up and I try not to wince with every step.

‘You sure I can’t convince you to hop on? It’ll stop your pretty feet hurting,’ he says with a wicked grin.

‘Nice try.’ I shoot him a smile. ‘But I’ve made a promise to never ride one.’

‘Even after all this time?’

‘I swore to her.’ I shrug.

‘Maybe it’s because I’ve grown up with them,’ Nate softens his voice. ‘But I think if they’re respected they can be safe.’

Rolling my eyes with a laugh, I say, ‘Maybe we should agree to disagree, Nate?’

He chuckles. ‘Betty and I will be here, if you change your mind.’

We press on another two hundred metres and he easily keeps pace despite hauling that lump of metal along too.

Turning into my neighbourhood, my house comes into view on the other side of a large green.

It’s beautiful.

‘Nearly there,’ I sigh with relief.

I scan between Nate, my house and the hard tarmac my feet still need to pound on.

The thought of almost being in the warm with my boots off, is too much. I stop, yank my footwear off and dart over the road to cut across the grass in just my socks.

‘Hey, that’s cheating,’ Nate calls out.

I glance back with a playful grin, wielding my boots above my head. ‘Race you,’ I laugh.

I set off at pace, eyes fixed on my house. Behind me, I hear the growl of a motorbike roaring into life.

Chapter 23

Nate

Disbelief shoots through me as I watch Ella prance away. It only takes a second for me to mount my bike, shove my helmet on and kick off.

I chuckle as I twist the throttle, taking the circuitous road route to her house.

Just when I thought the date might be fizzling out to a sombre end, she goes and springs a race on me, the delight on her face turning her beautiful features radiant.

It had stung, her complete aversion to my bike. Betty's my first love. Yes, inspired by Ella, I've taken to calling my bike Betty. Betty the bike. I was *sure* Ella would approve.

Betty is freedom.

And not just in the literal sense. Riding is therapeutic, freeing my mind, feeding my soul. Even giving me a second chance in life. Being involved with UK Blood Bikes gave me my confidence back, my self-worth.

But, after talking with Ella, I get it. She has her rules, her reasons. I'd be a prick if I didn't understand. Now, I'm just relieved this whole event wasn't another date ruiner.

She's quick, I'll give her that, but I'm gaining on her. It's looking like we'll arrive at her place at the same time and I think it's probably best for everyone if this little competition ends in a draw.

I scan the road for obstacles and when I peek back to Ella she's suddenly disappeared. Controlling my stop, I look back to the green and see she hasn't disappeared. Ella's on her hands and knees, laughter creasing her face.

Parking my bike as quickly as I can, I launch myself over the grass.

‘Are you okay?’ My eyes frisk her for injuries as I close the last few metres between us.

She’s covered in mud, but laughter is singing from her lips. She’s struggling to stand, she’s laughing so hard.

‘I’m such a nob,’ she giggles.

I reach my hand out to help her up. ‘Is this a good time to suggest you’d have been safer with me on the bike?’ I give her a flirty smirk, fairly convinced I know the answer from her exasperated grin.

Chuckling, she says, ‘It’s never going to be a good time to mention *that*.’ Her legs slip from under her on the slick mud and I grab her, stopping her from falling again.

‘Let’s get you home.’ I flip her over my shoulder and wade off the swampy ground, with her squealing and wiggling.

‘Careful, I’m heavy,’ she mumbles to my back.

‘Fuck off, I can bench double you,’ I retort.

She’s still giggling as I deposit her by her front door. She rummages in her bag for the key and eventually opens it up.

I scoop her back up, enjoying the way she feels in my arms, and carry her inside.

We manage to get the door shut behind us and I kick my shoes off, not wanting to put her down. Following her instructions, I carry her into the bathroom before reluctantly letting her go.

She sets the shower off, the sound of rushing water filling the air.

Catching her reflection in the mirror, Ella bites her lip with a wince. ‘Gross.’

‘I think you look hot.’ I pull her towards me, tugging on her scarf to get it out of the way, so I can kiss that bottom lip. I want to kiss everywhere, but I’m going to start there.

‘Wait, you should give me a sec to sort this.’ She gestures down.

Cocking my head, I can't see the problem. She's perfect.

'I'm disgustingly filthy.' Her hand tentatively explores her mud matted hair.

'Are you not going to let me help you get cleaned up?' I quirk my eyebrow, praying she'll change her mind.

'Let me get clean ... and then perhaps you can help me get dirty all over again?' She bites her bottom lip coyly.

'Five minutes.' I give her a reluctant kiss. 'The clock is ticking.'

Ella

Quickly, I wash the mud off in the shower and perform a last minute primp and prep.

It's ridiculous, my nerves ramping up like this. He's pretty much seen it all before. He had me laid out like an all you can eat buffet when we first met. But this is different. More intimate. To be honest, in the pub it was like an out of body experience. I never do things like that.

But this is real.

Before I know it, a knock at the bathroom door sounds out over the noise of the water.

'Can I help you rinse off?'

Through the steam, I watch Nate come in.

He stops.

For maybe the first time ever, he has no banter or witty remark, no heart melting declaration. His eyes smoulder and his teeth skim his lip.

The heat in his gaze, his sudden inability to form a sentence, gives me the confidence boost I need.

I flick the nozzle on the shower, changing the flow direction and it cascades down. The spray ricochets off the walls, the glass screen, off me.

‘You coming in like that?’ It’s impossible to wipe the coy smile from my face, seeing Nate dumbstruck.

Barely breaking eye contact, he pulls his jumper off, unbuttons his shirt and wriggles his trousers down. Now it’s my turn to be speechless as he stands in front of me wearing nothing but his boxer-briefs and smile.

I knew he was strong, broad, but seeing it is something quite different. My pitiful imagination couldn’t begin to conjure this beautiful image. Intricate tattoos, rich like artwork, cover most of his left shoulder and curl beyond his elbow. His chest is defined, but not imposing. Pecs lead to abs, to a smattering of hair. He has one of those incredible v-cuts: a giant arrow down to his junk. And believe me, my eyes are tracking down.

I don’t want to just see. I need to touch him. Feel him.

I flick a few droplets of water in Nate’s direction. ‘Don’t want to get your tighty-whities wet now, do you?’

A long ridge strains at the fabric causing me to hitch my breath.

I reach out my hand but he shakes his head, eyes dark with need.

‘Turn around,’ he grinds out.

‘Not fair. I’ve shown you mine.’ My gaze flicks down to my own body, trails of the last pearly shampoo bubbles hugging me.

The look he’s giving me doesn’t offer discussion. I turn away, risking a peep back to watch him strip down his boxers and step out of them.

Like an animal stalking its prey, he steps into the shower. As I turn to him, his hands find my face, his thumb traces my lip before he draws my mouth to his.

I wind my hands around his neck, running my fingers across his shoulders and down his back. He gasps.

Nate

I want to devour her.

The water from the shower is pounding down on us. Starting with my hands in her hair, I comb down, gliding through the soaked ribbons of her hair onto her arms then slipping onto the soft skin of her back. Grabbing the soap off the side, I massage her all over, taking my opportunity to touch every inch of her, like I've been fantasising about for weeks.

I want to worship her.

'You look fucking incredible.' Cupping her wet, soapy tits in my hands, I slide my thumbs over her nipples.

They pebble under my touch and my throat tightens, my breath coming out as a growl.

It's hard to hold back from bending her over right here. I kiss her until we're both breathless and then pull away slightly, resting my forehead against hers, the water trickling between us.

Her hands have worked their way down my back and she skims them around my hips, drawing patterns on my skin as she works her fingers to my stomach, and then teases me by fanning her fingers out again to my back, over my butt and then round to graze up my thighs, avoiding my dick by mere millimetres.

My cock is so hard it's throbbing. Thing's got a mind of its own as it twitches towards her touch. As if she can sense my need, she pulls my hips towards her, grinding her pussy against my thigh. The shower continues to thunder as my cock presses against the soft skin of her belly.

She breathes out a swear word as she grasps my shaft, squeezing just the right amount as she pulls slowly down and up. My knees almost buckle.

'This is quite ... woah,' she murmurs.

Strangling a groan, I try to distract her — to distract myself — and bite at the soft skin where her neck meets her shoulder. Still massaging her body, I bring my palms back to her breasts.

I home in on their perfection, a soft weight, just filling my hand.

‘This beats any foam party at the rock club.’ I try to joke but now I’m thinking about her soapy, wet body; looking at her soapy, wet body; feeling her soapy, wet body and I don’t think I can take any more.

The distraction isn’t working. Worried I might shoot my load all over her stomach before I’ve even managed to fully reacquaint myself with her pussy, I carefully lift her up. She wraps her arms around my neck as I carry her, princess style, and step out of the shower. Holding her tightly, I relish the feeling of her soft skin against mine.

She reaches out to shut the water off.

With Ella dripping in my arms, I pad down the hall. ‘Which way?’

‘Last door on the left,’ she mumbles as she runs her lips over my collar bone.

Droplets pool in her navel as I lay her out on the bed. I bend down, sucking the water up as she giggles.

‘Something funny?’ I ask, voice rough with restraint.

‘Your beard tickles.’ That glorious sound rings out again as I brush my chin on her belly.

‘Oh, you think that tickles, huh?’ I kiss and nip and brush across her whole body, seeking out all her sensitive spots and cataloguing where I really make her zing.

The back of her knee, tracking up her inner thigh has her squealing and I peer up to see that trademark blush smothering her from her cheeks all the way down her neck to her dark pink nipples.

My dick is desperate to join in the fun, but I’m worried if I start, I won’t be able to stop. I don’t want to get carried away and hurt her. It’s been a long wait. What’s a little longer to ensure I get this right?

I kiss my way over to her beautiful pussy and run my tongue along her slit. She groans, hand suddenly clamping

down on the back of my head, holding me in place as she opens her legs wider to me and I lick and kiss my way in. She's fucking wet. Primed. The sweet taste of her on my tongue floods back memories of our first time and another growl escapes me. I want to bottle this flavour.

My balls are seriously heavy and aching. You'd think I hadn't been tugging off in the shower twice a day since that night a few weeks ago when she strutted into the bar and took over my life.

I need her to come for me like she did in the bar. No, better. Harder.

I slip my pointer finger gently inside her, just a little, and she bucks her hips, showing me she wants more.

'You like that?' I murmur, rubbing my stubble on the sensitive skin of her thighs as I push deeper into her warm, welcoming depths.

'Uh-huh,' she moans, her breath hitching, her hands flying up to tug at her hair.

'Good, because I fucking love it,' I rumble, barely breaking the contact of my lips with her pussy.

A feral groan escapes her as I trail my tongue around her clit, she moves in rhythm as I pump my finger.

Gently, I introduce a second finger, slowing as she adjusts.

She's so tight, I'm worried I'm going to rip her in half when my dick finally gets its way.

With beckoning strokes, I find the spot that makes her legs tremble and coax her to the edge. She winds the duvet into her fists, knuckles white. I can tell she's close as she gasps my name, almost begging me to continue.

'Don't worry, I have no intention of stopping,' I speak against her, unwilling to move my mouth away from her.

I ease a third finger inside, gently stretching her pussy wider still. If she comes for me like this, then I know she'll be able to handle me. Her slickness drips onto my hand and I know she's almost there.

Clamping my lips over her clit, I give a long suck and in no time, she comes undone. I feel wave upon wave of contractions thunder through her as the muscles inside her pulse around my fingers.

When I'm sure she's ridden that wave for as long as possible, I draw my fingers back out, kissing my way to her lips.

'Can you taste how fucking hot you are?' I mumble through my kisses.

The thought of her tasting herself on my lips is such a damn turn on.

'I want you inside me,' she demands into my mouth, urgently kissing me back. Her hand circles my dick again.

'Fuck,' she exhales.

I chuckle at her response. I'm a grower. 'Shit.' I stop suddenly and raise on to my hands and knees, starting to move away.

She clamps her legs around me. 'What?'

'Condom. Wallet. Bathroom.' I punctuate my words with more kisses as I can't actually keep my mouth off her.

She sits up a little, shaking her head, chestnut hair cascading over her shoulders. 'Bedside table.' She reaches out to the left of the bed, hand grasping the air and I finish the move for her, pulling the drawer open and grabbing a small blue box.

'I've been tested. All clear, but, better be safe, right?'

Ella nods, plucking the box from my hand. 'Allow me.' She tears the cellophane off with her teeth.

I twist round and drop down to lie on my back, hands behind my head on the pillow, a smile creeping across my face. Cowgirl will be better, she can take control. Her hands are steady as she unrolls the condom over my cock, which feels like it has its own fucking pulse.

With a shake of her head she almost laughs. 'That thing is so freaking huge.'

‘Hey, this *thing* is just very pleased to see you.’

She climbs over me, her hands by my head, knees by my hips and I grasp her waist to guide her. Her gaze finds mine as she drags the head of my cock against her, soon it’s covered in her release. Slowly sinking onto my shaft, just an inch, her eyes widen, seeming to question if this is okay.

I’m almost seeing stars, she feels so good. I’m not going to leave her in any doubt this is more than okay. ‘You feel incredible,’ I manage to grunt. ‘You have no idea.’

She eases back up and then lowers down an inch further, her hot, wet pussy inviting me in deeper.

‘That’s it. Just like that,’ I grind out, still trying to keep some semblance of control.

A moan shudders through her and she arches her back as she takes me in even further. Her tits thrust forwards and I sit up a little to suck one perfect peak into my mouth.

Ella pushes me back slightly with a coy smile, angling her other breast for a turn in my mouth. She continues to move up and down on my cock, the steady pace building.

Unable to hold back any more, as she sinks down again I grasp her curves, pulling her firmly on to me as I buck my hips up.

‘Nate,’ she cries out, taking me to the hilt.

I fucking love my name on her lips. I’m glad I never shared it with anyone else in those dark years.

I withdraw most of the way, worried I’d over stepped, but her fingers dig into my pecs as she slams back on me again. *Oh so tight.* My eyes feel like they’ve rolled back in my head.

‘My god, you are doing so good.’ I can’t believe she’s taken all of me. It feels like we were made to go together; she feels like fucking perfection.

As she rides me, I reach my thumb in between us and circle her clit.

She leans back, angling my dick against her G-spot, and I feel my balls tighten.

The feel of her muscles spasming around my cock as she cries my name is the last possible straw and I follow her into the abyss. It's all I can do to clutch on to her and not let go as we fall together.

This must be how a junkie feels, jonesing for the next hit. My drug of choice, of course, is Ella — but more specifically — making her come.

Coming down from that high left me feeling untethered, like a loose rope in a storm. Holding her tight, I anchor myself. I can't stop from kissing her body, from tasting her. Before I know it, I'm straddling her. I have a divine nipple in my mouth, my tongue circling it while my thumb is drawing matching loops around her clit. She's fisting my hair like she's about to explode again. My dick rallies himself in some sort of superhuman effort and is back reporting for duty as she starts to shudder under me.

Wishing I had a second pair of hands, I manage to roll on another condom and while she's still catching her breath, I line myself up, the tip of my dick waiting politely to be invited in.

She takes a hold of me and strokes me against her. 'I need to feel you again.'

As I push my way in, she wraps her legs around me, pulling me down and into her.

Sweet fuck.

As I plough into her I have to bite the inside of my cheek, she feels so damn good.

Propped up, my arms outstretched, I have the most incredible view: her eyelashes curled against her cheek, juicy lips I can't wait to see wrapped around my cock, down to her tits, their weight drawing them down slightly over her ribs, the motion of me sinking in and out of her making them sway. My

eyes track down her body all the way to her apex, where I'm plunging into her, filling her up.

I sit up slightly, raising one of her legs to hook over my shoulder and watch how she moves over me as I drive in and out. She cries out with this new angle and I know I'm not far from delivering her over the edge again. I tighten my grip on her and quicken my pace.

'I've got you. You can let go.'

Chapter 24

Ella

Fuck, Nate is hung. I don't think I'd ever imagined dicks could come that big, not in real life. He's a big guy: tall, broad. All the signs were there, but still. No fucking idea.

We're entwined in bed, I feel safe lying here in his arms. He lazily rubs his thumb across my shoulder, down my arm and up again. His warm touch feels so right.

Everything feels right. Even the throb and sting between my legs where it feels like he's still inside me, feels right. My stomach does a little flip remembering how deep my last orgasm ran through me. I don't think I've ever come so hard or for so long.

It's got dark outside with the short winter days, and I couldn't tell you if we've been lying together for hours or weeks.

'So, tell me about your tattoos.' I trace the contours of a flower with a fingertip. A rich magenta infuses the petals. 'Do they have a story?'

'I usually tell people no, that I just happened to like them.'

'But?' I twist to look up at his face from where I'm curled against him.

He winds a lock of my hair through his fingers. 'I got them to remind me of important things.' Nate's chest rises and falls steadily against my cheek.

'What's this one?'

'The peony is to remind me life is transient.' He takes a breath and then says, 'Shit happens, and then it doesn't.'

I gaze into his eyes as I ponder this, then kiss the petals softly, unable to express how profound I find the sentiment.

My fingers tip-toe down to a twist of roman numerals. 'And the clock?'

‘Life is short, so I’d better have fun.’ He drops a kiss on my forehead.

I chuckle and brush my lips across the tattoo.

‘And this?’ The silhouette of sinews and fascia interlaced with cogs, bolts, pistons and pipes wraps across his deltoid, like he’s half man, half machine. His taut muscles move beneath the outline, eerily bringing the engine to life.

‘Ah, that was my first.’ He snuffs out a short laugh. ‘And that one really was just because I liked it.’

Before I can respond, my phone pings with a text.

Chloe: Get the kettle on.

I sit bolt upright. ‘Shit. My sister’s on her way back.’

‘Where is she?’ Nate mirrors my pose, eyes wide.

‘I don’t know.’ I jump out of bed. ‘She won’t let me track her location on that app thing. But she’s on her way.’

Throwing on the nearest clothing — some old leggings and a tee-shirt — I hightail it out to the bathroom to track down the clothes we’d discarded a couple of hours ago.

Nate dresses as I fill the laundry basket with my muddy gear.

Running fingers through my hair does little to tame my messy bed-head but it’s an improvement.

I shut the door on my room and urge Nate downstairs, pushing and prodding at his back to hurry him along. Perhaps I can get him out before Chloe bursts in on us.

No such luck. Half-way down the stairs, the porch light flicks on, illuminating the front door from outside, and there’s movement on the other side of the obscured glass.

‘That’s her,’ I whisper. ‘Into the kitchen.’

From behind, I steer Nate round the bottom of the stairs, ignoring his protestations it’ll be okay. I scuttle us through the hall and into the kitchen.

‘My boots are by the front door,’ Nate says as I shut the kitchen door behind us. I can hear Chloe’s key scratching in the lock.

The expression on his face is a mixture of trepidation and devilish amusement. I’m sure mine must be of sheer horror. This is specifically the situation I wanted to avoid. My brain has short circuited and I look from Nate to the door and back again with not a single useful thought coming to mind.

The front door rushes open and Chloe shouts out a hello, Nate releases a chuckle without any hint of compunction.

‘She can’t know,’ I hiss in panic.

‘It might be a bit obvious,’ he murmurs, eyes twinkling.

He gestures both hands open to me, in a ‘let me handle this’ kind of way and then calmly manoeuvres me so I’m backed against the kitchen counter. He places one hand either side of me and drops a kiss on my nose before reaching past and grabbing the kettle. As I watch him fill it under the tap, I try and ratchet in my breath.

Once he’s clicked the kettle on to boil, he settles himself on the opposite side of the kitchen, folding his arms across the muscular chest I’d recently been worshipping.

‘I’m back,’ Chloe calls out.

I don’t want to reply too soon in case it draws her into the kitchen before I’ve had the chance to think of a plan.

‘We need a cover story,’ I mouth under the noise of the kettle.

‘Is anyone home?’ she yells.

Nate taps a finger to his lips as if pretending to think.

All those orgasms have left my head completely devoid of useful thoughts and all I can focus on is that having a strange man in the house is the last thing my sister needs, the complete opposite of the steady environment I want her to have.

The kettle’s roar gets louder. Suddenly Chloe bursts into the room.

‘There you are. Oh, hi?’ She stares between Nate and me expectantly. ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Nate.’

Nervous, I move my hands to hug myself and then, realising that looks awkward, slide them behind me, leaning on them.

‘Tea?’ Chloe’s pulling mugs out of the cupboard.

‘Yes please,’ he replies before I can proclaim he’s leaving.

‘I’ll make it.’ I launch myself at the box of tea bags. Doing something is surely better than fidgeting in panic. ‘Nate’s just popped in for er ...’

‘I was passing and I, ah ...’

‘Err ...’ I chance a peek at my sister who’s looking confused and bored in a way only a teenager can.

The kettle reaches its boiling climax and then starts to quieten.

‘I figured he’d come over to try and fix Helena,’ Chloe snarks over the hubbub.

‘Yes!’ We both agree far too loudly.

Chloe rolls her eyes ‘I hope so. How am I going to get to school on Monday?’

‘You could walk,’ I say as I make the tea.

‘With all my ingredients for food tech, sports kit and art portfolio?’ She curls up her nose.

‘Take the bus like everyone else?’ I offer, half feeling bad that Mondays are particularly manic for her and half irritated by her expectation.

‘The bus? Ew!’ Chloe grabs the milk from the fridge and adds it to the steaming mugs. She grabs her drink and stalks off. The sound of thudding footsteps announces she’s gone to her room.

I slump back against the counter and sigh. My gaze is drawn to Nate’s chest and I track up, eyes locking on his. I’m not sure

who cracks first but we burst into giggles, lips pressed together, shoulders shaking, trying to suppress the noise.

Moving towards him, I link my hands around his neck and he leans down to kiss me.

‘You think she bought it?’ He rests his forehead on mine.

‘Depends on whether she noticed your jumper is on inside out,’ I mumble. ‘And that I’m not wearing a bra.’

His hands move immediately to my back and he groans into my mouth as he kisses me.

‘So, where is she then?’

‘Who?’ I pull away a fraction.

‘Rusty. May as well take a peek now I’m here.’

Nate

I find Chunk in the kitchen mixing a protein shake. ‘Dude, please can I borrow the Ranger tomorrow morning?’

‘Sure.’ He takes a swig before eyeballing me in his meaningful way. ‘You know, if you came to work for me properly, I’d get you one as a company car.’

I pat Chunk on the back in thanks, while inwardly grimacing at the thought of failing at that, too. It’s nice he thinks so highly of me, but it’d no doubt put a strain on our friendship if I fuck up his business. Fucking things up has been known to be my specialty. One day he’ll get the message and stop asking.

‘What time do you need it? Got time for a workout in the morning too?’

‘No, sorry, a bunch of stuff has come up.’

He runs his fingers through his hair. ‘You got another workout buddy, now? You flaked out on me yesterday too.’

I shoot him a sheepish grin. ‘Next time I’ll be there.’

Reaching my arms above my head, I feel the burn of a stretch. My body’s in bits. Up all night texting Ella, and then

after, I couldn't sleep for thinking about her. That, combined with hauling my bike a couple of miles yesterday, has almost finished me off. Perhaps I shouldn't blow off Chunk again, although working out with Ella was entirely more fun.

'What's that grin for?' Chunk raises an eyebrow at me. Prick can read my mind.

'Nothing.' I shoot him a grin. 'Right, I'm off. I've got a shift at the pub.'

I bat at my phone until the alarm stops. Squinting through the curtains, I can see it's still dark outside. Getting in late from The Bull means I only managed a few hours' sleep, I'm not usually awake this time on a Monday morning.

I can't believe I'm worried about what I'm wearing but I want to make a good impression, so I pull on a shirt. Chunk's ironed it to military perfection and I'm infinitely grateful to my neat-freak friend.

Unsure what time Ella needs to be at work or when her sister is due in school, I arrive at their house at half seven to be safe. As I ring the bell, the smell of toast is filtering to outside, making my stomach rumble.

Ella looks like an angel when she pulls the door back. She's wearing a smart blouse and skirt, hair piled on top of her head. This sexy secretary persona is almost making me reconsider an office job.

'This is a nice surprise. What are you doing here?' She leans on the door frame, tucking one leg behind the other.

I plunge my hands in my jeans pockets, only now concerned my offer may not be wanted. 'You mentioned the part you need for Rusty won't arrive for a few days. So, I thought I'd give you a lift to work.'

'That's ... wow.' Her eyes grow wide. 'Amazing.' I give her a bashful grin as she opens the door wider, swooping her arm back. 'Come in.'

Stepping into the narrow front hall, my eyes lock on Ella's lips as I crowd her, about to kiss her, but Chloe appears.

'Did you say lift?' She's almost bouncing. 'Can I get a ride?'

'Chloe! So rude.' Ella tuts, a flush coming to her cheeks as she somehow extricates herself from me.

'I'm happy to.' I shrug.

'You don't need to ...' Ella says, shaking her head, a lock of hair coming loose from where she's tied it up.

'I want to,' I counter.

'How else will I get to school with my bloody giant art portfolio?' Chloe throws up her hands.

'Swear jar!' Ella raises an eyebrow with an attempt at a stern smile which I can only describe as cute.

I hide a chuckle; it's fun seeing Ella in discipline mode. Fuck, I wonder what my penance for swearing will be; I could think of a few *punishments*.

Chloe disappears and Ella calls out, 'Twenty minutes or we'll be late.'

I love seeing Ella's relationship with Chloe, it must be hard to balance sisterhood with responsible adulting, and she seems so devoted to her.

'You fancy some toast while you wait?' Ella takes my hand and starts to lead me in the direction of the kitchen but I pull her back to me. Tugging her hips close to mine.

'I fancy you,' I murmur into her ear.

She sinks on to me with a happy sounding sigh but then stiffens. 'Wait, how are you giving us a lift? Not your bike.'

'Chunk's Ranger.' I offer my most mischievous smile. 'I'm not a maniac.'

Chapter 25

Ella

Accidentally copying in *all staff* to an execs email should be a sackable offence. But Boris is still in post. The email in question makes my blood boil. Determined not to be taken advantage of any further, I log off, reasoning it's pretty much midday and I need some fresh air.

Striding down the street on my lunchtime romp, I hold my phone to my ear as I wait for Josie to pick up.

'Today's the worst,' I garble the moment she answers the phone. 'Tell me about you. Distract me.'

'I was going to phone you actually.' I can hear the coyness in her tone. 'Need to ask a favour.'

'Please do.'

'I want to get a head start on my tax return, for my art stuff and the online shop. You think you could give me some pointers?'

'It's not due until the end of January, but of course I'll help. How come you're so *on it*?'

'It's not like me, I know.' She laughs. 'I'm trying to distract *myself* from bloody Scott.'

I pause and wait at a crossing. 'Did you know he and Nate are brothers?'

'Nate's his little brother?' she exclaims, her voice raising. 'Nope. I'm trying not to think about him. This kind of information is not helpful, Ella.'

'Duly noted. So, back to your question ...' I think through my calendar as the crossing bleeps go off. 'The part for Helena should be in by tomorrow, then I need to try and fix her. Is this weekend any good for you?'

'How do you know how to do all this stuff?' Josie giggles. 'Tax? Cars? Was there an adulting class I missed out on?'

I turn up my scarf in the cold wind as I round the corner onto the main street. ‘You know me, Little Miss Self-sufficient.’ I give a self-deprecating chuckle.

Little Miss Can’t-Bear-To-Accept-Help-From-Others more like.

I never profess to be particularly good at anything, but I want to be able to do things myself if I can, so I research a lot. Life’s taught me the only person you can really rely on is yourself.

‘Speaking of which ... ’ I can picture the quirk in Josie’s eyebrow from the lilt in her voice. ‘Jamie tells me that Chloe said Nate’s been dropping you both off in the mornings.’

Grateful she can’t see my flare of embarrassment, I give a little cough. I *try* to be independent, but when Nate showed up looking all tousled and sexy and keen to help, I wasn’t going to turn him away.

‘When did Chloe see Jamie?’ I frown. ‘It’s not like his college and her school are on the same side of town.’

‘She’s been getting him to give her a lift home.’

‘That minx.’ I tut. ‘She’s been telling me she walks home.’

‘Standard teenager, right? So, things are going well on the whole “see what happens” front?’

‘I’m trying not to overthink it.’ I bite my lip and look around at the grand downtown buildings as I walk.

‘Proud of you. So, what’s happened today?’

‘Urgh, Boris,’ I groan.

‘Oh, chick, what?’

‘I got copied in on an email. All staff did. He recommended all senior staff get a Christmas bonus except for me. Because I’m a junior. They left it up to him. He held my bonus in his hand and thought, nah, screw it.’

‘Shit, Ella.’

‘After everything I’ve done for them. For *him*. What’s it to him if I get a bonus or not? But it’d mean the world to me.’ I work hard not to let my voice break.

‘You’ve gotta leave that place. He’s taking the piss.’

‘We both know I can’t,’ I sigh. ‘Obligations. Bills. Sorry to moan. I just need to vent.’

Having left for lunch earns me the stink eye upon my return. Screw you, Boris. I’m entitled to leave my desk for half an hour and I’m definitely rethinking all my overtime in light of this no-bonus situation. What’s the point in being so diligent all the time when you just end up getting taken advantage of?

When I receive an email from HR mid-afternoon telling me I need to take all my annual leave before January or I’ll lose it, I have no hesitation about booking the following afternoon off. Again, *screw you, Boris*.

Nate: Can I take you to dinner tomorrow?

The message quietly lights up the screen of my phone, hidden in the shadow of a pot plant on my desk. Despite my affront at the bonus situation, I can’t shake abiding by office rules. Moving subtly, I send a response.

Ella: Need to work on Helena. Rain check?

Tucking my phone back away, I keep my head down and carry on with my work. Yes, I’m pissed off, but I don’t want to give them grounds to discipline me.

Bending backwards to try and unkink my spine, I sigh before straightening up and circling my shoulders. My watch says it’s just gone four in the afternoon. Being hunched over the engine for so long is less than ideal, and tinkering with Helena always takes longer than I think it will.

‘Hey you,’ Nate calls from the open garage door.

‘Woah!’ I spring back, startled.

As I walk over slowly, I take him all in. A checked shirt peeks out from under his jacket. He's wearing old jeans and the most heart-melting smile.

'This is a nice surprise,' I say with a bemused tone in my voice, dragging my oil-covered vinyl gloves off.

He gives me an innocent look as if he's pretending he doesn't know how happy I am to see him, despite having told him I needed to work on Helena.

Reaching up to link my hands around his neck, I pull him down for a kiss.

'Seeing as you didn't explicitly say "No" to my text yesterday, I thought I'd see if I could help. And, I figured you'd need to eat at some point, so I've brought it to you.' He holds up a bulging bag.

'That's so thoughtful, thank you.'

Suddenly, it's Nate's cheeks going red rather than mine.

'What are you thinking?' I ask coyly.

'This is going to sound cheesy ... '

'Go on,' I press him, intrigued.

He winds a loose lock of hair behind my ear. 'I ... missed you.'

'You saw me this morning ... ' Feigning innocence, I run my hand down the front of his shirt.

His hands wrap around my waist, pulling me closer. 'I missed kissing you.' His lips cover mine. 'Can't have my wicked way with you with your sister in the back of the car.'

'You know she's here *right now*,' I murmur through our kiss. 'And my mum will be back soon.'

'I didn't particularly think this through.' His mouth works across my jaw to my neck. 'You want me to go?'

'No.' It comes out a little too forcefully and I chuckle. 'I really do need to try and fix H, though.'

‘Shall I get dinner on and then come back and help?’ He quirks an eyebrow.

‘You can put dinner on and then come and stand there looking pretty.’

‘Men don’t want to be called pretty.’

‘But you are.’ I boop him on the nose with my finger and flash him a grin.

He pierces me with a look that suggests I’ll pay for that later and then heads into the house.

Nate

Chloe must be in her room as the downstairs is deserted when I head into Ella’s house. Having been here a few mornings in a row, I’m starting to feel like I know my way around. I make my way to the kitchen, hang my jacket on the back of the door, and put the oven on before unloading the shopping bag.

The last few weeks I’ve been walking around in some sort of Ella-induced haze. I can’t think straight when I’m not with her and, even when I am with her, I can’t get enough of her. I must be addicted.

What started out as a bit of fun banter has ended up with me entirely consumed. Bewitched. Hell, I even let her call me *pretty*. I’ll enjoy getting her back for that. My mind flicks to all the ways I’d like to tease her.

A thump echoes from the other side of the house. *Focus, Nate*. I shake my head to clear it.

She gets me like this, and I find myself doing the craziest things. I don’t know what I was thinking earlier, but I’m suddenly here and I’ve brought chicken and vegetables, potatoes, so apparently at some point I thought it would be a good idea to bring her dinner. I check the fridge and find some olives and half a ring of chorizo; I figure I’ll chuck it all in the oven together and it’ll make a pretty good meal.

What the fuck is happening to me, being all domesticated?

Finding an oven dish, I set about chopping things and bunging them into it, absorbed in my task until the door opens.

A lady who looks to be in her forties walks in with a big smile. ‘Ella told me we had company,’ she says.

‘It’s nice to meet you, Mrs ...’ My voice tails off when I realise, to my horror, I don’t know Ella’s last name.

‘Please, call me Gabby. And you’re Nate?’

‘Yes, Nate — Nathan,’ I stutter. ‘I’m Ella’s friend.’

Before I can decide if I’m supposed to shake her hand or kiss her cheek, Ella skids in.

‘Mum, what are you — ? I told you to wait!’ Ella scans between us, a look of disbelief on her face. She swipes anxiously at her misbehaving hair, tugging it behind her ear.

‘It’s my house too. I’m allowed to say *hello*, aren’t I?’ Gabby gives me a wink and I smile awkwardly. Is her mum flirting with me?

Ella mouths a pained “sorry” at me, eyes wide, as if this isn’t quite what she had planned. ‘Nate’s kindly offered to cook. We probably shouldn’t distract him.’ She grabs her mum’s elbow, as if to pull her away.

Gabby tuts good naturedly. ‘That’s your way of getting rid of me, isn’t it? Are you worried I’m going to start showing him baby albums?’

Ella visibly blanches. ‘Mum!’ She laughs nervously. ‘I wasn’t, but now I am.’ Grinning awkwardly, she says, ‘I’m supposed to be fixing Helena ... but now I’m wondering if I should hang out in here?’

‘To make sure I behave?’ Her mum cocks her head, pretending to be stern.

Chuckling, I lean back on the counter with my arms folded to watch their banter.

‘No grilling poor Nate.’ Ella’s eyes dance as she wags her finger. ‘*Or* embarrassing stories from my childhood.’

‘The sooner you get Helena sorted,’ she thumbs towards the garage, ‘the sooner you can get back to policing me. In the meantime, I promise I won’t terrorise your ... ’ Gabby gives me some serious side-eye before choosing the word, ‘friend.’

Ella scans between me and her mum a couple of times before settling her gaze meaningfully on me. ‘You okay cooking out here or do you want a hand?’

Holding my palms up with a smile, I try to reassure her. I can tell she’s overthinking every little thing. ‘It’s all under control. No need to worry about me.’ I want to do this for her, so I can brave a few questions from her mum.

Ella’s attention goes back to Gabby. ‘*Promise* you’ll keep out of his way?’

‘Guide’s honour.’ She gives a funny little salute.

Ella’s eyes narrow. ‘You told me you were chucked out of the Guides.’

‘Now who’s telling embarrassing childhood stories?’ Gabby puts her hands on her hips in mock consternation.

Ella gives me one last look to check I’m okay and I waggle my eyebrows to communicate everything’s cool. She seems to accept this and says, ‘I’ll be in the garage if you need me,’ before disappearing from the room.

I carry on chopping the last few ingredients while Gabby bustles around clearing the draining rack. I’m relieved no awkward questions are posed.

A minute later, Chloe walks in. ‘Oh, hey Nate, what’s for dinner?’

We bump fists like we always do when I pick her up in the mornings.

‘You’ll see.’ I squat down to slide the full dish into the oven and check the temperature is right.

Turning around, Gabby is regarding me curiously and Chloe, who’s now perched on the kitchen surface, has a knowing look on her face. I get the feeling they’ve been mouthing something behind my back, and that now I’m

outnumbered. Gabby looks like she's about to start asking those awkward questions.

Shit.

I'm not mentally prepared for this.

Bail out.

'I'm just gonna go and see ... ' I tail off, gesturing in the direction of the garage.

'Go and see if you can help her with the *car* again?' Chloe's mouth contorts with a smug grin.

Exiting the kitchen as quickly as possible, I say, 'Nice to meet you Gabby.'

There's no doubt Chloe has fully figured out what Ella and I were getting up to the other day, and Gabby seemed like she was reaching the same conclusion. Fuck. Now I'm going to have to sit through dinner pretending I don't have the most inappropriate thoughts about Ella.

'How's it going?' I ask Ella as I step into the garage, shutting the door behind me.

She pops her head up from under the bonnet, an adorable smear of oil on her cheek.

'Something's not right.' She looks flummoxed. 'It's still not working.'

'Can I help?'

'No, but thanks.' A small smile teases her lips. 'I thought it was the radiator hose; it was kinked and wearing. I've replaced it but it's still not sorted. I should probably call it a night.' She stretches and I catch her round the waist, my hands bunching in her cute overalls. 'Don't really want to head inside with a full house though.' Her eyes glint with mischief.

I run my thumbs from her ribs to her waist, loving the feeling of her even through her clothes. 'It felt like it might get a bit intense in there with your mum *and* your sister in the kitchen.'

'They cornered you, huh?' She arches into my touch.

‘Almost,’ I whisper.

Gaze full of heat, she says, ‘You know, there is *something* you can do to help.’

‘Anything,’ I mumble as I kiss her forehead.

‘Think I spotted a problem in the backseat.’ She nods to the car.

‘Ol’ Rusty needs some attention back there?’ I raise my eyebrow suggestively.

‘She’s called *Helena*. Is this revenge for me calling you pretty?’ Ella cocks an eyebrow back at me.

I give her a grin, popping my dimple as I love how it makes her bite her lip.

She reaches for a door handle, opening the passenger door with a clunk. ‘Get in the car, pretty boy.’

I swallow as she snaps off her vinyl work gloves with a flourish.

‘I’m not a fan of being called a boy, either.’ I protest as I slide into the back. She follows in behind me, crawling over the seat.

‘I’ll make it up to you.’ She waggles her eyebrows and then grabs at my flies. My cock springs to attention at her touch. ‘I’ve just got to free the beast.’

She gives me the most *charming* nicknames but I’m eating it up. And she’s right, my dick is kind of a beast.

‘You sure this is a good idea?’ I choke out, not wanting her to stop, but not wanting to put her in a compromising position with her family.

‘I’ve been reminded this week that being a good girl doesn’t pay off. And I kind of like embracing my naughty side.’

‘I’m not complaining,’ I rasp as she grips my shaft.

‘I was right, you know.’ She slowly starts to move her hand. ‘This is another reason why cars are better than motorcycles.’

She holds my gaze, keeping her pace steady. ‘Couldn’t get up to this on a bike.’

‘Ella,’ I growl, ‘when it comes to you on my bike, I’d make anything you wanted happen.’ It’s a struggle not to let my eyes roll back in my head. ‘She’s parked in the street if you want me to roll her in?’

Suddenly, she pauses. ‘Have you had sex on Betty before?’

The thought of fucking Ella while she straddles my Kawasaki makes me even harder below her fingers. But it kind of depresses me that she compares herself to people in my past. She is a queen, a bright ray of sunshine, while everyone else is a shadow in the dark.

‘No, but I’d give it a go with you. I’m sure I don’t need a *cage* to get down and dirty.’

‘A cage?’ Her eyes boggle.

‘A car.’ I tap on the roof. ‘You’re trapped inside, like in a cage.’

‘Still — ’ She dips her head towards the garage door. ‘They offer some protection in the case of family members bursting in on us.’

I startle. ‘You think they’d do that?’

With a mischievous smile, Ella shakes her head, certain. ‘You’re safe here. Neither of them have ever ventured into the garage before, too cold and grimy. And the spiders keep them away.’

‘Is that so?’ My eyes flick between Ella and the door. ‘I know you don’t want us to be getting caught, though.’

‘Better make it quick then.’ She smirks before devouring my cock into her hot mouth. I know I won’t disappoint on that front.

Chapter 26

Ella

‘Well, that was delicious, thank you.’ My mum beams at Nate, folding her napkin and placing it onto the table.

‘My pleasure, Gabby,’ he replies, shining his dimple on us all.

Dinner was a surprising success. I’m touched Nate went to all this effort, and relieved my mum and sister behaved like normal human beings. I would never have imagined everything to be so ... okay. It’s probably because they had no notice he was coming over, didn’t have the chance to turn into baby-photo-wielding, embarrassing-story-telling lunatics.

It’s all a little unnerving. I’m half wondering when the other shoe is going to drop.

Nate’s always gotten on well with Chloe and he and my mum seemed to hit it off immediately. But should that be a warning bell right there? Mum was always an awful judge of character, men’s characters at least, parading a string of unsuitable beaus past me and Chloe for many years.

Should I quit while I’m ahead?

No. I try to force my lungs to expand. Take a deep breath. I’m just seeing where this thing between us goes. No pressure. No need to freak out or overthink everything.

‘We’ll clear up,’ I announce, insisting Mum goes and puts her feet up and reminding Chloe she has work to do.

There’s not much to wash up but it takes a while as Nate and I are too busy flicking bubbles at each other and snapping tea towels.

‘That’s gonna bruise,’ he chuckles after I get him with a particularly loud crack on his sexy butt. ‘I should probably get going,’ he sighs.

‘You running scared?’ I brandish my towel.

‘Not me.’ He puffs up his chest and gives a little strut over to me. ‘But,’ he dips his head to kiss my cheek, ‘it’s a school night, a work night and I invited myself over unannounced.’

‘It’s been a great evening.’ I grin up at him, wrapping his hands in my towel like a pair of cuffs.

‘It has ... but I think I should head off.’ He flicks his wrists and somehow it’s me who’s ensnared in the material. A thigh clenching smirk crosses his face and he yanks me closer, his lips finding mine.

After I reluctantly see Nate out, Chloe reappears in the kitchen.

‘You finished your homework?’ I ask, hoping the answer is yes so I don’t need to nag.

Standing in front of the fridge, she ignores my question and waggles a bag at me. ‘You holding out on me?’

‘What?’

‘He brought pudding too — cheesecake.’ She passes me the dessert. ‘Your boyfriend must really like you.’

‘He’s not my *boyfriend*.’ My tone raises up a notch and I fiddle with the packaging, flustered.

‘Are you kidding me?’ She frowns in disbelief. ‘He cooks. He literally ferries me to school.’

‘That’s not how you use “literally” in a sentence,’ I tut.

Closing the fridge door, Chloe rolls her eyes and continues, ‘He’s helping you fix your car. That’s what boyfriends do, right?’

‘He’s a friend.’ I shrug, sliding the cheesecake onto a plate.

My sister pulls a face of disbelief, condescension, and general teenage disapproval.

‘We’ve only been on a couple of dates.’ The words come out breathy, a note of uncertainty in them, as if I’m asking Chloe for clarification.

She giggles. ‘He is *so* your boyfriend!’

Focusing on the dessert so I don't have to make feeling-betraying eye-contact with my little sister, I try to dismiss her teasing line of enquiry. 'We haven't discussed — oh, hi?!' I almost drop the plate in surprise.

Out of nowhere, Nate's back in the kitchen. Eyes wide, he gapes at me for a moment.

'Everything okay?' I place the crockery down with a clatter, heart pounding in my mouth.

Had he heard?

Does Nate think he's my boyfriend?

I thought we were just seeing where things went. We'd never discussed *this* and, honestly, I'd gone into this whole thing wondering if I'd even wanted to date him, let alone anything more. But now Chloe's put that notion out there ...

As he fills the space with his broad shoulders and a kind of magnetising pull that seems to grab me just below my navel, I swallow, temporarily forgetting my argument against him.

'Forgot my jacket.' He retrieves it from the back of the door and holds it up. 'Got my jacket. Bye.'

My turn to gape as he disappears as quickly as he arrived.

'You want some — ' I don't finish the question, he's already gone.

'Ugh, old people are so weird,' Chloe grumbles, looking like she's about to dislocate her optic nerve from all the eye rolling.

She dodges around me, grabbing the cheesecake and a fistful of cutlery. 'Better eat this before he comes back and wants a slice.'

I follow her as she wanders into the lounge and flops onto the sofa. Tracing Nate's steps to the front door, I look out. There's no sign of him.

Coming back in, I plonk myself next to her and grab a spoon. Chloe's already scrolling through the channels. I zone

out the god-awful show she's tuned into and let my mind wander over the details of the bombshell Chloe just dropped.

Boyfriend?

I've steered away from relationships to try and protect her from all the upheaval, the uncertainty, the inevitable abandonment. When mum's boyfriends left, Chloe and I would wonder if it was something we'd done or said. Didn't they like us anymore? Did they ever like us?

None of them stayed in touch. That's tough when you're a young kid. I tried to shield my sister from it as much as possible but I was only a kid myself.

When I was the age Chloe is now, I decided to take matters into my own hands. No boyfriends brought home, not unless they were the real deal. And none were. So eventually it was no boyfriends, full stop.

But Nate's ... amazing.

Before, the thought of a boyfriend elicited an automatic *no*, *I don't want one*. A reflex. But when I think of him ... so open with me, thoughtful, funny, sexy ... good with his hands ... his mouth ... oh God, I'm smitten. I grin idiotically to myself, curious about when I'll next get to speak to him again ... sound him out on this whole boyfriend thing.

Unable to resist, I tap out a text to Nate.

Ella: Thanks again for this evening. Are you up for popping by tomorrow morning again?

He doesn't reply.

A prickle creeps up my back. Had I gotten carried away?

Maybe he isn't interested in a relationship.

That look in his eyes when he came back for his jacket. Had he overheard us? Was the thought of being my boyfriend horrifying to him?

Fuck, Ella!

This guy has bent over backwards to prove himself. He's probably just on his way home.

Breathing deeply and forcing my shoulders to relax, I settle back and try to follow the trashy show Chloe's watching.

Several mouthfuls of cheesecake later and my phone still hasn't buzzed with a reply. My chest feels heavy.

As the commercials start, Chloe looks over to me. 'I forgot to ask, can Nate give me a lift again tomorrow?'

'I don't know,' I answer honestly. I can't risk Chloe getting let down. 'We can't presume he's free. Might be best to plan to get the bus. Or walk.'

'Can't you give me a lift?'

'I need a bit more time to sort Helena.' I take another bite of my cheesecake.

'Why can't you take her to a garage like a normal person?' She scrunches her nose in disgust.

'Because I can fix her.' I don't add it would cost a fortune we don't have. 'The bus won't do you any harm.'

'God help you if you tell me it's character building.' Chloe narrows her eyes at me. 'I might see if Jamie can pick me up.'

'Chloe, it's not great to be so reliant on other people. Besides, Jamie's college is on the other side of town. He probably won't have enough time.'

She huffs and taps out a text and I don't need to read it to know she texted Jamie anyway. When she chucks her phone on the table with a huff, I can imagine his response too.

'I'm off to bed.' I gather up the dirty crockery from our unexpected pudding. 'Make sure you give yourself enough time to get ready in the morning.'

She grunts in response. I'm not sure if I prefer teenagers monosyllabic or loquaciously insulting.

The lack of little blue ticks shows my text to Nate is still unread. Lying in bed, I send a goodnight message and try to squash down the feeling something's wrong.

Not a paranoid what-if-he's-not-interested kind of wrong. But a what-if-something's-happened-on-his-motorbike kind of

wrong.

This started out as me worrying about Chloe getting attached to a guy I bring home who ends up leaving like all the others. And now I'm worried he's going to leave us another way.

Nate

Hearing Chloe saying I was 'Ella's boyfriend,' almost made my chest explode. In a good way. Phrases keep popping into my head like, 'This is my girlfriend, Ella.' Sounds pretty fucking sweet.

As the noise of the engine roars in my ears, I can't help but shout out a whoop as I hit the open road. This isn't just the elation of proving her wrong, that became a moot point a while ago. This is about the fact that it feels right.

Riding my bike while riding on this high is like a drug.

Not wanting this trip to end yet, I take a tour around some country backroads. I shouldn't meet much other traffic this time of night and the beauty of riding in the dark is that other headlights give you an early warning something is coming. Pushing my bike to the speed limit, I give Betty the run she deserves, it's been all work and no play for her recently.

I chuckle to myself. Fuck. Ella's boyfriend? I am *all* in.

Despite the darkness, my headlight gives a good strong beam, turning the hedgerows a bluey-grey rather than the green and brown they usually are in December. Rounding the country lanes, and up and down hills, I see a single beam in the distance and wonder if I know the other rider. They're coming my way, dipping out of sight again as the road snakes through farmland and behind hedges. I wonder if they're out celebrating some good news, too, or maybe they just need to feed their soul.

Hurling round the next corner, I swear under my breath and ease off the throttle, trying not to send the bike into a skid.

Careering towards me is an old banger with a headlight out, not another bike at all.

Fuck.

I force myself to keep calm, keep my eyes open and guide Betty through the gap between the car and the hedge that's a little too close for comfort, all the while slowing the accelerator down. If my training has taught me anything, panicking right now would be a sure-fire way of ending this night in catastrophe.

The car's horn blares as if to shout at me for being in the wrong.

Check your fucking headlights, prick.

Remembering to breathe, I push myself to continue my journey, rather than turning and chasing that fucker down and giving them a piece of my mind.

I stop at a T-junction and, with no one in my rear-view mirror, take a moment to catch my breath. That could have been horrific. With Ella's words about bikes being death traps ringing in my ears, I decide to head to my brother's pub, at a much steadier pace.

My pulse is still hammering when I get to The Bull. My brother scowls at me when I walk in.

Geoff and Pauline are perched at the bar and I wander over to them, swapping greetings. Noticing their drinks are full and they don't need a top up, I choose to sit next to them, preferring their company to my grumpy brother's.

'What's up with you? You've got a face like a slapped arse,' I say when Scott comes over.

'Is that any way to treat your brother who's coming to offer you a drink? Which you could get yourself, you know.' He swipes his fringe back off his forehead with a jerk. 'And while we're at it, you don't look too peachy either.'

The mirror at the back of the bar shows I'm looking a little pale, and now I've stopped moving, I realise I've got clammy hands and a sick feeling to go with my racing heart. 'I'd offer

to help, but you hardly seem run off your feet.’ I dip my head to the empty seats along the rest of the bar. ‘I’ll have a lime and soda, please.’

‘Trouble in paradise?’ Geoff asks, nodding to Scott, when Scott heads off to make my drink.

‘No clue what’s pissing in his beer,’ I reply.

Scott’s been really cranky lately, but I’ve been too wrapped up in my own shit to dig into his issues. He’s usually grumpy, but the last week or so he’s been fucking petulant.

I catch sight of the end of the bar, where I’d laid Ella in front of me all those nights ago, and the sick feeling churning in my gut is soothed a little. Girlfriend, huh? Well, I’ve got Chloe’s approval.

Shit, what if Ella’s not into the idea? She didn’t want to date me, let alone be anything more.

I take my phone out of my pocket, ignoring the annoying red dots that seem to hover over almost every app and open up my photos, finding a selfie of Ella and me.

‘So, you took my advice?’ Geoff eyeballs my screen. ‘You went for it?’

‘Yeah,’ I reply simply, unable to say more because of the inane grin on my face.

Scott dumps my drink down with a grunt. ‘I guess you’re not wanting any more shifts now you’ve found your *lady friend*.’ He makes air quotes with his fingers.

‘I’m not gonna let you down. I’ll do my usual, but no, thank you, I don’t want to be doing any extra right now.’

‘It’s coming up to the busiest time of year,’ he huffs.

I peer around the virtually empty pub before fixing my gaze back on him.

‘Really? Maybe you should hire some more help. Help stir this place up a bit.’

God knows if he won’t take *my* ideas, he needs to take someone else’s.

‘Can I trouble you for another Margarita?’ Pauline asks.

Brilliant timing. My brother hates that the cocktail menu has been well-received. I direct my smirk towards my drink to avoid more of Scott’s wrath.

Scott gives her a lukewarm smile and reaches for the limes.

‘It is a bit quiet, isn’t it?’ asks Geoff.

‘It’s midweek. People are saving for Christmas,’ Scott replies.

‘What about a theme night for Christmas eve?’ Pauline’s eyes light up. ‘That’d be fun.’

‘I usually close early on Christmas Eve.’

‘Not sure that’s the best business model,’ I murmur.

Scott fixes me a look which tells me all the things he wants to say but doesn’t, like, if I was so good at business, why did I fail out of uni? If I was such a bold entrepreneur, why didn’t I take Chunk up on his offer? Why don’t I fuck off? It’s all conveyed in that one look.

He wouldn’t say any of it because he’s not a bellend like me. I remember tearing into him with vicious words when I was younger, when I was trying to make other people hurt as much as I was.

I’m forever grateful I was forgiven.

Suitably chastised, I try to be constructive. ‘What about a big night some other time?’

‘New Year’s?’ suggests Geoff.

As they’re swapping ideas, my phone buzzes in my hand.

Ella: Night night xx

The message is previewed on my lock screen.

That’s got to be a good sign. Goodnight messages are girlfriend-y behaviour, right?

Why do I feel so nervous about this?

I want to write back but second guess myself. Should I just say *night*? Should I ask her to be my girlfriend over a text? *Nope*. That's a *terrible* idea.

One glance at Scott and I decide to cut my losses. I down my drink and leave some cash on the bar. Scott isn't going to be any help in this situation. This needs Chunk's advice.

Chapter 27

Ella

‘I can’t guarantee she’ll be fixed tomorrow, either. You’ll have to get the bus again.’ I’m struggling to keep the contempt out of my voice as I speak to my ungrateful little sister.

Swiping the toast that had just popped up, she groans, ‘Gah, you’re the worst sister ever.’

‘Thought you wanted more freedom?’ I place more bread in the toaster, seeing as how she stole my first batch.

‘Urgh! When are you going to fix your stupid car?’

‘Hopefully today.’ I cross my arms. ‘And Helena is *not* stupid.’

‘Even giving her a *name* is stupid.’ Her eyes bulge with contempt.

‘If she’s so stupid, I suppose — when she’s fixed — you won’t be wanting a lift then, will you?’

She turns on her heel and storms to her bedroom. I’m relieved to get some distance from the teen drama. With Mum on a stint of double shifts again, it’s down to me to sort Chloe.

Besides, taking the bus won’t kill Chloe, no matter how much she complains.

I look at my phone, unable to stop my mouth curving into the hugest grin. My stomach flip flops into a thousand butterflies. Now who’s acting like a teenager?

Nate: Sweet dreams. I’ll come and find you tomorrow, but I’m sorry it won’t be early. Will you be OK? Xx

The message had been waiting for me when I woke up this morning. I don’t care that he can’t give us a lift. I’m just glad he’s ok.

To make the most of my leave, I’ve taken today off, too, needing space from work as well as wanting to fix Helena. I’m

so done with being taken advantage of in the office, but I can't simply quit and leap into a brand-new career.

Heading out to the garage in my overalls, I raise the door to get some daylight into the space. The light catches the glass, magnifying how filthy Helena has become, inside and out. Doubling back, I grab the little handheld vacuum cleaner to give her a thorough clean on the inside before I get filthy and oily.

As I push the nozzle back and forth, my mind drifts. I need to decide what I want to do, work out how to achieve it. It's frustrating that there are no good evening courses for me at the local college. Not much good for anyone, really, unless you want to learn Spanish, flower arranging, or beginners IT. Nothing that would help me in my life, nothing that's going to help my career or ease my burden of responsibilities.

The noise of the Hoover revs as I pause in one spot, thinking over Josie's comment from the other day about missing out on adulting classes. God, I don't feel anything like an adult. I'm just winging most of my life, even if I do understand accounting.

But maybe we're not the only ones who need help with this kind of stuff. Was this the answer? Could I offer a course in basic accountancy? A thrill runs through me; this definitely needs more consideration.

I finish cleaning Helena and murmur, 'Now, let's see what's getting you all hot and bothered,' as I unclip the bonnet.

Luckily, I was only a hundred metres from home when she first broke down and I managed to limp her back. Over the last few days I'd researched overheating — checking the coolant, thermostat, head gasket, and fan belt to no avail. It had been a false victory when I'd found the kinked radiator hose. Now I'm just left with spark plugs before I have to admit defeat and take her to a garage for a financially crippling diagnosis.

The old tool kit my biological father had left always leaves me with mixed feelings. It wasn't only tools he'd left behind, it was my fragile mother and me, just a toddler. But I also take empowerment from the tarnished old box. I can be self-

sufficient with these tools; I don't need him. Spanners and screwdrivers, on the other hand, now they are handy.

Grabbing my torque wrench, I set it to the right tension and release a spark plug. A singed end is revealed and I feel relieved the problem may now be solved. I keep a box of spare parts, and soon I've switched out the old spark plugs for new ones and I'm confident I've finally solved the curious case of Helena's hot flushes.

The bonnet shuts with a satisfactory clunk, and after wiping my hands off on a cloth, I cross my fingers and start the engine. Helena roars into life and her temperature gauge stays blissfully in the 'normal' zone. After a minute or so, I turn the ignition off and reach into my pocket for my phone. I need to share my success.

It vibrates in my hand as I pull it out.

Nate.

'Hi,' I chirp, 'I was about to call you!'

'Missed me, huh?' I can visualise his wry grin as he says this.

'Of course ... And I have news.' I pause for effect before announcing, 'Pretty sure I've fixed Helena!'

'Amazing! I was calling to take you to lunch, so now we have something to celebrate.'

'I'll come and pick you up. You can help me test drive her first, if you've got time?'

'I'm all yours until five.'

Nate sends me his address and, after I get changed and cleaned up, I tentatively head over, eyes flicking to check for warning lights at every junction.

Nate's already bounding out of the door as I'm halfway up the path.

'Whoop, ol' Rusty lives to drive another day.' He catches up with me, kissing me swiftly.

‘I told you. She’s got plenty of life in her.’ I pretend to bat his arm in consternation.

‘So, you don’t need me to give Chloe a lift anymore?’

‘Not now Helena’s fixed, thanks.’ I raise my heels and reach up for another quick kiss, pulling on his shirt to get closer. ‘And anyway, I think making her get the bus is doing her good.’ I turn and lead him back to my car.

His hand slots into mine and squeezes. ‘That’s a shame.’

‘You almost sound disappointed.’ I chuckle, twisting to face him as we reach the car.

‘Well, it was a boyfriendly thing to do.’ He raises an eyebrow, a smile tweaking at the corner of his mouth.

‘Boyfriend?’ I can’t stop the curve to my lips, or the hope in my voice.

He steps closer. ‘I *might* have heard you talking the other night. I thought it had a good ring to it.’

Nate runs his nose along my jaw as I say, ‘Well, I can think of plenty of other *boyfriendly* things you could be doing.’

With a growl, he cages me against the car. I’m trapped between the hard door and the steel planes of his body, and I love it. Woody notes of cedar from his skin invade my senses. He kisses me deeply before murmuring, ‘I’ve got a good idea.’

My, ‘What’s that,’ is breathless.

He tugs on my bottom lip as he ends the kiss. Then he pulls away and that dimple is out in full force. ‘Let’s give Helena a good run.’ His voice switches from gravelly smoke to perky in an instant, his golden retriever energy cranked to the max. ‘Give her an afternoon out.’ He shines his smile on me. I’m sure he knows full well he turned me to mush moments before. ‘We should make the most of your day off.’

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. ‘The beach? It’s about an hour away.’

‘Are *you* going to be there?’ He dips his head to me, running his nose up my neck.

‘Of course,’ I reply shakily.

He kisses my ear as he mumbles, ‘Then I think it sounds fucking perfect.’

‘I had an idea while I was tinkering earlier,’ I say as we pull onto the motorway.

My thoughts about an evening class burble out of me and Nate listens as I drive and chatter.

‘I’ve got to research what qualifications I’d need first, but this is the first time I’ve been excited about work in a long time.’

‘Sounds brilliant. You’d be great at it.’ His hand skims my thigh. ‘Do you ever do freelance accounting?’

‘I haven’t really, but I could. Why?’ I risk a glance at him. ‘Do you need an accountant?’

‘Not me.’ He gives me a little squeeze where his fingers rest on my leg. ‘But I might know someone.’

Excitement prickles at my skin and then zings through me. Things are starting to look up. There’s a light at the end of the tunnel.

Helena drives smoothly all the way to the coast, eating up the road, almost like she’s pleased to be stretching her legs again.

We park by the sea front. The brisk sea air, salty and fresh, whips me in the face as I climb out. There’s a row of multi-coloured beach huts lining the promenade, all pastels and draped with bunting, and we head towards them, hands entwined.

‘Can we get some ice cream?’ I ask.

‘In December? It’s about two degrees,’ he chuckles.

‘So?’ I scoff. ‘You can’t let the weather get in the way of good ice cream.’

Nate leads me over to a little shack selling hot drinks and snacks, and the server doesn't bat an eyelid when I order a scoop of raspberry ripple.

'See,' I cock my head towards the stall and grin. 'Every day's an ice cream day.'

'Okay, I'll have a — ' he pauses to read the list of flavours ' — a scoop of dark chocolate, please.'

We pay and take our order.

Eyeing his cone, I say, 'Bold choice.'

'I think our flavours are complimentary.' He winks.

I taste my sweet, tart, treat and Nate's eyes darken as he watches me.

'You want to try it?' I offer my cone and he dips his head down, flicking his tongue out and licking up a melting trail, keeping his eyes locked on mine.

The things that tongue can do.

'I didn't know ice cream could be so dangerous,' I murmur, half wanting to toss the snack aside and climb him like a tree.

We wander along the promenade, sharing tastes of each other's ice cream until they're gone.

Nate takes my hand as we venture up some steps to climb onto the breakwater. The wind picks up and we're spritzed by the aqua-grey water swirling and frothing below us. My hair flits around, the breeze pulling tendrils from the messy bun as we pick our way along the top.

Near the end, Nate perches on a raised part of the balustrade and holds a hand out to me. 'Come here.'

I move closer and he pulls me onto his lap, arms tightly encircling my waist and his mouth going straight to my neck. 'I couldn't resist anymore.'

My head falls back as his lips work over my throat. My gasp is whisked away into the squall.

I fist my hands into his jacket feeling like I might get lost in his kiss if I don't hold on tightly. It's as if we're the only people left in the world, out on this precipice, the tumultuous sea teeming around us.

'Will you stay with me tonight?' Nate whispers, so quiet I almost miss it in the roar of the breaking waves.

'I thought you had a shift? Wait.' I sit up straighter. 'Don't we need to leave soon?'

'I do ... and probably. But after?' His eyes lock on mine. 'Will you come to my place? Stay over?'

I've never heard this tone in Nate's voice before — softer, unsure. Vulnerable.

I scan his face, trying to read what he's thinking.

'Sorry, forget I said anything. I know you've got — '

Kissing him to stop him babbling, I say, 'I've got to grab some stuff, but I can come over after your shift,' with my lips pressed to his.

Cupping my cheek, he swipes his tongue over mine, but then pulls back slightly. 'Will Chloe be alright?'

I sit back, offering a smile. 'Mum will be home, and they can fend for themselves in the morning.'

A slow grin spreads across his face and his usual cheeky self is back. 'I'll make it worth your while,' he growls, moving his head back towards me.

'Will Chunk mind?' I stutter as he nips above my collar bone.

'Nah, he's out tonight.' Nate smoothes his mouth against my flushed skin. 'He wouldn't mind, anyway.'

'Really?' I cock an eyebrow. Even though I'm besties with Josie, I'm not sure I'd want to hear what she was getting up to after dark.

'I don't know, actually.' He stands up, pulling me with him. 'The situation's not come up before.'

He holds me close to him and we make our way back towards the shore.

‘Do you normally chuck him out? Poor guy.’

I feel Nate shrug. ‘Never taken anyone home, so it’s never been an issue.’

My footsteps falter and his grip tightens. ‘Never?’

He drops a kiss on my head. ‘Never had anyone I wanted to take home before.’

A smile creeps at the corners of my mouth and I try not to skip, grateful I’m tucked in under his arm so he can’t see the ridiculous look I must have on my face.

He stops us and turns to me, taking both my hands in his. ‘Fuck, Ella. I’m shit at playing things cool.’ He runs his teeth over his bottom lip and smiles, as if he can’t quite believe what he’s about to admit. ‘I like you. A lot. Actually more than I’ve ever liked anyone. It feels like you’ve come along and woken me from a dark and gloomy sleep. Except it wouldn’t have been sleep, figuratively speaking, I was passed out, unconscious, in a coma, my body just going through the motions ... and you brought me round.’

Nate opens his mouth and then closes it again as his gaze trails out to the horizon. I squeeze his fingers and he swallows, stirring himself out of the thoughts he just got lost in.

‘I had my heart broken,’ he says, eyes lost at sea. ‘At the worst time. I crashed out of uni, spectacularly, failing everything. And my then-girlfriend dumped me because she didn’t want to be with a loser. A failure. Someone with no prospects.’

He lets out a contemptuous bark of a laugh. ‘Stacey was top of the class, netball captain, queen of the fucking world, in her eyes. She was *embarrassed* to be associated with me, that I wasn’t *good enough*, that *she deserved better*.’

A gasp escapes me. His ex’s words were cruel, and I grip his hands tighter, but don’t interrupt. He needs to get this out.

‘Everything broke down all at the same time,’ he continues, staring into the distance. ‘Everything I’d worked towards was gone.’ He finally looks at me, a sheen of humility in his eyes. ‘I believed her when she said I was worthless. Believed that I’d fail at everything. Put myself on a pretty disruptive path, drinking until I was blackout drunk, raging at anyone close to me, sleeping with anyone that wasn’t.’ He shakes his head. ‘But Scott and Chunk pulled me out of it. They both gave me work, a place to live ... ’

‘Everyone has a past, you don’t need to worry — ’ I say, trying to reassure him.

‘Let me say this. I want to be truthful with you.’ His jaw sets with determination. ‘When I was gainfully employed with a choice of roofs over my head, it seemed — to an outsider — that I was fine. All better. But I wasn’t. I was just ... numb.’

‘Nate.’ I soothe his arm and he rests his forehead on mine.

‘I drank at any given opportunity. Slept around. Buried myself in anonymous women to help me forget. And I developed rules ... rules so I couldn’t get hurt again.’

‘I won’t hurt you, Nate. You can trust me.’ I plunge my hands around his waist.

His lips move to kiss my head and he lets out a sexy chuckle. ‘That’s my line.’

After a moment, I ask, ‘Who were the rules for?’ It’s almost a whisper.

‘Me. The women. Shit, I shouldn’t be telling you all this. You’ll think I’m the worst.’ His arms tighten around me. ‘But I need you to know everything.’

I bite my lip. It’s one thing suspecting someone’s had a colourful past, it’s quite another hearing all the details. But, echoing his words, I like Nate. A lot. More than I’ve ever liked anyone. So, I say, ‘You can tell me anything.’

He keeps his head nuzzled into mine. His voice husky. ‘I never gave them my name. Made sure they were from out of town. They knew the deal that we wouldn’t see each other again. I never took them home; they didn’t know where I

lived. If they were okay with all that, then ... ' His words trail off.

'You don't seem to be that kind of guy anymore.'

'I'm not. And I haven't been for a long time. I guess trying to prove you wrong about me made me realise ... '

'That you're actually a decent guy?' I smile up at him.

'It does seem that way, yes.' His thumb traces my cheek bone. 'I used to be a fucking smooth operator. Cool as a fucking cucumber. But now, thanks to you, I can't seem to stop running my mouth off. Blagh.' He shakes his head as if to make himself stop talking. 'Tell me something about you. Something I don't know.'

Entwining my fingers with his, I lead us back along the promenade. 'Something deep or, like, my favourite colour?'

'Whatever you want to tell me.' He shrugs with a smile.

I take a moment. Nate's shared so much. I feel safe, like I could open up to him, too. A thought darts into my mind, something I should confess.

'I can relate.' I sneak a glance at him but he's looking at me with his baby-blues, all reassuring and non-judgmental. 'I was on the verge of some kind of meltdown in the pub that night. Scratch an itch, Josie had said. Sounds so gross.' I chuckle but Nate's staring at me so earnestly my laugh fades. 'Everything was going wrong, like everything, so I tried to let off some steam ... except, well, you were there.' I smile at the memory. 'It was more like detonating a nuclear bomb.'

He squeezes my hand but doesn't interrupt.

'I was such a fucking hypocrite though.' I wince. 'Judging you for being this bad guy who was only after one thing ... when it was me who only had one thing on her mind.' I shake my head. 'I'm sorry.'

'I think you had lots on your mind. Wasn't that the point?' His eyes darken. 'I recognised it in you. Knew you needed the release.'

My blush burns down my neck. He's always been able to tell exactly how I'm feeling, sometimes before I can.

'We're kindred spirits, you and me,' he continues. 'Making rules for ourselves,' his voice rasps. 'The suffocating fear of rejection.'

Blushing harder at how much he truly *sees* me, I hold his gaze for a long beat. Gulping, I try to change the subject by saying, 'So, about those favourite colours, huh? Mine's red.'

He stops me, taking my face in his hands, running his thumb over my cheeks and down my throat, tugging a little on the neckline of my top. Tracing some invisible path.

'That's fast become my favourite colour too.'

Chapter 28

Nate

Scott only needs me until ten and I'm out of The Bull by a minute past. I race back to my apartment to beat Ella there and do a quick tidy round to tone down the bachelor pad aesthetic.

The buzzer rings as I smooth some clean sheets onto my bed. My heart stutters in my chest. From the moment I met Ella, I've been on a mission to see her again, to tease and make her blush. To show her the real me. But now, it feels kind of weird to be relaxed. I've shown her my truth and she's still here. Told her all of my iniquitous past, leaving me feeling light and free but at the same time, somehow, bound to her. Now, it feels like we have all the time in the world. I feel comfortable. *Happy*. And that's fucking terrifying.

I vault down the stairs to let her in. She nibbles her lip, a nervous smile on her face, and I can't wait to kiss her anxiety away.

'Hey.' I hold the door back for her.

'Hey, yourself.' She steps through into the lobby. As she brushes past, a waft of lavender surrounds me and I breathe it in.

I scoop her bag off her shoulder and pull her close, brushing my lips against hers.

'Thanks for coming. I'm on the second floor.' Grasping her delicate hand in mine, I lead her up and into the flat.

'Can I get you a drink?' I deposit her bag on the floor by the sofa. 'Cocktail? Beer? Wine? Tea?'

She follows me into the kitchen as I rummage for some glassware.

Ella's biting her lip again when I turn to hear her response.

'I'm not thirsty,' she whispers, echoing her words from our first stolen moments weeks before.

Eyes locked on hers, I shut the cupboard and cover the distance to her in a split second, suppressing an animalistic rumble in my throat. She has no idea what those three little words did to me, what they're doing now.

As I gather her into my arms, we breathe in each other's anticipation.

'You could still have one,' she murmurs.

'I'm not thirsty either. I was trying to be a good host.'

'You're always very *obliging*,' she assumes a breathy voice. Her face lights with mischief — as if she knows she's being cheesy — and a gentle blush soon follows. I fucking love her corny chat up lines. Her innocence.

'Is that so? You want the grand tour?'

'Only if it starts with your room.' She quirks up an eyebrow and I can't stop the growl ripping from my core.

I hoick Ella over my shoulder and haul her, fireman style, into my bedroom as she shrieks and kicks her legs.

She giggles as I toss her onto the mattress and crawl on top of her. Lying beneath me, she feels so right.

'You're insatiable aren't you?' I go straight to the spot under her ear I know makes her tremble. 'I invited you over,' I say, trailing my kisses along her neck, 'for a wholesome night of snuggling.' I pretend to be scandalised. Unbuttoning her shirt, I work my way down. 'You trying to corrupt me?' I reach her flies and flick the button open with my thumb. Sliding her jeans to her ankles, she helps kick them off. 'It's you who's the *bad girl*, isn't it?'

She flushes with the rosy glow I've become obsessed with. A coy smile plays on her face as she tries to look innocent. 'Me?'

Stripping her down to her silky, black thong, I take my time, wanting to cover every inch of her body with my mouth. Moving slowly, purposefully, I feather my lips from her stomach to her ribs, dropping butterfly kisses along the way.

Pausing at her breasts, I draw a pink, pebbled nipple into my mouth. She groans as I suck tenderly, fisting her fingers into my hair.

‘Mmm, you like that, don’t you?’ I ask as I nip her soft skin, gentle enough not to mark her but hard enough to evoke a gasp.

‘Uh-huh.’ She holds my head in place where she wants me and I glide my tongue along her smooth skin, grazing my teeth, just enough to tease her.

Fuck, she gets me so hard. Desperate to feel her skin against mine, I move away briefly. ‘Hold that thought.’ Pulling my tee-shirt over my head, I toss it on the floor, and shake out of my jeans.

Lying on my hip, I prop myself on my elbow, gently resting my weight down her side and caging her against the bed. My solid length is lying along her thigh, straining to get out of my boxers.

I trace my fingers from the hollow of her collar bone, down the valley of her cleavage, over the soft skin of her stomach, down to where I can feel her heat, her need, radiating through the satin.

Skimming her hand down my arm, she urges my fingers underneath the soaked fabric, whimpering when I slide straight to her centre.

‘Oh, you *really* like that,’ I whisper. ‘So ready for me.’ I pull my fingers, slick with her arousal, up to my lips and suck in the taste of her.

‘Well, I *have* been thinking about this all evening.’ She grapples with the waistband on my boxers, but I stop her, catching a hold of her wrist.

‘Not yet.’

‘Not fair,’ she counters with a pout, trailing her fingers along the elastic.

Moving her hand to her tits, I say, ‘Now, you’re going to need to be a *good girl* and wait a bit longer.’ I pause, to revel

in her heated response. Her nostrils flare at the nickname, eyes blazing at me, like she's at war with herself, conflicted over the patronising term turning her the fuck on. 'I want your hands here.' With my hand on top of hers, I roll her fingers over her nipple, encouraging her to give it a little pinch. 'Think you can manage that?'

'Nate ...' she starts to argue but when I slide my palm back over her belly and inside her thong, her eyes roll back in her head as I trace carefully over her clit.

She is so fucking wet for me. I slide my fingers inside her, now pressing over her clit with my palm and she writhes against me, seeking out the friction she needs.

Eyes shut, Ella follows orders, playing with her breasts as I zero in on that spot inside her. I can't stop myself from watching her, taking in the tiny expressions that cross her face, the curl of her smile, the bite of her lip, the hitch of her breath as her climax starts to build.

Working my fingers, teasing that little bundle of nerves, I sense she's moments from coming. 'Good girl,' I whisper, knowing it drives her mad.

Her eyes snap open, dark with need, and as our gazes lock, she hisses my name. Thighs tense, her pussy clenches around me. She's trembling all over, even her toes grip on the sheet. Her mouth agape with a whispered gasp.

I rip my eyes from her face and rake them over her flushed body, my dick growing almost painfully hard. Fuck, what this woman does to me without even realising. Making her come makes me feel like I have a super power.

I gently move my hand away, pushing down her underwear to reveal her perfect pussy. Running my thumb over her sensitive clit, I sink my fingers back inside her and bring my mouth to her tits. She locks her fingers in my hair again, grinding against me as I suck on her nipple. So close. I can tell she's moments from coming again as she whimpers, my name falling from her lips. Just how I like it.

As her muscles contract around my fingers, my dick strains to be part of the action, pulsing with her rhythm. Wriggling down, I kick off my boxers and flatten my tongue over her centre, swiping it over her glistening, pink core, groaning at the taste of her.

Moving back up her body, I ease her legs wider with my hips. She suddenly sits up, hands pushing on my shoulders to stop me. 'Wait, I want to taste you.' Her eyes black, pupils blown with craving. With desire.

In a flash, she pushes me over to the side and rotates to straddle me, reverse cowgirl. Shit, she's stronger than she looks.

She backs the hell up, wiggling her sexy ass until she's aligned her mouth with my cock. With no hesitation, she laps up my precum, swirling her tongue round, moaning as she tastes me.

Gripping her ass, I pull her down onto my face, licking along her slit, burying my tongue inside her. I'm covered in the wetness from her release, but I don't care. I could fucking bathe in it.

Matching her rhythm, I worship her pussy while she moves her hot mouth over me. I can sense she's about to come again. She tenses for the briefest second, her breath hitches, and a strangled groan escapes her as she takes me in deeper. She thrusts my dick to the back of her throat, her moan vibrating along the length of me, while she writhes and fucks my face, the waves of her orgasm rippling through her.

Holy.

Fucking.

Shit.

The moment she goes limp, I flip her on to her back. Her lips are swollen, cheeks flushed. She's glowing. So beautiful.

Grabbing a condom off the bedside table, I slide it on before slotting back between her legs. 'Where were we?'

With a knowing smile, she wraps her heels around my butt, pulling me closer.

‘Oh, yeah,’ I slowly inch into her. ‘You were trying to lead me astray, right?’

‘Is it working?’ She runs her hands up around my neck.

Carefully, I push deeper inside her. ‘With your sweet ... tight ... pussy?’ I punctuate each word with a slow thrust until she takes all of me. I pause, finding her gaze with mine. ‘Consider me entirely corrupted.’ Her eyes widen. ‘Addicted.’ A smile creeps at the corners of her mouth. ‘At your mercy.’

She sighs, and I feel her relax around me.

I run my nose along the length of her jaw before slowly moving inside her, relishing every movement, every squeeze, every touch. I can’t put my finger on why, but this feels like more than the best fuck of my life; this feels like heaven.

Chapter 29

Ella

Josie's flat is small but full of colour. There's not an inch of wall that isn't hung with her artwork. In fact, one entire wall actually *is* art — a mural so beautiful that it would be heart-breaking if the landlord ever made her remove it. Josie leans back against it as we sit on the floor, drinking tea.

'I'm so pleased for you,' she coos after I fill her in on the latest with Nate. 'I mean, endless orgasms aside, my bestie is finally letting love in her life. There I was, just hoping you'd get laid, but you've gone and hit the jackpot.'

Our beach trip and subsequent night together has been followed by countless texts and phone calls, sleepovers at his place, snatching any free time we can in between our different work commitments. Waking up in Nate's arms this morning was the best feeling and my cheeks warm as I remember what he did to me before we got in the shower.

'I'm not sure about love. But definitely a lot of lust and the potential for the big L, I guess. I always thought I had to choose. Family or a love life, like they couldn't co-exist at the same time. But Nate just seems to fit.' I marvel at how he's seamlessly dovetailing into my life, somehow allowing me both responsibility and fun. Freedom.

'I think being with him has brought some sort of balance to your life.'

'It helps that Chloe's older now, so she's getting the bus and things. I'm still not going to be bringing him home for the night, though. The bathroom's chaos enough in the mornings.'

Josie tilts her head, sceptically. 'Getting the bus? Is that a euphemism for *getting Jamie to drive her?*'

'Sorry,' I blanch. 'I've told her she shouldn't ask him.'

'It's fine. It's not all the time. Plus, I'm relieved, him chauffeuring Chloe about means he's not starting to hang with

the wrong crowd. It's hard to keep an eye on him.' Josie tips her head to the door. 'I feel guilty enough moving out.' She shoots me another grin with a happy sigh. 'I'm so happy for you. Finally prioritising yourself. Bagging a nice man.' Pressing her lips together, she hesitates. 'I know it's not my place to say ...'

'It's never stopped you before.' I arch my eyebrow.

'I was worried about you, with your mum ...' Josie looks guiltily back, swigging her tea to avoid speaking.

'I didn't have a particularly good example growing up?' I offer.

She scrunches her nose and gives a little nod.

'It must have been lonely for my mum, bringing up kids on her own, being abandoned by her parents, then my dad. Then Chloe's. I'm not mad at her for trying to find a guy all those years. Sometimes I think she works so much now to try and fill that void.'

Josie opens a box file, pulling an envelope out. 'Well, that I can relate to.' She starts laying receipts out on the rug.

'Sorry things went south with Scott.'

She bats her hand. 'That's nothing. I'm a big girl. It was a one-night stand ... well, two if I'm being accurate. It's cool.' Her voice catches and I don't quite believe her.

'But you *liked* him. God, me going on about Nate ... sorry.' I rub her arm and give her an apologetic look.

She fixes me with a pointed glare. 'Don't you dare dim your light to make others feel brighter.'

'Well,' I nudge her arm, 'I think you're radiant.'

'I've decided it's his loss. I *was* feeling pretty shitty about it last week but I got my art therapy on. Painted a whole red series. It's getting a lot of love on Insta. I've sold a couple already.'

Patting her pile of receipts and invoices, I say, 'Speaking of which, let's get your tax return sorted.'

I help Josie complete the spreadsheet I'd prepared for her to get all her incomings and outgoings in order and then spend some time working out some other things she could write off as well.

'Eeek. The spreadsheet has stopped working.' She starts striking the keys with increasing ferocity.

Stilling her hand with mine, I tap into the formula bar. 'You forgot the bracket here.' I make a quick change and the numbers sort themselves out.

'You're so good at this.' Her arm circles me for a brief hug. 'Thanks for helping.'

'I don't mind at all.' I shrug with a smile. 'Anytime.'

'Let me know if there's ever anything I can do for you.'

'Now you mention it ... how do you feel about taking an accountancy course?'

Hurt flashes through her green eyes. 'I thought you said you didn't mind helping?'

'I don't. No, the course is for me, I mean.' I laugh, realising my mistake. 'I'd be leading the course. I need a friendly face in the audience.'

'Leading it?' she croons. 'Tell me more.'

'I've had a chat with the local college. Still ironing out all the details, but I'll be delivering a basic, never-seen-a-spreadsheet-before type evening accountancy course. But I know,' I hold my hands up, 'I'm not a teacher, so I've signed up to do a certificate in education, and I need to get thirty hours teaching as part of the qualification. I'm going to deliver it online, too, so I can maybe help single parents or people that can't get out in the evening.'

Josie throws her hands up. 'Why the fuck are we doing my tax return when it's not due for a month? We need to go out and celebrate.' She pulls me up and thrusts my bag at me.

'Cocktails!' we say in unison.

Chapter 30

Nate

I'm on call tonight, but it's a quiet one. At a loose end, I decided to help Scott at the bar while waiting for my phone to ping. Ella's studying this evening, having already started her new course. I'm so proud of her.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes. It's Control. Must be a priority ad hoc request or I'd have heard from them sooner.

'Hi. Whatcha got for me?'

'Hey, Nate.' The dispatcher's voice is serious. 'It's a category one. We need a transfer between Princess Regal Hospital and Oldton Park General.'

'No problem. Consider it done.'

They hand over some more details and sign off with a 'Ride safe.'

Having already grabbed my helmet, I give Scott a wave as I head for the door. He knows the deal when I'm on call. Watching me from the pub doorway, his face is grim, one hand raised. He hates it when I ride in the dark.

I'd intended to tell him my news tonight, something huge that only Chunk knows, but that'll have to wait.

I ride over to the storage garage to swap my Kawi for the Blood Bike branded BMW RT. The garage is quite close to Oldton Park General, my local hospital, which means less time spent fucking around and more time for the job.

Completing the safety checks, I have everything I need, including a torch and a spill kit in the top box. Thank fuck in the five years I've been volunteering for blood bikes, I've never needed to use *that*.

I'd signed up as a way to try and buy back some good karma, settle some dues with the health service, maybe even get some credit. I'd never anticipated the community who'd

embrace me or the feeling of fucking purpose I'd get. Being involved with blood bikes has helped save me as much as I've helped them.

With a hi-vis jacket over my leathers, I'm ready.

The journey to Princess Regal, a large city hospital just under an hour away, is uneventful apart from a legion of screaming ambulances on the other side of the road heading to where I'd just come from. Something must have gone down. Prickles domino along my spine.

I cruise at the speed limit. Seeing such a convoy of emergency responders has had a sobering effect, and I can't explain why I feel kind of twitchy.

An unexpected call comes in via the comms set in my helmet.

'Everything okay?' I ask, concern furrowing my forehead. Sometimes they call with a diversion, but not when I'm already on an urgent job.

'Just a courtesy to say we have another category one — '

My eyes flick to the time on my sat nav screen. 'I'm concerned on time for that one. This is already going to be tight.'

'Same pick up point, same destination.' The dispatcher's voice crackles. 'Just to advise you there will be two handovers.'

'Two. Understood. Thanks.'

The night's getting busier and I have a sinking feeling it's not going to slow down.

The crew at The Princess Regal Hospital are pros, and soon, the paperwork is handled and I've stowed whatever's in the bags safely, one in each pannier. We never usually know what we might be carrying, it could be anything from medication to tissue samples.

Now it's back to Oldton Park General to make the delivery. Clock's ticking.

I'm allowed to park in the drop off zone right by the entrance, which is a relief as the car park seems to be heaving. There's a weird vibe around the place.

A person from Theatres is waiting for me in reception, bouncing on their toes. They grab their parcel and sign the appropriate slip, before leaving in a flash with a thanks thrown back over their shoulder. Holding my yellow copy of the paperwork, a little buzz flares in my chest, knowing what I've done may have helped save a life.

Next, to drop off the other package to the surgical unit. I take the quickest route to the ward, sprinting the stairs two at a time as I know the lift is slow.

A nurse with a familiar face greets me. Although I don't know his name, I must have delivered stuff to him before.

As he signs for the package, he says, 'Thanks, man. This is a relief you got it here so quickly.'

'No problem.' I pass him his copy of the paperwork. 'What's the deal out there tonight? Full moon or something?'

'Didn't you hear about it on the news?'

'I don't listen to anything when I'm riding. What's going on?'

'A&E is heaving. Multivehicle pile up. Helluva mess.' He shakes his head. 'Word is it's ten teens, all local. Three walked away. Two were airlifted off to I don't know where. The rest handled here. Had to send one of our team down as an extra pair of hands.'

My mind flicks to the parade of ambulances I'd passed earlier and a sick feeling gnaws in my stomach.

Oldton isn't a huge place. There's a good chance I might know these teenagers, or their relatives. A shiver runs down my back again with a feeling of foreboding. One I just can't shake. Ella's twenty-two; she's not a teenager. I try and rationalise my fear. She wasn't out this evening anyway. But what if the rumours are wrong? What if she was out in that rust-bucket of a car? Shit.

‘Anyway, I’d better process this,’ the nurse continues. ‘Thanks again.’

Drop off completed, I head back out to the main corridor, the clench in my belly tightening, my lungs not quite able to expand.

My leathers squeak as I walk briskly along the deserted walkway. The directory of wards and departments catches my eye and I find my feet leading me down the back stairs towards A&E.

I descend a couple of levels and then push through some double doors. Triage is in chaos. There are trolleys lining the walls. Someone is screaming out behind a curtain. Blurs of blue and green are rushing around.

Striding past, I dodge medical professionals hustling around doing their best to help. I feel bad for getting in the way — for imposing in the space — but I can’t stop myself. I’m inexplicably drawn to the waiting room. I remember where it is. Could never forget.

The vision of collecting Scott from here eight years ago — the night his best friend died in a traffic accident — is clear in my memory. Luckily, I haven’t had to come back to this particular spot since.

I tell myself I’m just passing through to the exit, but really, I have to know.

Another set of double doors and I’m surrounded by a sea of faces. A group of people all whip around, looking to see if I’m someone bringing them news about their loved one. Then big brown doe-eyes find mine and there’s a moment of relief before the penny drops. It’s like a knife in my heart.

‘Nate,’ Ella chokes out, tears streaming down her blotchy face.

I’ve covered the distance to her by the time she’s stood up and she clings to me, her face buried in my neck as she sobs.

‘What’s happened? Is it Chloe?’ My arms close around her back and I rub circles, trying to soothe her.

‘I’m so glad you’re here,’ she cries.

I whisper useless platitudes into her hair. I’m telling her it’s going to be okay, but I don’t even know what’s wrong, let alone if it will be okay. I don’t know anything. I just squeeze her tighter. There’s nothing I can do.

‘She was in an accident,’ she eventually whispers, face still pressed into my neck. ‘She’s — ’ Ella looks towards the clinical area and breaks down into tears again.

‘What have they told you?’ Pulling her in close, I try to cocoon her, wrapping my arms around her. I stroke her hair as I murmur, ‘How’s she doing?’

‘I don’t know. I haven’t seen her. They told all the families to wait here,’ she says through sniffs. ‘They haven’t told us anything. Surely if she was okay, they’d have come down by now?’

She looks up and wipes at her face. It’s as if she sees me for the first time. ‘Wait. How did you know to come here? What are you wearing?’

‘I didn’t know. I was doing a delivery and had this *feeling*. I had to come and check.’

She’s staring at me wide-eyed and I realise how strange it sounds. But it’s the truth. I had the worst feeling — a knot of fear that something happened to Ella — and somehow I was right.

I grasp her shoulders with both hands, and stare into those chocolate-coloured pools. ‘What can I do? Do you want me to go and ask someone what’s happening?’

She shakes her head. ‘They need all the staff to work on the kids.’ Her voice breaks at the end and fat tears fall down her cheeks again.

‘Chloe’s going to be okay.’ I fight to keep my voice strong for her. ‘She’s in the best place.’

‘There were ten of them. In the accident.’ She sniffs and buries her head into my shoulder again. The scent of her shampoo drifts up to me as I rest my chin on top of her hair.

Across the room, I see Ella's friend, Josie, resting her head onto an older lady's shoulder and realise that Josie's family must be involved too. The older lady looks familiar, but I can't place her. I figure it must be her mum.

It dawns on me that Gabby should be here. 'Where's your mum, Ella?'

'I can't get hold of her.' A frown creases her brow. 'Often on shift, she's so busy she doesn't check her phone. I've left countless messages.' She pulls her mobile out and taps the screen, as if to check for a response. 'I don't know what else to do,' she sighs. 'I can't go and look for her. What if Chloe needs me here?'

'Where does she work?'

'The nursing home, but sometimes she picks up the odd community care work shift. I don't know where she is.' Ella breaks down again and I hold her to my chest.

'I'll find her.' I pull her in even tighter.

When she catches her breath, she says, 'Take Helena. You can't make my mum ride pillion.'

'Okay.' She hands me the key. 'I'll start at the nursing home and go from there. Call me if you need me.'

Ella nods and pulls away. I'm reluctant to let her go but the sooner I get her mum here, the sooner I can hold her again. The way she clung to me. It was like she was already broken and I was holding her together. Whatever it takes to help her, I will do it. I will be her fucking glue.

I wait until she's sat with Josie before I leave, tapping out a message to my brother as I walk back to the bike. I need to return it to the storage unit and then track down Rusty.

Nate: Job done. I won't be back tonight. Ella's sister was in the accident. Ella camped out at A&E.

Scott: Shit. The one with all the teenagers on the news? You staying with Ella?

Nate: No. I have to find her mum but her friend Josie is with her, although I think her family might be involved

somehow too. It's a nightmare in there.

Scott: Is someone covering the rest of your on call?

Nate: Fuck

The word repeats through my head as I type it out to my brother and hit send. How had I entirely forgotten I was on call tonight?

Shit, shit, shit. In my agitation, I fumble with the screen, taking a while to find Tony's details.

While the phone rings, I pace the pavement, waiting for him to answer.

'Everything okay, Nate?' Tony's voice is cautious as he answers.

'Sorry to disturb you so late.' I rub my temple, praying my hastily thought-out plan works. 'And sorry to ask, but any chance you can cover my on call tonight? Please?'

'Something happened?'

'Yeah, I — '

'No need to explain,' he cuts me off. 'Of course. Fill me in another time.'

'Thanks, man.' I exhale in relief. 'So much.'

'You get doing what you need to do. I'll tell Control to divert calls to me from now on.'

Chapter 31

Ella

Time seems to have lost all meaning and now I'm not sure if Nate was here a minute ago, an hour ago, or if my stressed-out mind imagined the whole thing. A fresh tear leaks from my eyes and I swipe it away angrily. It feels so fucking useless being stuck here doing nothing.

I get up and pace, preferring to keep active while Josie has taken the catatonic route. She's resting back on her mum, eyes glazed. I don't think she's moved for half an hour, not even a sniff. I can't begin to imagine how the Clarke family are feeling. It's like history repeating itself.

The waiting area is emptying of families as, one by one, the teens involved are patched up and discharged or admitted for observation. There's many a relieved gasp and, while I'm happy for them, I'm gutted Chloe's and Jamie's names aren't on the doctors' lips.

Soon it's just me, Josie and her parents left. Sitting on the uncomfortable plastic chairs, I feel an eerie sense of stillness, almost like I'm suspended in another dimension that can see through to this one.

Josie's taken to pacing now and I feel frozen in place.

Janet's holding a dog-eared magazine open but not turning the pages. They occasionally swap small talk but it's all so contrived. David has propped his elbow on his knee while pinching the bridge of his nose, lost in his thoughts. They both look exhausted. I look around for Nate, but there's no sign of him or my mum. Maybe I did dream he was here.

The thud of doors opening and closing gets my attention. Again. Every single time I give myself whiplash hoping for an update.

A familiar figure walks through the door but it's not Nate. It's not even my mum.

It's Nate's brother.

A flash of anger and indignation passes through me as he walks towards Josie. His eyes are fixed on her, so he doesn't notice me, or my scowl.

'Josie?' His voice is rough, strained. 'I came as soon as I could.'

They clash into each other and he hugs her to him, much like Nate had hugged me an hour ago.

I don't hear what Josie is murmuring to him but he shakes his head.

'Scottie Mullins? Is that you?' Janet sits forward, magazine abandoned.

'Hey, Mrs. Clarke. I'm so sorry to hear about Jamie.'

'Stop with the Mrs. Clarke crap and come and give me a hug. David,' she nudges her husband, 'it's Scottie, Marcus's friend.'

A jangly shiver passes over me as I process what they're saying. Scott was friends with Josie's older brother?

And Nate had said his brother had lost someone...

Pennies and pounds and whole rolls of notes start dropping as I realise Scott must be Marcus's best friend. He was there the night he died. I recall a quiet figure at the funeral, but my memory of his face is shadowed.

I let out a breath. Being back in this situation would be utterly horrifying for Scott, too.

And, it occurs to me, perhaps the reason for Scott rejecting Josie involved more than just an age gap.

Scott untangles himself from Josie and walks over to give Janet a hug and an awkward handshake to David.

'It's been a long time, Scott,' is all David says before going back to his trance.

'It has, Scottie,' Janet says. 'Eight years, no?'

‘Mum, he’s a grown man.’ Josie rolls her eyes. ‘Call him Scott for God’s sake.’

The conversation seems tense but my attention is suddenly diverted back to the doors. They’re swinging open and I feel the blood rush in my ears again as I wonder if it’s the doctor.

Next thing I know, Mum is rushing at me and scoops me into a hug.

‘I’m sorry I didn’t get here sooner,’ she’s saying. ‘How’s Chloe? What have the doctors said?’ Questions tumble out of her. ‘Where is she? What happened?’

But it’s like listening to an untuned radio, the words muffled as if my brain is filled with static.

My feet feel spongy, knees weak. I cling to her, feeling like a child. I’m twenty-two but, right now, I wish I was eight again, being told everything is okay.

Nate follows Mum through but hangs back, hands in pockets. A woman in green has come in as well. The room is starting to feel overcrowded.

‘Chloe Smith’s family?’ She peers around.

Mum’s fingers are digging into my hand as she squeezes it. ‘Yes. I’m her mum.’

It’s only then this lady smiles. ‘Chloe’s going to be okay, but she’s had quite the scare.’

As the sound of the hustle and bustle ramps back up, I realise I’ve been frozen, kind of suspended. Mute on the side lines. Terrified to move. Waiting to hear those words.

‘You can go and see her in a minute. Broken glass from the collision caused a large wound in her thigh, and she lost a lot of blood. She’s had some transfusions and surgery, and she’ll probably need some physiotherapy ... but she’s out of the woods.’

Mum crumples into the chair behind her. A sob escapes her and I snap back into caretaker mode.

‘Mum,’ I try to reassure, ‘she’s going to be okay.’

The doctor excuses herself and heads towards Josie's group. 'Jamie Clarke's family?' she asks. I hold my breath, waiting to hear more.

'He's doing well. He insisted we treat him last so I'm sorry about the wait ... '

The relief is impossible to put into words.

I try to focus on what needs to happen next. 'Mum, let's get cleaned up and go and find Chlo'.'

'Just give me a sec.' Her hands are covering her face and I know she's trying to compose herself.

Nate has been hovering in the background but he comes forward now. 'Thank fuck she's okay,' he murmurs in his gravelly voice.

'Nate,' I fake-whisper, eyeballing him and hoping my mum didn't hear him swear.

'He's right,' Mum speaks up, lifting her head. 'Thank fuck!'

Nate grins conspiratorially with my mum. 'I'll go and find out where she is.' He squeaks off in his leathers, hi-vis vest gleaming.

Chloe doesn't look pale, she looks positively grey. And so tiny in the starched white bed sheets. She's asleep, though I don't know how with the sound of the beeps going off and so many lines and cables and drips you could weave a tapestry with them.

Steri-strips are holding together cuts on her face, dark rings under her eyes.

Mum sits on one side of the bed and takes her hand, while I copy on the other.

'You'll be okay, my sweet girl.' Mum strokes her forehead, smoothing the hair off her face.

Chloe stirs, eyes blinking open and shut again in the harsh lighting.

‘Take your time. We’re here,’ Mum carries on in a calm tone, reassuring her there’s nothing to fear. As if this were no big deal.

As she talks, I can see her gaze darting around all the paraphernalia. She’d know exactly what all the numbers mean and what all the leads do. She seems satisfied, even though she’s not happy about it.

After a minute, Chloe manages to open both eyes and look between us. She offers a small smile and I almost break in two.

‘Hey you,’ I whisper, moving in for a careful hug.

‘Are you ready to talk about it?’ Mum asks.

‘I hurt my leg.’ She goes to pull at the sheet to show us but Mum stops her.

‘It’s okay, take it steady. Let’s leave that all dressed nicely. The nurses worked hard on that.’

Chloe nods and drops her hand back down again. She plucks at her sheet. ‘I don’t remember the accident. We were driving on the motorway, then we weren’t.’ She shrugs. ‘Is Jamie okay?’

‘I think so.’ I nod, forcing a smile. ‘He’s allowed to go home tonight.’

‘He held my hand while they were ... ’ her voice tails off, ‘sorting us out.’

‘He’s a good boy,’ says Mum, squeezing Chloe’s hand.

‘Josie will be relieved,’ I joke. ‘She’s been worried he might be mixing with the wrong crowd.’

Chloe doesn’t say anything but a tear slips down her cheek.

Mum presses her hand to Chloe’s forehead. ‘Is this too much? Are you getting tired?’

‘It’s just,’ Chloe squirms on the bed, ‘everything hurts.’

‘I’ll go and get the nurse.’ Mum heads out of the room.

Eyes sharp, Chloe watches her leave.

‘Truth time,’ I say softly. Our catchphrase when we know the other one is bullshitting.

‘He was driving,’ she croaks, and another tear falls. ‘Don’t tell Mum yet. I know she’ll find out, but I want to be better first.’

‘It was an accident,’ I try to reassure her.

Chloe has her guilty look, bottom lip stuck out. She doesn’t quite meet my gaze.

‘It *was* an accident?’ I repeat.

‘They were trying to race us,’ she says quietly.

‘Who?’ My stomach churns.

‘The other car. Rachel, Byron ... I don’t know the others’ names. They were messing around, cutting in and out. They wanted to race.’

‘Did you race?’

‘Jamie didn’t want to.’

My sister won’t lie as such. In fact, she’s usually brutal with the truth. But she will withhold information to suit her goals. Those four words tell me more than she realises. They did race. And *she* wanted to.

I pick my words wisely, not wanting her to clam up. ‘How do you know them?’ I keep my voice light so she knows she’s not in trouble.

‘From the bus.’ Chloe shrugs. ‘We’ve hung out after school a couple of times.’

My insides clench. ‘I don’t think you mentioned them before.’

‘I guess they’re new friends.’ Her shoulders twitch again. ‘And neither of us has been home much to chat.’

Mum comes back in with the nurse.

‘Let sort your pain medication out, sweetie,’ the nurse says and fiddles with one of the lines going in her arm.

I fix my face into a gentle smile. Holding my sister's hand, just as I hold my shit together. Now is not the time for a meltdown.

But fuck.

This is entirely my fault.

If I hadn't been preoccupied with Nate, she wouldn't have been hanging out with these people. Hell, if I hadn't made her get the bus, she probably wouldn't have met them. My stomach twisting, I feel sick with the thought of how selfish my actions have been. And what the repercussions are.

'Ella, you okay? You look like you're about to blub.' Chloe's voice is teasing. She's in irritating younger sibling mode and I'm so grateful for it now, I could cry.

'It's been a long day. I'm okay though.' I force a smile to my lips, painfully aware of how unconvincing it is.

There's a tap on the door and Nate pops his head in. 'I hope I'm not intruding? How's the patient?'

'I'm hungry and uncomfortable.' Chloe grins and offers out her closed fist, which he bumps with his own.

'I got you something.' He holds up a wiry-furred grey bear and Chloe lights up like a kid at Christmas.

'Thanks, Nate.' Despite the drip lines, she stretches her arms out and hugs it to her like she's three.

'Are you hungry?' I ask, jumping up. 'I'll see if I can get you something.'

An old sandwich from the canteen or a chocolate bar from the vending machine is in no way going to assuage my guilt, but I need to start somewhere.

'I'll come with.' Nate follows along with me. We're silent as we walk along the maze-like corridors.

My mind is reeling with guilt and accusations, and desperate bartering for Chloe to be okay.

This is my fault.

If I hadn't ...

If I'd only ...

I'd do anything to make sure she's okay.

We arrive at an abandoned canteen. There's no staff serving food, but there are plenty of vending machines stocked with everything from sweets and chocolate to sausage rolls and sarnies.

'Can I get you anything?' he asks, eyes earnest.

'I ... No, thank you.' I press my lips together.

'You need to eat, too.' He frowns. 'How long have you been here? Hours?'

'I don't des — I'm not hungry.' A scrap of hair falls over my cheek as I shake my head.

'What do you mean?' He jerks back. 'You were going to say you don't deserve to eat, weren't you?'

Casting my gaze down, I say, 'I'm just going to grab a sausage roll and one of those dubious looking apples and get back to my sister.'

'Ella,' he says, his voice ragged, 'you can't look after her properly if you're not looking after yourself.'

'That's total bollocks.' I cock my hands on my hips. 'I can't look after her properly if I *am* looking after myself.'

'What?' His brows fold together.

'This is all my fault. All *our* fault, really. If I hadn't been so distracted and swept up in all of this — ' I point between him and me ' — in us, then this would never have happened.'

'It was an accident, El.' He splays his hand wide, like he's trying to calm a stray animal. 'This isn't on you, or on us.'

I shake my head, rolling my eyes. 'You wouldn't understand. It's my fault she was mixing with these people. If I'd have been there for her, she wouldn't have been there with them.'

‘You can’t blame yourself for this.’ He reaches out for me but I take a half step back. ‘They’re just kids messing around. It was an accident.’

‘You wouldn’t understand,’ I bite out again.

‘Take a break for five,’ he pleads. ‘Eat something. You’ll feel better.’

‘I’m not the one with a gaping hole in her leg. I’m not the one who needs to feel better,’ I shout.

‘We’ll get through this,’ he says as I turn away.

I spin back. ‘There isn’t a *we* or an *us*.’ My voice catches. ‘We can’t be anything.’

‘Ella.’ His eyes are black, imploring.

‘I’d better get back. Chloe needs me.’ I stalk back into the maze, tears blurring my eyes.

Chapter 32

Nate

‘We could be everything.’ I say it softly as I watch Ella walk away.

Shit. I want to follow her, but I know this guilt. There’s nothing I can say to change her mind. Not right now.

It was the same with my brother. A kind of survivor’s guilt. Second guessing everything that happened before. Trying to pinpoint where it went wrong, what should have happened to prevent this. Working out how you were to blame.

I’ll just have to hope Ella isn’t as stubborn as Scott. Ever since Marcus died, Scott has lived a small life, like he doesn’t feel he deserves anything bigger. He gave up his passion for motorbikes. Too dangerous. He runs a pub, but he doesn’t let it thrive. He shuts down any chance of a relationship before it can begin. It does Marcus’s memory an injustice, his not living life to the fullest.

Scott’s guilt never made much sense to me. It wasn’t his fault a fucking car hit Marcus when they were on a ride. But then I guess that’s grief. It doesn’t have to make sense. Now Ella’s blaming herself for what happened with Chloe.

Knowing I need to give her some space, I ride home to get a shower.

‘Dude,’ Chunk greets me when I get in, face grave.

‘You still up?’ I frown, then give him a small smile of appreciation.

‘I guessed you’d be out helping with the aftermath of that accident. Wanted to make sure you were okay when you got in.’

I fill him in on everything I know and he puffs out his cheeks with a deep exhale. ‘Thank fuck no lives were lost.’

‘Ella’s blaming herself,’ I sigh. ‘Well, more specifically, me. Us.’

‘How?’ Chunk dips his head in confusion.

He looks at me with pity as I explain and then says, ‘She doesn’t mean it, man. She’s still processing shit.’

I clap both hands on top of my head, pushing down my palms as if they’ll help me feel like my head isn’t going to explode. ‘I know she’s lashing out ‘cause she’s scared.’ I’ve ridden that fucking road myself.

‘What are you going to do?’

I puff out a weighty exhale. ‘Whatever it takes.’

‘That’s right.’ He slaps me on the back. ‘You tell your brother yet? Your news about the job?’

‘Didn’t have the chance.’ I shrug.

‘I get it. Don’t want to rush it.’ Chunk stands and stretches. ‘I’m gonna hit the sack but wake me if you need anything.’

Instead of taking a much needed shower, I slump onto the sofa. It’s warm from where Chunk had been waiting for me.

My mind is firing after everything that’s happened. I want to be there for Ella. She’s been through so much. It took a lot to get her to trust me and I’m not losing that trust now. If anything, I need to step up. Let her know I’m here even when things are hard.

Absentmindedly, I pick up the controller but stare at a blank screen, knuckles white from my grip. My heart rate cranks higher. I’m not fucking failing at this too. I’ll do whatever it takes.

Ella

‘What are you doing here?’ I eye Nate sceptically.

Ignoring my demand yesterday, he’s pulled up outside the house in Chunk’s Ranger, engine still running. The exhaust is puffing out a spectre in the December morning.

He's clean shaven, wearing ironed clothes — totally unphased by my proclamation the last time I saw him. 'I'm here to give you and your mum a lift. To the hospital.'

'What?' My forehead scrunches. 'No. I told you last night.'

'All I heard last night was that you were tired and hungry. No one makes good decisions in those circumstances.' He cracks a small smile. 'And to that end, there are bacon butties in the back.'

'Ella, why are you standing in the door?' My mum appears. 'You're letting all the warm air out ... oh, hello, Nathan.'

'Gabby,' he greets her. 'I'm here to give you a lift to the hospital. Whenever you're ready, of course.' That bloody dimple of his peeps out as he flashes her his most endearing grin and I could scream.

'Oh, thank you.' She rubs his arm as she says, 'That's very sweet. I just need to get a few things.' Mum retreats into the hallway.

'No, Mum. I'm driving us. We're not putting Nate out.' I throw him a glare and pray he can read my mind. There's no fucking way we're going with him.

'Oh, pish.' Mum turns back. 'Nathan is here and he's ready to take us. Save you driving Helena, and probably a lot more comfortable.'

'No, Mum — ' She comes up with rebuttals to all my protestations and, somehow, I find myself in the back of the dirty SUV, clutching a foil wrapped parcel and trying not to glower at my own mum.

'And you found time to make breakfast?' My mum is cooing from the front passenger seat.

'Didn't want my best girls getting hungry,' he replies, catching my eye in the rear-view mirror.

I swear I'd beat that dimple right off his face with the bacon butty if he wasn't so far away. And driving. And actually, I'm hungry, so I'm just going to go ahead and eat this stupid roll.

By the time Nate pulls into the parking area at the hospital, the bacon has filled my belly and stiffened my resolve. It's given me the fuel to work out how to convince Nate I'm serious.

We're over.

We have to be.

Mum gets out first and I tell her I'll catch her up.

As I open the door and slide out of the back, Nate unbuckles his belt quickly, meeting me on the tarmac.

I can't quite meet his eye.

'Nate, thank you for the lift but ... we don't need your help getting home.' Looking over his shoulder, I stick my chin out. 'I'll order us a taxi.'

'That's silly, I'm happy to help.' He tips his head, trying to meet my gaze.

'But I'm not happy to receive it.' I shake my head. 'This thing between us can't happen.' I concentrate on his Adam's apple and grit my teeth as I force out the words, 'It won't. I'm sorry but ... it's over.'

'Ella — ' He reaches for me.

'I'm serious.' I hold my hand up to him. 'I'm focusing on my sister. She deserves better than half my attention and I need to look after her.'

'I can help you.' He strokes up and down my arm.

He's not listening. Or not hearing me.

I have to make him understand.

'But that's just it.' I shake out of his grip, hair spilling out of my bun. 'I don't want your help.'

'This is bullshit, Ella.' His forehead creases into a frown. 'You don't mean this.'

I risk a peek up to his eyes, but the intense way they search mine is unbearable and I look away, wishing I was braver. Wishing there was another way.

I know this is going to hurt.

But I have to do it.

It's the only way he'll get the message.

Taking a deep breath, I rip the plaster off. 'I trusted you and look what happened.' My voice comes out bitter. Unforgiving. 'I deserve better than you. I deserve better than some biker guy who failed out of uni and can't even settle at a proper job. It's been fun, but who are we kidding? Party's over. I need to get back to real life.' Finally, I settle my gaze on him, unblinking, resolute — a mask of defiance plastered on my face. 'Goodbye, Nate.'

I walk away, not daring to look back in case he sees the stream of betraying tears running down my cheeks.

Chapter 33

Nate

There was no doubt in my mind this was going to be hard. But now, standing in my kitchen, this feels impossible. The foil is still out on the counter from where I didn't clear up properly in my eagerness to get out. I feel like a fool, expecting a round of bacon butties to fix everything.

'You want to work out some frustration?' Chunk holds up the sparring kit. 'I've got an hour before I head to The Wreck.'

Feeling numb, I put on the gloves and go through the motions, following the routine Chunk always sticks to.

We work out in silence, except for him calling out prompts. I can't drown out the echo of Ella's words. She deserves better than me.

It's fucking true. My best efforts aren't good enough. If wish and want alone were enough, then there wouldn't be a problem. But she needs more.

'I don't know if I can do this.' I thrust my forehead into my gloved hands, but the pressure isn't helping to clear my head.

'What the fuck are you talking about?' He smacks the pads together, indicating I should keep jabbing.

Ella's face swims into my memory. She looked hollow, tormented. Seeing her suffering hurt more than the words she tried to cut me with.

'Ella.' Punch. 'She's falling apart.' Punch. 'I swore to myself I'd be her glue, to keep her together.' Punch, punch. 'But what if I'm not *sticky enough*?' Punch. 'What if she doesn't want this particular brand of *adhesive*?' I throw out my hand, defeated.

Chunk chuckles. 'I hope you're better at being glue than you are at analogies.'

Stupid, traitorous tears prick my eyes. But this is Chunk and I don't care what kind of mess he sees me in.

'Listen to me.' He clumsily grapples my shoulders. 'You are her glue. Her lynch pin. Her rock. Whatever she needs right now, you are. And if that means giving her the space she's asking for, that's what you do.' Chunk gives a final squeeze and shake and lets go, lifting the pads back up as targets. 'Be patient.'

I nod and jab out a couple more crosses before my arms drop again.

Chunk is levelling his gaze on me and I find myself saying words I hadn't fully admitted to myself. 'What if I fuck this up, too?' Throat tight, it comes out as a fucking squeak.

What if I fuck everything up, like I always do?

The rest of the day goes by in a blur. I try to call Ella but she doesn't answer. I suck at giving her the space I know she needs.

My shift at The Bull is boring as hell. It takes roughly three percent of my brain to go through the motions, leaving the rest to obsess. It doesn't help that it's quiet with only a few regulars in.

As I polish the mirror at the back of the bar, I scowl as I catch sight of my own miserable reflection.

'What's with you?' Scott asks as he pulls down the top shelf bottles to clean.

'Nothing,' I grind out. We can both be Mr. Grumpy.

After a minute, Scott puts down his cloth. 'What did you want to talk to me about the other day, before you had to do your blood bikes thing?' He's really trying here.

I stare at him in the mirror, wondering how he'll take the news. Deliberating if it's still a good idea. 'I've been offered a full time job. I'm thinking of taking it.'

That's kind of a lie. I'd fully accepted the role, but now I'm having serious second thoughts.

'Good for you.' He raises his eyebrows and nods slowly, levelling his gaze on me.

'You're not annoyed?' My eyes flick away, and I keep polishing over the same shiny spot.

'This was only ever supposed to be a stop-gap for you.'

I glance back up to see his reflection.

'I'm relieved.' He shakes his head with a small smile, puffing out a breath. 'Mum's always on at me about what you're doing with your life. So, what are you going to do? Will Chunk mind?'

'I hope not,' I turn to look directly at him. 'He offered me the job. Head of Hospitality. I'm in charge of realising the luxury treehouse venture.'

Chunk's so excited about this he's already drawn up a job description and contract. Now I'm concerned it's just another thing I can screw up.

'About fucking time.' He dips a bottle at me like he's raising a toast before returning it to the shelf.

'You're not mad?' My eyes widen. 'I'm not letting you down?'

'Absolutely not.' Scott dusts off his hands and then pauses to study me. 'I'm so bloody proud.' He shakes his head again. 'Kind of envious, actually.' He pulls my head under his arm and scrubs his knuckles to my scalp. Luckily my hair has grown in a bit for some meagre protection from his noogie. 'You've come such a long way, baby brother.'

'Fuck off.' I smile at his unexpected compliment as I duck out of his hold, 'What are you envious of anyway?'

'I wish I had the balls you do,' he exclaims. 'Coming back from a set-back, seizing what you want.'

About to argue, I realise Scott's right. Since Marcus's accident, he's held himself back, he doesn't take risks or rock

the boat. He's safe, he's pedestrian, and I have always hated it.
I want more for him. I want more for me, too.

Chapter 34

Ella

Chloe was sick of wearing the hospital gown, so we brought her favourite pyjamas. Except, it's only when we get to the hospital entrance, I realise I've left them in the boot of Mum's car.

'I'll go back and get them,' I say to Mum. 'You go and see Chloe. She'll be wondering where we are.'

'Thanks, love.' Mum gives me a little wave and disappears through the automatic doors.

Trudging back to the car, I think back over the last two days. It's been interminably miserable but it's all I deserve.

I had to make him believe me.

Accept that I'm serious.

I needed him to hate me, so he wouldn't try to change my mind.

I had to lie.

It was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. Other than witnessing my little sister's tiny form swamped in tubes and bandages.

I'm disgusted I used his words, his brave confession, against him. He'd opened up to me, telling me about his ex. How she'd turned a low point of failing at university into his darkest hour. And I came along and turned it into a fucking black hole.

I messed up.

It backfired.

His eyes, usually so full of warmth and desire, turned dark, and that vision keeps flashing into my mind. But they didn't fill with hatred as I'd hoped. If he hated me, then he would leave. Instead, they looked ... *sad*. There's no better way of describing it.

And that is so much worse than him hating me.

An invisible wound in my chest burns. I rub at my ribs and try to dismiss it; it's probably indigestion, or a stitch from racing up the stairs. Except it's constant. I try to tell myself it's a reminder I almost lost my sister, but deep down I know the truth. The selfish part of me knows my heart is hurting for someone else.

Pyjamas in hand, I get back to Chloe's ward. I swipe under each eye and take a deep breath. I should be happy. My ultimate goal was achieved. He won't be trying to change my mind. I've got what I wanted.

Haven't I?

Fixing a smile on my face, I go into Chloe's room. The space is white. White walls, white bedding, with grey equipment and my ashen-coloured little sis in the middle of it all.

'You look awful,' Chloe remarks when she sees me.

Mum's voice trickles around the corner from the nurse's station. She must be getting an update.

'You hardly look your best,' I retort.

Her face falls and I realise she's in that delicate, can-dish-it-out-but-not-receive-it state.

'I'm sorry. Here's your favourite jarmies.' I hold out the soft, brushed-cotton pyjamas, patterned with snoozing sloths. 'Can I get you anything? Help you get changed?'

'I just want to come home.' She shakes her head sadly. 'Mum's gone to ask.'

Ignoring the sign saying I shouldn't, I climb on to my sister's bed next to her and give her a hug. It's as much for me as it is for her.

'We'll get you home as soon as we can. Promise.' I kiss the top of her head. 'I contacted your teachers. They're going to email the work you need to catch up on.'

'Thanks. I think,' Chloe grumbles.

‘All being well, you can go home tomorrow afternoon,’ Mum announces as she enters. ‘I’ve arranged some time off work, so you’ll have me for company.’

‘I can take some time, too, if you need,’ I offer, knowing we can’t really afford for her to be off work.

‘We’ll be okay, won’t we Chlo’? Although — ’ Hand on her hip, Mum tilts her head to the side as she appraises me. ‘You do look a little peaky. Maybe you could do with a break.’

‘Thanks a lot. I’ve been having a *break* for the last two days,’ I snap.

I feel bad immediately. It’s not Mum’s fault I’ve had trouble sleeping, what with my thoughts jumbling in a confused mess about Chloe’s accident and the awful things I said to ... him. I can’t even bring myself to think his name. It hurts too much.

My phone buzzes, the caller ID flashing abruptly across the screen.

Nate.

I rub at the ache behind my ribs, the pain intensifying as I read his name.

As I click to silence the call, I catch Chloe giving me a curious look.

‘No phones on the ward.’ Swallowing a lump in my throat, I shrug.

I have to remain focused on Chloe.

‘You could take it in the corridor.’ She frowns as if confused at my stupidity.

‘I’m fine here.’ I force a smile which may be bordering on manic, judging by the narrow of Chloe’s gaze. Mum doesn’t seem to notice. She’s buzzing around, folding blankets and tidying magazines.

‘Mum, please can you get me a cuppa?’ Chloe asks, not breaking her eye contact with me. ‘And some biscuits?’

‘Of course,’ she gushes, probably relieved to be given a job. ‘Anything for you, Ella, love?’

‘No, thanks.’ I haven’t been able to touch anything since that bacon butty yesterday morning.

As soon as Mum’s left the room, Chloe rounds on me — kind of hard when you’re squashed together on a single bed, but she manages all the same.

A frown contorts her face, a fist screwed at her hip. ‘Why are you being so weird?’

‘I’m not, I — ’

Chloe fixes me with a glare, one I recognise from my own face when I’m not taking any shit.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh. ‘I’m sorry for all of this. I feel like it’s my fault.’

‘Why?’ She looks at me like I’ve grown an extra head. ‘You weren’t driving the other car.’

‘No, but if I’d have been paying more attention, you wouldn’t have ... ’ I trail off, my words failing me. ‘If I hadn’t been ... It won’t happen again.’

‘What are you talking about?’ She scowls with derision. ‘No one ever knows what’s going to happen.’

‘Well, I can guarantee I won’t be distracted by a stupid guy again.’ My voice flutters out in a thin laugh. ‘You’ve got my full attention now.’

‘What do you mean?’ Chloe eyes me suspiciously. ‘What have you done?’

I sigh, ‘I called it off with Nate — ’

‘You did what?’ she shrieks over me. ‘Why?’

‘That’s not important.’ I shake my head. ‘It’s done.’

‘You’re a fucking idiot.’ She spits out the words.

‘Er, thanks.’ I copy her usual sarcastic teenage tone. ‘And ... *Swear Jar.*’

‘You are!’ she huffs. ‘Why have you dumped a gorgeous, thoughtful, lovely, sexy guy like that?’

‘Chloe,’ I warn.

‘I mean, he’s too old for me. But as old guys go, he’s fucking hot.’

‘He’s not old, and *language!*’

‘It’s situationally appropriate,’ she snaps. ‘He’s fucking hot and you’re a fucking idiot.’ She crosses her arms across the patterned hospital gown, flicking a line away before all her tubes and cables get tangled.

‘You wouldn’t understand.’ I soften my voice. ‘It wasn’t meant to be.’

‘Try me.’ She raises her eyebrows in a challenge.

Scrambling to remember my usual argument, I say, ‘He’s not a good influence for me to bring home. I shouldn’t have let him meet you.’

‘I don’t believe this. And don’t put this on me.’ She scowls. ‘What’s not good about him?’

I sigh, ‘He reminds me of the type of guy mum used to bring home.’

‘Examples, please.’

I swallow, trying to collect my reasoning. ‘He rides a motorbike.’ It comes out as more of a question.

‘He borrowed a car to give me lifts to places,’ Chloe counters.

I scrub at my forehead, reaching for excuses. ‘The buzz cut, the tattoos, the leathers ... ’

‘What buzz cut?’ Chloe’s going to bring on early wrinkles with all the frowning she’s doing at me. ‘He didn’t have one when I saw him last.’

I think back. Nate’s hair had grown out a bit in the course of my knowing him.

‘And those tattoos?’ she continues, ‘They were like a piece of living artwork.’

She’d noticed too, huh.

‘He’s not particularly meaningfully employed.’ I pick at a loose thread on Chloe’s sheet, trying to avoid her scrutiny. Avoid admitting my arguments are as thin as the hospital linen.

‘Didn’t you say he had at least two jobs, *and* he volunteered? That’s more than most.’

‘They’re hardly steady careers.’ I try to regurgitate all the reasons I’d told myself in the beginning, but, even to my own ears, I don’t sound very convincing.

‘Judgey much?’

‘I ... ’ I gape at her. ‘I ... I just want to do what’s best for everyone.’

Chloe starts sniffing. ‘This smells like bullshit.’

I wince. ‘Nate said something similar.’

‘Truth time.’ She cocks her head with a smirk.

I hesitate, trying to find the courage to confess my fears to Chloe. I’ve spent all this time trying to protect her from them. ‘I didn’t want to bring a guy into our lives who’s going to leave again.’

She takes my hand, roles reversed. ‘He doesn’t seem like the others.’

I groan. ‘That’s what Josie said. But me being distracted with him ... it meant I wasn’t there for you.’

‘You’re not to blame for ... ’ Chloe gestures to all the tubes, wires, and equipment around us, ‘ ... this.’

‘No, I am.’ Mum’s voice comes from the doorway.

I have no idea how long she’s been standing there. She enters the room, placing a tray of tea and biscuits on the cabinet beside the bed.

‘I should have been there more. I’m sorry, Chloe.’ She turns to me and I sit up straighter. ‘And Ella, I’ve relied on you too much. I never meant for you to make so many sacrifices. It’s not fair on you — ’

‘Jesus, you two,’ Chloe interrupts. ‘It’s my fucking fault. I made a bad decision. I’m a kid. It’s what we do. It’s not your fault. It’s mine. Fuck!’

My sister’s sudden outburst rings through the air and I find my gaze meeting Mum’s, our eyes equally bugging out in surprise.

‘Swear Jar,’ Mum tuts and then breaks into giggles.

Chloe follows and then I start giggling, too, overwhelmed by the situation.

Eventually, I sigh. ‘I’m beginning to think I’ve made a huge mistake.’

‘Monumental.’ Chloe nods vehemently.

‘Nathan volunteers for UK Blood Bikes, doesn’t he?’ Mum’s forehead puckers. ‘Could it have been him that delivered the blood for your sister’s transfusion?’

The dull ache behind my ribs erupts. Chloe’s right. I’m a fucking idiot.

Mum perches on the bed, clutching one of Chloe’s legs, and one of mine. ‘Things like this, they shake your very foundations. But they help you clarify who or what your priorities are. You can use them as a new start, too.’ I’m not sure if she’s trying to reassure Chloe or me. Probably both of us. Maybe even herself.

Elbows propped on my knees, I hide my head in my hands, wishing I could bury myself in the hospital sheets.

‘Phone him,’ Chloe urges. ‘Surely you can fix this.’

‘It won’t be too late to sort this, love.’ A soft note soothes in Mum’s voice.

I look up at them both, giving a weak smile.

‘You need to focus on making this right.’ Mum squeezes my hand. ‘No more not living your life trying to help me. We’ll be fine, won’t we Chloe?’

Chloe nods and Mum tips her head as if to ask what the hell I’m waiting for.

Wriggling off the bed, I then stoop over to hug them both. ‘I need to make a call, but not to Nate. Not yet.’

‘Go, then.’ They shoo me from the room.

In the corridor, I head to a quiet area and fish my phone from my bag. I bring up the right name on the screen and tap the phone icon.

As I wait for the call to connect, footsteps pound out from around the corner. Josie’s brother comes into view. His strides shorten as he sees me.

‘Hey, how you feeling?’ I mouth.

Jamie rubs at his neck. ‘Fine. Bit achy.’

The ring of the unanswered call sounds in my ear. ‘You here to see Chloe or have you got a check-up?’

‘Ummm —’ His eyes shift around but, before he answers, the call connects.

‘Hey, you okay?’ Josie’s voice sounds in my ear.

‘Sorry,’ I interrupt him with a whisper, ‘it’s your sis. Catch you later.’ I give him a wave before answering Josie. ‘Hey, I’ve just bumped into Jamie. Small world.’

‘Even smaller. I’m sitting in the car park waiting for him.’ I watch Jamie as he heads towards Chloe’s room but then carries on walking past it.

‘Is everything okay with Jamie?’ My feet lead the way across the beige vinyl floor towards the main corridor of the hospital.

‘Yeah, I’m being his taxi. His car’s written off.’

I grimace. ‘I’m glad I didn’t see the wreckage. My nightmares don’t need any more detail.’

‘How come you were calling? Everything okay with Chloe?’

‘I think so.’ My relief echoes along the corridor. ‘She’s got to have a final review by the doctor and the paperwork sorting, then we can bring her home tomorrow. But,’ I glance around

to see if I'm alone, 'there's something I need to ask you ... something silly and selfish and ... '

'You want to keep me company while I wait for my bro?'

'Yes,' I breathe. It'll be easier in person. 'Actually, are you dropping Jamie home after this?'

'Uh huh.'

'Please, can you give me a lift home? Mum drove here and I need to pick up my car.' Heading past several sets of double doors, I turn a corner and bounce down the stairs.

'Sure, but this has to go down in history as the first time you have ever wanted me to drive you anywhere.'

I laugh as I head through a side exit that takes me to the car park.

Bright yellow, it's easy to spot Josie's car. Hanging up, I climb into the passenger side, greeting her with a quick hug.

'Everything okay?' Josie asks. 'What's up?'

'Everything's horrible.' I grimace with a sigh.

'I thought you said Chloe was okay?' Josie gasps, grabbing my hand.

'No, she's faring up pretty well. It's me ... I need your permission for something.'

'You're nuts sometimes.' She chuckles. 'Is this about Nate?' She mock whispers, 'You don't need my permission for anal.'

I bat her arm as I blush at the thought.

Raking my hands through my hair I say, 'I messed up. I was so awful.'

'What happened?'

I explain about my rash decision to call things off. That I'd thought it was my fault Chloe had been in the accident. That being distracted by him meant I couldn't look after her properly.

Josie listens to the horrible things I'd said without interruption, an empathetic look on her face.

Twisting around in the seat to face her, I finish saying, ‘I need to make it up to him. Show him I trust him. And show him he can trust me.’

‘Anal?’ She quirks an eyebrow and laughs, breaking the tension. ‘I get it, you need a grand gesture. Romcom-stylee.’

‘Yes, but no boom boxes or flash mobs.’ I wince as I pluck up the courage to ask her. ‘I have an idea, but I need your ... approval.’

‘What? Now I’m starting to get concerned *I* need to have anal.’

‘Stop saying anal and I’ll tell you!’ My voice is raised with mock irritation and somehow a smile breaks through.

Deep breath, Ella. You can do this.

‘He wanted to share something with me a few weeks ago, something special to him, and I totally shut him down. We kind of laughed about it. He was fine afterwards but my point-blank refusal to not even consider it probably hurt him.’ I worry my lip with my teeth. ‘So I’m thinking maybe if I can do it for him, he’ll give me another chance.’

Josie raises a cunning eyebrow and starts to open her mouth.

I interrupt. ‘If you ask if it’s anal, Josie, so help me I will wound you!’

‘You got me.’ She snickers. ‘What is it? What could you need my permission for?’

I take both of her hands in mine. ‘I made a promise — ’

Suddenly a back door opens and Jamie bowls into the car. ‘Thanks sis, I owe you.’ He clicks his seatbelt in place. ‘You joining us, Ella?’

Totally flummoxed, I drop her hands, rubbing my sweaty palms on my thighs and mumble an unsure, ‘Er, yes?’

The silence is heavy as we all sit in the parked car, Josie gripping the wheel.

‘Sooo,’ Jamie lengthens the syllable, ‘we waiting for anyone else?’

‘No, no.’ Josie starts the engine and pulls out of the space.

‘Kinda feel like I’ve interrupted something back here. Something about a promise? Talk amongst yourselves. Pretend I’m not here.’ Jamie starts enthusiastically tapping on his phone.

Josie’s eyes roll and she mouths, ‘Sorry.’

With a lower tone, I try to formulate the words.

‘Eight years ago, I made you a promise ... To never get on a motorbike.’ I watch her jaw tighten as I speak. ‘But now I need to retract that vow.’ My saliva almost gets stuck in my throat as I swallow. ‘Please can I get on a motorbike?’

‘Ells, they’re fucking death traps.’ Josie’s eyes don’t leave the road.

‘I know, I know. I don’t ask this lightly. Marcus ... that motorbike accident ... I ... I can’t imagine. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have — ’

‘Oh, bloody hell, I can’t give you my permission.’

My breath catches.

Josie’s lips tweak. ‘You don’t need it,’ she clarifies, sounding exasperated.

‘But I made a promise?’ I repeat, guilty about breaking my word.

‘Eight years ago. When we were kids.’ She gives me a bemused frown. ‘I’m hardly going to hold you to it forever.’

‘Wait.’ Jamie sits forward, gripping on to Josie’s head rest. ‘You made Ella promise never to get on a motorbike? *Ever?*’

‘Yeah,’ Josie scowls, like, of course she did.

‘And you were just going to follow along with that?’ His eyes flick to me.

‘Yes.’ Marcus’s accident was horrific. Devastating. He got T-boned on a stormy night. The driver just didn’t see him,

apparently. At the tender age of fourteen, witnessing my best friend's world upending, I didn't need convincing riding a motorcycle was something I should avoid. Even now, I still freak out a little when I drive in the rain.

'You promised as well.' Josie flashes Jamie a quick look in the rear-view mirror.

'Like fuck I did.' He jerks his head back.

'Yep.' She nods slowly. 'You were nine. I made Mum and Dad swear, too.'

'You're not holding me to that.' His voice squeaks with indignation.

'Well, I — ' Josie counters.

'I mean, you literally can't,' he interrupts. 'I'm gonna get a motorbike instead of a new car. When the insurance eventually pays out.'

'What?' Josie and I both shriek. Our voices bouncing off the low car roof and jangling inside the vehicle.

'If I avoid every vehicle because I might have an accident in it, there'll be nothing left. I'll have to walk everywhere. I tripped over some shoes earlier. Gonna ban those too?'

'The pair of you are going to finish me off,' Josie mumbles.

Concentrating on traffic and the road, she falls silent and Jamie and I follow suit. After a couple of miles, we pull up outside Josie's childhood home, a detached mid-century property surrounded by privet hedges and a gravel drive.

'OK, piss off you little shit.' Josie smirks fondly at her brother.

'You're the best, sis.' He grins, unclipping his belt. 'Same time tomorrow?'

Jamie stretches a long leg out of his open door, but before he gets out, Josie adds, 'Get lessons.'

He turns back, brow puckered.

‘Both of you,’ Josie continues. ‘Just get lessons. Life’s too short to hide from things. But don’t forget it’s too fucking short to die young as well.’

Her brother double taps the roof before she pulls away.

‘What are your plans for the rest of the day?’ Josie asks as she takes me back to my house.

‘I need to go shopping.’ We stop at a red light and wait.

‘Industrial size bottle of lube for all that anal?’ Josie catches my eye, hers glinting mischievously.

‘Something like that,’ I snigger, batting her arm.

The Wreck is really something to see in daylight. I take in the splendour of the forest setting and the activity centre nestled into the wilderness. With the winter sun falling through the canopy, it looks very different. On the ground, various cabins blend into the leafy backdrop, with trails enticing you off into the woods. Above, the platforms I’d climbed with Nate are dotted amongst the trees with ropes and cables weaving through the canopy.

Nate’s bike is in the carpark, as is the muddy SUV. I feel a pang of apprehension mixed with relief now I’ve found him. Feeling ashamed — and not really knowing how to approach him — I’d decided to answer next time he called. But then, suddenly, my phone stopped ringing. Worried I’d missed my chance, I decided to track him down in person. I was afraid of him screening my call or telling me to fuck off. Finding his apartment abandoned and hearing that Enzo at The Bull hadn’t seen him, I drove to The Wreck.

Holding the brown paper parcel to my chest like a security blanket, I trudge across the dirt to the hut marked Base Camp. This was the cabin we got the kit from when we came here before.

Behind the desk is a broad shouldered brick wall of a guy. Blond haired, he’s attractive in a menacing kind of way. I note

a scar tracks down one side of his face and wonder if this might be Chunk.

‘Hi. Is Nate around?’

He looks up, startled, and then scans cold, moss-green eyes over me.

‘Is he expecting you?’ His voice is deep and rumbly.

‘No.’ I take half a step back. ‘If it’s a bad time I can come back, but I’d appreciate the chance to speak with him. It’s important.’ The package crinkles as I squeeze it tighter. The gaze of this gatekeeper is quite terrifying.

He stands, pulling a walkie-talkie from his belt. ‘Nate. Your presence is requested at Base Camp, over.’

Static sounds over the waves before a distorted voice crackles through. ‘Dude, I’m fine. It’s too soon for more cake, anyway. I’ll be over later.’ The guy who might be Chunk catches my eye and there’s a flicker of mirth before he looks away.

‘Negative. Report to base.’

‘Fuck, man,’ the static pops and whistles, ‘if I come now, will you leave me alone to let me get on with this?’

‘Nate, this is code Whiskey Tango Foxtrot.’

He stows his walkie talkie and then gets back to typing on his computer with his giant fingers, or should I say finger, the laborious hunt-and-peck technique is painful to watch.

A minute later, the scuffing sound of feet approaches and my eyes flick to the doorway. I try to arrange my face into a position that looks calm and attractive and not at all like I’m about to cry. Or vomit.

What if I’ve blown everything?

The footsteps stop and there’s a knock at the door before Nate strides in, eyes flashing. He looks flushed.

I don’t think he notices me at first, so I speak up with a timid, ‘Hey.’ I squeeze the package tighter, my cheeks trembling as I try to offer a small smile.

‘Hi.’ His voice is cool, even.

Shit. No smile, none of his usual banter or nice words. He hates me.

‘Can we talk?’

‘Yeah.’ His jaw is locked tight, expression blank. He’s impossible to read.

I clutch the parcel tighter and head out of the door.

Chapter 35

Nate

The axe cracks into the wood, splitting it in two. *Thwack*. The pile of kindling is growing steadily in the corner of the barn. The interior, which, until recently, Chunk has been using for storage, is huge. Now we've cleared access to it, Chunk and I are setting the barn up as an event space. He's installed a wood burning stove and I'm currently stocking the wood store. I'd asked Chunk for some hard labour, something menial and absorbing. He didn't disappoint.

He also keeps giving me cake in a bid to cheer me up. I need this workout to burn off the slab of red velvet he foisted on me. I want to be at my absolute best when I convince Ella to reconsider. It was part of the deal, though. Cake and car in exchange for my first love. Phase one of the plan is complete. If only I knew what phase two needed to be.

I've somehow managed to stop calling her, commanded myself to back off a little, giving her some space to process everything.

She was devastated about her sister and lashed out at someone who'd forgive her. Been there, done that. The irony is not lost on me. I know deep down she didn't mean what she said. I could see the pain in her eyes.

The radio crackles and Chunk is being weirder than normal, bringing back a ridiculous code we made up as kids but haven't used in years. Whiskey Tango Foxtrot. That used to be our way of saying something outrageous has happened and we can't put it into words, either because we didn't know how, or we didn't want someone to hear us actually say What The Fuck? Him bringing it back to life now must be another way of him trying to cheer me up. I keep telling him, though, I don't need cheering up. I need to get my shit together. Then I can make my own happiness.

I impale the axe into the log and take off my safety goggles and gloves. The sooner I can convince Chunk I'm okay, the

sooner I can get back to this barn and work out what to say to Ella. Get her to understand how I feel about her.

Approaching the cabin, I make myself as loud as possible. It's a habit I've fallen into after I realised I scared the shit out of Chunk once when he didn't hear me approaching. He almost offloaded a paintball gun all over me.

I rap on the door to give him a heads up. I don't know why Chunk wants to force-feed me cake. I get the feeling if I had long hair he'd be wanting to plait it or something. He's gone into full-scale mother hen mode. But I wish he hadn't. I've got some serious thinking to do and his good intentions are hindering it.

As I step into the cabin, Chunk has what can only be described as a shit-eating-grin on his face and, as my eyes adjust to the relative gloom, I realise there's someone else standing there.

'Hey.' Ella's nibbling on that bottom lip and I want to run to her. But I don't. I don't want to spook her. Instead, I freeze.

'Hi.' *Real smooth, Nate.* My words are as barren as my tongue is dry.

'Can we talk?' She takes half a step forward, voice quiet, hesitant.

'Yeah.' This is what happens when I'm stressed. Words fail me.

Chunk speaks up. 'I'll hold your calls,' he says, before starting his painstaking typing on the computer.

I love that prick. I don't know if he thinks he's helping by making me sound more important than I am, or if he knows this will lighten the mood, but, whatever his intentions, he's made me chuckle. My initial panic, forgotten.

Now my brain's ramping into overdrive as it scrambles to bring my plan together, having to sort things out with Ella sooner. To work out the perfect words. I hadn't quite nailed it down. Actually, I had no real clue. And now she's here and this might be my only chance.

I lead her outside, heart pounding, hoping this visit will bring good news rather than a restraining order.

Side by side, we walk through the clearing, our feet crunching on the dirt, the high ropes course strung above us.

A yellow arrow shape, nailed to a stake, marks the start of one of the trails. We follow this path as it wends its way through trees. She's silent and I follow her lead, wanting to give her the space to say what she needs to, and I'm still not sure what to say, anyway.

Soon, we're swallowed by the forest. Ahead of us is the Christmas tree scene we'd viewed from up high a few weeks ago. The large fir decorated with cheery bright reds and golds looks incongruous out in the natural woodland, and in such a tense atmosphere.

We come to a stop in front of it and I can't bear it anymore. If she's here to tell me to stop calling her, to leave her alone forever, I need to hear it sooner rather than later.

'How's your — ' I start to ask but she speaks at the same time.

'I'm sorry, I should have called.'

There are dark circles under her wide eyes. She looks wrung out. My beautiful Ella needs to give herself a break.

'You don't need to call in advance. It's good to see you — ' I start, but before I can calm her, reassure her, or get my words together in any coherent way, she's speaking again, tripping over her own words.

'If I don't tell you this, I might burst. I'm so sorry.' Her eyes plead. 'I messed up. I hurt you. On purpose. I wanted you to hate me.' The words are spilling out of her. 'Fuck, I was so nasty and I didn't mean a word of it. It was the only way I could think of to get you to listen. Understand.' My heart breaks at the pain I know she's in. 'But I realise now how wrong I was. I should never have pushed you away. I should have seen how strong we could be when we pulled together.' She barely breaks for breath before her tirade continues. 'I've never regretted anything more in my life. I need you to know

I'm so sorry. I *do* trust you. And I really hope you'll give me a chance to prove it to you.' Her chest heaves when she finally pauses. Panting. She moves towards me as she says, 'I got you a present.'

I want to hug her, kiss her, but she's thrusting a parcel at me, catching me by surprise.

My overwhelmed brain is in go-slow mode and it's hard to think straight. Shit, I can't let it fail me now.

I force my face into a smile, trying to reassure her, hoping it's not a grimace.

I don't want to fuck this up and the fear is paralysing.

'Open it.' She's biting that lip again and I just want to pick her up but now I'm holding this hefty bundle and she's looking at me expectantly.

I shake my head. 'You didn't have to do this.' Feeling awkward, I rip into the paper and it peels back to reveal soft, black leather.

My chest constricts at the unexpected reminder of my recent loss. It doesn't matter, I tell myself. It was worth it.

People are more important than things.

'What is this?' I shift my gaze from the gift back to Ella's gorgeous face, her brow furrowed with apprehension.

Her shoulders drop. 'It's the worst kind of present. Oh, shit, sorry, I've probably got this all wrong.' She's wringing her hands together. 'It's not even for you. It's for me. To wear with you.'

Shaking it out of the paper, I open it to discover a women's leather jacket. I feel sick as my heart plummets.

'I thought you could take me out on your bike.' A pained look crosses her face. 'You don't like it.' It's not a question, she's reading my reaction and despite Herculean effort, I can't give her a reassuring smile.

'It's really great Ella. I think you'll look amazing in this.'

‘Why do I feel there’s a but?’ Tears well in her eyes. ‘It’s too little, too late, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not too little, but it is a bit late.’ I force my lips to curl up as I keep my voice light. ‘I got rid of my bike this morning.’

‘No!’ Her hand flies to her mouth. ‘Why?’

I pull in a breath and ease it out slowly, my smile tinged with sadness. ‘I wanted to show you that you mean more to me than anything. I want you to feel safe with me. It’s the best way I could think of to show you I prioritise you. I’m not going anywhere.’

Ella lets out a choked sob and I grab her, pulling her to me, my arms full of coat and wrapping paper and wonderful Ella.

‘You didn’t have to do that. This is all my fault.’ Her voice is muffled against my chest and I kiss her soft hair.

‘I chose to.’ I shrug. It wasn’t a hard choice at the end of the day; I loved my bike, but I love Ella more.

The ‘L’ word seems to float on the edge of my subconscious, hovering on the periphery of my inner ramblings, unsure whether it’s welcome. It doesn’t make me flinch like I always anticipated it would. In fact, it feels ... right.

Holy Fuckballs. I love Ella.

Unaware of my internal profound revelation, she pulls away slightly, cheeks glistening, nose pink. ‘But what about volunteering for Blood Bikes? And how are you going to get around?’

‘I’m still helping out with the charity. We have to ride their bikes, not our own. And, as for wheels, I traded Betty for Randy.’

‘Randy?’ She half laughs, wiping at her cheeks.

‘Randy the Ranger.’ I nod with a smirk. ‘I traded with Chunk. He’s had his eye on Betty for a while now.’

‘Randy!’ she hoots. ‘That’s the perfect name for her.’

‘You’ve got Rusty, I’ve got Randy.’ I drop another kiss onto her head, inhaling her fragrance.

She quiets suddenly, looking up at me. ‘But I can’t believe you got rid of Betty.’

I lean forwards. ‘If it’s you or the bike,’ I say softly, slowly, so she’s in no doubt, ‘I’d make the same choice again in a heartbeat.’

She doesn’t break eye contact, doesn’t blink. ‘I’d never ask you to make that choice,’ she breathes shakily.

‘You didn’t have to.’ I tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. ‘I just figured you needed to know; it’ll always be you.’

Finally, a smile lights up her face, as if she’s believing me at last. Weaving my fingers deeper into her hair, the way I always do when I need to get as close to her as possible, I pull her in, my forehead touching hers, her cold nose pressed to mine.

I feather kisses over her face until I reach her lips, then I can’t stop myself from consuming her, like she’s the last drop of water in a desert.

Frantic at first, as if trying to make up for lost time, we eventually slow, easing into a languorous kiss. There’s no need to rush; it feels like now we have forever.

My cheeks feel damp and I’m not sure which one of us is crying. Maybe we both are.

Ella pulls back slightly, setting her big brown eyes on me, top teeth tugging on her bottom lip. ‘So, dare I hope you’ve forgiven me?’

‘Of course.’ I brush her cheek with my thumb. ‘I knew you didn’t really mean it. You were hurting. Scared.’ I frown, not sure how to explain that I absolutely get it. ‘You were protecting your family. No reason to apologise for that.’

‘Well, I appreciate your understanding, but I was wrong and I handled it awfully.’ She shakes her head as she continues to punish herself. ‘I’m so sorry.’ Her eyes close, long lashes dark against her cheek. ‘I said I wouldn’t hurt you — ’

‘And you didn’t,’ I interrupt. ‘I knew what you were trying to do. If I felt any hurt it was for you, that you were going through all that guilt.’ I tilt her chin up, studying her face for a moment. ‘Please stop,’ I whisper. ‘Your love for your family is part of the reason I love you.’

‘But I — Wait! What?’ Flying open, her eyes blaze into mine. ‘You love me?’ Her voice hitches.

I chuckle and she frowns.

‘What’s so funny?’ she gasps. ‘Are you teasing me?’

‘Nope.’ I pop the p for emphasis. ‘I’m such a dick.’ I can’t stop my chest shaking with laughter. ‘I’ve spent days trying to work out how to explain to you how I feel, and there it just went and slipped out, no stress, no big monologue.’ Pulling her towards me, I rub my nose against hers. ‘Just wish I’d told you sooner.’

‘I think I love you too.’ Her blush infuses her pale skin in seconds.

Lifting her off the ground I spin her round and she giggles. Cliché but I don’t fucking care.

‘You know,’ I venture slowly, ‘we should look at this little *blip* as a good thing.’

‘We should?’ She cocks an eyebrow.

Nodding, I admit, ‘It helped me recognise my feelings. Who knows how long it’d have taken me to work this out otherwise. So definitely no need to apologise.’

‘Okay, but I *am* sorry about your present being a waste.’ She runs her fingers over the black leather.

I look up and notice the decorated fir tree that’s towering nearby, then my gaze finds Ella again. ‘You’re the only present I need.’

Ella groans but grins at me. Unashamed, I can’t be appalled at my own cheesiness, not when she’s looking at me like this.

My smile doesn’t need any coercion this time. I feel it spread across my face like sunlight at dawn.

Fuck, I must be in love. Even my musings are poetic as fuck. My smile can't be spreading wide like a hookers legs — nope — it's like fucking sunlight at fucking dawn.

Tugging on her fingers, I say, 'Let's go back and warm up at Base Camp.'

Ella takes the leather jacket from me, looping it over her arm. 'So, what should we do with this? I should be giving it to Chunk, huh?'

I scoop her to my side as we walk along and she fits there, perfectly.

'Not sure it's his size.'

Ella looks up at me. 'Has Chunk got a special someone we can give it to instead?'

'Not in the leather-jacket-wearing-lady sense, no.' Leaves crunch under our feet with each step. 'He's married to this place, really.'

'Could you swap your bike back?'

I shake my head and squeeze her that bit tighter. 'I'm happy with my decision. Plus, I don't want to mess him around. He's my best friend and he's been trying so hard to look after me. Besides, he really has hankered after Betty, and I need Randy, and not just for when Helena breaks down.'

She jabs me with her elbow playfully. 'What do you need her for?'

'My new job.' I shoot her a cheeky smile as she registers what I just said.

'You never said ...' Ella gapes.

'I hadn't had the chance,' I chuckle. 'I'm going to work for Chunk full time. I start in the new year.'

'That's amazing! Congratulations.' She leaps onto me, her hair fanning over me, shrouding me in her lavender scent.

I pretend she's floored me, faking a fall as I lower us on to the ground.

Ella straddles me, raining down kisses which I cannot get enough of.

Flipping her on to her back, I run my nose along her jaw before my lips find hers again. Pressed against her body, I'm rock hard as my tongue explores her mouth. Fuck, I've missed her.

The radio squawks, crackles and bleeps and I realise I've been leaning on the talk button.

'Shit.' I jump up, fiddling with the walkie talkie to make sure it's off now.

Ella's lying on the ground, laughing. 'Oops! Good job we hadn't got much further. Chunk and I have barely met.' She reaches up for me.

I pull her to her feet and pluck a leaf from her hair. 'We'd better go and introduce you, then.'

As we make our way back to Base Camp, I fill her in on my new role at The Wreck.

Chunk's smirking when we enter the office. 'You get everything sorted?'

'Yes, thanks.' I tug Ella into my side as I say, 'Chunk, I'd like to introduce you to Ella. My — ' I raise an eyebrow to Ella, letting her choose how to finish the introduction.

'Girlfriend,' she interjects, wrapping her arms around me and gazing up into my eyes.

I squeeze her tightly, dropping a kiss onto her forehead.

I *love* the sound of that.

Epilogue

Ella

I arrive at The Wreck at bang on eight, insisting to Josie she's invited to Chunk's party too.

'Are you sure this isn't weird? I don't know him or anyone.' Josie fidgets with her scarf as if trying to protect herself with it.

'You know me ... and Nate.' I appraise my friend. Despite her effort, she is not her usual, confident self. 'Come on, you'll enjoy it.'

'Will Scott be there?' Her eyes are large, voice small.

'I don't know for sure. He might be working at the pub tonight. It's Christmas Eve after all.'

She gives a large sigh. 'He doesn't know what he's missing, right?'

'Exactly.' I leap on her unconvincing attempt at confidence. 'You're amazing. Let's see if there's someone here tonight who can see that.'

'Why do I get the feeling I'm being set up?'

Instead of answering her question, I say, 'It's a magical time of year where anything could happen.' Adding a cheeky eyebrow waggle to try to tempt her.

It doesn't work. Josie stays buckled into the car looking pensive.

Twisting around in the driver's seat to face her, I let her know we're not in any rush to get out. 'What are you thinking?'

'Who knew getting rejected would bum me out so much,' she huffs, sounding annoyed with herself. 'I just ... I thought when Scott showed up at the hospital, he'd changed his mind.'

At the thought of Scott, I roll my eyes. 'I can't believe he used the "you're my best friend's little sister" line. Absolute

Douche Nozzle.’

‘Am I ridiculous? That I’m still thinking about this? It was weeks ago.’ Josie holds my gaze, and I can see the dejection written all over her face. The spark my friend usually has, dimmed. ‘It’s not like we were together, like in a relationship. He stopped it before we got anywhere like that. It’s not like I had *feelings*,’ she babbles.

‘Jose.’ I reach out to her arm to try and comfort her. ‘You had feelings. They’re still valid even if you didn’t know him that well ...’

‘Maybe it’s just the sting of humiliation. Being little-sister-zoned is way worse than being friend-zoned.’ She forces a laugh which doesn’t quite sound authentic.

‘Do you think you still like him?’

‘It doesn’t matter, does it? He doesn’t want me.’ She sighs again.

‘If our roles were reversed, you know you’d be encouraging me to go and have some awesome self-confidence-boosting sex. You’d probably call it “Wellbeing-banging” or something.’

‘A health hump.’

‘I knew you’d have a phrase for it.’ I laugh. ‘It’d do you the world of goo-ood,’ I sing-song in an impression of her.

‘Can’t believe I’ve rubbed off on you and now you’re trying to inflict your newfound loved-up ways on any unsuspecting passer-by.’

I chuckle at her faux indignation.

‘But you’re right.’ She ripples with a cleansing shiver. ‘I’ve gotta shake myself out of this rut. I’m fucking awesome. And I’m awesome at fucking.’

‘Come on.’ I undo my seatbelt and grab the bag of beer we’re contributing to the drinks table.

We exit my car and head towards golden lights which flank the door to the barn. A mixture of Christmas music and merry

voices drifts out into the winter night.

Josie stays close to me as we step inside the recently renovated space.

‘Who’s that?’ she squeaks.

It’s easy to follow her gaze. She’s homed in on the tallest guy in the room, who can be clearly seen over the heads of all the other people. ‘Ah, that’s Nate’s bestie, Chunk. Our host. I’ll introduce you.’

I try to keep my voice steady and not snicker at how my plan is coming together.

‘He’s quite something,’ she breathes.

‘He’s huge, isn’t he? Gentle giant though, I’ve decided.’ I link arms with her as we cross the room.

Chunk’s wearing a velvety Santa suit, but has forgone the big beard, opting instead for some sexy stubble. I’m pleased he’s looking hot for Josie’s sake. I’m hoping maybe he can help her get her confidence back ... and maybe she’s what he’s been looking for?

‘Shit, is that Scott?’ she mutters as we drop our booze off in an ice bucket at the table full of drinks before making our way over to Santa.

Scott’s standing against the far wall of the barn, sipping on a drink, his usual faint scowl in place.

‘Seeing him is good, right?’ I whisper. ‘Getting over that first encounter?’

‘I can do this,’ she mumbles through a smile, so only I hear. ‘I can talk to him like a normal person.’ She nods as if psyching herself up.

‘You’ll be great. You want me to stick around when you speak to him?’

‘No, it’s probably better not to have an audience for *that* awkward conversation.’

I squeeze her hand briefly, letting her know I’m with her in spirit, whatever happens.

Chunk's made his way through the crowd and greets me with a kiss on each cheek. I introduce Josie and he swoops in for a peck with her, too.

Feeling a presence at my back, I look up to find we've been joined by Nate ... and Scott.

'Hey, you.' Nate surrounds me with his muscly arms which have been wrapped up in the wool of his Christmas jumper. I giggle as he nuzzles kisses into my neck.

'Hey, yourself,' I reply, twisting to return his kiss. 'Oh, hi, Scott. Didn't know you'd be here.' I force a smile at Nate's brother, trying not to batter him over the ears for being a dick to my friend.

He says hello to us all, his voice a little strained.

Just as I'm wondering what Scott feels about Josie being here, looking hot as hell, Chunk grasps both Nate and me on the shoulder, bearing down on us with his huge hands.

'Can I borrow you both for a sec?'

My eyes dart to Josie and she shoots me an, "I'm a big girl, I'll be okay," look.

I squeeze her hand again and grimace, still feeling guilty leaving her with Scott. 'Back in a bit.'

Nate and I follow our giant Santa over to the tree he's decorated in the corner.

'I won't keep you long. I wanted to give you guys your Christmas presents.'

I frown, bemused that a man I hardly know has been thoughtful enough to get me a gift. I'd only brought along some beer for the party.

He passes me a bulky parcel and Nate a much smaller one, the size of his hand. 'Merry Christmas,' he sings out. Then, hearing another guest call his name, he turns to leave. 'I'll make sure Josie is okay,' he says before he dashes off. 'Catch you later ...'

Nate and I look at each other and glance around. ‘Do you reckon we can open them early?’

‘Can’t see anyone stopping us.’ I wiggle my eyebrows. ‘You go first.’

Nate rips the red and green paper apart to find a keyring and chunky key. He narrows his eyes. ‘Open yours,’ he says suspiciously.

Peeling back the tape, my parcel unfurls to reveal a familiar black leather jacket.

‘What’s Chunk up to?’ I look around for him but can’t see him anywhere. ‘I’d left this at the front desk that day I came to apologise. Told him to hold on to it in case he got some use out of it one day.’

‘I’d left this,’ he holds up the key, ‘with him that same day. In exchange for Randy.’ Nate shakes his head in disbelief, a grin stretching across his face. ‘I don’t know what I’m gonna do with that guy. He’s always generous but ... I’m not sure if I can accept this.’

A funny swirl passes through me, a sense of unease. Danger. But also excitement.

‘It’d probably be rude to refuse ... ’ I venture.

Nate stares at me, eyes wide, like a kid at Christmas. ‘Are you suggesting what I think you’re suggesting?’

‘Probably best to take it out and check it works before you start drinking.’ *Before I change my mind and chicken out*, I mentally add.

Nate takes my hand and leads me out of the barn. We cross over to his bike, which is parked in the usual spot, a bow on the handlebars, helmets stowed on the seat.

I sling the jacket on, for warmth as much as protection, pulling my hair out with a swish as it fans down over my shoulders.

‘You look fucking incredible.’ Nate kisses my forehead before his steady hands help me secure my helmet. He then

dons his own before straddling the metal beast and kicking off the foot stand.

With nerves trembling through me, I climb on behind him and cling to his waist. My grip is tight, as much to stop my hands quivering as to keep me safe.

‘You ready?’ he calls out.

As I’ll ever be. ‘Let’s do it.’ I squeeze myself to his back.

A press of a button and the acid green bike roars into life. The vibrations start at my core and ripple out to the tips of my fingers and toes.

Trees whip by in the beam of the headlight as Nate drives us on a steady path through the abandoned country lanes. I finally get it, Nate’s love of the open road. The sensation. The freedom. It’s immense.

It kind of reminds me of the zip line. Hurling along, looking scary from the outside, but once you’re brave enough to jump on, it’s a hell of a ride.

Kind of like relationships, too.

It’s not a long loop, just a taster, and soon Nate is heading back to The Wreck. But it’s whetted my appetite, and, as we roll back into the car park, I can’t stop the excitement, the adrenaline, from bubbling over.

I hop off the bike and throw my arms around Nate as he dismounts, giggling. ‘That was insane.’

He helps me pull my helmet off and once he’s whipped his away, his lips crash against mine.

‘You enjoyed it, huh? Living dangerously?’ he growls through his kisses, his hands roaming over my body, still clad in leather.

‘I was in no danger. I was with you.’

He bites and nibbles at my neck, sending an electric thrill to my already zinging core. That engine emitted quite a throb of vibrations. He’s pressing into me, his cock rock-hard against my stomach, urging its way home.

‘If it’s danger you want, though, I’ve got an idea.’ I hook my pointer finger inside his waistband and run it along from one side to the other before circling back to the button. Popping it open with an easy flick, I drag the zip down slowly. I can feel him straining beneath the fabric of his boxer briefs.

His breath comes out in a choked rush. ‘So help me, Ella, you are going to be the death of me.’ He grips my hand in his, not letting me go any further, but not pulling me away.

Before I know what’s happening, he’s thrown me over his shoulder, fireman style, and we’re thundering towards the Base Camp building. A shove of his other shoulder opens the unlocked door and Nate crosses the room, dumping me on the desk.

The office is in darkness, only moonlight and party lights filtering in through the window.

He hoicks at my trousers, tugging them off in one movement, my boots crashing on to the ground. Immediately, my hands are grappling with his jeans, getting tangled with him. It’s rough and fast and I can’t get him inside me quick enough.

‘Keep the jacket on,’ he breathes before rolling on a condom.

Finally, he thrusts inside me. We collectively gasp; I’m so wet, and he’s impaled me to the hilt.

Digging my nails into his bottom, I urge him on as he pounds into me, my hips pumping to meet his movements. Grabbing hold of my ass, he picks me up and spins. In a couple of steps, I’m caged against rough wood as he drives me up against the wall.

My legs wrap tightly around him and I cling to his shoulders. I can feel him so deep inside of me. So deep.

As he thrusts, he finds that most perfect spot. Hypnotising. My pussy clenches around him with a mind of its own.

‘Fuck,’ he growls. ‘You keep doing that and I’m not gonna last much longer.’

I feel him growing bigger inside me as my climax builds. The pressure mounting as he drills me into the wood, hitting my g-spot with every stroke.

His lips find mine and I cry his name into his mouth as I come. The feeling of him pulsing inside me with his own pleasure draws my orgasm out even further.

Nate helps me down with care, but inhales sharply as I grip his bicep for balance.

‘What was that?’ I ask. ‘Are you hurt?’

‘Careful with those beefy mitts of yours.’ He quickly bins the condom and pulls his jeans back up. ‘You don’t know your own strength.’

I gape, stunned. I’d barely brushed his arm. ‘Are you okay?’

Nate chuckles, dropping his straight-face. ‘Nothing I can’t handle.’

‘What’s happened?’

He turns away and starts to carefully slide out of his jacket.

‘What did you do?’ My voice drops, hesitant.

‘I added to the collection.’ He pivots, bringing his exposed arm towards me, sleeve pulled up to his shoulder. His vivid tattoos have been intertwined with a luscious vine that snakes around his arm, wrapping around his bicep and up under his tee-shirt.

‘It’s stunning.’ I hesitate before touching my finger gently to the design, slightly raised on his skin.

‘It represents growth.’ His voice is husky. ‘You inspired me.’

‘Me?’ I blink.

‘Yeah. With your new course, you’re learning and growing. You want to help others learn and better themselves.’ He shrugs. ‘You make me want to do better for myself, too. And this serves as a reminder for all the growing and shit I’ve done already and all that I still want to do.’

‘Growing and shit, huh?’ I smirk.

He pumps his eyebrows. ‘So you like it?’

I nod my head vehemently.

‘Good, cause this *bad boy* wraps all the way up to my clavicle and over my shoulder blade.’

‘Interesting choice of words,’ I murmur.

Lightly, I trace the emerald trail over his deltoid to where it disappears.

He kisses me slowly, almost reverently, then brushes his nose against mine.

‘We better get back,’ he says with reluctance and sets about helping me find all my strewn off clothing.

‘I’m going to have to rethink the whiskey and socks I got Chunk for Christmas,’ Nate says as we leave Base Camp, shutting the door behind us.

As we walk back to the party, the air is bitterly cold and I wrap the jacket closer around me. ‘This is a good gift, if I do say so myself.’

Nate chuckles. ‘I’m not complaining.’ As he pushes the barn door open, he says, ‘Do you think anyone noticed we’re missing?’

‘I hope Chunk kept his word and has been looking after Josie.’ I squint into the barn, looking for my friend.

We head to the makeshift bar where we last saw her, but she’s not there. However, there is a pile of discarded shot glasses. But they could be anyone’s, right? Next to it is the table with nibbles, easy catering like crisps, nuts, a cheese board draped with grapes. Still no Josie.

A cheer sounds from one corner of the barn and I’m drawn to the weird energy being emitted. Nate follows close behind, hand at my back.

There’s a circle of people sitting down, bottles in hand. Chunk seems to be the ring-leader. He’s holding something up — small, round, and purple — and giving instructions. He

pops it between his teeth and turns to the woman on his right who takes it from him with her lips and turns to the person on the other side of her. Pass the grape, perhaps.

I track the progress and that's when I see her. Josie is sat to the left of Chunk and on *her* left, Scott.

'Shit,' I hiss as I watch Scott receive the grape — or whatever it is — in his mouth.

He turns to Josie and it's like time slows.

This isn't going to end well. But I'm not sure for who.

My feet track forwards as I helplessly watch on. Josie retrieves the grape, eyes open, and she pauses. Then she turns and Chunk is there, his big hands cup her head as he pulls her to him. His mouth consumes hers.

My eyes flick to Scott. It looks like a vein's about to burst on his forehead.

Josie's crushed against Chunk, her hands wrapped around his broad shoulders.

'What's happened to the grape?' Nate's breath tickles my ear. He's clearly been as enthralled by this inevitable car crash of a party game as I have.

Then Josie climbs up to straddle Chunk's lap as the onlookers give a whoop and the gang starts to break up. Game over.

I can barely move out of the way quick enough as Scott comes thundering towards us.

He clips Nate as he charges by.

'Easy, bro.'

'I knew this was a bad idea,' he rumbles as he storms out.

To be continued ...

The Wreck and Bull Series continues with Josie's story.

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Thank you for reading Nate and Ella's story. I'd be so grateful if you could pop a short review on any of your usual reviewing platforms — Amazon, Goodreads, Instagram, Facebook etc.

It doesn't have to be long or detailed, but if you could take just a moment to do this, it would be amazing.

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Note: UK Blood Bikers (UKBB), mentioned in this book, is an entirely fictional charity inspired by the real life NABB – Nationwide Association of Blood Bikes, and its members. This is a collection of rapid response motor cycle based charities run by volunteers, who support the NHS by providing free, medical transport for things like samples, platelets, medications, donor milk etc, 24/7. These people are absolutely incredible. You can find out more here: www.bloodbikes.org.uk

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About The Author

Cherry Keeley is a British writer, who enjoys reading and writing steamy romance to escape reality. Why not follow her for spicy book recs, and sneak peeks of her future releases?

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